A History of Theological Thought in the Korean Church*

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I. Introduction

This essay seeks to investigate an historical overview of theological thought in Korean Protestant Christianity. Even though Korean church history has passed just a little more than 120 years, it shows a wide spectrum of theological thought as the imports of theology from the West have interacted with our own creative responses in the Korean soil.

In its first stage after middle 1880s, Korean Protestantism began with the help of foreign missionaries. So its theology had to be formed under the influence of their theological orientation. Because the Western missionaries maintained their own theologies in their theological education of Koreans, Korean theology sooner or later grappled with the heavy conflict between conservative and liberal theology. However, as we rightly expect, Korea was not a vacuum in terms of thought, culture, religion and ethics. Accordingly, first Christians entered Christianity with their presuppositions in understanding the gospel they received. So their belief and theological reflections were colored by some dialogues with eastern religions and their ethos. But this does not mean that the gospel essence was much deformed in its process of inculturation or indigenization. Rather, a creative synthesis of interpretation could be its final outcome. Still, the difficult issue of religious syncretism or pluralism is going on in Korean Christianity. As Korean churches grew and got mature intellectually, theological development also had taken more roots in the modern national history and its socio–political realities. Minjung theology as a Korean form of liberation theology subsuming other contextual

* This paper was presented at the 2011 annual conference of the Korean Association of Christian Studies in On–Yang City, Korea.
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engagements of progressive theological thought emerged in the newly developed contemporary situation.

Ryu Tong–shik, who is one of the major historians of Korean theology, once said that our theology is impoverished and enjoyed no sufficient time for the development of a rich theological tradition.\(^1\) But my appraisal of Korean theological thought has a different point of view. Our Protestantism has clearly a rich and unique contribution to the whole theological works of World Christianity. The thing is that we need to rediscover our precious heritage with a view to applying it positively for a global context of future Christianity. Admittedly, we need to see our shortcomings and limitations. However, Korean theological history has its own strengths and merits for a global Christianity at the same time.

Now I am going to consider major issues of Korean theological history until 1980s. This essay does not intend to make a comprehensive, detailed survey of our subject. But the major important issues will be treated with particular nuances. Instead of dealing with them in a chronological order or by historical stages, I will choose to synthesize in a thematic way, trying to demonstrate some important characteristics of Korean theological thought.

First, I want to explore the theology of Early Revival (Awakening) Movement which formed the earliest theological foundation of Korean spirituality and theology. This has been recently highlighted by Korean Protestantism which celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Great Awakening Movement. Second, the theological conflict between conservative and liberal theology will be explicated. This issue has been an enduring problematic structured in the Korean theological history. There should have been an opening horizon to see above the needless wars, mutual wounds and schisms inculcated by this theological fracture. Unfortunately, it was not the case in Korean theology as had been with the Western predecessor. Third, the creative interpretation of Christian gospel in relation to cultural, religious heritages of Korea or the issue of indigenization will be considered. From the start, Korean theology had to make dialogues with traditional religions like Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism. The character of our belief has been tried in this inevitable engagement. Finally, I will treat the Minjung Theol-