As Christianity has come to East Asian soil, its Gospel content has been accepted and transformed by people who grew up and lived in their own multi-religious life setting. How did people in this multi-religious matrix accept and understand the Christian Gospel? An issue here is how to discuss the Reformation teaching of justification in dialogue with a Buddhist concept of Other Power in Amida Buddhism and the Buddhist model of sudden enlightenment and gradual self-cultivation.

In the historical development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, in reference to Japan, we perceive a parallel between Pure Land’s model of salvation and the Reformation model of justification. After dealing with these two different principles in the understanding of Christian justification and the Buddhist model of faith and enlightenment in the Buddhist-Christian context, it is important to propose an Asian irregular hermeneutic dealing with God’s saying-in-action in the interreligious context which also is significant for an ethic for the Other.1

To what extent can the Reformation teaching of justification be understood and transformed in a cultural-hermeneutical way in an East Asian self-understanding? It is illustrative and pedagogical to introduce South-Korea as an example for advancing an Asian inter-religious deliberation. My home country, South Korea, is full of multi-religious heritages. Shamanism is a primordial religious matrix. The Korean peninsula was divided into three separate kingdoms: Koguryo (37 BCE–668 CE), Paekche (18 BCE–660 CE), and Silla (57 BCE–668 CE). Buddhism was introduced to Koguryo by Chinese monks late in the fourth century CE. By the period of the unified Silla Dynasty (668–935 CE), the major Chinese sects of Buddhism made inroads into Korea. These include the San-lun, or Three Treatises, school of Madhyamika; Fa-xiang, or school of Yogacara; Pure Land, Chan and Hua-yan, among others.

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Buddhism functioned as a state religion in this unified period and the successive Koryo period (937–1391). Then, during the Cho Sun dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism (or Neo-Confucianism) took over the role of Buddhism, becoming the state religion. Two centuries ago, around the 1770s, the Roman Catholic Church was organized in Korea, apart from a missionary effort. In 1887, the first Protestant Church was organized in Korea by H. G. Underwood, an American missionary.

In the religious tradition of Korea there has been no war among religions. Some Western scholars interestingly characterize the Korean religious mindset in the following way: “A Korean personally takes his education from Confucius; he sends his wife to Buddha to pray for an offspring; and in the ills of life he willingly pays toll to a Shamanist ‘Mootang’ [sorceress].”

If I paraphrase the statement above for the characterization of a Korean religious mindset in the general sense, then a Korean retains a Confucian head, a Buddhist heart, and a Shamanist gut. When Christianity came to this multi-religious matrix, how did people accept and understand the Christian Gospel? More specifically, to what extent can the Reformation principle of justification be understood and transformed crossculturally in an East Asian self-understanding?

Introduction to Some Basic Ideas of Buddhism

For the clarification of this hermeneutical encounter, let me first deal with some basic Buddhist principles. “What is Buddhism?” Generally speaking, the teaching of Buddhism can be divided into three main traditions: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism (including Chan Buddhism), and Vajrayana Buddhism. After the enlightenment, the historical Buddha began to teach the four noble truths and the eightfold path.

According to the Four Noble Truths: 1) everything and everybody is in pain (*dukkha*); 2) the cause of pain or suffering comes out of cravings (attachment) for external things; 3) there is a way of transcending and overcoming cravings or an attached desire in an eightfold way; and 4) thus, liberation (*Nirvana*) is freedom from all suffering and pain. This original teaching is central to Theravada Buddhism.

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