



A LESSON THE WEST CAN LEARN FROM THE EAST:
CONVERSION OR ADDVERSION

by

Pil-Ro Hwang
Director
Korean Institute of Philosophy and Religion
Ko Yang City, KOREA

The Twenty-first International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Washington, D.C. November 24-30, 1997

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Philip H. Hwang, Ph. D.

Director

Korean Institute of Philosophy and Religion

1. East and West

Kipling in *The Ballad of East and West* declared that "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twaine shall meet," but right after this line he also declared that "But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth." This was 1889. Since then, the East and the West have merged in communication, politics, economics, civilization and in many other fields. The only exception to this is the case of religions.

Why particularly in religions? For in religions we have to make a sharp distinction between truth and falsity, and to accept P as true is to reject non-P as false. From these it follows that we as religious people have to make a distinction between true, real, orthodox religions on the one hand and false, unreal, heterodox, immoral, superstitious religions on the other. This is why for example Paul Tillich says: "It is *natural and unavoidable* that Christianity affirms the fundamental assertion of Christianity that Jesus is the Christ and reject what denies this assertion"(my emphasis).¹⁾ But we have to recognize frankly that no religion can monopolize the truth, that all religions have a grain of truth because truth itself is many-faceted, and finally that all efforts to convert a non-Christian religious person (a sinner, a heathen, a pagan, a child of darkness or an anonymous Christian) into a Christian in the West is therefore futile.

In the East, conversion has always been regarded as something undesirable and even impossible. For, as *I Ching* says, one can take not only different ways at different times but also he can take different ways at the same time. I think this is one lesson the West can learn from the East.

In "Interreligious Dialogue: It's Reasons, Attitudes and Necessary Assumptions," I argued that, if we are to engage in genuine religious dialogues, we must entertain "the possibility of conversion risk."

We must admit the genuine possibility to be converted to other religions. If we are really open-minded and honestly acknowledge the similarities and differences among religions, in the due process of time it is quite possible to come to believe that the religions of other people are somehow better than ours in many ways. I do not mean of course that every comparative religionist should convert to other religions. But I sincerely mean that one must be willing to be converted, and risk all the consequences.

Unless we seriously entertain this sad thing, yes it is a sad possibility, we will not have a genuine dialogue.²⁾

Of course, for some people conversion may not be the final point. Thomas Merton could have more profound faith in Christianity by learning more about Buddhism. Mohandas Gandhi was always proud of being a Hindu, and yet did not want to be known as a representative of Hinduism alone. They were truly religious cosmopolitans. For them there was no conflict between one religion and many religions. But, in practical course of religious life, conversion has always been, and still is, a fact.

But in this paper I will argue that my former claim for the possibility of conversion is entirely unjustified by showing (1) that conversion in this sense has been, in fact, and can be, in essence, misused, (2) that conversion is by definition a dualistic Western concept, (3) that conversion in pure sense is a practical impossibility, and (4) that, as a conclusion, we should accept "add-version" rather than "con-version." Based on these arguments, I will finally present Korea as a model of addversion and as a pacesetter for the accretion of wisdom interests, east and west.

2. the misuse of conversion

James Strachan frankly admits that "conversion, the greatest of moral events, is not the monopoly of one religion. It is a human as well as Christian fact." But he also says that "as there is one blood in the veins of all nations, and one breath in all nostrils, so there is one Divine Spirit brooding over and striving within all souls."³⁾ So what he means by conversion is not a free choice from one religion to other religions but what he calls "to the highest call," i. e., Christianity only: "In every age and race there have been minds that have turned to the light, hearts that have felt the expulsive power of a new affection, wills that have striven, and not all in vain, to attain the ideal."⁴⁾

This is a case of sheer misuse of conversion, simply because "a genuine dialogue cannot be made if we try to explain different concepts of different religions by one concept of one particular religion. We should not fancy that Taoistic Tao or Confucian humanity or Christian love can explain all religions. No fake generalization can bring about a genuine dialogue."⁵⁾ This "nothing-but argument" is simply unsound.

At this moment, one may present a "better-than argument" in the following way: There are indeed conversions in all religions but they are different in degrees and in kinds, thus making one conversion more inferior or superior to others. Strachan thus admits that "the conversion of Gautama, afterwards known as the Buddha, is as real a fact as that of Saul of Tarsus, Francis of Assisi, or any other spirit that has ever obeyed the heavenly vision. Similar phenomena are found in Confucianism, Islam, and all other great religions." Although this is a historical fact, however, he immediately argues that the difference between all such movements and the Christian conversion is "so great" that we can even say, to quote one passage from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, "what to Plato was but a hallucination, and to Socrates a chimera, is now clear and certain to your Zinzendorfs, your Wesleys, and the poorest of their pietists and Methodists."⁶⁾ But this hierarchical argument is only a weaker version of the former.

3. the dualistic Western character of conversion

It is generally agreed among scholars that Western mind is "either-or" whereas Oriental mind is "both-and." Let me illustrate this point by comparing Korean shamans with those of the West. At the heart of all shamanism is a belief that there is a kind of communion between spirits and men. According to this faith, it is not man or nature that rules over all things in the world. Instead, all fortunes, good or bad, are dependent on the spirits. In order to control the natural and human world properly, one must then have a right relationship with the spirits who are the sources of all powers. In other words, one must be able to persuade or control the spirits as he wishes.

But there is a difference between the East and the West. Korean shamans always make a tender and harmonious appeal to the evil spirits and never involve in a life-or-death struggle with them. Their job is to appease or cajole, not to fight. There is indeed no "Exorcist" in Korean shamanism. Here is an example.

Mongdal Spirit, you who died as a boy
Songak Spirit, you who died as a virgin
Spirits of the young who did not eat enough food and did not have enough clothes,

Stay away from these couple [then the shaman calls the name of the groom]
If not,
I will put you in the iron hole,
Tearing off your ugly mouth with salt
Throwing you in the hell of fire.

We have prepared all these delicious foods,
Make full of your stomach and get lost immediately,
If not,
I will cut your big belly into three pieces with a big sharp knife,
Hanging your dead body in the street,
So that all people will tear off your body into twelve pieces.
Now you'd better know it right now, son of a bitch.⁷⁾

In the East some spirits are evil, but they are not the enemies to be conquered or killed by man. Rather they are the objects of human worship. On the other hand, people in the West always believe that they must belong to one particular religion only, thus making conversion as a throwing away old beliefs entirely and accepting new ones. But this is not so in the East.

In Korea and China a real "gentleman" is a man of Confucian-Buddhistic-Taoistic in the present as well as in the past. This is why "western travelers were often baffled to find that in China a man might 'belong' to three different religions at once: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It only gradually dawned on them that the Chinese did not perceive these, through western spectacles, as alternative religions, but as something more analogous to three interpenetrating fields of force within the continuous life of China."⁸⁾ Chan thus declares that "one of the outstanding facts in the history of Chinese philosophy has been its tendency and ability to synthesize,"⁹⁾ and Fingarette declares that "Confucius in his teachings in the *Analects* does not elaborate on the language of choice or responsibility."¹⁰⁾

4. the impossibility of conversion in pure sense

Now I like to argue, not only that conversion in the West can in essence be misused, but that conversion in the strict sense is impossible. If we take conversion simply as a change from the secular to the religious life or an entry into monastic life as we did in the medieval church, it is no wonder possible. But if we mean by conversion to clear out our old beliefs entirely and to accept a brand new religion mentally and spiritually without any residues from the past, there is no such thing. For, without resorting to the theory of Freudian unconsciousness, we can safely say that in one way or another the old beliefs, even in a distorted form, will always remain with the converted.

Let us suppose, for example, here are two converted Christians, one from Islam and another from Buddhism. There are surely some differences in their religious attitudes, behaviors or belief systems. To take one more example, the most dramatic conversion story in the New Testament (Romans, 7) is that of St. Paul. But today we all know that he, being a great Greek philosopher, has hellenized many hebraic spirits of Jesus' message. This is why some feminist theologians argue that, by interpreting wholistic Christian message in a Greek dualistic way, he has colored or to some extent changed the main spirits of Christianity.

Furthermore, conversion is not mechanical but existential. It is not something happening suddenly in one's life at particular time and place. It is not a one-time activity but a continuing process. Thus the most beloved disciple of Jesus, Peter, could deny his Lord at the moment of temptation, evidently showing his (and our) "need to be reconverted."

In order to cling to the mechanical version of conversion, however, some theologians make a distinction between conversion and regeneration, as does Strachan:

There are the human and the Divine side of the same experience. Regeneration is the gift of the God's grace, the power or principle of the new life implanted by His Spirit; conversion is the act of human freedom, the voluntary turning of the heart to God. The one is a necessity—"ye must be born again"(John, 3:17); the other, a duty—"repent and be converted"(Acts, 3:19).¹¹⁾

The distinction may be logically possible, but it is a sheer sophistry as far as our practical life is concerned, and this means that conversion in a pure sense is impossible.

5. the alternative: addversion rather than conversion

All human cultures, including religious experiences, are cumulative. Without ancient philosophy there would be no medieval philosophy, and without the latter there would be no modern philosophy. As they say, we are what we were, and we will be what we are. It is simple as that. But this is particularly the case with Orientals.

Confucianism in Korea, since its introduction, has mainly been studied from its literary aspects or as a means for political career or a moral cultivation. But it undoubtedly remains as the last fortress of national morality, although it generally remains to be conservative. Every Korean, unless he belongs to some specific religion, usually associates his ethics and

morality with that of Confucianism. It has indeed taken deep roots in the living mode of the masses, as found in their observance of the three-year mourning for the dead parents or in their respect for the aged, to say nothing of the minute details governing their family system. In this sense we can say that all Koreans are Confucian in their hearts, and they carry these Confucian spirits with them even when and after they become Buddhists or Christians. For them religious experiences are cumulative, thus making addversion more desirable than a clear-cut conversion.

Another reason we have to prefer addversion to conversion is that although all religious truths in themselves are complete and perfect, they are incomplete and imperfect for us, as clearly shown by Thomas Aquinas. We choose what we think true rather than what is true. The Oxford English Dictionary thus defines conversion as "the bringing of any one over to a specified religious faith...especially to one regarded as true from what is regarded as falsehood or error." Here conversion is a change from "what is regarded false" to "what is regarded true" rather than from falsehood to truth. This means that all religious people, like it or not, have a possibility to leave their religion to take another, thus making them keep adding his new religious experiences to the old ones as time goes on.

One may ask: Doesn't this concept of addversion make all religions relative. Yes, but to me this seems to be the best way. For as far as religions are concerned, we have to accept subjective absoluteness and objective relativity simultaneously. As William James says:

We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems... Why need it be one if we are good and sympathetic from the outset? Unquestionably, some men have the completer experience and the higher vocation here, just as in the social world; but for each man to stay in his own experience, whate'er it be, and for others to tolerate him there, is surely the best.¹²⁾

To sum up: Cantwell Smith makes a distinction between faith as an inner aspect and "cumulative tradition" as an outer aspect of religious life:

By "faith" I mean personal faith... For the moment let it stand for an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person: the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real. By "cumulative tradition" I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question.¹³⁾

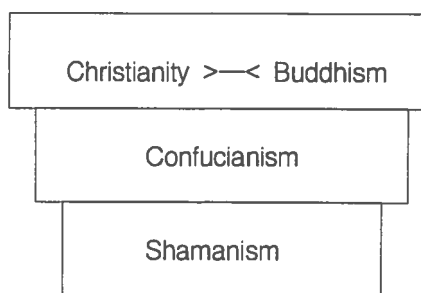
I think this distinction is valid, but unfortunately he as a historian of religions from the West does not see that faith itself is a "historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life" of the person in question.

6. Korea as a pacesetter

In this situation, I like to suggest that Korea can be a pacesetter for the accretion of wisdom interests. That it, I like to suggest that Korea can be a living example of an ideal state in religious dialogues, the ideal state we are yet to achieve in human history.

Many scholars characterize the present religious situation in Korea as "a department store of religions."¹⁴⁾ At least five religions, i. e., Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism and New Religions, are equally thriving nowadays. This is a unique phenomenon in the world one cannot find in any other place. Of course, there were many states where different religions fought and conquered one another or where during the short periods of time they co-existed peacefully. This is why, for example, we can find Judaic, Christian and Islamic monuments altogether in one city, Jerusalem. But these were all in the past. Israel became Judaic state, China Confucian state, and America and most European countries Christian states.

Only in Korea many different religions exist rather peacefully, although there are some local conflicts. How is it possible? I believe the answer is in the concept of addversion. All Koreans have basically Shamanistic beliefs mainly in unconscious forms, and on these beliefs they add Confucian morals, and on these they add again Buddhistic or Christian beliefs as shown in the following Diagram A.



(Diagram A)

Historically speaking, Shamanism was the first religion which occupied Korean minds. There is nothing special about it, for Shamanistic beliefs were universal in all primitive worlds. What is special in Korea lies in the fact that those Shamanistic beliefs are still present strongly in other religions as well as in general social practices. This is way many scholars rightly or wrongly criticize the Shamanization of Korean churches,¹⁵⁾ and, for example, it is not unusual to observe a Shamanistic offering with a pig head at the opening ceremony of the most modern computer firms.

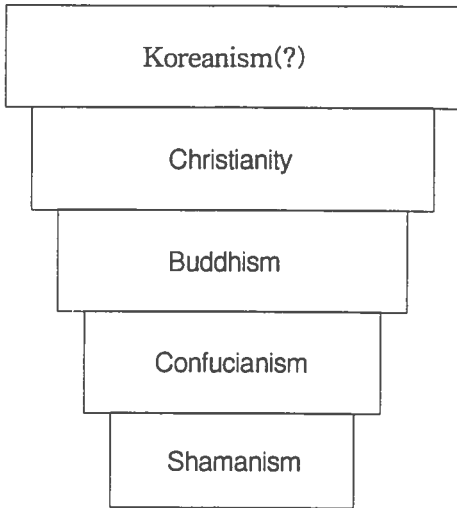
Then Confucianism was introduced from China,¹⁶⁾ but Koreans did not abandon entirely the old Shamanistic beliefs in order to accept new Chinese concepts. Rather, they accepted Confucian morals on the basis of old beliefs. Shamanism was officially persecuted during the Silla, Koryo and Li Dynasties, but Shamanistic practices among the common people were unofficially permitted in those periods.

Then Buddhism was introduced, but Koreans again did not abandon old Shamanistic and Confucian beliefs entirely in order to accept new Buddhistic concepts. This is why, for example, one can see today Seven Star House in all Buddhistic temples in Korea, which was originated from Shamanistic worship and not related with any Buddhistic practices.

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Then Christianity was introduced, but a peculiar thing happened in this case. Koreans did not abandon entirely old Shamanistic and Confucian beliefs in order to accept new Christian concepts, but in such way that Christianity became anti-Buddhistic and Buddhism anti-Christian. It is a sad thing, and this explains why some antagonistic feelings are prevailed between Christians and Buddhists today. All these historical facts are shown in the Diagram A.

But the Diagram A depicts the present religious situation in Korea: Both Christianity and Buddhism are equally Shamanistic and Confucian, but they are mutually exclusive. In fact, there are no Buddhistic Christians or Christian Buddhists in Korea, mainly because it has only been two centuries since Christianity was introduced into Korea. But I believe it will eventually be as in the following Diagram B.



(Diagram B)

Assuming we keep following the old middle way as we did in the past, I hope that all religious people in Korea be Shamanistic/ Confucian/ Buddhistic/ Christian in the near future. We cannot predict how long it will take to reach this situation, but it is the direction to which we from now on must move. However, in the final stage I think we will have one more religion on the top of all other religions, and perhaps this religion will be one originated from Korea, although we cannot even predict at the present time whether it will be one of the existing religions such as Chondoism, Won-Buddhism, Dankoonism, Unificationism etc. or it will be a new religion which does not exist now and yet to emerge in the future. At any rate, in this final stage all religious people in Korea will be Shamanistic/ Confucian/ Buddhistic/ Christian/ Korean and thus the accretion of all different kinds of wisdom interests will be in full swing.

In our religious journey, whether we add or subtract, amplify or deduct, increase or decrease our religious experience, i. e., whether we make it richer or poorer, it is our choice.

- 1) Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, Columbia University Press, 1963, p. 29.
- 2) Philip H. Hwang, "Interreligious Dialogues: Its Reasons, Attitudes and Necessary Assumption," *Dialogues & Alliance*, vol. 3, no. 1, Spring, 1989, p. 13.
- 3) James Strachan, "Conversion," *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*.
- 4) *Ibid*.
- 5) Hwang, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 6) Strachan, *op. cit.*
- 7) Tongshik Ryu, "Shamanism in Korea," *A Guide to Religions*. ed., David A. Brown, London, 1975.
- 8) John Hick, "Foreword," Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Harper & Row, 1978, p. vii.
- 9) Wing-tsit Chan, "Syntheses in Chinese Metaphysics," ed., Charles A. Moore, *The Chinese Mind*, The University Press of Hawaii, 1974, p. 132.
- 10) Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius-The Secular as Sacred*, Harper & Row, 1972, p. 18.
- 11) Strachan, *op. cit.*
- 12) William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, Macmillan, New York, 1961, p. 379.
- 13) Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 156~157.
- 14) Since I first used the expression "a department store of religions" in the above article, it has become popular among the scholars today.
- 15) Philip H. Hwang, "Four Problems in the Study of Korean Shamanism" (written in Korean).
- 16) Historically speaking, Buddhism was accepted as an official religion before Confucianism was accepted in the Li Dynasty. But I am here following a psychological order rather than a historical one.