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Korean Understandings of Nicaea's *Homoousia*, and Their Implications on Ecclesial Unity in Korea

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I. Introduction

In the commemoration of the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed in 2025, this paper seeks to investigate how Korean church has understood the Nicene Creed and especially its very pivotal term '*homoousia*,' which refers to the same substance or being between God the Father and God the Son in the Holy Spirit. And also, considering the contemporary renaissance of trinitarian theology¹ and "the Easternization of the Trinity,"² this paper seeks to find a unique understanding of *homoousia* within Korean culture and context. And then this paper examines how those understandings of the Trinity and especially of *homoousia* have been related to ecclesial unity in Korean church. Finally, this paper argues that the doctrine of the Trinity and its doctrinal position of *homoousia* could neither play its own formative role nor become a predominant factor in the history of Korean church. In order to break through such situation, it is needed to explore some constructive insights of those understandings to

¹ Chung-Hyun Baik, *The Holy Trinity - God for God and God for Us: Seven Positions on the Immanent-Economic Trinity Relation in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 19-20. Hereafter cited as *The Holy Trinity*.

² Heup Young Kim, *A Theology of Dao* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 57-58.

reinvigorate their implications on ecclesial unity both in Korean church and all over the world.

II. *Homoousia* in the Nicene Creed

The term *homoousia* (ὁμοουσία, the same substance / consubstance), consisting of *homos* (ὁμός, the same) and *ousia* (οὐσία, substance), is the most important term in the Nicene Creed which was formulated at the first ecumenical council in Nicaea held in the year 325 A.D.³ It is about Christology, which means that Jesus Christ as the Son of God is of the same substance or consubstantial with God the Father.

Through various twists and turns, the term *homoousia* continued into the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, more widely known as “the Nicene Creed” for short, which was formulated at the second ecumenical council in Constantinople held in the year 381 A.D.⁴ And this Nicene-Constantinople Creed added Pneumatology and extended to formulating an ecclesiology which states “the one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic church.” These are later known as the four marks of church: unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity.

Considering this addition and extension from Christology through Pneumatology to ecclesiology, we can say that these four marks of church presuppose or are grounded on *homoousia*. Otherwise, the Nicene-Constantinople Creed could not go further to formulate such an ecclesiology. It is more so with the unity of church. In this aspect, *homoousia* is very important not only in affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but also in forming and fostering the unity of church. In this way, *homoousia* has become the most

³ John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (3rd Edition) (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 28-31. Hereafter cited as *Creeds of the Churches*.

⁴ Ibid., 31-33.

important article of confessing ecumenical faith.

In the controversial context around the 4th century, however, the term *homoousia* refers to a particular position which is very different from the other positions. It is very different from the other terms *homoiousia* (ὁμοιούσια), *homoiosis* (ὁμοίωσις), and *anomoiosis* (ἀνομοίωσις). Here *anomoiosis* means unlikeness or dissimilarity, which indicates that Jesus Christ is unlike or dissimilar to God the Father. And *homoiosis* means likeness or similarity and its adjective form is *homoios* (ὅμοιος), which indicates that Jesus Christ is like or similar to God the Father. And *homoiousia* (ὁμοιούσια) consists of *homoios* (ὅμοιος, like/similar) and *ousia* (οὐσία, substance), which argues that Jesus Christ as the Son is similar to God the Father in substance or essence, but not the same.

The other three positions were represented by Arius (c.250-336) or Arians who followed him either moderately or extremely. Arius persistently claimed by stating: “The Son was not before he was begotten,” or “There was once when the Son was not.”⁵ By these phrases Arius intended to argue that Jesus Christ is created by God the Father, meaning that Jesus Christ as the Son of God does not have the same substance as God the Father, and also implying that Jesus Christ as the Son of God is inferior to God the Father.

In a stark contrast, Athanasius of Alexandria (c.293-373) argued for *homoousia*, by stating that the Son is “true God and *homoousios* [ὁμοούσιος] with the true Father.”⁶ He confirmed the position of *homoousia* primarily from a perspective of Christology and soteriology.⁷ And this position is more fundamentally grounded on the early church’s understanding of Jesus

⁵ Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, 4. As quoted by Baik, *The Holy Trinity*, 43.

⁶ Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, I, 9. As quoted by Baik, *The Holy Trinity*, 44.

⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 66.

Christ as the *Logos*, that is, the Word of God, which holds both the intimate relation and distinction between God the Father and God the Son.

As the first two ecumenical councils supported and adopted a doctrinal position of *homoousia*, *homoousia* has become also the most important standard and norm of ecclesiology, which accepts authentic churches and forms ecclesial unity. This term *homoousia* has continued to be maintained and supported by many theologians throughout church history such as Gregory of Nazianzus,⁸ Augustine,⁹ and John Calvin.¹⁰

III. Korean Understandings of Nicaea's *Homoousia*, and Their Implications on Ecclesial Unity in Korea

In general, Korean church has accepted Nicaea's *homoousia* in a Christological sense, strongly believing that Jesus Christ as the Son of God is God. And Korean church has also accepted Nicaea's *homoousia* in a soteriological sense, firmly confessing that Jesus Christ can save us because Jesus Christ is God. In this way, Korean church holds fast to a doctrinal position of *homoousia* between God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Korean Catholic church came into being by itself around the 18th century. Some intellectual Koreans read and learned Chinese Christian literatures to become believers, which were then called as "Western Learning" (西學, Seohak). They were brought into Korea at the

⁸ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Augustine, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press, 2002).

¹⁰ John Calvin, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973).

time of Choseon Dynasty (朝鮮, 1392-1897/1910) by some Koreans who visited China. Prior to this, around the late 16th century, the Roman Catholic church came into China mainly through Jesuit missionaries such as Pompillio Rugierie (1543-1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). And it produced many Christian literatures, some of which were introduced to some Koreans who visited China. Interestingly, Rugierie first translated God into 天主 (Cheonju) and the Trinity into 三位一體 (Samwiilche), and these terms were also accepted and used by Korean Catholic church.

Much earlier than this encounter, Christianity came into China at the time of Tang Dynasty (唐, 618-907) around the 7th and 8th centuries, which was actually the East Syriac Christianity. It was then called as “Jingjiao/Kyeonggyo (景教)” which literally means “a religion of light” or “luminous religion.”¹¹ Interestingly, it translated the Trinity into 三神同歸一體 (Samsindonggwuilche) by using Buddhism terms predominant at the time of Tang Dynasty, which became very different from that of Rugierie. With regards to it, a Korean theologian Sung-Bum Yun (尹聖範, 1916-1980) proposes a hypothesis that it later might have come into Korea.¹² However, this hypothesis is not yet verified with sufficient evidence.

¹¹ Dingjian Xie, “Christianity in Tang China.”
<https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubccommunityandpartnerspublicati/52387/items/1.0404472#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20Christianity%20in%20Tang%20China%20begin>

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¹² Sung-Bum Yun, “Hwanin, Hwanung, Hwangeom are God,” *A World of Thought* (May 1963): 258-271.

After the official beginning of Korean Catholic church in 1784 when Seung-Hun Lee (李承薰, 1756-1801) was baptized in China, Yak-Jong Jeong (丁若鍾, 1760-1801) was one of the first Korean Catholics, who taught Catholic doctrine very actively and wrote the first Korean book of Catholic doctrine, *Jugyo Yoji* (主教要旨)(*The Essentials of the Lord's Teaching*) in 1797-1798.¹³ While explaining the Lord of Heaven (天主, Cheonju) as the Trinity in terms of three persons and one substance (三位一體, Samwiilche), this book states: "The Father and the Son are one substance."¹⁴

And then this book teaches incarnation by arguing that the incarnation of the Lord of Heaven is necessary for the atonement and redemption of all people in the world, because human sins are boundless and his merit would be as infinite as his highness.¹⁵ Here this book states: "He is truly Lord of Heaven, for God the Holy Son together with God the Holy Father and God the Holy Ghost are one substance and one nature."¹⁶

On the side of Korean Protestant church, which had the official start with the arrival of an American medical missionary Horace Newton Allen in 1884 though there were also some Korean Protestant believers even before it, Byeong-Heon Choi (崔炳憲, 1858-1927), a Methodist pastor and theologian, wrote several books on Christian apologetics from a

¹³ Yak-Jong Jeong, trans. Debernieri J. Torrey, *Jugyo Yoji* (主教要旨)(*The Essentials of the Lord's Teaching*) (Seoul: KIATS Press, 2012). Hereafter cited as *Jugyo Yoji*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82-84.

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

perspective of comparative religion among Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity. One of them is *Seongsan Myeong Gyeong* (聖山明鏡)(*The Clear Mirror of Sacred Mountain*) written in 1909, being based on its previous journal essays in 1907.¹⁷ In this book, a figure called Sincheonong (信天翁), literally meaning “an old man who believes in heaven” and representing Christianity, explains the Trinity by stating: “With regards to divine person (位, Wi), there are three persons [三位, Samwi]: the Holy Father, the Holy Son, and the Holy Spirit. And with regards to divine substance (體, Che), there is one substance [一體, Ilche], which refers to the unique and unmatched God.”¹⁸

And then immediately Sincheonong (信天翁) goes further to talk about the incarnation of the Holy Son by saying, “God the Son became incarnate in the world and faced immeasurable suffering. He is the Messiah who was nailed to the cross, died, and redeemed the sins of all peoples of all nations through his blood.”¹⁹

As has been discussed above, Korean church has generally accepted the doctrine of the Trinity and also the essential point of Nicaea’s *homoousia* in a Christological and soteriological sense. Korean church strongly believes that Jesus Christ as the Son of God is God, and firmly confesses that Jesus Christ can save sinful human beings because Jesus Christ is God.

¹⁷ Byeong-Heon Choi. trans. Debernieri J. Torrey. *Seongsan Myeong Gyeong* (聖山明鏡)(*The Clear Mirror of Sacred Mountain*) (Seoul: KIATS Press, 2010). Hereafter cited as *Seongsan Myeong Gyeong*.

¹⁸ Choi, *Seongsan Myeong Gyeong*, 64.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Under these general characteristics, Korean church also showed a unique understanding of *homoousia* especially in terms of Confucian emphasis on the father(父, Bu)-son(子, Ja) relation, which is an idea of filial piety (孝, Hyo). This was suggested and discussed by some Korean theologians and pastors who were directly or indirectly influenced by Korean Confucian culture.

One representative theologian of such understanding is Sung-Bum Yun (尹聖範, 1916-1980), a Korean Methodist theologian. He emphasizes Hyo (孝, filial piety) as an ethical implication of “A Theology of Seong (誠, Sincerity)” which he proposes as a Korean theology.²⁰ Yun argues that Christian ethics and Confucian ethics have a common strand and resemblance. He explains about this by stating: “For in Christian ethics the concrete ethical pattern is Jesus Christ, and whenever one speaks of Jesus Christ, the relationship of the Heavenly Father with His Only-begotten Son is always present. In this it resembles Confucian ethics in which filial piety (孝), i.e. the father-son relationship is the constant norm and the basis of all virtue.”²¹

Then Yun explains how such idea of filial piety is shown in the trinitarian thought by stating as follows:

In the structure of faith as it appears in the New Testament, the relationship of

²⁰ Sung-Bum Yun, *Korean Theology – A Hermeneutics of Seong (誠, Sincerity)*(Seoul: Seonmyeong Culture Publishing Company, 1972). Here he proposes “A Theology of Seong (誠, Sincerity)”; Sung-Bum Yun, *Hyo(孝, Filial Piety)*(Seoul: Seoul Culture Publishing Company, 1973).

²¹ Sung-Bum Yun, *Hyo (Filial Piety) and Religion (Yun Collection 3)* (Seoul: MTU Press, 1998), 137-138.

God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, is essential. This is clearly manifest in the New Testament's trinitarian thought: God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and the Spirit which is the union of the two. One can see that the fundamental premise in this ordering of relationships in this consideration of the triune God is the father-son relationship.²²

And then Yun goes further to explain how Jesus Christ as the Son of God completely performs his own filial piety towards God the Father. He states: "Following the will of His Father, Jesus Christ becomes an atoning sacrifice for the sake of mankind. To the very end His attitude as son was confidence and trust in His Father's will; His faith was nothing but complete fidelity to His Heavenly Father. What we learn from Jesus is not the unique value of the individual, but rather what is involved in the perfect living of the father-son relationship."²³ In this sense Yun maintains that Jesus Christ is "the filial Son" who has "a mystical relation of union" with God the Father.²⁴

In brief, while accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, Yun understands the relation between God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son from a perspective of Confucian emphasis on the father-son relation. Here he understands *homoousia* not merely as an unconditional and undifferentiated equality, but as a personal, intimate, and dynamic relation between God the Father and Jesus Christ as the Son. Within such relation, Jesus Christ as the Son follows and obeys the will of God the Father even to the death on the cross, and God the Father restores and raises Jesus Christ from the dead even to the right hand of God the Father.

A few decades later, a Korean born-American theologian Jung Young Lee (1935-1996), much heavily influenced by Confucianism, also accepts Yun's proposal of understanding a relation between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son in terms of Hyo, and even extend it

²² Ibid., 144-145.

²³ Ibid., 145.

²⁴ Ibid., 342-343.

to familial relation through his analogy of family, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form a divine family.²⁵ And while being based on the Eum (陰)-Yang(陽) relation in *the Book of Changes* known as *Yeokkyung* (易經) or *Jooyeok* (周易),²⁶ Lee accepts Jesus Christ as being both human and divine. In so doing, however, Lee reinforces Confucian hierarchical order more than others, thereby more strongly maintaining the precedence of the Father over the Son, and even the functional subordination of the Son to the Father.²⁷

Such hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of family relation later incurs criticisms by some theologians such as Heup Young Kim (金洽榮, 1949-present). As a Korean theologian belonging to PCUSA, Kim also understands the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of Confucianism and also Daoism, namely, in terms of a Confucian-Daoist understanding of Dao (道, Do).²⁸ While reappraising and reappropriating Lee's proposal, Kim also suggests to explore some Confucian and Daoist insights for a further understanding and reformulation of the doctrine of the Trinity such as anthropocosmic vision, inclusive humanism, and ontology of change, process, and relation.²⁹

As noted above, Korean church's unique understanding of *homoousia* especially in terms of Confucian emphasis on the father-son relation, namely, filial piety (孝, Hyo) needs to be

²⁵ Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

²⁶ Ibid., 21-49.

²⁷ Ibid., 88-89.

²⁸ Heup Young Kim, *A Theology of Dao* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017). Chapter 4 of this book was published first as follows: "The Tao in Confucianism and Taoism: The Trinity in East Asian Perspective," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 293-308.

²⁹ Ibid., 57-74.

deeply analyzed and reappraised for a diverse understanding of the Trinity within the context of Korean culture and thought, and also its constructive implications need to be further examined and developed for an ecumenical faith in the Trinity.

Either in Catholic church or in Protestant church, Korean church has accepted Nicaea's *homoousia* in a Christological sense as well as in a soteriological sense. Such acceptance is very strong in Korean church, and especially in its faith and theology. However, Nicaea's *homoousia* could not lead to forming and fostering the unity of church between Korean Catholic church and Korean Protestant church in the late 19th century and in the early and middle 20th century.

On the one hand, this disclosed such controversial, competitive, and even antagonistic relation as had been formed and maintained between the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant church after the Reformation in 1517. On the other hand, however, this was also mainly due to the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts of the Korean Peninsula at that time. Thus the doctrinal position of *homoousia* could not play its own formative role within Korean church. In brief, the doctrine of the Trinity and especially that of *homoousia* were actually not a predominant factor in the history of Korean church.

Especially due to its persistent rejection of ancestral rites, Korean Catholic church was severely persecuted and horribly martyred several times by Choseon Dynasty (1392-1897), which had revered Confucianism as a ruling ideology and emphasized loyalty (忠, Chung) to king and filial piety (孝, Hyo) to father.³⁰ In such situation, then, Korean Protestant church,

³⁰ For some Neo-Confucian characteristics of Choseon Dynasty, refer to the following book: Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*

though also rejecting ancestral rites as an idol worship, differentiated itself from Korean Catholic church from its beginning in order to present itself to be different from Korean Catholic church.

In this way, Korean Protestant church came to be regarded as another religion which is very different from Korean Catholic church. The latter was called as *Cheonjugyo* (天主教), that is, a religion of the Lord of Heaven, whereas the former was called as *Kidokgyo* (基督教), namely, a religion of Christ, or *Yesugyo*, namely, a religion of Jesus. Though both believe the Trinity and confess the doctrinal position of *homoousia*, both are not only distinct but also separate and even contrast from each other.

Only many years after the World Council Church was established in 1948 and some years after the Second Vatican Council was held in 1962-1965, Korean Catholic church and Korean Protestant church (especially through the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) which was established in 1924) began to meet and talk with each other. And both cooperated with each other in translating the entire Bible together into Korean from 1968 to 1977. And both began together “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” in 1968, which has been continuing until today, and which has also developed and widened a bilateral meeting of unity, finally resulting in a formal establishment of the Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches in 2014.³¹

In this way, Korean church has made a step forward in forming ecclesial unity between

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). And with regards to Confucian influences on Korea church, refer to the following article: Chung-Hyun Baik, “Some Influences of Confucianism on Korean Christian Family Life: Confucian? Christian? Or Confucian-Christian?” *Theology Today* Volume 76 Issue 3(October 2019): 242-251.

³¹ The Commission on Faith and Order of Korean Churches, <http://fno.or.kr>.

Korean Catholic church and Korean Protestant church. Nonetheless, it still gets a long way to go towards a more unity of church, because such ecclesial unity is restrictedly discussed mainly within some ecumenical theologians from each side, but is not yet spread widely to a level of church practice and congregational life.

On the side of Korean Protestant church, NCKC was established in 1924 and has been actively performing many significant ecumenical works both at home and abroad. It is supposed to be comprised up of churches which confess Jesus Christ as the Savior and are called to the glory of the Trinity.³² However, as for now, current participating churches are only 9 out of 374 denominations within Korean Protestant church. According to the official report of Korean government on the current state of religions of Korea in 2018, there are 374 denominations.³³ These statistics show that Korean Protestant church, though confessing Jesus Christ as the Savior (that is, as the Lord and God of salvation) and accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, has been notoriously divided and split into a huge number of churches due to many reasons. In this process, the doctrinal position of *homoousia* could neither play its own formative role nor become a predominant factor in the history of Korean church.

IV. Conclusion

As has been discussed above, this paper investigates how Korean church has understood the Nicene Creed and especially its very pivotal term '*homoousia*,' which refers to the same substance or being between God the Father and God the Son in the Holy Spirit. And this paper also finds a unique understanding of *homoousia* within Korean culture and context. And then

³² The National Council of Churches in Korea (NCKC), www.ncck.or.kr.

³³ The Current State of Religions of Korea in 2018, <https://mcst.go.kr>.

this paper examines how those understandings of the Trinity and especially of *homoousia* have been related to ecclesial unity in Korean church. As a result of such investigation and examination, this paper argues that the doctrine of the Trinity and its doctrinal position of *homoousia* could neither play its own formative role nor become a predominant factor in the history of Korean church. However, this paper also finds a new possibility of breaking through such situation. Though it would not be easy to do, it is needed to explore some constructive insights of those understandings to reinvigorate their implications on ecclesial unity both in Korean church and all over the world.

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