

**The Conversion from ‘*Hananim*’ to ‘God’:
The Term Question in Korea among the Protestant Missions (1882-1911)**
Daniel S. H. Ahn

Abstract

It would not be an exaggeration to say that no issue has been more controversial in the history of Christian missions in Korea than translating the name of God into vernacular languages, known as the Term Question, since the progress of Christian missions has essentially depended on the ability of indigenous people to acknowledge the Christian God in terms that made sense within their traditional worldview. It was also because the Korean people had totally different concepts of god due to their polytheistic and pantheistic contexts. The Term Question in Korea emerged among the Protestant missions from 1882 to 1911. It was the issue of whether the name of the Korean Supreme Being (*Hananim*) could be adopted as the name of God in the vernacular Bible translation or whether a foreign-loan word from a biblical language should be introduced as the name of God. To a deeper and wider extent, the question underlying the terminological controversy was the issue of ‘whether the Christian God had preceded among the indigenous peoples before Christian missionaries’ arrival’¹ or whether there was a radical discontinuity of monotheistic belief among the indigenous peoples between ‘pre-Christian past’ and ‘Christian present’.²

This paper argues that a deep-seated primitive form of monotheism, consonant with Christian belief, had existed among the Koreans since the twenty-fourth century BC. That is, the Koreans in the pre-historic period were originally monotheists who worshipped a Supreme Being who was the same God as the proclaimed by the foreign missionaries. As a result, the term *Hananim* in the Korean Bible translation played a significant role in growth of the early Korean churches because, in Koreans’ view, *Hananim* is situated atop the hierarchical structure of gods and spirits as the highest being, so the resonance of this term was uniquely suited to pave the way for an understanding of the monotheistic God of Christianity as being distinctively Korean as well as universal. Hence, the adoption of the term *Hananim* in the Korean Bible translation was crucial in preparing a link between the Korean religious culture and the imported Christian faith, prompting an effective transition for the Korean people from the indigenous notion of god, *Hananim*, to that of Christian image.

According to Andrew F. Walls, *conversion*, derived from the Greek noun *epistrophe* or verb *epistrepho* (to turn, return or turn around),³ is neither ‘a matter of substituting something new for something old (that is proselytising)’ nor ‘a matter of adding something new to something old, as a supplement or in synthesis’⁴; yet *conversion* is ‘turning what is already there’,

¹ John S. Mbiti, ‘Challenges of Language, Culture, and Interpretation in Translating the Greek New Testament’, *Swedish Missiological Themes*, vol. 97, no. 2 (2009), 146; Kwame Bediako, ‘The Significance of Modern African Christianity – A Manifesto’, *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1995), 51-67, cited in James L. Cox, *Rational Ancestors* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 27-8; Lamin Sanneh, ‘The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective’, *IBMR* (Oct. 1983), 166.

² Andrew F. Walls, ‘African Christianity in the History of Religions’, *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1996), 187.

³ Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. I (Grand Rapids and Exter: Zondervan and Paternoster, 1975), 355, cited in Brian Stanley, ‘Conversion to Christianity: the Colonisation of the Mind?’, *International Review of Mission*, (July 2003), 319.

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, ‘Old Athens and New Jerusalem’, *IBMR*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1997), 148.

including ‘the elements of the pre-conversion settings’, in a new direction to Christ.⁵ In view of this fact, in the minds of the missionaries in Korea, the Christian God, clothed in the dress of primitive monotheism, and bearing the name of *Hananim*, had preceded the arrival of foreign missionaries in Korea. Therefore, *Hananim*, the Korean ‘Unknown God’⁶ whom the Korean people had unconsciously worshipped through their own indigenous religion since the twenty-fourth century BC, had been not *substituted* but *converted* by the Korea missionaries into a new *Hananim*, the Only One, the Triune and Incarnate God of Christianity.

Daniel S. H. Ahn is an Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies at Tyndale Theological Seminary, the Netherlands. He received his PhD in World Christianity from the University of Edinburgh, and Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has extensive cross-cultural experiences, teaching at educational institutes in Europe, North America and Asia. His special field is contextualization of Christianity into multi-religious contexts, with a focus on the problems of translating Christian concepts into local languages and cultures. He has contributed to several books and articles including *Religious Transformation in Modern Asia* (Brill, 2015), *Korean Church God’s Global Mission Global Christianity* (Regnum, 2015), *The Theological Implication of the Translation of the Name of ‘God’ in the Chinese Bible Translation* (Cambridge Scholar, 2011), *The Future of Christianity in China* (2014) and *Johan H. Bavinck’s Reformed Theology of Non-Christian Religions* (Bavinck Review, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2012).

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, ‘The Translation Principle in Christian History’, in *The Missionary Movement in Christianity History*, ed., idem (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 25-6; idem, ‘Old Athens and New Jerusalem’, *IBMR*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1997), 148; idem, ‘The Mission of the Church Today’, *Word & World*, vol. 20, no. 1(winter 2000), 21; emphasis mine.

⁶ The Book of Acts 17:22-23