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THE COMPLEX HYBRIDITY OF HAM SOK-HEON

DAN CHRISTY RANDAZZO

This paper examines the multiple elements of Korean Quaker Ham Sok-Heon's religious, political, and theological identity from the perspective of hybridity, with a special focus on the impact of that hybridity on Quaker reconciliation theology. In this article, I outline the basic elements of his ideas and context, emphasising the ways in which they interact in the intricate web of his thought. I also outline ways in which both reconciliation and Liberal Quaker theology are present in his ideas, and how exploring these overlaps would strengthen theological and ethical thought in both of these areas. His ideas are relatively unknown outside of Korea, due in part to the fact that very few of his writings have been translated: both literally translated from Korean, but also figuratively translated into non-Korean contexts. As I argue, however, his ideas are actually highly 'translatable' to both reconciliation theology and Liberal Quaker theology. As a result, I argue that any subsequent construction of Quaker reconciliation theology which fails to take Ham's work into consideration is incomplete, especially due to the potential implications of his work to respond to the complex hybrid nature of both reconciliation and Liberal Quaker theology.

THE STATE OF LIBERAL QUAKER RECONCILIATION THEOLOGY

While Liberal Quaker thought has continuously engaged with the wide field of peacemaking approaches and philosophies, as one of the main elements of Liberal Quakerism is its significant emphasis on peace and peacemaking, neither reconciliation theologians nor Liberal Quakers have attempted to bring both fields into any sustained dialogue. This, however, is not the case with political peacemaking in general, and political reconciliation specifically. Liberal Quaker peacemakers have engaged with the categories of political reconciliation at great length, demonstrating how they have either employed these techniques in their peacemaking efforts, or how they have incorporated the theoretical

foundations of political reconciliation in their peacemaking. These are the main themes of any work that has dealt with reconciliation and Quaker peacemaking: the development and application of the Quaker Peace Testimony, the role that the Peace Testimony plays in the overarching Quaker ethical structure, and the intersections of both the Peace Testimony and Quaker ethics with those of political reconciliation and religious peacemaking in general. Any theology mentioned is done in the context of the Peace Testimony in specific, and in connection with the implications of the Quaker concept of divine immanence in peacemaking in general. From the holistic perspective of reconciliation theology, however, this specificity is incomplete.

Reconciliation works on four levels: the theological, between God and humans; the interpersonal, between individual people; the social, between local, alienated communities; and the political, across an entire nation or region.¹ Each level carries its unique complexities, yet all are sequential processes with different goals for each sequence.² Reconciliation requires that classifications based on the ‘other’ are removed, and that new identities are created for all in a society, including those who had enjoyed privileged status.³ Reconciliation is thus a totalising process, touching on every single aspect of the human-human and human-divine relationship. Liberal Quaker reconciliation theology must thus go further than simply a theological examination of the Peace Testimony: it must engage in abstract questions of theological anthropology, sin, evil, and incarnation, as well as practical questions of peacemaking process and practice.

It also must be continuously open to re-examination. As with many contextual, liberation, and post-colonial theologies, the core elements of reconciliation theology are continually re-evaluated in light of new realities and applied to unexpected contexts. This includes bringing into dialogue theologians from many different cultural and geographical settings, as well as confessional traditions. This also includes theologians who might not describe themselves as ‘reconciliation theologians’, yet who engage in similar categories and strive to answer similar questions as those few theologians who would claim the title. In a sense, ‘reconciliation theology’ can be defined as a specific set of analytical tools which can be applied to any situation where systemic evil and sin has led to destructive conflict, and the attendant separation between humans, and between humans and God. To work in reconciliation theology is to be constantly seeking to develop new areas where its analytical tools could be applied.

It is in precisely this way that the hybridity of Ham Sok-Heon's thought can be effectively brought to bear in service of Liberal Quaker reconciliation theology: Ham endeavoured to apply Liberal Quaker theological concepts of anthropology and sin, as well as the Peace Testimony, to the hybrid religious and political context of Korea, thus crafting a unique hybrid of Christian, Western, Korean, Taoist, and Quaker religious thought that is rooted in a very particular political and ethnic context, yet universally applicable to other settings of division and conflict.

THE LIBERAL QUAKER RECONCILIATION THEOLOGY OF HAM SOK-HEON

Ham Sok-Heon was born before the division of Korea in the region of Pyong-an, an area now located in North Korea, in 1901. He was raised a Presbyterian, yet became a convinced Friend⁴ after a series of interactions with American Friends⁵, specifically Howard Brinton.⁶ He later made a special note to mention the influence that Kenneth Boulding's 1970 Swarthmore Lecture made on his understanding of Liberal Quaker thought and ethics, demonstrating that he recognised an underlying link between his ideas and those of Liberal Quakerism.⁷

He was an intellectual, who devoted his life to Korean reunification based upon what he understood as the necessary and complete reformation of the spiritual life of the Korean people, and as such, his ideas and example are considered the forerunners of both Korean Reunification Theology and minjung theology, two of the most influential recent Korean Christian theological constructs.⁸ He engaged with the same questions that reconciliation theology deals with: what creates conflict and division on both the political and theological planes, and how God responds to the divisions that result amongst humans and between humans and God. He brought Christianity, Universalism, and Liberal Quakerism together into a unique expression which reflected his context, and which could also be translated to other contexts of division and reconciliation. These are the areas where his ideas could be 'translated' both figuratively and literally: the role of human sinfulness in creating division; the false promise of redemptive violence; the role of the cross in atonement; divine/human interdependence and the role of the 'Inner Light'; and the role that the dynamic God plays in 'continuing revelation'. I explore these briefly in turn.

THE ROLE OF HUMAN SINFULNESS IN CREATING DIVISION

Ham first became politically aware during the thirty-five year period of Japanese occupation of Korea. Ham viewed the occupation as the complete subjugation of the Korean national identity under a foreign culture, as he viewed the Korean nation as possessing a discernible existence, including a body, personality and a soul.⁹ He termed the Korean soul *han*, which he understood to mean ‘great one’, and ‘oneness’.¹⁰ This oneness applied to the entire Korean peninsula, not only to the people who inhabited the land and the culture they developed, but to the land itself. This reflects the concerns of other areas which have experienced ethnic conflict, in particular Northern Ireland: a region whose native tradition of reconciliation theology has sought to recast the link between people and land in more universalist terms, rejecting the exclusive and exclusionary link made in the ethnic conflicts of Ireland between specific ethnicities and the land. Ham reflected this union of universality and specificity by emphasising that the hybrid God joined both together in body and action: the universal God is present throughout, and beyond, the entirety of creation, yet is also inextricably present within the specific land and people of Korea. This interplay between universal and specific links all aspects together into both a cosmic and earthly reality: as in, the actual land of Korea was infused with the presence of God. Thus, any political or theological rupturing of the people (such as the partition of Korea into North and South Korea in 1948) went against the will of God.¹¹ In this way, he examined the role of human sinfulness in creating division.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE

In response to the partition, both Korea developed mutually antagonistic political philosophies: communism and democracy. Both societies developed policies of unilateral reunification, where reunification would only occur on the basis of either system completely replacing the other.¹² In South Korea, this led to a development of a Christianity dependent upon democracy, which valorised the use of violence both in defence of the democratic system and in its potential imposition upon North Korea in any future reunification. Ham saw this as embracing the false promise of a form of redemptive violence which both literally and figuratively imprisoned the people.¹³

THE ROLE OF THE CROSS IN ATONEMENT

Ham viewed the people (who he termed *minjung*) as oppressed by any and all ‘statist’ systems, as they are all based upon the subjugation and oppression of the *minjung*.¹⁴ The *minjung* were the mass of the poor and oppressed who were only pawns in the power schemes of the statist systems. In their suffering, the *minjung* were self-sacrificial peacemakers who embraced the non-violent unity of Christian pacifism as the true liberation.¹⁵ In this, *minjung* were akin to Christ on the cross in that *minjung* suffering was redemptive.¹⁶ In Ham’s vision of this pacifist, unified *minjung*, their rejection of the violence of statism and embrace of non-violence would lead eventually to the reconciliation/reunification of Korea.¹⁷

DIVINE/HUMAN INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE ‘INNER LIGHT’

Their only liberation came through enlightenment to their true nature as ‘*ssial*’, however, which Ham defined as an interdependence between the individual and the community, where both were essential to the other. *Ssial* was dependent upon the divine/human interdependence both rooted in the Korean soil, as well as in the insistence that the ‘ordinary people’ were actually carriers of an inner ‘seed’ of God within themselves.¹⁸ This reflects both Ham’s Liberal Quaker belief in the Inner Light and ‘that of God’, but also his Christian understanding of the immanent incarnation within the human person.¹⁹ Once Ham became aware of the concept of the Inner Light, he used it in an imprecise, metaphorical fashion to describe his understanding of the presence of God within the human. This idea was placed in continuous dialogue with *ssial*, where *ssial* was the human side of the interdependent relationship, while Inner Light was the divine side.²⁰

THE DYNAMIC GOD AND ‘CONTINUING REVELATION’

This continuous, imprecise dialogue reflected the dynamic nature of a God who was ever-evolving, ever becoming. God was the paradoxical absolute being (which he termed ‘neither existent nor nonexistent... which transcends everything’) who was also the radical presence within the creation which both created, and was the creation.²¹ This dynamic and paradoxical changelessness/ever-changing was

continuously revealing itself to the creation. For Ham, this led directly to his unique form of Universalism which reflected its rootedness in the ‘place’ of Korea, in that it held all aspects of Korean culture and identity in tension: in a sense, Ham’s religious beliefs were an attempt to reconcile within himself all of the disparate elements of Korea: Christian, Western, Eastern, Taoist, and Buddhist.²²

Thus, Ham saw Korea as a plane upon which all ideas and beliefs could commingle and be translated to each other. In this way, Ham utilised the complex and interweaving aspects of his thought, his identity, and his rooting in the ‘place’ of Korea to craft a hybrid Universalist reconciliation theology: one that was shaped by Christian reconciliation theology, yet was rooted in the diversity of Korean culture and identity.

ENDNOTES

1. John W. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 26.
2. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 27.
3. de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, 30. Noted reconciliation practitioner John Paul Lederach expresses a similar point, arguing that reconciliation falls within three paradoxes: between dealing with a painful, divided past and charting an interdependent future; locating a place where the search for the truth about what occurred meets mercy to let the past go; and finally, where the accountability of justice and the common vision of peace can be held in creative tension. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 31.
4. ‘Convinced Friend’ is the terminology used by Quakers to describe someone who converts to Quakerism, while someone born into a Quaker family and raised in a Quaker community is called a ‘birthright Friend’.
5. Quakers use the terms ‘Friend’ and ‘Quaker’ interchangeably. ‘Friend’ is the traditional name for those who consider themselves members of the Religious Society of Friends, while ‘Quaker’ is a term that was initially given as a derogatory nickname to Friends, and has since been taken on by Friends as an accepted alternative name.
6. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon’s Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea: A Quaker Theology of Peace* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 182.
7. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon’s Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 185.
8. Jung dedicates an entire section (4.3) in his book on Han to describing the impact that his ideas had on the development of both of these theologies, including the specific theologians who have helped fashion these theologies. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon’s Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*.
9. Park Jae Soon, ‘Ham Sok Hon’s National Spirit and Christian Thought’, in *An Anthology of Ham Sok Hon*, Ham Sok Hon (Seoul, South Korea: Samin Books, 2001), 203.
10. Park Jae Soon, ‘Ham Sok Hon’s National Spirit and Christian Thought’, 199.

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11. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 207.
12. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 209.
13. Ham Sok Hon, *The Anthology of Ham Sok Hon*, (Seoul, South Korea: Samin Books, 2001), 119.
14. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 210.
15. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 150.
16. Park Jae Soon, 'Ham Sok Hon's National Spirit and Christian Thought', in *An Anthology of Ham Sok Hon*, Ham Sok Hon (Seoul, South Korea: Samin Books, 2001), 207.
17. Park Jae Soon, 'Ham Sok Hon's National Spirit and Christian Thought', 208.
18. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 162.
19. Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*, 164.
20. Kim Sung Soo, *Ham Sok Hon: Voice of the People and Pioneer of Religious Pluralism in Twentieth Century Quakerism, Biography of a Korean Quaker* (Seoul, South Korea: Samin Books, 2001), 181.
21. Park Jae Soon, 'Ham Sok Hon's National Spirit and Christian Thought', 210.
22. Park Jae Soon, 'Ham Sok Hon's National Spirit and Christian Thought', 221.