

## **Hananim, Hanūnim, Hanullim, and Hanöllim: The Construction of Terminology for Korean Monotheism**

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This paper questions the assumption that Koreans were monotheistic long before they encountered Christianity. The author first examines ancient myths and historical records which have been used to support a claim for an indigenous Korean tradition of belief in one God. He suggests that those sources have been misread and misinterpreted. He then examines more recent documents, starting with the earliest Catholic and Tonghak writings in han'gŭl. Those materials provide further support for the argument that Koreans had no indigenous term for God in the monotheistic sense until Protestant Christians began using the terms "Hananim" and "Hanūlim" near the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that new religions such as Ch'ōndo-kyo and Taejong-kyo have had to coin their own names for God, Hanullim and Hanöllim respectively, is cited as further evidence that there were no indigenous Korean terms for God until fairly recently. The author concludes that an indigenous Korean monotheism is an invented tradition.

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The people of Korea are quite conservative, generally speaking, and traditionally have preferred the old to the new. Koreans love to brag that Korean civilization is 5,000 years old, for example. Sometimes they even mock relatively young nations such as the US and Canada for lacking any genuine culture of their own, as though there is something suspect about anything which lacks deep roots. Although Korean society and culture have been transformed by rapid urbanization and industrialization over the last forty years, South Korea has managed to

keep the doors of over 230 Confucian academies open, more than in any other nation in the world, even more than now exist in all of China. Another sign that Koreans have kept one foot in the past even as they have marched boldly into the future is that shamans continue to thrive even in modern Seoul, where they cast out troublesome spirits within the shadows of towering skyscrapers.

Over the last hundred years, Koreans have joined nationalism to their conservatism. In the first half of the twentieth century, almost four decades of Japanese colonial rule, and the disdain for Korean culture those colonizers expressed, led to a Korean counter-reaction which was expressed in proud claims of not only the antiquity but also the glories of Korean tradition and Korean civilization. When Korea gained its autonomy in 1945, it found it had to borrow everything from industrial technology to educational systems from the outside world if it wanted to survive and prosper. This blow to traditional Korean pride in self-sufficiency further fueled that nationalistic counter-reaction. In North Korea, this reactionary nationalism had led to grandiose claims that the first homo sapiens appeared in what is now North Korea, and that the world's first writing system was invented in the P' yŏngyang area. South Korean nationalism has been somewhat more reasonable, but nevertheless the last couple of decades have witnessed a growing tendency to exaggerate the accomplishments of ancient Koreans. For example, there are dozens of books for sale in bookstores in Seoul which include maps of an alleged ancient Korean empire which supposedly embraced much of what is now northern China and southern Japan 5,000 or more years ago.

Even though there is no archaeological evidence for this purported ancient Chosŏn kingdom, nor much documentary information about the cultures which supposedly followed it in and around the Korean peninsula a couple of millennia ago, a lot of scholarly time and energy has been spent describing and analysing such ancient Korean culture and civilization. In those descriptions, we often find clear evidence of conservatism and nationalism interfering with the accuracy and objectivity which are supposed to be essential elements of academic research and writing.

One example of such interference is the invention of an indigenous ancient tradition of monotheism. When Korea began modernizing at

the end of the 19th century, most of the first modern schools and hospitals were opened by Christian missionaries with the help of their Korean converts. The leading role Christianity played in modernizing Korea was stymied temporarily during Japanese colonial rule, but after 1945 Christians, both Korean and foreign, again took the lead in adapting institutions in South Korea to better cope with the modern world. This link between Christianity and modernization in modern Korean history has created a crisis of ethnic self-confidence for some Korean nationalists. Some wonder, since modernization and Christianity have become so closely intertwined in Korea, must Koreans abandon their traditional religious beliefs and practices in order to become modern?

One solution, allowing Koreans to maintain pride in their past while marching into the future, has been to redefine the past to make it more compatible with the present. In religion, this has meant claiming that the monotheism which Christianity introduced to the Korean peninsula, and which therefore has become an identifying characteristic of a modern religion, is actually nothing new or imported at all. Over the last century or so, many Koreans, both Christians and non-Christian alike, have come to believe that in ancient times Koreans believed in one God, a God called *Hanūnim*, and that therefore monotheism is neither new nor imported but is old and indigenous. This assertion of an indigenous Korean monotheism has been made so many times, and by so many respected scholars, that it has become a mainstream assumption of Korean religious history, and has even sparked the birth of new non-Christian organized monotheistic religions in Korea.

This claim that Korean religious culture has been essentially monotheistic for millennia allows Koreans to be both conservative and modern (by identifying the new idea of One God with the ancient past) as well as both nationalist and open to the outside world (by adopting a new theological orientation from the West but claiming that such a theological orientation has Korean roots). Since a belief in ancient Korean monotheism thus allows Koreans to maintain pride in their traditions and in their ancestors while at the same time radically transforming much of what their ancestors created and passed down to them, it has gained overwhelming support in both academia and in popular culture. Nevertheless, it lacks much scholarly evidence to support it. The indigenous Korean tradition of monotheism is an invented

tradition, and the theological terminology which has been constructed to support that tradition is of equally recent vintage.

A lot of scholarly ink has been spilled building a case for the Korean origins of modern monotheism.<sup>1</sup> Arguing that Korean monotheism is a relatively recent construction is swimming against the tide. In order to do so, I first need to address the evidence which has been used to support the original hypothesis of indigenous monotheism, and show how the documents which form that evidence have been misread. Only then can I go on to show how modern Korean names for the One God have been constructed and sold to the public.

The oldest accounts of the people who lived in and around the Korean peninsula are Chinese records from around 1,700 years ago. Though the traditional dates for the founding of the Three Kingdoms of ancient Korea would indicate that kingdoms had already arisen on and around the peninsula by this time, those Chinese records indicate that the Korean peninsula was primarily inhabited by tribal peoples at that time. Moreover, it is clear that, rather than one Korean people, there were a wide variety of peoples, with different languages and customs, living to the north-east of what had been Han China. However, Korean scholars often point out that these various peoples did share several common cultural elements, one of which was the worship of heaven. For example, the northern Manchuria *Puyō* people are said to have sacrificed to heaven, as did the peoples of *Koguryō*, *Ye*, and *Mahan*.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, some scholars argue, worship of “*hanūnim*,” the God in Heaven Above, has ancient indigenous roots.

There are a number of problems with such an interpretation. First of all, the worship of heaven described in those Chinese records is clearly not a reflection of a monotheistic tradition. The worship of several other spirits is mentioned as well. Moreover, the worship of heaven

1. To cite just one example, Korea University's Center for the Study of Korean Culture included a chapter on the history of the indigenous Korean belief in *Hanūnim* (God) in its encyclopedic survey of Korean cultural history. See Kim Kyōng-t'ak, “*Han'guk wonsi chonggyosa, II: hanūnim kwannyōm paldalsa*” [The original religion of Korea, II: the development of the concept of the God of Heaven]. In *Koryō Taehakkyo minjok munhwa yōn'guso*, ed. *Han'guk munhwasa tagye* [A Survey of the Cultural History of Korea], VI. (Seoul: Korea University's Center for the Study of Korean Culture, 1971), 115-176.
2. For translations of those records, see Peter H. Lee, ed. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 15-24.

usually takes place in the tenth month, suggesting a harvest festival. In other words, the heaven worshipped by these tribal peoples 1,700 years ago was more likely a god of nature (the sky god, who, along with the god of the earth, the god of the mountains, the god of the sea, and other supernatural entities played a major role in making it possible for those ancient peoples to harvest the food from the land and the sea they needed to stay alive) than the God of Creation which the name “*hanūnim*” refers to today. “Heaven” may have even been the generic name for various spirits believed to dwell in the skies above. The classical Chinese in which those records were written does not tell us whether the object of worship was singular or plural. Moreover, we should also keep in mind who wrote these descriptions of ancient Korean religious festivals. They were Chinese, from a civilization which already had a tradition of placing Heaven at the center of its official rituals. It is therefore possible that those Chinese observers placed more importance on the “Korean” worship of heaven than the “Koreans” themselves would have done at that time.

Further evidence that the worship of Heaven may not have been as important a feature of ancient religious practices on the Korean peninsula as some would have us believe is that the oldest extant Korean histories make no mention of any such monotheism or any such concentration on the God of Heaven to the exclusion of other deities. Instead, we have heaven as the ancestral home of the first rulers of ancient Korea’s kingdoms. For example, the first king of the Northern *Puyŏ* people is said to have descended from heaven, and a later king of Eastern *Puyŏ* moved his capital when the ruler of Heaven suggested such a move to his prime minister in a dream.<sup>3</sup> However, such an assertion of the heavenly origins of earthly rulers says nothing about the existence or non-existence of other deities and thus can not be used as evidence of early monotheism. In fact, since those who argue for an indigenous Korean monotheism usually argue that the ancient Korean people worshipped Heaven as God, these myths serve to undermine their argument since it is unlikely that kings who claimed to have

3. *Samguk yusa*, I: 12-13, in Kim Yong-ok, ed. *Sam’guk yusa indūk* [A concordance for the Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms] (Seoul: T’ongnamu, 1992), 21-22. Translations are available in James Grayson, *Myths and Legends from Korea: An Annotated Compendium of Ancient and Modern Materials* (Surrey, Great Britain: Curzon Press, 2002), 59-65.

heavenly ancestors would have allowed commoners to worship royal ancestors and thereby claim kinship with the king.

Another problem with using these myths for evidence of ancient Korean worship of Heaven is that we don't know how old those myths are. The text in which they are found, the *Samguk yusa*, was written by a Buddhist monk in the thirteenth century. He says he is drawing from earlier materials (materials no longer extant), but he doesn't tell us how old those materials were. Therefore we can not determine whether or not these myths represented the beliefs of the people who lived in and around the Korean peninsula a thousand years before the monk Il-yŏn recorded them. We do have one much earlier Korean reference to Heaven. The fifth-century stela honoring the Koguryŏ King *Kwanggaet'o*, a monument which had been forgotten until the Japanese discovered it in Manchuria in the late nineteenth century, includes a statement that the founding ancestor of Kwanggaet'o's royal line was the son of the ruler of heaven.<sup>4</sup> However, just as with the other royal family origin myths, we can not draw from this statement any implications about Korean belief or disbelief in other gods, or about which god or gods the people living in and around Korea at that time worshipped.

These stories about a heavenly origin for the royal families of *Puyŏ* or *Koguryŏ* usually play only a minor role in scholarly arguments for the existence of an indigenous Korean monotheism. More frequently, it is the myth of *Tan'gun*, the legendary first ruler of a Korean kingdom, which is used to point to the antiquity of an indigenous Korean tradition of worship of Heaven.<sup>5</sup> However, the problems we saw with using *Puyŏ* and *Koguryŏ* royal family origins myths to prove that ancient Koreans worshipped Heaven reappear in attempts to use the *Tan'gun* myth to support the same argument.

There are several problems with using the *Tan'gun* myth for insight into the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Koreans. First of all, we are not sure how old that myth is. The oldest versions of it date

4. Grayson, 70.

5. See, for example, Yi ūn-bong, "*Tan'gun sinang ūi yŏksa wa ūimi*" [The history and significance of *Tan'gun* worship], Yun I-hŭm, et. al., *Tan'gun: kŭ ihae wa charyo* [*Tan'gun*: How he has been presented in documents and how he has been understood] (Seoul: Seoul University Press, 1994), 293-325.

from the thirteenth century. Moreover, they are filled with Buddhist terminology which makes it difficult to extract an “original” non-Buddhist version, if indeed such a version ever existed.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it appears likely that, if a *Tan’gun* myth did exist earlier, it was probably only one of many such “royal” family origin myths and was only turned into a myth of an ancient pan-Korean kingdom when the people of Korea fell under attack by peoples from the north during the Koryŏ dynasty. Facing a common threat, the people of Korea reinforced their sense of a common identity by compiling the first unified histories of the Three Kingdoms, the *Samguk sagi*, which appeared in the twelfth century, and the *Samguk yusa*, which appeared in the thirteenth. It is possible that the same impulse led to the creation at about the same time of the myth that all Koreans once lived together a long time ago under the benevolent rule of *Tan’gun*, the grandson of a ruler of heaven.

However, even if we accept the purported antiquity of the *Tan’gun* story, we still can not use it to support a claim that ancient Koreans worshipped Heaven or that they believed in One God. The *Tan’gun* myth roughly is as follows:

A deity in Heaven named *Hwanin* (also known by the Buddhist name of *Chesŏk* and by the Chinese name of *Sangje*) had a son by a concubine. That son, *Hwanung*, wanted to leave heaven and descend to earth. His father Hwanin let him do so, and let him take 3,000 other beings from heaven with him. On earth he met a bear who wanted to become a human being. He helped her do so and then, after she had been transformed into a woman, mated with her. The child of their union is known as *Tan’gun*. *Tan’gun* established a kingdom called Chosŏn, which he governed for over a thousand years. He then retired to the mountain of *Asadal* where he became a mountain god.<sup>7</sup>

There are three points we should notice about this story. First of all, *Tan’gun’s* father was the son of a heavenly concubine. In addition, when he descended from heaven, three thousand other celestial beings came with him. That means there was more than one God in Heaven. Second, after retiring as an earthly ruler, *Tan’gun* became a mountain

6. John Jorgensen, “Who was the Author of the *Tan’gun* Myth?” In *Perspectives on Korea* Sang-oak Lee and Duk-soo Park, ed., (Sydney, Australia: Wild Peony Press, 1998), 222-255.

7. Various early versions of this myth can be found in Grayson, 30-58.

god. (The classical Chinese of the text doesn't tell us whether he became a mountain god or the mountain god, but since Korean folk traditions usually identify specific mountain gods with specific mountains, and *Tan'gun* is identified with a specific mountain, it is safe to assume that he became a god of a particular mountain, not the God of all mountains.) Third, there is no mention of the worship of heaven in this myth, either by *Tan'gun* or by the people he ruled over. Therefore this story does not support an argument that ancient Koreans worshipped Heaven or worshipped one God. There is even less evidence to support the popular modern belief that the *Tan'gun* myth tells us that ancient Koreans worshipped a trinitarian God, that *Hwanin*, *Hwanung*, and *Tan'gun* were seen as three persons in one God.<sup>8</sup>

Though there is plenty of room for argument about both the age and the interpretation of the *Tan'gun* myth, there is another account of the religious orientation of the Korean people over a millennia ago which is both straightforward and can be accurately dated. Ch'oe Ch'i-won was born in the Korean kingdom of Shilla in the second half of the ninth century. He later traveled to Tang China, passed the civil service examination, and served for a few years as an official in the Chinese government before returning to Korea. Back on his home soil, he wrote an inscription for a monument honoring one of Korea's young noblemen. That inscription includes the statement that "There is a wonderful and mysterious way in our country called *P'ungnyu* [styl-ish]. Its origins are recorded in detail in the "History of the Immortals." It embraces all the three teachings [Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism]."<sup>9</sup> Ch'oe says nothing about a distinctive Korean worship of one God or of Heaven. One would think that, if monotheism formed a strong current in Korean religious culture, Ch'oe, who had spent many years immersed in a Chinese culture which was populated with many supernatural entities, would have pointed to that monotheism as one of the distinctive identifying characteristics of "*p'ungnyu*" or of Korean culture.

8. Kim Kyōng-t'ak, 126-130 is but one example of this imposition of Christian trinitarian thought onto ancient Korean mythology. For more examples, see Cho Chayong, *Samsin Min'go* [A few thoughts on the people of the Trinitarian God] (Seoul: Kana Art'ū, 1995), 139-189.

9. *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, 101; Kim Kyōng-t'ak, 134-35.

More evidence against the indigenous monotheism argument can be found in another document which probably dates to only a few decades after Ch'oe wrote his inscription. The founder of the dynasty which replaced Ch'oe's Shilla dynasty early in the tenth century, the *Koryŏ* dynasty, supposedly left ten injunctions for his successors on the throne to follow. Though it is unlikely the *Koryŏ* founder Wang Kŏn actually wrote those injunctions himself, they probably were written within a few decades of his death and therefore probably reflect the religious beliefs and attitudes of the ruling elite of Korea in the tenth century.

Those injunctions include a call for continuing support of Buddhism and for the continuation of the festival honoring the spirit of heaven, the spirits of the five sacred mountains and rivers, and the dragon god.<sup>10</sup> Notice the use of the term "spirit of heaven" instead of a term like "Lord of Heaven" or "*Sangje*" which could have more monotheistic connotations. Also note that the spirit of heaven is ranked alongside the spirits of mountains and rivers. Clearly a spirit of heaven was one of the many spirits worshipped by the ruling elite, and probably the people, of *Koryŏ*, but just as clearly, the spirit of heaven was not the only spirit worshiped nor was it seen as far more important or more powerful than the other spirits. The spirit of heaven was a god of the *Koryŏ* people but it was not the God and thus is not the equivalent of the monotheistic deity called *Hanūnim* today.

If it is clear that the Korean people were not a monotheistic people in centuries past, why bother to spend so much time discussing myths and other windows into the religious beliefs and practices of Koreans in the *Koryŏ* dynasty and earlier? I do so because over the last few decades many South Korean scholars have turned to these same materials to construct an argument that pre-modern Koreans were monotheistic. In other words, I am arguing that these materials have been repeatedly misread.

Why have those materials been repeatedly misread? Why has the religious history of the Korean people been forced into a monotheistic mold? Korean scholars today, including historians and religious stud-

10. *Sourcebook*, 264.

ies specialists, are participants in a nation-building project, working with their fellow Koreans to construct a modern nation-state on the foundation laid by their ancestors over several millennia. They are aware that their long-time neighbors, the Chinese and the Japanese, have constructed their modern nationalism with claims of ethnic unity and distinctiveness stretching back thousands of years. Koreans therefore want to give their nationalism equally deep roots.

Ancient Korean monotheism, which supposedly has survived uninterrupted up to the present day, provides one of the components of an alleged common Korean identity long before the Korean people were brought together under one government and spoke one language. In other words, worship of one God supposedly united people across tribal lines across the entire Korean peninsula and into Manchuria long before there was a country called Korea. Moreover, that one God is said to have been a God unique to Koreans. Their sky-god called “*Hanūnim*” is said to be very different from the Sun Goddess of the Japanese and from the Jade Emperor or the *Sangje* of the Chinese. Worship of “*Hanūnim*” is believed to have provided one of the identifying markers of a distinctive Korean cultural identity, allowing Koreans to remain Korean despite the different governments which have ruled over the peninsula, and despite the intrusion of such foreign religions and philosophies as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity.

This assertion of a distinctive Korean tradition of monotheism is used to support another pillar of modern Korean nationalistic pride—the claim that the Korean people are heirs to an advanced, sophisticated civilization. In modern South Korea, modernization has been closely linked with Christianity. That is because Koreans adopted modernization primarily from two sources: the Japanese and Christian missionaries from the West. Since the Japanese colonized and mistreated Koreans for most of the first half of the twentieth century, Koreans do not want to identify modernity with them. However, Christian missionaries were not associated with colonial rule or imperialism in Korea, so it is acceptable to, either consciously or unconsciously, identify modernization with the West and its religion of Christianity. As a result of this identification of Christianity with Western civilization, and Western civilization with modernity, the monotheism which Christian missionaries introduced to Korea has become identified with modernity, and

consequently with advanced civilization. Some Koreans have concluded that if they can show that they were monotheists long before Christian missionaries brought worship of their One God to the peninsula, then Koreans have a basis for claiming that, according to at least one criterion, their ancient civilization was at least as advanced and sophisticated as that of the modern West.

In short, worship of “*Hanūnim*”, an indigenous tradition of monotheism, has become a symbol of a unique Korean identity with ancient and proud roots. This deep-rooted cultural and ethnic identity has provided one of the most important building blocks of modern Korean nationalist ideology, and has helped justify the construction of a modern independent Korean state.

Ironically, Koreans were unaware of their “indigenous tradition of monotheism” until Christian missionaries pointed it out to them in the late nineteenth century. The first Christian missionaries in Korea were Catholic priests. A Chinese priest arrived in 1795 and lived in Korea for six years before he was executed by Korea’s then staunchly Confucian government in 1801. However, a few decades later, he was followed by several priests from France, some of whom managed to live underground on the peninsula for over a decade before they too were executed. Yet none of those priests report seeing any signs of an indigenous monotheism. They report that Koreans performed Confucian rituals to *Sangje* (We can not help wondering what rituals those were, since Korean sources do not talk of any ritual interaction with *Sangje*) and to the God of the Soil and that Koreans also prayed to a number of local household deities, but that in general Koreans could be described as a people without any real religious faith of their own.<sup>11</sup> In the first Korean language dictionary, prepared for the use of Catholic missionaries in Korea, there is no entry for “*hanūnim*.” Though there is an entry for “*hanūl*” (the indigenous term for Heaven), the only references to God are under the entries for two imported terms, *Sangje* and *Ch’ōnju*.<sup>12</sup>

Our suspicions of assertions of a pre-Christian Korean monotheism were reinforced when we noticed that the first Korean Catholics, when they tried to write about their beliefs in Korean rather than in classical

11. Charles Dallet, *Histoire de L'Église de Corée* I (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1874), 138-151.

12. *Dictionnaire Coreen-Français* (Yokohama: C. Levy, 1880).

Chinese, had difficulty finding an appropriate term for God. For example, the *Sōnggyo yoji*, purportedly written by Yi Pyōk in 1779, uses a number of different terms for God, all of them either Chinese terms or Korean translations of Chinese terms rather than an indigenous Korean term.<sup>13</sup> *Sōnggyo yoji* is a poem consisting of 49 stanzas, written in classical Chinese. However, it also includes vernacular explanatory notes. The poem itself refers to God by name only once. The first stanza begins with the lines “Before the first human being was born, Sangje already existed. He is the one and only true God.”<sup>14</sup> That is the only place in the body of the poem itself where the name of God appears.

In the han’ gŭl explanatory notes, however, God is mentioned several times. However God, except in the note to the last stanza which quotes a passage from the Confucian Classics verbatim, is not *Sangje* but *Sangju* (the Lord Above). *Sangju* is a term adopted in China after the term *Sangje* was banned by the Vatican.<sup>15</sup> In China, the Catholics called their God both *Sangju* and *Ch’ōnju*, though *Sangju* appears to have been preferred when a less foreign, more natural-sounding name for God was needed. The author of this text, if he really had been a Korean, felt more comfortable using an imported Chinese name for God than an indigenous term, even though he was writing in Korean. That indicates that perhaps no indigenous term was readily available to him. In other words, it indicates that this early Korean monotheist was not aware of any indigenous monotheistic tradition.

The same collection of documents which includes the *Sōnggyo yoji* also includes a poem, entitled “a poem of veneration of the Lord of Heaven” (*Ch’ōnju kongkyōng ka*).<sup>16</sup> That short poem, unlike the main body of the *Sōnggyo yoji*, is written in Korean rather than classical Chinese, though it is said to have been written by the same Yi Pyōk who is given credit for the eloquent classical Chinese of the *Sōnggyo*

13. Yi Pyōk, *Sōngkgyo yoji* [Essential points of the Holy Teachings] (Seoul: Sōng Hwang Sōktu Luga sōwon, 1986).

14. *Sōngkgyo yoji*, 37.

15. Min Ki, “*Han, chung, il kat’ ollik ōhwisa*” [The history of Catholic terms in Korea, China, and Japan]. In *Han’guk kyohoesa nonmunjip* II [A collection of articles on the history of the Korean Catholic Church II] (Seoul: Han’guk kyohoesa yōn’guso, 1985), 619-621.

16. Yi Sōng-bae, *Yugyo wa kŭrisūtogyo* [Confucianism and Christianity] (Waegwan, Korea: Benedict Press, 1979), 47-51.

*yoji*. If the author is indeed the same, his language is quite different.

God in the poem of veneration of the Lord of Heaven is consistently called *Ch'ōnju*, not *Sangju* or *Sangje*. That is the same imported name for God preferred in another vernacular text supposedly from the same formative period of Korean Catholicism. The “song of the ten commandments” (*Ship kyemyōng ka*) is said to have been written by Chōng Yak-chōn in 1789.<sup>17</sup> For the first and second commandments, which direct Catholics to worship the one true God only and to refrain from taking His name in vain, the word used for God is *Ch'ōnju*, though one line does note that *sangje* and *sangsin* (God Above) mean the same thing. Nevertheless, for the rest of the poem, *Ch'ōnju* is the only name which is used.

*Ch'ōnju* is also the term used for God in another early Korean vernacular Catholic text, the *Chugyo yoji* (Essential Teachings of Catholicism) written by Chōng Yak-chong before he was martyred in 1801.<sup>18</sup> Throughout this lengthy introduction to the basic teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, God is simply *Ch'ōnju* or *Chu* (Lord), with one exception. In a section in which Chōng argues that the supreme deity of Taoism, called *Ok-hwang Sangje*, is a false God, Chōng says that there is only one *Ch'ōnju Sangje* and that is the Catholic God.<sup>19</sup> Here he uses *Sangje* in a context he knows most Koreans would be familiar with, the name of a deity popular in the folk religion, but he then attaches that term to the term *Ch'ōnju* instead of *Ok-hwang* to show that *Ch'ōnju* is the true name for God.

Neither Chōng Yak-chong nor his predecessor Yi Pyōk used the purported indigenous Korean term for God. In no early Catholic writings is the word “*Hanūnim*” used, nor was there any attempt to convince Koreans that the God of Catholicism had a counterpart in their own indigenous tradition.

17. Ha Sōng-nae, “*Ch'ōnju kasa yōn'gu*” [Studies of Catholic hymns], *Han'guk ōnō munhak* 8-9 (1970): 302-312. There is a problem with both the date and the author given for this poem. It includes a warning against Confucian ancestor memorial services, yet it was not until 1790 that Korea's Catholics learned of the papal prohibition against participation in that ritual. Soon afterwards Chōng Yak-chōn abandoned the practice of Catholicism rather than abide by the ban against that ritual.

18. Chōng Yak-chong, *Chugyo yoji* (Seoul: Sōng Hwang Sōktu Luga sōwon, 1984).

19. *Chugyo yoji*, 25.

Yet, when Protestant missionaries began arriving on the peninsula in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they claimed to have discovered a Korean montheistic tradition which the Catholics had overlooked for an entire century. For example, the P'yŏngyang missionary Charles Allen Clark, when he was on home leave in America in the 1920s, stated in a couple of public lectures on the religions of Korea that "*Hananim* is unique. There is scarcely a question that he goes far back into the dim ages of Korean history long before any of the foreign religions came into the country...It was Hananim whom Tanguon worshipped ... In the Koreans' attitude toward [Hananim], ...there is much evidence for a primitive monotheism."<sup>20</sup> Earlier the Canadian missionary James Gale had written "The Korean talks of God. He is Hananim, the one Great One. His name in Chinese and also in Korean is made up of terms meaning 'one' and 'great.' So he is the Supreme Ruler for whom there is no image or likeness in heaven or earth or under the earth."<sup>21</sup>

The certainty with which these two missionaries expressed their conviction that Koreans knew of God before the missionaries arrived to introduce Him to them, and that they called God "the one Great One," is a change from the first impression most Protestant missionaries had of Korea's religious culture when they first arrived on the peninsula in the 1880s and 1890s. When one of the earliest Protestant missionaries, Horace Underwood, compiled a dictionary of the Korean language, he listed *Shin*, *Sangje*, *Hanŭnim* and *Ch'ŏnju* as possible translations for the English term "God." *Hananim* was nowhere mentioned.<sup>22</sup> Nor did any of the example sentences in the two Korean grammar handbooks the early missionaries used have any references to *Hananim*.<sup>23</sup> Even in the three editions of his own Korean-English dictionary, Gale refrained from claiming that "*hananim*" was a common Korean term for God.

20. Charles Allen Clark, *Religions of Old Korea* (Seoul: The Christian Lecture Society of Korea, 1961), 196-7.

21. James S. Gale, *Korea in Transition* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1909), 78-79.

22. Underwood, Horace Grant, assisted by Homer Hulbert and James Gale, *A Concise Dictionary of the Korean Language* (Yokohama: Kelly and Walsh, 1890).

23. James Scott, *A Corean Manual or Phrase Book with Introductory Grammar* (Seoul: English Church Mission Press, 1893); James S. Gale, *Korean Grammatical Forms* (Seoul: Trilingual Press, 1894).

He did include an entry for *Hanŭnim*, which he glossed as *Sangje*, the King of Heaven. And he had separate entries for *hanŭl*, glossed as heaven, and *hana*, glossed as one. But nowhere in his dictionaries did he repeat his claim that the colloquial Korean term for God meant the Great One.<sup>24</sup> (Gale 1897, 1911, 1931)

When James Gale and five of his missionary colleagues, including Horace Underwood, began preparing a Korean language translation of the Bible in the 1890s, they still were not sure which name to use for God. They had available to them an earlier version of the Bible, an incomplete 1887 version done by the Scotchman John Ross with the help of a Korean residing in Manchuria, which used the term *hananim* for God.<sup>25</sup> Ross had concluded that “The Corean for ‘heaven’ is *hanal*, for ‘lord’ or ‘prince’ *nim*, originally Chinese; and *Hananim* is the term by which Coreans everywhere acknowledge the Ruler above and the supreme on earth.”<sup>26</sup> Gale asked the Board to follow Ross’s example and adopt “*Hananim*.”

At first other members of the board argued for *Ch’ŏnju* instead but Gale’s arguments eventually proved more persuasive and *Hananim* became the primary Protestant word for God.<sup>27</sup> Roman Catholics and Anglicans continued to use *Ch’ŏnju* exclusively until recently, leading many Koreans to believe that Christianity and Catholicism are two separate religions rather than varieties in approach to the same God.

The leading Protestant proponent of adopting *Ch’ŏnju* was Horace Underwood. His reasons were probably similar to those given by his wife, Lilius H. Underwood, in her account of “Fifteen Years Among the Top-knots.” She mentioned that some believed that “the personal name of a heathen deity should not in any way be applied to the Eternal Jehovah, that such a course is in direct conflict with God’s own word.” Though she admitted that proponents of using the term *hananim*

24. James S. Gale, *A Korean-English Dictionary*. 1st edition (Yokohama, Kelly and Walsh, 1897); 2nd edition (Seoul: Yesugyo Sŏhoe, 1911); 3rd edition (Seoul: Korean YMCA press, 1931).

25. Paek Nak-chun George. *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea 1832-1910* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1980).

26. John Ross, *Yesu Syŏnggyo Chŏnso* (Mukden: Wenkuang Shuyuan, 1887) discussed in “Corean New Testament,” in Kim Chŏng-hyŏn (James H. Grayson), *Han ’guk ūi Ch’ŏt Sŏn ’gyosa* [The first missionaries to Korea] (Taegu: Kyemyŏng University Press, 1982), 210.

27. Rutt, Richard, editor. *James Scarth Gale’s History of the Korean People* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1972), 26.

believed that name simply was a colloquial Korean version of the Sino-Korean term *ch'ōnju*, she countered that “of course, it is impossible to claim that it refers to the only God, since all the heathen who worship this one also worship countless other smaller deities.”<sup>28</sup>

The divisions among the missionaries over this question must have been deep, for Mrs. Underwood made clear her personal feeling that the Heaven worshipped by Koreans was “the personification of the visible heavens, who ... is identical with the Baal referred to in the Old Testament.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Gale’s argument that Christian missionaries should build upon a purported proto-monotheistic tradition carried the day.

Gale overcame the objections of his colleagues by abandoning Ross’s attempt to claim dialectical variations in pronunciation as an excuse to link a word which can be translated as “the One God” (*Hananim*) with the more traditional word for the sky-god (*Hanūnim*). Gale claimed instead that “*Hananim*” had nothing to do with sky worship but was instead a traditional Korean way of referring to the One God Above.<sup>30</sup> Gale’s skillful misinterpretation of Korean tradition finally convinced even Horace Underwood, who came to believe that, in rejecting the term *hananim* as the name of a heathen god, “he had been laboring under an error.” Underwood’s own research into early Korean history led him to conclude “at a time when only one god was worshiped ... that god was called *Hananim*; the word was a descriptive term, signifying the great and only One.”<sup>31</sup>

Underwood, Gale, and the other Protestant missionaries who agreed with them were wrong. Historical records provide no evidence that Koreans were monotheists before they encountered Christianity in the

28. Lillias H. Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Top-knots* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1977), 104.

29. Lillias Underwood, 9-10.

30. Yi Ik-söp, “*Hanūnim kwa Hananim*” [*Hanūnim* and *Hananim*]. In *Kugō sarangūn nara sarang* [To love the National Language is to Love the Nation] (Seoul: Munhak sasang sa, 1998), 32-38, argues from the standpoint of a scholar of linguistics that there is no linguistic connection between “*Hanūnim*” and “*Hananim*,” that “*hanūl*” and “*hana*” are actually two totally different words. Gale was right on that point, though he was wrong to claim that “*Hananim*” had been a part of Korean theological terminology long before missionaries began using it to refer to the God of Christianity.

31. Underwood, *Lillias H. Underwood of Korea* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1918), 126.

late 18th century. Those North Americans read Western theological concepts into Korean tradition, misled by their assumption that all peoples have at one time in their history recognized the existence of One Supreme Being, and by their need for hope that Christianity would not find totally alien soil in Korea.<sup>32</sup>

Most scholars today recognize that those Protestants missionaries were wrong to think that Koreans had worshipped a deity known as the one Great One. In recent decades, the use of the term “*Hananim*” has faded among Protestants, and more and more Korean Protestants and Catholics alike are using “*Hanūnim*” instead. Although it is now acknowledged that “*Hanūnim*” means “the Lord of Heaven,” not “the One God,” the monotheistic import which Gale gave to “*Hananim*” remains with “*Hanūnim*.”<sup>33</sup> A term once used on rare occasions to refer to heaven *above* is now generally taken to be a traditional name for the Supreme God above, and is used as evidence that Korean culture has a monotheistic core.

The first Koreans to be convinced by the Protestant missionaries that Korea had its own monotheistic tradition were the first Korean Protestant converts. Wanting to retain some link to the culture into which they had been born and in which they still lived, and unwilling to appear unfilial by rejecting everything their ancestors had believed in, they convinced themselves that the missionaries were right; by becoming Christian, they were affirming the monotheistic traditions of their ancestors rather than repudiating their Korean heritage.

The next to be convinced by the missionaries’ monotheistic reshaping of Korean tradition were non-Christian religious believers. Buddhists were not convinced, nor were Confucians, unless they converted to Christianity. Not even shamans, whose beliefs and practices supposedly remained close to the original pre-Buddhist and pre-Confucian religious culture of Korea, were convinced that they were monotheists without knowing it.

The non-Christians who came to accept the Christian reinterpretation

32. For more on this missionary assumption that all cultures were originally monotheistic, see Sung-deuk Oak, “North American Missionaries’ Understanding of the *Tan’gun* and *Kija* Myths of Korea, 1884-1934,” *Acta Koreana* 5.1 (January, 2002): 51-73.

33. Yu Ch’ang-don. *Ōhwisa yŏn’gu* [Research into Etymology] (Seoul: Sŏnmyong munhwasa, 1973), 69.

tion of Korea's religious past in the early twentieth century tended to come from the indigenous new religions which began appearing in Korea in the second half of the 19th century. Many of these new religions are monotheistic, primarily because Christianity, and its associated monotheism, has come to define what a modern religion should look like. However, these new religions, particularly the *Taejong-gyo* family of religions which worship *Tan'gun* as God, often claim to be a revival of the ancient religion of the Korean people, and therefore they share the Christian assumption that the original religion of the Korean people was monotheistic. Nevertheless, though many of those new religions borrow some of their rituals from Korea's folk religion, they have not borrowed much of their theology from it (with the exception of the *Chŭngsan-gyo* family of religions).

If we assume, as many Korean scholars do, that the folk religion of Korea, which embraces shamanism, village rituals, and household gods, is a living repository of tradition, then we run into problems with the claim that Korea's indigenous religious tradition has a monotheistic core, or even that "*hanŭnim*" is the traditional Korean term of the God. Among the peninsula's shamans, and among the masses who practice that mixture of popular Buddhism and shamanism that has been the religion of the majority of the Korean people for over a millennium, the term *hanŭnim* is rarely heard. Instead, in naming the chief spirit above, the titles usually preferred are *Ch'ŏnshin* (The Heavenly Spirit) or *Okhwang Sangje* (The Yellow Emperor, the chief deity of Taoism).

However, no assumption is made that there is only one God. In fact, one researcher, Kim T'ae-gon, has identified thirteen types of heavenly spirits, as well as 260 other varieties of spiritual entities.<sup>34</sup> A Japanese researcher, writing during the time that Japan ruled Korea, found evidence of belief in a heavenly spirit (or, more likely, celestial spirits) in official rituals dating back to the Three Kingdoms period as well as in the shamanism and folk beliefs of colonial Korea. However, he also found belief in many other types of spirits as well, from mountain and dragon spirits to deified human beings. He found no evidence that any one of those many spirits was lifted above the rest and identified as the

34. Kim T'ae-gon. *Han'guk musok yŏn'gu* [A Study of the shamanistic folk tradition of Korea] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1991), 280-285.

One True God, or that the term “*hanūnim*” was particularly prominent in Korea’s indigenous religious culture.<sup>35</sup>

We can find occasional references in the folk tradition to a spirit referred to as *Hanūnim* (or more frequently, as *Ch’ōn*, Heaven). Moreover, under the guise of *Ch’ōnshin* or *Okhwang Sangje*, *Hanūnim* (the Lord of Heaven) was the object of some popular devotions. However, whatever name he is called, the celestial spirit of Korea’s folk tradition is quite different from the *Hanūnim* of Christianity. For example, unlike the Christian Supreme Being, he did not create the universe. In the traditional Korean worldview, the world has no creator, for it has always existed. Nor can *Hanūnim* bend the universe to his will. He is recognized as having some degree of power over the weather, individual fate, and political fortunes, but even there he shares his power and responsibilities with other deities.

The monarchs of the Chosŏn dynasty honored Heaven through ritual but they also solicited the aid of other spirits when the need arose. The rest of the population almost always turned to lesser spirits for assistance.<sup>36</sup> Heaven, as *Ch’ōn*, could only be worshipped by the king, and even that came under dispute from those who felt the worship of Heaven was the sole prerogative of the Emperor of China. Away from the palace, *Hanūnim* or other celestial spirits did not appear in shamanistic rituals nearly as often as long dead Chinese generals did. He was depicted in sacred portraits far less frequently than a mountain spirit was. It is only in the modern era that substantial numbers of Koreans have turned to *Hanūnim* alone for divine aid.

Nevertheless, *Taejong-gyo* (the Religion of the Grand Progenitor) has taught since its founding in 1909 that not only did Koreans worship one God for several millennia, before their indigenous religion was overwhelmed by Buddhism around one millennium ago, but that the one God is *Tan’gun*, the founder of the legendary first Korean kingdom in 2,333 BC. *Tan’gun* is not just a god, he is The God. Moreover, he is

35. Murayama Chijun. *Chosen no kishin*. (Tokyo: Kokusho kankokai, 1979) (Reprint of a 1929 publication by the office of the Japanese Governor-General in Seoul), especially 121. 126-127, 131, 138-139, 149-150.

36. Han U-gŭn, “Chosŏn Wangjo ch’ogi-e issŏsŏ ūi yuhak inyŏm ūi silch’ŏn gwa shinang chong-gyo” [Religious beliefs and the implementation of Confucianism in the early part of the Chosŏn dynasty], *Han’guk sanon* 3 (1976): 147-228.

one person in a trinitarian God. *Taejong-gyo* reads the myth of *Tan'gun* as evidence that ancient Koreans believed in a Divine Trinity. Though the Christian term for the trinity is “*samwi ilch' e*” and the *Taejong-gyo* term is “*Samshin ilch' e*,” the meaning is the same: There is but one God but there are also three Divine Persons. The *Taejong-gyo* name for the One God is *Hanöllum*. However, when seen in his trinitarian aspects, he is *Hwanin* (God as Creator), *Hwanin's* son *Hwanung* (God as Educator), and the grandson *Tan'gun* (God as Ruler).<sup>37</sup>

Notice that God the Grandfather is a creator. Korea had never before had a God who created the universe. The influence of Christianity is obvious, both in assigning responsibility for creation to God and, of course, in the fact that there are three persons in one God. When this is pointed out to *Taejong-gyo* believers, however, they answer that any similarity is a result of Christian borrowing from ancient Korean religion, rather than *vica versa*.<sup>38</sup>

*Taejong-gyo* is actually one of the smaller of Korea's new religions, with only a few thousand followers. However, it has had influence far beyond its numbers. Many of the texts which it has promoted as authentic accounts of ancient Korean history, texts which teach that ancient Koreans worshipped one God, are growing increasingly accepted by non-believers, including even scholars of Korean history and thought.

The preface to one of those ancient histories, *Kyuwon sahwa* (Historical tales from the Garden of Deliberation), claims it was written around 1675 by a Chosön Taoist named Pugae.<sup>39</sup> That preface further claims that the *Kyuwon sahwa* is based on information taken from a number of ancient histories which are no longer extant, including a work by a *Parhae* writer which he claims was translated into classical Chinese during the Koryö dynasty. Despite what the preface says, *Kyuwon sahwa* actually appears to have been written no earlier than

37. *Taejong-gyo ch'ongbonbu. Taejong-gyo yogam.* [The Bible of *Taejong-gyo*] (Seoul: *Taejong-gyo ch'ongbonsa*, 1983).

38. Kim Tongch' un, *Ch'önbugyöng kwa Tan'gun sahwa* [The Celestial Amulet Sutra and *Tan'gun* histories] (Seoul: *Kirinwön*, 1986), 27, 311.

39. Pugae. Ko Tong-yöng, trans. *Kyuwön sahwa: Hanminjok üi sanggosa* [The *Kyuwön sahwa: A history of the Korean people in ancient times*] (Seoul : Han Ppuri, 1986). The untranslated classical Chinese text was published by Hanbburi Publishing company in 1990.

1795 and most likely was written much later, probably as late as the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth. There are two reasons for believing that *Kyuwon sahwa* was written within the last hundred years or so. It is not until the 1920s that any mention is made of this work. And there are indications that the author of this purported seventeenth-century manuscript was aware of the creation story found in the Genesis chapter of the Bible and was also familiar with the Christian beliefs in the trinitarian nature of God and in the immortality of the human soul.<sup>40</sup>

A second, and the most widely used, apocryphal history of ancient Korea is the *Handan Kogi* (Ancient tales of Han'guk and Tan'gun Chosön), also known as the *Hwandan Kogi* (there is a dispute over whether the first character should be pronounced *Hwan*, as in *Hwanung*, or *Han*).<sup>41</sup> The *Handan kogi* is actually four books supposedly compiled into one volume in 1911 by Kye Yön-su. However, it did not attract scholarly attention until it was published in a modern translation in Japan in 1983, although a hand-copied version is said to have begun circulating as early as 1949 and a xerographic version appeared in 1979.<sup>42</sup>

It is obvious that the *Handan kogi* was written by someone who had at least passing knowledge of Christian doctrines and practices. For example, God in this text is not only a trinitarian God, he is also a Creator God, concepts absent from traditional Korean religion.<sup>43</sup>

40. Sö Yöng-dae, "Tan'gun kwangye munhön charyo-üi yön'gu" [An examination of historical documents on Tan'gun]. In *Tan'gun*, Yun I-hüm, et al. (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1994), 57-59, 74-75; Pak Kwang-yong, "Taejong-gyo kwallyön munhön-e wijk manht'a: Kyuwon sahwa' Hwandan kogi' üi sönggyök-e taehan chaegömt'o." [There is much that is fabricated in the documents revered by the *Taejong-kyo*: a reexamination of the "Kyuwon sahwa" and the "Hwandan kogi."], *Yöksa p'ip'yöng* (1990): 207-211. For signs of Christian influence, see pages 72 and 132-33 in Ko Tong-yöng's translation.

41. Hwandan Hakhoe, ed. *Hwandan kogi* (Seoul: Kwan'gö Ihaesa, 1979); *Hwandan kogi*, edited by Kye Yön-su, translated by Yi Min-su (Seoul: Hanbburi: 1986.); *Handan kogi*, translated and annotated by Im Söng-kuk (Seoul: Chöngsin segyesa, 1992).

42. Kim Sang-il, "Taejong-gyo sasangsa." In *Han'guk chonggyo sasangsa* [The History of Korean Religious Thought], vol. IV, Kim Hong-ch'öl, et al. (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1992), 124. For a persuasive argument that the *Handan kogi* was actually written in the 1970s, see Yi Sang-si, *Tan'gun silsa- kwanghan kojök yön'gu: uri sanggosariün tasi ssöya handa* [An investigation of the historical data regarding Tan'gun: Our ancient history needs to be rewritten] (Seoul: Koryöwon 1990), 238-240.

Moreover, we are told that ancient Koreans believed that when you died, you went to heaven (*Ch' ŏn*), where you enjoyed eternal life!<sup>44</sup> In addition, they regularly gathered together to worship Heaven by singing and praising the glory of the Lord, foreshadowing the Christian worship services held on the peninsula after the 1880s.<sup>45</sup>

At first scholars were dubious of the authenticity of these texts. Even the nationalist historian and one-time follower of *Taejong-gyo*, Sin Ch' aeho, did not accept two earlier supposedly Tan'gun era texts, the *Ch' ŏnbu-kyōng* (The Celestial Amulet Sutra) or the *Samil sin'go* (Reflections on the Trinitarian God), as authentic ancient texts.<sup>46</sup> The *Taejong-gyo* approach to ancient Korean history was originally left to non-academics to promote. However, we are beginning to see professors at some of the less prestigious universities in Korea, including even some in Seoul, accepting those documents as genuine and using them to draw a picture of life in and around the Korean peninsula five thousand or more years ago.<sup>47</sup>

We are also seeing growing acceptance of the claim that the *Taejong'gyo* name for God is an ancient indigenous name. *Taejong'gyo* calls God *Hanöllim* rather than *Hanūnim*. *Hanöllim* supposedly is an ancient Korean way of combining the name of the Korean people, "Han," and a term meaning the Korean spirit, "öl." It is also explained as combining a Korean word for large, "han" and a Korean word for the spirit which fills the entire universe, "öl." Either way, there is no evidence in Korean historical records of the use of the term *Hanöllim* before the twentieth century. Rather than being an indigenous term for God, it is a Korean variation on the terms promoted by Protestant missionaries, *Hananim* and *Hanūnim*. Since *Hananim* was invented by Christian missionaries, and *Hanūnim* was not widely used for God

43. The term for a trinitarian God, *samshin ilch'e*, appears a number of times in the *Handan kogi*. See pages 149, 199, 202, 211, 263, and 302. The reference to God as a creator can be seen on pages 67 and 148. Page 148 in particular echoes the book of Genesis from the Judeo-Christian Bible.

44. *Handan kogi*, 150

45. *Handan kogip*, 63.

46. Han Yōngu, *Han'guk minjok chu'ui yōksahak* [The history of Korean nationalistic historiography] (Seoul: Iljogak, 1994), 164.

47. For example, see Yi ūn-bong, *Han'guk kodae chonggyo sasang* [The Religious Thought of Ancient Korea] (Seoul: Chimmundang, 1999), and Cho Cha-yong, *Samsin Min'go*.

before the missionaries adopted it, both terms must have sounded more Christian than indigenous to the founders of *Taejong-gyo*. In order to sound truly Korean, therefore, they had to come up with a name for God which had the monotheistic overtones of the Christian name but sounded more authentically Korean. *Hanöllim* is the name they invented.

Many would argue that I am wrong when I claim that there was no indigenous name for the One God above. As proof, they point to the Tonghak religion, now known as *Ch'ōndo-gyo*. *Ch'ōndo-gyo* is the oldest of Korea's new religions. It was founded in 1860, more than two decades before the first Protestant missionaries entered Korea. Yet, it is argued, *Ch'ōndo-gyo* has its own term for God, *Hanullim*. Therefore Koreans must have had their own vernacular name for God before Christians gave them one.

However, a careful reading of *Ch'ōndo-gyo* documents for its first half-century shows that the primary *Ch'ōndo-gyo* (Tonghak) name for God was *Ch'ōnju*, the Catholic word for God. That is the name Ch'oe and the two patriarchs who followed him used in most of their writings and that is the reason Ch'oe was accused by the Chosŏn dynasty of being a Catholic. However, when God appeared to Ch'oe in 1860, he introduced himself as *Sangje*, the traditional Sino-Korean word for the God in Heaven above. He does not call himself *Hanullim*.<sup>48</sup>

*Hanullim* appears only in the few vernacular documents *Ch'ōndo-gyo* began producing from the early 1880s, where it joins *Sangje* and *Ch'ōn* as names for God written in those documents in the Korean alphabet instead of in Chinese characters. Though scholars today insist that *Ch'ōnju* is merely a Chinese translation of the indigenous term *Hanullim*, which means, literally, "the honorable Heaven," it was more likely that it was the other way around. *Hanullim* was the vernacular translation of the term *Ch'ōnju*, since it was *Ch'ōnju* rather than *Hanullim* which was preferred in most early Tonghak and *Ch'ōndo-gyo* documents.

Moreover, we do not find any statements in early Tonghak or *Ch'ōndo-*

48. *Ch'ōndo-gyo* Headquarters, *Ch'ōndo-gyo Kyŏngjŏn* [The scriptures of *Ch'ōndo-gyo*] (Seoul: *Ch'ōndo-gyo* Headquarters, 1993), "p'odŏk mun," 19.

gyo documents claiming that monotheism was an indigenous Korean tradition or that Hanullim was a common vernacular term for God. Quite the contrary. Moreover, Ch'oe himself acknowledged that *Ch'ŏnju* (or *Hanullim*) was not a common object of worship in the Korea of his day.<sup>49</sup> The third patriarch, Son Pyŏng-hŏi, affirmed, in a statement which is included in the *Ch'ŏndo-gyo* scriptures, that Tonghak/*Ch'ŏndogyo* was a totally new religion, unlike anything that had been heard of before.<sup>50</sup> In 1924, the leading authority at that time on *Ch'ŏndo-gyo* beliefs, Yi Ton-hwa, noted that the term *Hanullim* (which had by then come to be used much more frequently than *Ch'ŏnju* or *Sangje*) once indicated the actual physical sky and that Koreans, just like other peoples around the world, were originally polytheistic. Later polytheism evolved into monotheism (he says nothing about worship of *Hanullim* at this stage) and then evolved even further into pantheism, the stage that he said *Ch'ŏndo-gyo* represented.<sup>51</sup> Even as late as 1938, another leading writer on *Ch'ŏndo-gyo*, Oh Ch'i-yŏng could compare *Ch'ŏndogyo* beliefs to those of other religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and even Christianity without feeling any need to argue that the God of *Ch'ŏndo-gyo* in any way resembled a God of traditional Korean religion.<sup>52</sup> It was not until after the Korean War that the argument began to be made that *Hanullim* represented the God of Korea's traditional monotheism.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, that opinion has become dogma in contemporary South Korea. Few try to explain, however, why there are four vernacular terms for God: the original Christian *Hananim*, the modified Christian *Hanŭnim*, the *Taejong-gyo Hanŏllim*, and the *Ch'ŏndo-gyo*

49. *Ch'ŏndo-gyo Kyŏngjŏn*, "nonhak mun," 36-37.

50. *Ch'ŏndo-gyo Kyŏngjŏn*, "Ch'ŏndo-gyo wa shin chonggyo" [*Ch'ŏndo-gyo* and new religion], 706.

51. Yi Ton-hwa, *Ch'ŏn nae in yoŭi* [The essential meaning of 'human beings are heaven'] (Seoul: Kaepyŏk Publishing Co., 1924), reprinted in Paek Sunjae, et. al. ed. *Tonghak sasang charyojip* III. (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1979), 169-457, esp. 278 and 325.

52. Oh Ch'i-yŏng, *Tonghak sa* [The history of Tonghak] (Seoul: Yŏngch'ang sŏgwan, 1940), reprinted in Oh Ch'i-yŏng *chŏnjip* [The complete works of Oh Ch'i-yŏng] (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1992), 7-265, esp. "Yu.Pul.Sŏn gwa odo" [Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and our Way], 31-38.

53. That argument was made in Ch'oe Tonghŏi, "Tonghak-esŏ mitnŭn hanŭnim" [the Hanŭnim Tonghak believes in]. In *Tonghak ŭi sasang kwa undong* [Tonghak thought and the Tonghak movement] (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwan University Press, 1980), 50-80.

*Hanullim*. Few have noticed that *Taejong-gyo* and *Ch'ōndo-gyo* have had to coin their own “traditional” names for God because the supposedly traditional term of *Hanūnim* sounded too Christian to non-Christian ears.

Even fewer have noticed the role that this myth of a unique Korean monotheistic tradition has played in the construction of modern Korean nationalism. Koreans did not have much need to create an “imagined community” in the modern world, since Koreans had their own country, with their own language, and their own distinctive food and culture, for millennia.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, their sense of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness was not so strong that it did not need strengthening to enable Korea to survive as an independent nation in the modern world of competing nation-states.

Religion has been one of the elements used to forge a strengthened Korean national identity. Shamanism has begun to play that role over the last few decades, as Koreans have noticed that their shamans have distinctive rituals and interact with distinctive gods and spirits, distinguishing the folk religion of Korea from the folk religions of Japan and China. For some, however, shamanism is not modern enough for Koreans to point to with pride in the modern world as a marker of the past glories of Korean civilization. Instead, they have seized upon monotheism, a defining characteristic of modern religion, as one of the building blocks of Korea’s distinctive civilization from the very beginning. An assertion of an indigenous, and unique, Korean tradition of monotheism allows nationalistic Koreans to brag that they had little, if anything, to learn from the outside world, since even “modern religion” has been present on the Korean peninsula as long as there have been a Korean people.

This invented monotheistic tradition has also been used to paper over a rip in the temporal fabric which separates contemporary Koreans and their beliefs from their ancestors and the religious beliefs those ancestors held. It allows Koreans to construct a uni-linear historical narrative by imposing temporal and spatial unity on the diverse traditions of the peoples of the peninsula in millennia past. By depicting the various peoples who lived in and around the Korean peninsula in

54. John Duncan, “Proto-Nationalism in Pre-modern Korea,” *Perspectives on Korea*, 198-221.

the ancient past as sharing a common monotheistic faith, a faith which Koreans continue to practice today, this narrative buries significant differences and changes over time beneath an imposed religious and therefore cultural and ethnic unity. If we assume that the peoples of and around the Korean peninsula have been united for as far back as we can see by a shared faith in the One God above, and if that faith distinguishes them from their neighbors in China and Japan, then when we use the terms “Korea” and “Koreans” in constructing an historical narrative, we can feel confident that we are talking about the same people, the same culture, and the same place.

This distortion of the religious history of the Korean people has proven very useful in healing the wounds to their national pride Koreans suffered in the twentieth century. It has also, ironically, opened the door wider for the foreign religion of Christianity. Even though the vast majority of South Koreans today believe that their ancestors several millennia ago worshipped a God known as *Hanŭnim*, *Hanöllim*, and *Hanullim*, that does not mean that a majority of religious Koreans have flocked to the new indigenous religions of Korea dedicated to restoring what they portray as the original religion of the Korean people. According to South Korean government census figures, less than 30,000 people belong to *Ch'ōndo-gyo* today, and less than 10,000 to *Taejong-gyo*, compared to 10 million Protestants and 4 million Catholics. However, many of these Christians are able to tell themselves that they are continuing the monotheistic traditions of their forefathers when they go to church on Sunday and pray to *Hanŭnim*. They are therefore able to be both proudly modern and proudly Korean at the same time. It is that joining of modernity with tradition which has given the recent invention of indigenous Korean monotheism so much persuasive power, and made it such an important formative element of contemporary Korean national identity.

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