CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE: YI SŬNGU'S NOVEL *SAENGŬI I MYŎN* [THE REVERSE SIDE OF LIFE]

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This study examines the themes and motifs of Christianity in modern Korean literature, as well as their representation and relevance. The first part of the text discusses the phenomenon of Christianity and its evaluation in intellectual circles during the Japanese annexation. In literature, the depiction of this imported but still alien religion tends towards formulaic but also sporadic images of Christianity, except for in certain novels such as Han Sŏrya's (1961) *Sŭngnyangi* and Kim Tongni's (1995) *Ŭlhwa*, which are briefly mentioned. The second part of the study concentrates on Yi Sŭngu's (2013) *Saengŭi i myŏn* (The Reverse Side of Life). In this novel, Christianity underlies the hero's life and influences his thoughts. It enables the reader to imagine the details of the 'Christianities' during Pak Chŏnghŭi's presidency. Besides the theme of the roles of Christianity, the novel touches on 1960s Korea and its ideologies, political trends, and tendencies in an era in which values were reassessed. The main narrative also examines the reality of the idea of Christian love, its oscillation between *agape* and *eros*, and ideas of God associated with the early stage of modernisation during Pak Chŏnghŭi's era.

Key words: Korea, Christianity, 20th century, novel, Yi Sŭngu, *Saengŭi i myŏn*

Christianity and the Transitional System of Values

On the threshold of the twentieth century, the combination of massive modernisation and the loss of Korea's sovereignty gave birth to a new ideology centred around nationalism. However, whereas "Christian patriot" was an untenable identity in Japan and China, in Korea "this identity, charged up through ritual action against a non-Western aggressor, remained a viable option" (Cane & Park, 2009,

p. 391). At that time, Koreans mainly understood Christianity as a mundane phenomenon, like streetlights or trams. The persistent efforts of foreign Christian missionaries resulted in Christianity becoming deeply integrated in various areas of life. New communalities arose, and the church and school became centres of education. The Christian hospital, offering several standards of care, started to become a fixture in cities. The accommodation of Christianity varied;[1] it was not limited to the intellectual elite representing the nation. Many scholars have written about Christianity's role during Korea's initial modernisation process and the Japanese annexation, presenting diverse and, at times, opposing views.[2] Christianity, however, has played an indisputable role in Korean feminism.[3]

In the early twentieth century, Korean intellectuals considered Christianity a new religion, a prerequisite of being modern. Christians themselves saw their religion as having the potential for regaining and defending Korean independence, and outside the Christian community it was viewed as a strange phenomenon that was hostile towards tradition, people, and the family. Despite Christianity's presence and popularity among a certain population group, the ideas it contained were not reflected in the modern system of values. When intellectuals enumerated the concepts critical to establishing a future Korean state or nation-building, they never mentioned ideas drawn from Christianity. For example, let us examine Yi Kwangsu's 이광수 (1916) (1892–1950) essay, *Munhak iran hao* 문학이란하오? (What is Literature?), the seminal text of the new modern literature. The author does mention Christianity and even praises it, but not for its spiritual power but because it fostered the spread of the Korean alphabet, *hangŭl*: "with Protestantism flooding into Korea, the Old and New Testaments and other Christian works have been translated into Korean recently, contributing to the wide use of *hangŭl* and influencing the Korean literary world."(Yi, K., 1916/2025)[4] Yi Kwangsu experi-

[1] In Korea, Protestantism was widely accepted and accommodated. However, Catholicism functioned as a parallel option. It is hard to evaluate the process as a whole without further distinctions and details that are not the object of this study.

[2] An enormous number of studies about Christianity in the first half of the twentieth century have been produced. Naturally, they all take different views on Christianity's importance, often stemming from the authors' own identities and priorities, and the aims of the book or article.

[3] Without a doubt, Christianity was highly beneficial for women: Nevertheless, women's voices were not decisive or major in colonial society, or prominent in modern literature. For details see, e.g., Baker, 2016; Choi, 2020.

[4] Yi Kwangsu. *Munhak iran hao*? [online, pdf file]. https://m.blog.naver.com/PostView.naver?isHttpsRedirect=true&blogId=woongbob&logNo=50086813204. Yi Kwangsu was influenced by Christianity, but as a teacher in Osan school "he disagreed with conservative Presbyterian theology and could not compromise his intellectual honesty to embrace a literal understanding of the Bible or accept at face value traditional doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and Resurrection" (Matsutani, 2012, p. 260).

enced missionary work firsthand, and, as a typical intellectual, he disagreed with it. His observation that "[t]he educated classes of today are not satisfied with the kind of Christianity we have now" (Matsutani, 2012, p. 267) characterises Christianity's complicated situation in Korea and the intellectual opposition against Christian institutions and missions.

Christianity is not a precondition for the new education, not a medicine for the new woman, even though both education and medical care were provided by institutions established by missionaries. Christianity was a part of everyday life, especially in the capital of Seoul. However, even if a person was a member of the Christian community, it did not mean that it was the sole ground of their whole life and no other ideologies or '–isms' could have a substantial impact on them. It was not a voice for the future or the next generations.

Christianity was an imported dogma; it did not belong to the Korean nation, and Koreans would have never considered it to be "ours".[5] It was distinctly supranational, personified by figures such as Jesus, God, and the Pope, which Koreans could not adopt or apply to the national rhetoric.[6] Instead, the Korean elites drew heavily on "national" or nationalised belief systems such as Ch'ŏndogyo. Buddhism was also transformed to meet nation-building needs.[7]

Christianity and Korean Literature

Christianity in Korean literature had no tradition in the pre-modern era. The *literati* only addressed this issue in the late 1700s, when Catholicism was having its initial impact on the country; almost all of them opposed this novel religion from the position of Confucian scholars in *mundaps*, fictional dialogues or treatises. The best example of such a work is An Chŏngbok's 安鼎福 (1785/1996)

[5] Some scholars have evaluated the impact of Christianity as powerful. For example Donald Baker (2016): "Christianity had more influence on Korea's religious culture as well as politics and society in general over the last two centuries than either Buddhism or the indigenous religion of shamanism/animism have had. Moreover, though the legacy of Confucianism is still strong in Korea today, particularly in ethical rhetoric and in defining and strengthening family solidarity, Christianity has played a much greater role than even Confucianism has in stimulating the cultural transformations that have created the Korean culture we see today" (p. 47).

[6] This thesis is not applicable to the Christian press and publications, but it is not the general perception of the society.

[7] Though nationalists and authors of the cardinal texts were modernists at heart, relying on Western philosophers for their most radical concepts, they did not understand that Europeans were mostly Christians or educated at Christian institutions, in other words that there was a Christian ethos in the background of every Western text. Therefore, Western civilisation was read outside of its Christian context.

(1712–1791) famous *Ch´ŏnhak mundap* 天學問答 (Dialogue about Christianity). Some *mundaps*, however, defended the religion, such as Chŏng Hasang's 丁夏祥 (1839/2025) *Sangjesangsŏ* 上宰相書 (Letter to the Prime Minister).[8] Nevertheless, Christianity was not a central issue in *literati* discourse, but only the peripheral interest of some scholars, an expression of their ideological standpoints, whether positive or negative.[9] After Korea opened up in 1876, Christian motifs appeared in *sin sosŏl*, the new prose, but mostly as symbols of the West or modernity (in the form of a church building or a church bell). When modern literature was emerging in Korea, Christianity was new and still not a central theme in stories or writings dealing with the essence of religion; it was not yet considered an idea readers had to deal with.

However, several early-twentieth-century Korean authors incorporated Christianity into their texts as something natural (e.g., in Yi Kwangsu's *Mujŏng* 무정, The Heartless, the first modern novel, serialised in 1917), as a status symbol. In *Mujŏng*, one of the protagonist's possible partners comes from the Christian family of a diplomat. As a "new woman" she is characterised by her religion, her piano playing, and use of the English language. In the same novel, the main character, Hyŏngsik, believes that he is a pioneer of progressive thought in Korea. He reads

> Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Émile*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*. He read[s] political theory and literary criticism in the new journals … [H]e knows Tagore and read[s] the biography of Ellen Kay. (Yi, K., 2010, pp. 229-230)

This brief enumeration includes Western classics that are not of an explicitly religious nature.[10] Yi Kwangsu rejects literature's educational aspect and the moral frameworks encoded in works, as he states in the above-mentioned *Mun-*

[8] Both treatises are written in Classical Chinese in the form of a traditional Confucian dialogue (*mundap*). They also use the same terms and arguments.

[9] Outside the mainstream was the subgenre of the religious *kasa*, long poems which served as a tool to teach catechism. *Kasa* was also used in genres such as travelogues, diaries, and admonitions. The religious *kasa* of the nineteenth century served not only for Christian, but also Buddhist and Tonghak catechisms. The form of the *kasa* is appropriate for memorising the basic ideas and the essence of teachings. The most well-known Catholic *kasa* is Chŏng Yakchong's 정약종 *(1760–1801) Chugyo yoji* 쥬교요지 (*The Essence of Catholicism).*

[10] Traditional reading in this novel is attributed to the hero's former love Yŏngch'ae, who believes she has to behave like classical literary heroines such as Ch'unhyang and Sim Chŏng, heroines who influenced the portrait of the ideal woman: Ch'unhyang as a faithful wife and Sim Chŏng as an illustrious daughter. Also the motif of selling herself to save her father, taken from Chinese literature, was highly popular. Yŏngch'ae behaved like a classical heroine, but her model didn't work anymore.

hak iran hao. In *Mujŏng,* he stresses that traditional values do not belong in a modern society and can be dangerous, as the main female character, Yŏngch'ae, experiences. Significantly, his protagonist does not believe that Christianity can help him.

The first two generations of modern Korean authors did not share the same value systems. Yi Kwangsu's positive view of modernity was countered in stories written by Kim Tongin 김동인 (1900–1951) or later in Kim Tongni's 김동리 (1913–1995) prose. The naturalist writers of the 1920s did not praise modernism and the revolution in the values it promoted as a step forward. In several stories from the 1920s, modernity results in the protagonists' moral collapse and committing sins against Confucianism.[11]

Korean leftist proletarian literature,[12] like the progressive Marxist-influenced writing produced in Europe throughout the twentieth century, demonised religion. The writers of such literature followed Karl Marx's (1843) (1818–1883) famous claim that religion "is the *opium* of the people" made in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.[13] Although throughout the twentieth century this quotation was frequently invoked to describe Communism's relationship with religion, it was often read out of context.[14]

However, prewar proletarian novels, such as Han Sŏrya's 한설야 (1936) (1900–1976) *Hwanghon* 황혼 (Dusk) or Kang Kyŏngae's 강경애 (1934) (1906–1944) *Ingan munje* 인간문제 (Human Tasks),[15] and short stories do not describe otherwise despicable characters – capitalists, landowners, or girls from wealthy families – as being Christians.

In early modern literature being a Christian is a requisite feature of modern characters, as in *Mujŏng*, like playing the piano, wearing modern clothing, and studying abroad. The only exception is Kim Namch'ŏn's 김남천 (1939) (1911–1953) *Taeha* 대하 (The Tide) , a social novel set in the early twentieth century.

[11] They can be understood as universal sins. Protagonists violate the basic commandments, commit murder or infidelity, and transgress against cardinal familial or societal relationships. They feature parasites, whores, etc.

[12] Proletarian literature in Korea was introduced in 1925, and until 1935 it produced stories, novels, and plays with the idea they would support the oppressed.

[13] Marx, 1843. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm

[14] Marx continues his criticism with the following explanation: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*." (Marx, 1843) https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm

[15] For details about both novels and an analysis, see Löwensteinová and Yu, 2023.

The author associates Christianity with the new education and ideas of human equality, presenting this religion in a positive light as a means for liberating the self. Christianity provides opportunities to underprivileged people like the protagonist, who is a bastard child, and a *kisaeng*. On the other hand, despite its positive power, Christianity could not solve the crucial problems in the protagonist's life.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Christianity was not a central theme in Korean literature; it featured rarely, and when it did it was presented as a modern but foreign ideology, underlining the clash between traditional thought and imported religion, between the old and the new, between ours and theirs.[16] To sum up, in this period, religion did not play a key role in Korean literature, that is, unless we consider nationalism or modernism to be a form of religion. It seems as if Yi Kwangsu's call for emotionality without morality in modern Korean literature had finally been heeded.

Intermezzo*:* Ŭlhwa and *Sŭngnyangi*

Two influential works of fiction in which religion plays a main role were produced in postwar Korea. The first is Kim Tongni's (1934) *Munyŏdo* 무녀도 (The Portrait of a Shaman), later rewritten as the famous full-length novel *Ŭlhwa* 을화 (*Ŭlhwa*) (1978/1995), which deals with shamanism, Confucianism, and Christianity; it presents Christianity mainly as a negative ideology. The second work is the iconic novel *Sŭngnyangni* 승량이 (The Wolves) (1951/1961), written during the Korean War. In it the author, Han Sŏrya portrays American missionaries in a highly unfavourable light. The novel had a wide circulation during the 1950s and was later adapted in various works as a drama and film, and used in propaganda in North Korea. Although the word "wolves" had been used as a metaphor for Americans for decades, it lost its religious sense and served as a propaganda tool. Although one of these books was widely known south of the 38th parallel and the other north of it, they both shared an anti-Christian sentiment, and the motifs they contained resonated throughout postwar culture and literature.[17]

[16] In a very particular way, Christianity is depicted in Kim Tongin's (2017) short story *Myŏngmun* (Distinguished Statement) (1924), in which the main hero misinterprets the Ten Commandments. Here, Kim Tongin criticised passionate Korean Christians who committed crimes in the name of their faith. However, Kim Tongin's knowledge of Christian dogma was imperfect, and his protagonist, Chŏn Chusa, ends up standing before Yahweh to be judged.

[17] Surprisingly, Yi Sŭngu's (2013) *Saengŭi i myŏn*, even though it is set in the 1960s, shares the same motifs as Ŭlhwa.

Kim Tongni's Ŭlhwa develops the prewar short story *Munyŏdo*. The author tells the story of a shaman whose son was educated as a Christian. He returns to his home village and tries to Christianise his family. The author does not depict Christianity as an alternative faith that brings spiritual power to the individual or solves their troubles. In this novel, the mother's and son's gods are in conflict with each other. In the beginning, it is not a deadly dangerous battle. The Christianity of the shaman's son seems to be a personal faith, a sort of love. For other people, especially men in the village, it represents personal ambitions in the same way as Confucianism did before. This Christianity looks like an intolerant dogma. Therefore, two Gods are fighting: the better and idealist one of Ŭlhwa's son, who is a Christian in his heart and tries to convert his shamanistic mother. He is convinced that his mother's faith is heretical, and he offers salvation to her because he loves her. This face of Christianity does not prove its "power"; the author lets the son die. The real "power" of Christianity was possessed by the village elite of Confucian style, presbyters, and other Christian men. They follow the old Confucian ways, with ambitions to rule over the village. These men cause the family's destruction, which was sparked by the son's faith but culminated due to the dirty politics of those who are in power. However, the Bible in this novel symbolises evil, and therefore, the mother-shaman decides to burn it.[18]

Sŭngnyangi is a symptomatic product of North Korean literature, connected with Communist ideology. Christianity only plays a minor role in the plot. The American missionary couple and their son are portrayed primarily as enemies of the Korean people. Han Sŏrya, however, depicts their power as coming from Christianity, and their ideas about God's priorities inform their racist thinking (God has no interest in black people and dirty Koreans). The nature and source of their racist beliefs are exemplified in the following dialogue between the pastor and his son, Simon:

> "But father, we Americans have the right to beat blacks to death, don't we? God forgives us for doing that."
> "That's because blacks are not sons of God."
> "And Koreans are?"
> At this, the missionary hesitated a while, then said:
> "There are some sons of God among them… Reverend Yi, Reverend Kim, Elder An..." (Meyers, 1994, p. 165)

This religious worldview justifies the missionaries' appalling crimes, such as brutally beating an innocent Korean child, then intentionally giving him a lethal injection, and subsequently cremating him without performing the proper ritu-

[18] The crucial chapter of this battle is titled "The Bible and Knife".

als. The opposite of these 'wolves' are little Sugil and his mother and their sincere Christian faith.[19]

Postwar "National" Religiosity

During Yi Sŭngman's presidency (1948–1960), Protestantism came to hold a unique relationship with political power, which continued under President Pak Chŏnghŭi's administration (1961–1979), especially when Pak announced campaigns against corruption, immorality, and superstition. Nevertheless, the country's leaders proclaimed Buddhism to be a faith that could solve Korea's problems; for example, at a session titled Korean National Culture: Tradition and Modernity held in 1978, one of Pak Chŏnghŭi's supporters, Yi Kiyŏng, made the following statement: "I do not think the modern world is succeeding in solving the absurdities of industrial society within the boundaries of Western civilisation"; "All the problems we met [alienation] are caused by Westernisation. The nation should not be a cultural colony of the so-called 'advanced countries'" (Kim, Tae-kil, 1990, p. 308). This signals the priorities of power, and although modernisation and Westernisation continued in the 1960s and 1970s, strong counter-reactions emerged, especially in the cultural or spiritual spheres.

However, it was Kim Tongni who addressed postwar tendencies in literature in his famous essay *Sunsu munhagŭi chinŭi – minjok munhagŭi tangmyŏn kwajerosŏ* 순수문학의 진의 민족문학의 당면과제로서 (The True Meaning of Pure Literature: The Contemporary Task of National Literature), published in *Sŏul sinmun* on 15 September 1946, and widely discussed in the southern part of the peninsula. Kim Tongni, an authority on literature, proclaimed that it was time that Korean writers gave up their aspirations of breaking into the global literary scene. He claimed Koreans were not yet mature enough for this move and that first they had to understand their own traditions. In this essay, Kim Tongni purposefully regrounds Korean literature in the national tradition. Korea had not yet reached a stage where it could fully absorb imported systems and traditions. Therefore, as Korean literature did not incorporate broader European concepts, Korean writers could not imitate contemporary Western ways of thinking. Instead, he deemed the Korean way of writing acceptable for the following decades. The ideas contained in this essay are, of course, nationalistic but they did not permanently reject all invented traditions. The author simply prioritised the domestic over the imported, a category which also included Christianity (Kim, Tongni, 2013, pp. 105–109).

[19] For this, see the absence of all Christian symbols at posters dealing with the theme. There are no missionaries, but American soldiers, who throw the new-born into the well before the eyes of his mother.

Saengŭi i myŏn as a Testimony of Pak Chŏnghŭi's Era

Yi Sŭngu's 이승우 (1992) (b. 1959) novel *Saengŭi i myŏn* 생의이면 (The Reverse Side of Life) takes place from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a period covering the end of Yi Sŭngman's presidency and the first decade of Pak Chŏnghŭi's rule. The novel is set in a wide range of locations. The story begins in a remote village, where the protagonist is born and raised, before moving to small towns and, finally, to the capital in the 1960s. The changing geographical location enables the novel to portray the sharp contrast between the countryside and the capital as the processes of modernisation, Westernisation, and nationalisation were occurring. Not all these processes are depicted in detail, however.

This novel stands out due to the particular position of its author: Yi Sŭngu was not only a well-known writer during Korea's early democratisation, but he had also received a theological education, which is reflected especially in *Saengŭi i myŏn*'s philosophical subtext. The story can be read as an allegorical depiction of being expelled from Paradise (although not from the true Paradise) and being forced to wander the world seeking salvation, ultimately to find redemption. However, such a reading involves a rather teleological simplification that ignores the main story of the disturbed individual. As a twenty-first-century reader, I tend towards the interpretation that this novel deals with a child and a teenager who lacks a proper family and parental care during the era of runaway modernisation. Therefore, it is not Christianity that plays a decisive role in the child's formative years, but society and its changes. However, the main character lives through an era of ideological shifts that create a special mixture of tradition and modernity, the renewal and reinterpretation of nationalism, in which Christianity plays a certain role.

The Faces of Christianity

> There were too many Christianities. Nevertheless, the many Christianities were united in the desire to imitate the life and spirit of Jesus. If there was a difference, it was in how they understood and interpreted that life and spirit. Such differences in understanding and interpretation created countless, distinct Christianities. (Lee, 2005, p. 186)

Yi Sŭngu's knowledge of theology sets him apart from his contemporaries, and as a result *Saengŭi i myŏn* differs from other literary works from this period. The novel contains an unprecedented number of biblical allusions. For example, we find the motif of a forbidden fruit (the boy is not allowed to enter a back garden to eat persimmons). Violating the rules, the boy picks a persimmon, an act for which he is punished. He is then allowed to taste the fruit, but unlike Adam and Eve, he

gains no knowledge by doing so. Breaking this taboo leads to the boy's discovery of a madman, whom the child helps die; this man turns out to be the child's father (hence the motif of patricide).

The boy's experience with the taboo can also be considered mystical. The novel, however, contains more than just indirect allusions to biblical themes; it also directly mentions the Bible, both as a symbol and a physical object. The Bible's importance is also discussed by students of theology who refer to it as "sacred". The Bible is also described as one of the books the child "consumes as cows and lambs chew the cud" (Lee, 2005, p. 11). Despite the Bible's frequent presence in the novel, it contains no biblical quotations.[20]

Another symbol of Christianity featured throughout the novel is the cross, which is presented in two contrasting ways. In a rural church, we see an abandoned cross lying in disgrace; in contrast, in a Seoul church, the cross belongs to its place. In this context, the cross spiritualises; it represents more than just Christ's dead body. The protagonist speaks to the cross (not to God, not to Christ). God and Christ are not his idols; for him, the cross is God. How the protagonist imagines Jesus and God is intermingled with other profane symbols that he draws from his extensive reading.[21] However, the Bible and the cross (his God) are not symbols of his religiosity but of a turning point in his life.

In this novel, Christianity is filtered through the eyes of a child. It is Christianity accommodated and not free from domestic arrangements and politically ambitious addenda. Almost unspoken questions include the concept of God and His importance in contrast to the individual, a very rare motif in Korean fiction.

Christianity in Korean society, as mirrored in this novel, went through three distinct phases that functioned consecutively. They are defined by how people interacted with God and what their expectations were. This development is interconnected with the protagonist's interpretation of love in the light of Christian concepts, especially that presented in Anders Nygren's (1930) (1890–1978) essential book *Agape and Eros*, which combines traditional and imported religious concepts of the sacred.

The storyline of *Saengŭi I Myŏn* does not concentrate on Korean Christianity but on how a person's early years shape the rest of his life, and how the absence of a family model provided by a father and mother and their care leads a child into sociopathy. The plot also focuses on the protagonist's search for love in a form that he can produce.

[20] The novel does mention other Christian literature, such as Pascal's (1995) book *Pensées*, in which the author controversially defended Catholicism by claiming that God was hidden from people.

[21] He is a voracious reader; as a child he reads legal literature, and at university his reading is a selection of theological writings and new books from the West.

The first part of the story is set in the countryside, where family life was still guided by *hoju*, the family "head". The demands from the family drive the protagonist's father mad, and his mother is banished because she allegedly contributed to his husband's madness. Against this narrative backdrop, the role of the church and pastors in the remote parts of the country is presented. The second part of the novel is set in the capital. The Seoul of the 1960s is a manifestation of modernity with an emphasis on the role of the Christian community and its function. The third part of the narrative focuses on the protagonist's coming-of-age and his early university studies. The ambitions of Christianity to participate in political power are exemplified in students' discussions about concepts of God, the sacred and the profane, and the necessity of broadly reforming ideas about the function of God. In any case, religion comforts the oppressed and the lonely through music and by evoking feelings of safety and stability; religion also supports ideas of community, collectivism, and new hope. It also always works like an anaesthetic for the desperate, following Marx's idea about religion as the "opium of the people". This broad representation of Christianity, although portrayed through fiction, provides many details about the essence of modern Korean religiosity.

The book depicts the society of the Pak Chŏnghŭi era from the point of view of a child, a wanderer, a person who voluntarily seeks loneliness but also the company of "his" person (love). He encounters Christianity in three different spaces and forms: 1) in rural pastors, their roles, and ambitions; 2) in the Christian community in the capital; and 3) at the theology college where he studied.

Each space has its specific symbols. The novel portrays the village as devoid of any signs of modernity, such as paved roads or electricity, and its inhabitants as traditional and heartless. The locals observe the pastor in much the same way people did in the 1930s.

> One day, a young man who had left the village a long time before suddenly returned, carrying a briefcase with a Bible, hymnal, and tracts inside. He wore a suit with dress shoes and glasses. […] He went around the village, passed out tracts, and tried to give a speech whenever two people were gathered. At night, he rang the bell. In this way, Christianity was introduced to this village. (Lee, 2005, p. 29)

The pastor is only accepted by women, including the protagonist's mother. Like other women, at night she visits the pastor in church or at his home, where he consoles her. He is a confidant to whom she can trust her misfortunes. To her he does not represent faith, but a rare opportunity to communicate. Her communication with God is one function of Christianity that Marx and Feuerbach criticised due to its false premise, arguing that it is a human who created God. Children come to church for sweets, and the pastor teaches them basic Bible stories and the Ten

Commandments. The pastor seems to be a positive figure; on the other hand, he does not understand his role as a mission, but as one step in a career coloured by enjoyment and luxury. For the protagonist, the church is a place his mother visits at night, from which she returns home to hug him and cry. The church is also a place where he is informed about her banishment. It is also in the empty church that he plays the organ and contemplates. The church with the fallen cross provokes him to engage in a strange revolt before he leaves the village. For him, this church does not represent magnificence, fond memories, or safety; its image and the memories of his mother awaken not his faith but rebellion.

Urban areas promised many illusions: ample food supplies, modernity, a fast pace of life, and fun. The novel presents a modern church that is separate, safe, where nobody can interfere. The church, however, does not offer an alternative to modern life; the faithful are consumers as well. There is no pastor visible; the community is guided by women. It is an open but closed community with prayers, a sacred space, but also the profane (the Sunday school). Members of the community receive benefits such as stipends. For the protagonist, the city church, in contrast to the village church, is a safe place. When he enters it for the first time, he is in danger but is enchanted by a piano melody played by a woman. This church delights his eyes, ears, and nose. It is a place of light. The plot follows his special acceptance of God, whom he understands as a way to receive "her" as the essence of all his religious emotions. To obtain her, he "signs" a contract with God and accepts the formal conditions of the community (he becomes a believer and a student of theology).

The protagonist's third encounter with Christianity comes in the form of a theology college University students understand theology and God in several ways that reflect the ambitions of the church in the 1960s and 1970s. The protagonist's university life seems to be liberal. The library offers translations of works of world literature (books by Albert Camus, James Joyce, Hermann Hesse, and André Gide are mentioned), political theory, and philosophy – not by ancient writers, but contemporary, truly modern authors (e.g. the theologians James H. Cone, Jürgen Moltmann, and Gustavo Gutierrez, Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Anders Nygren). The novel also depicts a student strike. Most importantly, through this novel, Yi tries to understand political theology and *minjung* theology, interconnected and viewed by the university students, whose debates and thoughts paint a vivid picture of the state of Christianity in the early 1970s.

> In one quarter of the Christian world as well, contemporary politics were discussed more frequently now. Speakers pointed out the meaninglessness of individual salvation in the absence of social change and argued emphatically that the focus should be on the salvation of society through the reform of the system. But this was not the voice of Christianity as a whole. Left and right coexisted under the name of Christianity. Both mystics and prophets were Christians. (Lee, 2005, p. 186)

Two Faces of Love

Throughout the novel, the author deals with the protagonist's capacity for love, or rather the lack of this capacity. Love is, however, a cardinal concept in Christianity. In the novel, we encounter love several times and in various forms, all of which inevitably end in failure. Like every child, the young protagonist needs parental love to confirm his existence, but he does not get it as he loses his mother and father early in life. His relationship with his parents is complicated and rather hateful; his need for his mother's love is projected onto a woman and his desire for his father's onto God, at least for a while. He feels the necessity to surrender to authority, and he views God as the authority he needs (Lee, 2005, p. 144).

A woman whom he meets in a church is older than him. There is no reason for his love. However, he understands her as his other self and his love for her is nothing but the self-love of Narcissus (p. 163). Yi Sŭngu asks if such love can be considered a blessing. His answer is no: such love is practically adoration, which is akin to selfishness. To the protagonist, she is the idea of perfection. But the woman he sees, longs for, depends on, and dreams about does not exist in substance. He merely projects onto her the image of the perfect woman he has created in his mind (p. 167). This view is a result of his belief that the world does not stand on his side (see the title of the book), but being on the reverse side means to be chosen. What he offers to this woman is his company, his side of the world. His feelings for her shift between Nygren's *agape* and *eros*.[22] His love seems to be a kind of cult. He puts her on a pedestal, only to later tear it down. When he smells her scents and hears her sounds, he feels as if he owns them. He knows, however, that she is not a goddess and he is not God. Nevertheless, he asks her to fulfil his requirements; he asks her to be isolated, and he wants to be rewarded because of his adoration. This leads to collapse.

Here, the author opens up the invisible and inexhaustible concept of Christian love, as viewed by Pascal and especially Nygren. Nygren calls Christian love *agape* or unselfish love, which is God's love for humans (Bankston, 2007, p. 47). Agape is spontaneous and unmotivated. Creatures that are loved have value because of this love, not because the object of love deserves love or not. In the Platonic sense, it is necessary to differentiate between the vulgar Eros and the heavenly Eros. However, this love is profane in all its representations. Nygren's idea of agape attributes love to the Christian tradition. Yi's (1992) protagonist is not able to love; he understands love as worship and tries to reach God through the object of his affection. He believes his love is absolute: "I worshipped her, because I believed

[22] Nygren distinguishes between two concepts of love, for which he uses the Greek terms *eros* and *agape*. The former is a non-Christian concept of love, while the latter denotes the Christian conception. For details, see Tollefsen, 2021, p. 18.

worshipping is the highest form of love […]. If the most beautiful and pure love was called agape, my love had to be called Agape" (p. 180). However, the protagonist's idea of love can change to meet his needs: his love is sometimes presented as an alternative to God. On the other hand, he demands the "object" of his love to behave like a goddess. His love is ultimately more than just eros. Eros is possessive and individual; it is an obsession. As the protagonist confesses, "I loved as if I were fighting a war" (p. 180).

Ideas of God

> *"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."*
> (1 John. 4:8)

In Korea, the discussion about the essence of the Christian God began when the country first encountered Catholicism, and it still continues today. Korean ideas about God's appearance and functions have been influenced by the indigenous culture through Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanism. In *Saengŭi i myŏn*, God is closely connected with love. In the first part of the story, the protagonist's mother accepts God, but she does not communicate with Him directly; she needs a mediator, and therefore, the pastor plays an essential role here. Her understanding of God is religious but not conscious. Her communication with Him goes in only one direction; she asks but offers nothing. This primitive religiosity changes in the second part of the book, where the protagonist tries to define his relationship with God:

> God could not be the motive for his actions […] He believed that had he not met her, he would not have known anything about God. And in some ways, it was true. But, strangely enough, to get close to her, he had to go through God. She was the bridge that led to her. He could not help but do whatever she wanted, and this is because he understood God's will through her will. (Lee, 2005, p. 144)

The protagonist's confession in front of a cross leads to a special acceptance of God, whom he understands as superior. But his relationship with God is transactional, as he expects something in return.

The last concept of God presented in the novel reflects the reality of Pak Chŏnghŭi's era and the awakening of the modern sense of God that had to be reformed according to current needs; it also helped the oppressed.

> We existed between politics and religion. The age in which we lived did not let our lives take their course. […] The two coordinates defining our existence were politics and religion […] the line marking one's political position was drawn from left to right, and asked our attitude towards form and reform. Another line marking our religious position was drawn from the top to the bottom and measured our level of conservatism or progressivism. (Lee, 2005, p. 157)

This excerpt describes the relationships between God and people and between people and politics. During Pak Chŏnghŭi's rule, students felt it necessary to enter politics and establish their position. Yi's novel reflects the era and its focus on reform by depicting discussions held among students of theology. Students' ideas of God reflect different requests and societal demands. There is a "political God of the oppressed, who demanded reforms (progressive), but another God who stays in the prayer room (conservative)." In the middle, we can also observe the God who "is in the midst of the people, and people means universal sense. He [the protagonist] is interested in awakening the God hidden in people's souls" (p. 160).

These representations of God symbolise the visage of the age and His possible personalisation. The progressive notion of God portrayed Jesus as a political Messiah (a prophet who enters the civil space), while the conservative idea called for a spiritual Messiah (a priest who stays in the library or prayer room). Students stressed God's outer and inner roles, and thus, an active and passive attitude to God. Nevertheless, the modern Korean Christian is portrayed as a *homo politicus*, that is, not as a simple believer sacrificing his life to God, the church, and their representatives. And such a God might support the political requests of the era. In this novel, believers ask Him for consolation, they receive welfare, and, finally, they offer to provide benefits. The characters in this work of fiction take different approaches to communicating with God. Villagers are portrayed as subordinates engaged in monologue with God. In contrast, members of the church community in Seoul hold dialogues with God that are meant to lead to agreement. Finally, the basis of the dialogue is equality. Such a dialogue means reformation of Him, though He is understood as Messiah or fighter.

Conclusions

Not many religious motifs appear in modern Korean literature, and only a few novels focus on Christianity as a major theme. *Saengŭi i myŏn* is an exception. In many respects, it is an outstanding novel. It is innovative in its focalisation, as it discusses important themes related to human existence and poses a set of essen-

tial questions. It touches on Korean spirituality during the era of industrialization and the role of faith-based ideologies in the military regime. It also serves as a source of information about religiosity in postwar Korea, especially Christianity. The story unfolds in chronological order, beginning in the late 1950s and ending in the early 1970s. The setting shifts from a remote village to the capital. The plot also serves as a vehicle for portraying generational and gender changes in modern Korean society.

The novel paints a picture of Christianity in the era of Pak Chŏnghŭi. It depicts distinctive village pastors, the church community, and young theologians.

Two cardinal themes run through the novel's plot, both connected with Christianity. The first one is love and its representation, from parental love to the love of God, its presence, and its absence. The second theme deals with people's relationships with God and ideas about His role. It starts by pleading with God in villages and presenting Him in the church in Seoul. This is the passive standpoint of believers. The active relationship is guided by the idea of reforming, helping, or "substituting" God, which represents the political theology in Korea during the late 1960s.

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