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5

WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN THE KOREAN SALIMIST[1] CONCEPT

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Introduction

The topic of family has received much attention since the 1980s, both inside and outside the churches. Particularly, Korean churches in the 21st century have been perplexed by the phenomenon of a fast deconstruction of the traditional nuclear family and the emergence of various types of families. Most Korean Christians feel uneasy about the frequent breakdown of marriages, the seriously low birth rate, and the weakening of the conventional nuclear family. Therefore many Korean churches have been concerned about family issues and invested their energy in various family recovery programmes that focussed on the traditional family concept.

Recent discourses on the issue of family can be divided in two groups. Both agree that family forms are changing, but diagnose the cause and results of this phenomenon very differently. On one side are those who are concerned about widespread family disintegration caused by a rising divorce rate. On the other side are those who view newly pluralistic family forms as liberation from the patriarchal nuclear family. Diversity in families is a welcome change, and it should not be judged as socially and morally inferior.[2]

In the Korean society, a male dominant culture with patriarchal structures has been operating in many families where values of control and a powerful, dominant and authoritarian leadership can be observed. Hence families are contexts in which male violence against women and the abuse of children are still increasingly found. Families are criticised for having confined wives to the private domestic sphere where they are subservient to the needs and demands of husbands and children. Conservative Korean Christians are very concerned about the need to restore what they say is the biblical view of the family: a male-dominated nuclear family consisting of a working husband, a non-working wife who is a full-time mother, and several dependent children. From the conservative stance of a Korean church, therefore, the weakening of the leadership of the father in the family must be faced determinately.

However the hierarchical pattern of power in patriarchal structures fails to show God's grace and love to all members of the family.

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It also fails to show the original Christian vision of radical equality in Christ. This pattern of leadership is paternalistic and authoritarian and thus not reciprocal. It is hardly to be transformed by family practice. The exhortation to the husband to love your wife as Christ loves the Church, is not paralleled by the exhortation to the wife to love her husband likewise, but rather by a command to submit to her husband as the Church submits to Christ. A similar pattern is suggested in the relationship of slaves to masters and subjects to the emperor.[3] The family is the basic unit of society and it is the place where people can learn and practice the primary skills and attitudes of leadership among the mother, the father and the siblings.

The notion of 'family' has become a moral and political symbol, it is ideologically charged. Theological reflection will need to begin with the experience of families and family members who are impoverished, marginalised, victimised or violated. Families can be life-enhancing or life-destroying, and the Church has colluded oppressively and uncritically with the family by endorsing versions of it which are patriarchal, sexist and marginalising. The family must be a place where God's grace is experienced and where people can find nurturing and healing, but in these times, the family has been a place where people have experienced the deepest wound and suffering, which is the most difficult for the victims of domestic violence. Whether families are channels of God's grace has a lot to do with the way in which power is exercised in the family group.

Therefore, life in abundance for all people and life as central affirmation of the Gospel of Jesus is impossible in today's world. The culture of death and violence has been developed in close relation with the patriarchal system and a Western civilisation focused on growing and competing values. The patriarchal culture and the corresponding structure deeply and systematically affect the constitution not only of beliefs and ideas but also of emotions, the subconscious and unconscious dimension of both men and women which allow to affirm male domination and women's oppression. It seems to me that we, Christians and theologians, have not sufficiently developed and honoured our understandings of a life witnessing Jesus' teachings in the challenges of our day.

This paper tries to examine how we create new family leadership models for a radical transformation of the hierarchical, authoritarian, violent and patriarchal values in Korean families and churches. How do we fulfil life in abundance through families as we resist the culture of violence and death in our daily life? How do we develop women leadership to create an alternative family leadership through the critique and the transformation of the current patriarchal domination? In order to develop women leadership, how do we have to change our way of thinking in concrete as much as we criticise the culture of vio-

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lence and its cultural domination in the patriarchal system? These are the questions I want to deal with in this essay.

In Korean society and in the Korean Church, the issue of leadership and especially of women's leadership as an alternative has received much attention from the late 1990s to the present. In the various areas where the issues of leadership have been discussed – such as political leadership and business leadership – people seriously re-evaluate female characters and values in order to find alternative leadership patterns responding to the paradigm shift of the contemporary Korean society. Within the contemporary discourse on the family, it is a particular issue as to how to create a new model of Christian women's leadership: Korean Christian women need to change inherited patterns of family leadership which has been represented by the males only, such as the fathers, sons, and husbands.

To find a new model of family leadership, I explore the Korean concept of Salim and feminine values of Daoism.[4] Religious plurality necessarily plays a central role for Korean Christianity and many Korean feminist theologians are acutely aware that they are rooted in several religious identities such as Shamanism, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. I think that Korean thought and Daoism can be the philosophical and cultural soil in which we should develop the new values and meanings of women's leadership as an alternative pattern of family leadership.

1. The Cosmic Salim Model of Leadership as a Model of Family Leadership

One of the significant problems of family leadership is, for East Asian women, the strong division between the private and the public spheres as well as the male domination in the relationships between husbands and wives or sisters and brothers. This patriarchal hierarchy has produced values of power and competition, rather than caring, sharing, serving and emptying. Those values produced by the hierarchical patriarchy closely related to distortion of spirituality have easily controlled people's lives, thoughts, minds, and spirits. We must concretise all the ideas and concepts for new models of family leadership in response to how to live and practice with faith in God. We must create a new way of life that enables all members of the family to be blessed by God.

In the traditional Korean way of life, people believe that a human being is part of nature and that economy and ecology must therefore be in a harmonious relationship making all life in abundance possible. These two words – economy and ecology – share a same Greek root, 'oikos' (house, habitation). The Korean word corresponding to

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this meaning is *Salimsali*. This word consists of two different parts, *Salim* and *Sali*. The first one is derived from household economy and the latter from house management. *Salimsali* means all the work and spirit which make things alive. I want to suggest Salim leadership as a new model of family leadership: the goal of good family leadership is to make things alive.

Salim refers to a Korean woman's everyday household chores, e.g. gathering wood, water and food, cooking, cleaning, washing, raising children, healing the sick. These tasks also include caring for the old and the weak, as well as for plants and trees. Salimists make things alive again, especially dying things and wounded things like the Earth. When Korean people say about a particular woman that 'she is a *'Salim-kun'* (a Salim expert)', this means that she has perfected the skill or art of making things alive. This includes feeding and nurturing everybody (so that they are all full and happy), creating peace, health, abundant living and a beautiful environment for the family (the very large extended family of all forms of life).

A Salimist also embraces a vision of fundamental social change, she gets involved in movements and develops strategies. She is an 'inclusivist,' or 'embracist.' A Salimist, in other words, is a peace activist. In Korea, some Salimists are married. Their husbands call them *'An-Hae',* which means 'the sun of the household.' Salimists promote conflict resolution, non-violent resistance, peace, reconciliation and harmony wherever they go.[5] Salimists, therefore, are leaders for peace and life.

2. The Principles of Salimist Leadership

a) Shift from a Male-Centred to a Life-Centred Way of Life

The new model of Salim leadership can emerge through a paradigm shift from reason-centred, human being-centred and material-centred reasoning and behaviour to a life-centred and spirit-centred approach. This perspective leads us to the future of cosmic community and to recognise even our responsibility of maintaining and preserving our planet Earth, which goes beyond individualistic and nationalistic worldviews. This is what we may call 'cosmic Salimsali'. This shift produces new values of Salim culture such as keeping alive *(Salim)*, serving, emptying and sharing to find new ways of life.

b) A New Women Leadership Through Interaction Between Human Beings and Nature

Through inter-feeling between people and nature for building an ecological community, which respects all life on earth, we can learn

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from earth and nature to correct the destructive and wounded way of life. Facing, in particular, the ecological crisis in relation with the growing economical injustice, many Western Christian theologians concede that Christianity has a great responsibility in this problem. To fix it, Daoism suggests the recognition of a deep connection between nature and human beings. The core beliefs of Daoism are relationality, mutuality, and wholeness between humans.

In Daoism, the law of nature is not dualistic, in the sense of opposing, for instance, life to death. Rather, it is the circulation of all existence. The human being is part of nature and follows the natural cycle. An Eastern Asian philosophy such as Daoism, originally does not contain any concept of dualistic domination. It emphasises the balance and unity of nature, which includes the human being as a part of it. The Eastern epistemology has a potential to provide schemes and models for a new way of life. Nevertheless, the original principle of Daoism is hard to be found in contemporary society even in Eastern thinking. It is our responsibility, both in the East and in the West, to revise the life style for the future.

The inherent characteristic of nature is the constant flux of life. This flux, in the Salimist concept, depends on the female, which means on the life-giving and life-nurturing role women are able to fulfil. Throughout history, women have struggled with the natural resources such as food, land, water and energy. Nevertheless, unlike the dualistic view that puts the nature/culture in antagonistic relation, women do not objectify nature, but are rather embedded in it, embrace it as part of their life, and nourish it. Therefore, it is very natural that feminists are radically participating in movements of nonviolent resistance against the ecological crisis. Thus, the Earth and the land are often symbolised as the mother or the women's womb, which is the metaphor of creation and product as we can particularly see it in Daoism.

c) Female Leadership Focused on the Values of Sharing, Emptying, and Serving

According to Mother Teresa, there is no peace without sharing. The reason of poverty and oppression in present days is not a lack of resources but a failure of adequate distribution and sharing. Economical injustice and ecological destruction cannot be resolved through a change in our ways of thinking or through reforms of the system only; they require a change in every individual's way of life. If we can transform values of life according to Salimist principles such as sharing, emptying, serving, people will know that wealth and possession cannot guarantee life and peace, and that changing values, styles and attitudes of life can give life and peace for all living beings

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on Earth. Serving others and sharing with others is very difficult for everyone. But persons who live with sharing and serving can be persons who know the art of living and who experience a real happiness of life. They are often happier than those who receive help from others. Therefore, persons who never experience sharing, never experience the joy such sharing creates. The way to overcome the divisions in this world is only sharing and emptying.

d) The New Leadership in Re-evaluating Feminine Values Such as Nurturing, Caring, Accepting, and Life Giving.

In some Western epistemologies, which are based on hierarchical dualism, the image of the female is often connected with a negative concept such as body, feelings, myth, spontaneity, darkness, weakness, death, etc. These concepts support a hierarchical social structure, and the ideology of gender control has been established on this. However, Daoism suggests different methods of looking at and understanding our contemporary society. In what follows, I will evaluate these female images to enrich the concept of women leadership presented thus far.

There are several female images in the *Dao Te Ching*, such as giving birth, nurturing, softness, darkness, etc.[7] These notions are often used to explain the Dao and the principle of nature. The notion of Dao does not contain any negativity, and more important, any notion of domination. Thus the female image in Daoism does not contain and yield negativity or oppression; rather it presents very positive and embracing aspects. Before discussing the female image in the *Dao Te Ching*, it is necessary that the two different images of the female in modern society be classified. One category is the mythical, irrational image of the female characterised by chaos, spontaneity, darkness, fluctuation, weakness, etc.[7] The notions in this category support male domination over women in hierarchical society. Some former Western ethics or concepts of nature, that is, the exploitation and monopolisation of resources, are also placed in this category because symbolically nature and women have been considered to be in the same image. Most contemporary Western environmental ethics look at it critically.

The other category is the image of the mother; it entails nurturing and devotion and is often considered in a very positive way in contemporary society. However, the fact cannot be ignored that the positive outlook embraced by the mother image has also been used for manipulation and for the advancement of the ideology of gender control.

The mother image in Daoism represents the Dao,[8] which is life-giving and nurturing. Lao Tzu said: 'The Dao is called the Great Mother: empty yet inexhaustible, it gives birth to infinite worlds.'[9]

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He also said that 'the Dao gives birth to all beings, nourishes them, maintains them, cares for them, comforts them, protects them. […] That is why love of the Dao is in the very nature of things.'[10] Therefore, this mother image cannot be restricted to the women's reproductive role or the domestic work only. It is an immense and profound image. The Dao as the female image creates all things, human beings and nature. At the same time, it is immanent in its creation. The metaphor-image of the Great Mother is the harmony and unity of the creator and the creation.

Daoism presents other concepts, which can be categorised in the female image, such as softness and flux, in an affirmative way. As Lao Tzu said: 'The gentlest thing in the world overcomes the hardest thing in the world.' The softness and weakness as the female image are usually regarded to be inferior to the rigidity and strength of the male image. But Lao Tzu saw it reversed. He said: 'Thus, whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life. The hard and stiff will be broken. The soft and supple will prevail.' The emphasis on the superiority of the female image illustrates the emancipation of life. All things die when the circulation of life is blocked, but all things live if they are let to flow with their own circulation.

Conclusion

Women leadership includes feminine, female, and feminist perspectives altogether. To create a new model of leadership focused on life and peace, I think that it is important to rethink and re-evaluate various kinds of women's ways of seeing, thinking, and acting which have been silenced, marginalised, and considered as inferior concepts for a long time. I think that women leadership oriented along the lines of the concept of Salim and inspired by the Daoist principles summarised above, could restore and revitalise all families which are suffering, wounded and broken.

NOTES

1 'Salimist' is a term derived from the Korean word *Salim*, which means literally 'to make things alive'. The word *Salim* is one of the important concepts through which we can understand Korean thought. Initially, the Association of Korean Feminist Theologians used this word in 2001.

2 Cahill, Lisa Sowle, *Family. A Christian Social Perspective,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 200, p. 9.

3 Radford Ruether, Rosemary, 'An Unrealized Revolution. Searching Scripture for Model of the Family', in: Stuart, Elizabeth/Thatcher, Adrian (eds), *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, pp. 442-450, especially p. 449.

4 Daoism and Confucianism are the most important and dominant factors, which formed the spiritual aspect of both Chinese and Korean culture. While Confucianism was usurped by the rulers

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and became the political ideology of the dynasties, Daoism remained the metaphysical soul of East Asia.

5 The Korean feminist theologian, Hyun Kyung, presented a 'Salimist Manifesto' at the 2005 World Life-Culture Forum in Gyeonggi, Korea.

6 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching. New English Version*, transl. by Stephen Mitchell, New York: Harper & Row, 1988, chap. 1-5.

7 See e.g. Graham, Angus C./Chuang-Tzu, *The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writing from the Book Chuang-tzu*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981.

8 Dao, as the word is used in China, Korea, and Japan, is not limited to Daoism; in all major Chinese systems it refers to the right way (the Way) or cosmic order even though different schools have different interpretations.

9 Lao Tzu, *op. cit.*, chap. 6.

10 Lao Tzu, *op. cit.*, chap. 51. For the following quotes, see chap. 6-13.