

## Guest Editor's Note

EDWARD Y. J. CHUNG

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First of all, I appreciate the editorial board of *Acta Koreana* for inviting me to serve as their Guest Editor for this special issue of *Acta Koreana* (December 2019). I am pleased and honored to do so by providing the following introduction. This special issue presents five scholarly articles on the special theme of “good and evil in Korean philosophy, religion, and spirituality.” The first two are on Buddhism by Robert Buswell and Sumi Lee, respectively; the third one on Confucianism by Edward Chung; the fourth on a modern Christian thinker by Halla Kim; and the last article, by Donald Baker, offers a historical overview of the theme.\* When Robert E. Buswell, Jr. presented a keynote speech at the international conference on the same theme that I hosted at my university in 2018, he asked the following question:

If the buddhanature universally exists in the human mind or if God's universal love and grace are freely given, where does evil come from and how do we explain the active problem of evil in the human world?

Good and evil is one of the most important and contentious topics in world religions and philosophies. In general, human nature has been regarded as fundamentally good or evil, both good and evil, or neither good nor evil, depending on certain levels, aspects, and conditions of human existence, most of which are interpreted according to the basic doctrines and practices of various spiritual traditions. Each tradition justified the origins of good and evil and endeavoured to explain the inevitable problem of evil. A distinctive set of moral-spiritual

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teaching and practice is also provided to attain the ideal goal of “the absolute good” that is variously described as enlightenment (buddhanature), self-perfection (sagehood), salvation, and so on.

What is important about each religion in this regard, how does it relate to other traditions in the Korean and East Asian context, and how would this enrich our broader interreligious understanding of the topic? It is with these questions in mind that I will introduce these five articles and present my perspectives and insights for your consideration.

**Robert Buswell’s article** is “the Origins of Good and Evil and the Challenge of Theodicy in the Buddhist Tradition,” the expanded version of a keynote speech. According to it, Buddhism focuses “less on the issue of why evil...and more on the question of how best to respond to that evil.” This emphasis on “soteriology” influenced the development of key Buddhist doctrines and practices, which requires our understanding of theodicy in East Asian Mahāyāna and its Korean tradition. The impressive range of Buswell’s discussion includes the Buddha, two early scriptures, the Mahāyāna sutras such as the *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra* (K. *Kūmgang sammaegyōng*) and *Awakening of Faith*, the Yogācāra doctrine, Wŏnhyo’s (617–686) Korean commentary, and the Chan school and Chinul’s (1158–1210) Korean texts. Buswell frequently emphasizes that evil derives from people’s “craving” (*tṛṣṇā*), “greed,” “attachment,” “ignorance,” “delusion,” or “defilement.” Another key theme he clearly articulates is the East Asian dichotomy between the so-called Tathāgatagarbha doctrine and the Yogācāra teaching: universal belief in “the embryo of buddhahood” (or the enlightenment inherent in the minds of all sentient beings) *vis-à-vis* the existential fact that “sentient beings are ignorant and not already enlightened.” Their challenging issue was: “How evil might exist even amid the pervasive reality of enlightenment?” Korean masters such as Wŏnhyo and Chinul realized this problem of theodicy, so they endeavoured to harmonize the two conflicting-yet-complementary systems of Mahāyāna teaching. Buswell concludes that every human being is responsible to overcome evil, so Korean Buddhism developed “an elegant soteriological” remedy.

In my view, what needs to be discussed in future scholarship is the extent to which the ecumenical Buddhism of Wŏnhyo and/or Chinul is uniquely Korean or distinctive from the Chinese or Japanese counterparts, especially in terms of emphasizing *practical* soteriology or spirituality. Another thought-provoking topic for a book project would be the broader meaning and implication of Buswell’s article for the advancing study of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

**Sumi Lee’s article** presents the middle way approach to Buddhist ethics by focusing on the doctrinal problem of buddhanature and Wŏnhyo’s (617–686) Korean interpretation of this problem. In outlining the Buddhist concept of good as “wholesome” (S. *kuśala*, K. *sŏn*), this textual study points out that early Buddhism divided “wholesome dharmas” into the “mundane” and “supramundane” levels, and its soteriology expected each practitioner to cultivate both types of the wholesome dharmas for enlightenment. Lee explains why

the Mahāyāna ethical system doubted this dichotomy and the East Asian interpretation of it therefore focused on the two conflicting notions of the buddhanature: “the universal spiritual capability innate in all sentient beings” and the *icchantika* incorrigibles “who are devoid of the capability (wholesome dharmas).” I find it remarkable that this dichotomy closely pertains to Buswell’s discussion of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine and the Yogācāra teaching. Lee eloquently presents Wŏnhyo’s interpretation of the so-called four antinomies of buddhanature in human beings according to the *Nirvāna Sutra*. Wŏnhyo affirmed the universal buddhanature for both the *icchantikas* and those having wholesome roots. Lee concludes that Wŏnhyo emphasized the true meaning of the wholesome dharmas as the practice of the middle way, which resonates with some of his contemporaries’ Buddhist ethical thoughts; this is a key topic that demands further research, as Lee has informed me in our latest e-mail communication.

In light of Buswell’s discussion, it is also necessary consider the question of evil (“unwholesomeness”) and soteriology in Wŏnhyo’s Buddhism, although Lee claims that the problem of evil is not mentioned in Wŏnhyo’s writings. In my opinion, another interesting topic for future scholarship might be the context in which Wŏnhyo’s inclusive (or ecumenical) interpretation is East Asian but differs from its Chinese or Japanese counterparts.

**Edward Chung’s article** is “Yi T’oegye on Transcending the Problem of Evil: A Neo-Confucian and Interreligious Perspective.” It discusses Yi Hwang’s (T’oegye, 1501–1570) interpretation of good and evil. Despite Confucian belief in the *ideal* state of innate human goodness, the human person in his/her *real* life is misled to evil or may even be capable of doing evil. T’oegye dealt with this dilemma. In the Mencian and Neo-Confucian context, human nature is originally good; however, one can become evil when that human nature is neglected because of selfish emotions and cravings. For T’oegye, then, no original evil exists in the ontological sense. Evil is our moral failure: it arises when one’s disturbed *ki/qi* (vital energy) associated with the selfish body or mind acts against moral principles (*i/li*). This is why T’oegye emphasized a self-controlled and reverential way to do good and remove selfishness and potential evil. At the heart of his ethics and spirituality is this holistic practice. Chung presents some interreligious perspectives as well. T’oegye’s way does not contradict the Buddhist practice of extinguishing cravings and attachments. It is also compared with the Augustinian explanation of evil as the neglect of good and Leibniz’s (1646–1716) theodicy of “moral evil.” By citing medieval Christian thinkers such as Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) and John of the Cross (1542–1591), Chung articulates T’oegye’s soteriological method as compatible with their Christian way, insofar as both paths require one’s complete detachment from self-indulgence. The similarity between T’oegye and other spiritual traditions is the ultimate quest for good over evil.

A related issue that we can articulate further is the way in which T’oegye’s interpretation is distinctively Korean or differs from Zhu Xi in terms of emphasizing moral and spiritual *practice*. As a specialist in the comparative study of religion, Chung thinks that the broader implication of this article is another intriguing topic on T’oegye’s religious thought; in fact,

Chung is pursuing a book project on this topic (accepted for publication).

**Halla Kim's article**, "Tasök Yu Yöngmo [1890–1981] on God and Nothingness," presents the "indigenized" Christian theology of Tasök (Yu's penname), a famous Christian thinker in modern Korea, in terms of God, Nothingness (or Emptiness), *taiji* (supreme ultimate) and *wuji* (limitless ultimate), *dao*, and religious pluralism. Tasök assimilated the Christian notion of God (K. *hananim*) with the Korean and comparative framework of these beliefs and ideas. Kim systematically discusses Tasök's ideas of the true self (K. *ch'am-na*), spiritual self (*öl-na*), phenomenal self (*che-na*), and bodily self (*mom-na*). The true self is identified as the spiritual essence of humanity (also known as *ssial*) that "embodies divinity," whereas the phenomenal self represents the combination of the body and the mind. Kim's article does not discuss good and evil specifically. However, it indirectly suggests that with respect to God, Nothingness, *wuji*, and *dao*, the true (or spiritual) self is the ultimate source of the good. Tasök's sayings and Kim's interpretive phrases include "attachment to body," "recover the true self," "keeping the bodily self in careful control," and "overcome...carnal temptations." In this regard, Kim has confirmed through our latest e-mails that the phenomenal or bodily self is "the origin of evil" due to its hedonism, greed, and selfish desires. I find this article interesting and engaging partly because of Tasök's open-minded pluralistic theology. We can call him an "ecumenical Christian" or a "global Christian," who has transcended the conventional dilemma of interreligious differences and promoted the unifying truth of world religions.

One relevant topic that we need to discuss more specifically is the way in which Tasök explains the problem of evil and suffering and its soteriological path. As a specialist in Korean Neo-Confucianism and interreligious dialogue, I also think that another ideal topic for a book project would be universal God and interreligious dialogue in Tasök's "syncretic indigenized Christianity."

**Donald Baker's article** discusses what he calls the core of Korean religious and philosophical thinking that has wrestled with the contradiction between "the expectation of human perfectibility" and "the recognition of moral frailty." This extensive historical study presents Korean Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and three "indigenous" new religions. Eminent Korean thinkers realized the contradiction and explained "why human beings fail to realize their full potential." A Korean Buddhist solution was "the gradual replacement of pre-enlightenment habits with moral habits after becoming enlightened." Baker discusses Chinul (1158–1210), Kihwa (1376–1433), and Söngch'öl (1912–1993), all of whom emphasized the elimination of attachments; Chinul is highlighted for his doctrine of "sudden awakening and gradual cultivation." Baker would agree with Buswell that sentient beings suffer due to their ignorance and attachment, which also implies the problem of evil. In presenting T'oegyë, (1501–1570), Yulgok (1536–1584), and Tasan (1762–1836), Baker clearly argues that Korean Confucianism struggled with its own dichotomy between the innate goodness (perfection) of human nature and the potential evil of selfish emotions and cravings. So they emphasized self-

cultivation as a life-long path. By contrast, Korean Christians offered a completely different soteriological solution: salvation through God and Jesus Christ. Consequently, they rejected their traditional belief that human beings are capable of self-perfection. Baker examines three “new religions” such as Tonghak (Ch’öndogyo), Chüngsan’gyo, and Won Buddhism and articulates how they, too, managed the perfectibility-*versus*-frailty dilemma by preaching the coming of a new good world without suffering and evil.

Baker concludes that Korean religion and philosophy have sought effective ways to resolve the conflict between theoretical perfectibility and practical difficulty. In my view, a related topic for a good book project is the broader implication of Baker’s article would be what makes Korean religions “truly Korean” and “what they all have in common.”

Overall, Korea’s religious and philosophical traditions articulate the dichotomy of good and evil in human existence. It is therefore necessary to talk about not only their differences, but, more importantly, their similarities. A common aspect of their religious discourses is to resolve the following conflict:

Despite the *ideal* ultimate reality of the universally enlightened mind (buddhanature), Heaven-mandated original human goodness, or the good image of God in humanity, human beings in their *real* life experiences are misled to evil or may even be capable of doing evil.

Buswell articulated this dilemma in terms of Buddhist theodicy and soteriology including its Korean tradition, most of which centers around the Mahayana dichotomy between the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, on the one hand, and the Yogācāra teaching, on the other. Lee talked about “wholesome dharmas,” two conflicting East Asian notions of the buddhanature, and Wōnhyō’s interpretation. Kim articulated the same quandary in terms of Tasōk’s “syncretic Christian” explanation of “the true (spiritual) self [purely good]” *versus* “the bodily self [potentially evil].” Chung discussed the Korean Neo-Confucian and interreligious context by presenting T’oegyē’s interpretation in terms of the difference between *i/li* and *ki/qi* and between moral principles and virtues and selfish emotions and cravings. Baker discussed the contradiction between the teleological goal of perfection (nirvana, sagehood, etc.) and the actual outcome of moral frailty (or failure).

With some flexible perspectives, these articles generally agree that evil fundamentally originates in our moral failure, i.e., the neglect or ignorance of good, insofar as it is caused by the selfish body or mind dictated by cravings, emotions, attachments, greed, defilement, sin, and so on. Accordingly, the common soteriological solution among Korean religious traditions emphasizes moral-spiritual practice to transcend the problem of evil while working toward perfection or liberation. We may ask what is distinctively Korean here; all articles more or less affirm the Korean meaning and identity of these traditions, especially in the context of emphasizing faith and practice over speculative metaphysics or argumentation (or theology). However, it seems that this topic hasn’t been explored sufficiently. So I hope to see more research and publication on this fascinating topic in the near future!

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a prominent modern Christian monk and scholar talked about the realization of what he calls the divine seed in humanity (see my article for Merton’s books). From his comparative standpoint, what the Christian soteriological path, despite its monotheistic or Christocentric dimension, ultimately concurs with the (Korean) Buddhist way is the deeper meaning of discovering one’s “true being” through the death of ego and selfishness. This is also compatible with T’oegy’e’s Confucian way of following the moral-spiritual mind (K. *tosim* 道心) and removing selfish cravings and attachments.

To conclude, the converging horizon among Korean Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and other spiritual traditions is their shared faith in the moral and transcendent reality of human existence. In my view, it means the ultimate quest for good over evil. In line with the unity of world religions, this is potentially our universal commitment to empowering the spiritual transformation of the self and the world.