Encounter with Sewol:
Madang as a Possibility of Interreligious Solidarity for Social Justice in South Korea

Abstract

This research begins with my own encounter with the tragic incident of Sewol Ferry in South Korea on April 16, 2014. It starts from the reaction during the Holy Week. Since this tragedy with more than 300 people – mostly teenagers – found dead or missing, the Lenten and Easter season became one of painful times for all people in life and faith. This research will examine how the churches responded to such collective “shipwreck” experience and how interreligious dialogue and action for social restoration began as a possibility of a redemptive community. And then it will discuss the concept of Madang and core principles of it as an alternative redemptive community in Korean context.

Shipwreck

Heesung, did you see the news?

It was Thursday morning, April 17, 2014 when I got a phone call from one of my Korean friends. It was during Holy Week and I was busy working in my church office for Easter Sunday and Children’s Egg Hunting. I did not have time to check the late news yet, so did not know what was going on around the world. During the season of Lent, I was rather devoted to meditating on Christ’s life and suffering, and preparing for Easter events.

Yesterday Sewol Ferry sailing to Jeju Island sank on their way. My heart breaks that most of them in the water were teenagers.

Yet, I did not realize how serious the situation was. I asked with no real interest or compassion, as if it was one of numerous incidents that could happen anywhere or anytime in the world.

So, are people rescuing the passengers? They must have!

I slowly realized the seriousness of the situation listening to my friend’s account and browsing internet news. My friend who was raising two little boys said in tears that her heart had
fallen as if her children had fallen into the water. Since then, my soul seems to have sunk into the water. Just like listening to the sounds in the water and trying to breathe forming bubbles, the shock of the incident revolved around my consciousness.

On Holy Friday, the cantata and worship was more serious than ever. The climax of the cantata, the scene of Jesus taking the cross to Golgotha and his last cry on it, saying “My God, my God, why have you left me?” overlapped with the situation of people in Sewol under the water. After the worship, the senior pastor mentioned about the Sewol incident in Korea and requested intercessory prayer. His benediction included that Almighty God would rescue those young people as if God raised Jesus from death, so that everyone would witness the power of God and rejoice together in this season of Easter. We still had some hope until then.

Easter Sunday, the fourth day after the incident arrived. The critical time of the rescue already passed. Yet the ‘resurrection,’ which had so earnestly begged by so many people, did not happen. For Korean Christians, it was the first Easter Sunday without joy of Christ’s victorious resurrection. They felt perplexed between despair of death and little hope for life.

On April 16, 2014 in South Korea, Ferry Sewol with 476 passengers began their voyage to Jeju Island which was famous for tourism. Among 476 passengers, 325 were high school students from the same class of Dan Won High School in Ansan for their field trip and sightseeing. Before entering the last grade to take the college entrance exam, it is a tradition for Korean students taking a memorable field trip together. Most of those students who joyfully departed from home could not come back to their parents. Except for the students who escaped nonetheless, most of students who followed the wrong announcement to sit still and wait for evacuation, eventually drowned in the ferry.

The incident with great chances to minimize the damage if there was a quick rescue operation, became the unforgettable live broadcast of the process of their dying. The news related to Sewol were the first of daily newspapers and television and the desperate images of the parents who rushed to the closest port were reported in photographs and videos every day. Yet, without a clear explanation of the main cause of the accident, 304 people were reported dead or missing. It was the main reason that made people, including me, most frustrated. Before this sudden accident, people wanted to know ‘why.’ Even if you cannot reverse the accident, at least you want to know the exact cause and see a sincere response of the authority.

Since then, encountering the technical shipwreck of Sewol, all of the people in South Korea went through – is still going through – emotional and spiritual shipwreck collectively. The tragedy that could happen anybody in one’s own family, neighbors, community was broadcasted nationwide and all over the world. And the poor response of the government and personnel to cope with it has added to the anger of people’s sorrow. Deep sadness, anger, and helplessness swallowed them. Many people complained of emotional suffering. Some of the victims’ parents even committed suicide. In her book, Big questions, Worthy Dreams, with the dialogue with Richard Niebuhr, Sharon Daloz Parks discusses the meaning of shipwreck.

1 Mark 15:34, Common English Bible.
Metaphorical shipwreck may occur with the loss of a relationship, violence to one’s property, collapse of a career venture, physical illness or injury, defeat of a cause, a fateful choice that irrevocably reorders one’s life, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate. Sometimes we simply encounter someone or some new experience or idea that calls into question things as we have perceived them or as they were taught to us or as we had read, heard, or assumed. This kind of experience can suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul.  

Not only survivors and their families of Sewol incident, every Korean and Korea diaspora who had friends, relatives, or neighbors felt deep sorrow. And Christians were no exception here. In fact, the reality Korean Christians encountered in faith was even worse. The existing belief systems and theological interpretation could not explain what was happening in the season of Lent and Easter, like my own shock and struggle.

On that Easter morning, while children were busy finding Easter eggs in the courtyard, their mothers gathered talking to each other. It was not bright at all for the Easter talk, since it was all about the Sewol incident. One of mothers approached me and asked.

_Pastor Heesung, did you see the news? What do you think? What should we do? How could God do such…?_

Other than compassionately sharing the most current update with each other, I honestly could not answer to any of their questions. In fact, I wished so much I could have someone else to ask the same questions. “What is going on in this world? Why is this happening to us? How can we cope with it? How can we understand God in this? What can we pray and do?”

There were some churches visited the site or offered comforting messages to people who were feeling confused and despair. Although their actions cannot be regarded as impatient and wrong, the interpretation and response particularly from conservative theology, which occupies the majority of Korean Christianity, hurt the audience, especially to Sewol victims and survivors and arouse the questions of theodicy. Among some sermons followed right after the incident, for example, the sermon of Rev. Sam-hwan Kim, a lead pastor of Myung Sung Presbyterian Church, one of the largest churches in Korea, was criticized by the public. In his sermon on May 11, he said “God did not sink Sewol Ferry for no reason. God wanted to sink the entire country, Korea. But by sinking the students, those young people like flowers, God gave us another chance… to repent… and to make things right….”

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Was it indeed the work of God? Was it to warn people of their wrong doings and wrong beliefs? Does God give hardship only you can bear? Such messages and questions rather became a catalyst for existing members leaving the church. Fortunately, of course, not everyone interpreted the Sewol incident like Kim. As one of responses to Kim’s message, Sung-hwi Ko, a New Testament scholar of Korean Anglican Church, criticized the disruption of the Christian moral consciousness, violent languages that isolates the church from social relations.\(^7\)

I also argue that we cannot truly overcome this shipwreck without rebuilding this communal and educational space for solidarity with our neighbor. Therefore, my research began with the collective shipwreck experience leads to theological struggle after Sewol and pedagogical breakthrough for the church and the society. In the same regard with Ko about the social isolation of the Korea church and theology, I want to challenge the Korean church to recover social relationship with its neighbor beyond its comfort zone. Aad as a pedagogical methodology for the suggestion, I suggest the concept of Madang. The definition of Madang comes from architecture, referring to the communal space in traditional Korean houses, or a part or chapter of a performance that can happen in that space.\(^8\) In this personal and communal space, people share human life histories of joy and sorrow from birth to death with others.

### The Crucified Christ: Toward the Post-Sewol Theology

Before we begin discussing the issue of community, we must first deal with the questions of theodicy caused by the Sewol incident. Many Korean theologians compared the experiences of Sewol and Auschwitz. Although it is not comparable on a scale basis, the emotional and theological impact of it is so for Koreans.\(^9\) Jürgen Moltmann, a prominent German Reformed theologian who went through the Nazi regime shares theological insights from his own experience.

…In what seemed like a miracle, I lived, and I still don’t know today why I am not dead too, like my companions. In that hell I didn’t ask: why does God let this happen? My question was: my God, where are you? Where is God? Is he far away from us, an absentee God in his own heaven? Or is he a sufferer among the sufferers? Does he share in our suffering? ……These questions bring us to the heart of the Christian faith: the message of the crucified Christ.\(^10\)

For Moltmann, God is not the God of judgment that exists without emotion in the distant, but the one who has come to this earth with love and compassion, and is participating in human suffering. As he asserts, this crucified Christ, this suffering God is at the center of the Christian faith, unlike any other religions.\(^11\) This God understands our complicated struggles and helps us


\(^8\) See the definition of 마당 [madang] in Korean dictionary. http://krdic.naver.com/search.nhn?query=%EB%A7%88%EB%8B%B9&kind=all


\(^11\) Moltmann, 64.
through his own suffering and tears, not in some miraculous ways. Yet, if God only stays among us and struggles with us in the midst of injustice without changing the problems in the world, is this God still good?

In his article, “The Review of Theology of the Left”, Choong-Yeon Kim also points out that “this traditional answer is no longer a great ‘comfort’ for the grieved or those who have experienced [the suffering].” Then he urges us to change our perspective from seeking an answer from theodicy to hamartiology. His appeal is convincing given the fact that the Sewol disaster revealed the corruption between government and entrepreneurs.

In the seminar for the Second Memorial Rally for Sewol in March 31, 2016, Geunju Kim and Sung-hwi Ko also argue that it is not right to pass the responsibility of suffering to God. They insist that we need to ask questions not to God but to ourselves, to our human beings, to profit-seeking corporations, to governments that do not save lives. God should not be a scapegoat against the perpetrators’ fault in alliance with the power and capital. Rather, they assert the government and officials to reveal the true causes of the incident in the name of God, God of Justice.

It is very natural and important, of course, to seek for God’s presence in the midst of the storm of life. Yet, the honest yearning for understanding God’s will should not be used as a means of passing the responsibility of human-made disasters. Kim and Ko also point out the lack of awareness of the publicness of faith in Korean churches. They criticized that most Korean churches focused solely on their own spirituality and individual salvation, not putting enough effort into the issues of social justice. If God is understood only as a judgmental and exclusive figure to Christians or non-Christians, it is a task for we theologians and religious educators to change. With this in mind, the Korean church should renew its understanding of God and religion and make it an opportunity for open dialogue with society and other religions, rather than being isolated by itself.

Throughout the period of great revival in the 1980s and '90s, the Korean Church enjoyed glorious growth and success. The pride of believing in the God of victory and success made the Korean church fail and forget those who were marginalized. The Korean theology, focused on the resurrection of Christ, forgot the suffering and humiliation that human Jesus went experienced on the cross. It is important to ask what the will of God is before the suffering of the human world, but it is also important to look at how our God acts for humanity. We need to remember how Christ humbled himself and joined in human suffering. Here, it is noteworthy that Moltmann urged to remember crucified God and to think about what it means to follow Christ.

So following Christ means engaging in the struggle of life against death, and against the people who spread death. It means engaging in this struggle in our own place and our own time. In my own situation, I see ‘the way of Christ’ In the struggle against the system of nuclear deterrent and

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12 Ibid., 40.
14 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
for peace on the foundation of justice; in the struggle against the exploitation and indebtedness of the countries of the Third World; in the struggle against the deadly destruction of nature.\(^8\)

Our God choose to save us by fully participating into human suffering. However, if we are comforted only by God who is with us, our faith loses the joy of resurrection and the power of salvation. The death of Christ is completed by resurrection, and the Christian faith is completed by sharing and living the joy of resurrection with others. As Moltmann stated, by participating in the path of Jesus suffering, we, his followers encounter social injustice, not walking away from it. By facing and changing it, we announce the resurrection of Jesus to the world.

In his article about Post-Sewol theology, Chang-hyun Park, a Korean Methodist theologian in Missiology, urges that we should recognize the true meaning of Christ’s resurrection and anticipate for the resurrection of the unjustly dead, the survivors, and the witnesses in our own context. For it, he emphasizes the resurrection as a religious mystery. Therefore, what we expect is not the physical resurrection of Sewol victims, but religious experience as a sign of resurrection through social transformation.\(^9\) Korean churches participated into the suffering of Sewol survivors and cried “with those who were crying.”\(^20\) Yet, many of them failed to enduringly stay and work together with them and with other groups of people.\(^21\) I believe such social transformation as a sign of Jesus’ resurrection can be made through the active social participation of the church and the solidarity with other religions for common good. It is the way of our faith and action in resurrecting the suffering Christ. Crying with the crying and helping them to wipe their tears and stand up, walking along with them should be the beginning and the foundation of Post-Sewol theology.

**To the New Shore**

On March 23, 2017, after 1,073 days of waiting and protesting, the Sewol was finally salvaged. It was transported to a near harbor for further investigation with the hope of finding the last nine bodies.\(^22\)

From now on, the task is to clarify the real cause of shipwreck, make those who were in charge take legal responsibility. We also need to remember those who could not come out from the water, those who survived, and those who devotedly worked for the rescue. As Christians, asking God's intention and action plan is a task. We also need to continue to communicate with our neighbor. Here our neighbor means two things: people who are hurt and marginalized and people in different religious traditions. Among the victims and survivors of the Sewol incident,

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\(^8\) Moltmann, 48.


\(^20\) Romans 12:15. CEB.

\(^21\) Jung-Bae Lee, “세월호 참사 이후 하느님 영을 말하는 법 [How to Say about God’s Spirit after Sewol Tragedy],” *Theology of The Left: Memories of Sewol, Wrath and Beyond it*, ed. The National Council of Churches in Korea: The Special Committee for Sewol Disaster (Seoul: Dongyeon, 2015), 15-29.

\(^22\) As of July, 2, 2017, according to the headquarter of investigation, four bodies of the nine people were found. The investigation for the remaining five will be closed at the end of September. “세월호 수색 작업 종료 시점이 확정됐다 [The time of the end of the search for the time of the month was confirmed],” [Huffpost Korea, July 2, 2017,](http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2017/07/01/story_n_17364218.html?utm_hp_ref=kr-sewol-ferry).
Christians were in fact minorities. There were many Catholics, Buddhists, representatively, as well as atheists. The shock and theological strikes of Christians in this tragedy that happened during Holy Week, therefore, are multilateral. With the exclusiveness of faith which emphasizing no other way of salvation other than Christ, it is not possible to interpret and speak of the wounds of our neighbors. It is the same – or similar at least – dilemma that people had after Auschwitz and after 9/11. It is also revealed in the interpretation of Moltmann's salvation and hell.

Do we know anyone who is in hell? Would we tell a mother weeping at her son’s grave that her son is in hell because he never found faith while he was alive? We should respond to the first question with an embarrassed silence. And we would not answer ‘yes’ to the second one either. But I know someone who was in hell: it is Jesus Christ, who the creed says ‘descended into hell.’

Is the work of the Christians in the scene of the accident, only for the church members, or for the whole people there? The answer is simply ‘no.’ The charitable activities of the Christians are for everyone, and it should not be with an intention of evangelism and conversion. For there is no exception in Christ's love and salvation. Likewise, Christians are subject to the altruistic salvation of other religions, such correlations expand the scope of each other's understanding and redemption.

**Madang: Interreligious Solidarity for Social Justice**

In a multi-religious society like Korea, solidarity with other religions is essential for such theological interpretation and action. Jumin Hong, a scholar of Diakonia theology in Germany, asserts that the Sewol incident is a turning point for Korean Christians to pay more attention and participate into the world of pain and joy, as the experience of Auschwitz called for the reformation of the German church to Diakonia church. He defines the Diakonia church as a model of a community that jumps into the water and actively rescues people, rather than just drawing a lifeboat watching people dying. In this way, the Sewol incident led to the "Theology of the Square" phenomenon, meaning that churches and seminaries got out their own comfort zone and communicate with the neighbors in the midst of protest for justice. It is not a metaphysical theology, but a theological conversation and process that fights and worries together in the field of human suffering and contradictions.

While waiting for rescue in Paeng Mok Harbor, the nearest harbor from where Sewol fallen into the water, diverse religious people gathered, worshiped, and helped survivors over times. However, this was not an act of cooperative worship for all, but rather a coexistence of diverse religious groups in a shared space for a common purpose. Nevertheless, I saw a possibility of solidarity here. I saw the possibility to look for a common place and to pursue common good, beyond the numerous barriers of antagonizing, criticizing and rejecting each other. This reminded me of the hope for the redemptive community that Jack Seymour described: “Even in the midst of oppression, the realm of God is possible. Redemptive

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23 Moltmann, 144.
24 Hong, 174-185.
25 Hong, 175.
community can be built, if we stop hoarding, hiding, and excluding.”

Now, I lift my head in the depths of despair and look for the movement of hope.

Even though it is still a small number, religious dialogue is also taking place, focusing on the ethics and social role of religion. The Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP), a collaborative organization of seven major religions in Korea, celebrated their thirtieth anniversary in 2016 and issued a joint statement for urging further investigation of the Sewol incident. With the famous quote of Hans Küng saying “no peace among the nations without peace among the religions,” the presence and cooperative work of KCRP is significant. I believe their dialogues and cooperative works make social justice and transformation in South Korea possible.

Witnessing such possibility for solidarity made me envision Madang approach as a part of continuing the theology in the square that began after Sewol. In general, a square or plaza usually refers to a huge space for gathering activities of religion, politics, commerce, and social gatherings are held. Historically, it has served as a center of social life for citizens. Yet, in Korean architecture, Madang, which is comparable to the courtyard in the Western house, smaller than a square, is a space that is in every traditional Korean house. In dictionary, Madang is defined as the courtyard laid flat on the front or back of the house as a space for individual activities, for family’s project, or for communal events. Overall, any flat space in front (or back) of the building where the group can gather and do something can be called as Madang. In the Madang, each family invites their neighbors to have a meal, a birthday party, a wedding ceremony, or a funeral service. Madang in a house is therefore a private and public space at the same time. Here people communicate with neighbors and share the joys and sorrows of life.

Now, in South Korea, at least in Seoul, it is not easy to find traditional houses with Madang, as these spaces have been replaced by apartment complexes. However, this concept of Madang did not completely disappear, but is becoming a virtual space as the concept of gathering and communication of people. In the public bulletin board of the Internet, Madang continues as a place of communication between neighbors.

As mentioned above, I have gained the insight of Madang from people who have gathered in the harbor for Sewol beyond the boundaries of religions, politics, and all the reasons for separating each other. This is the reinterpretation of the redemptive community in Korea. In Seymour’s definition, people in redemptive community look for signs of God’s realm in the midst of human life. They invite strangers and the marginalized to their table. They also “pray for relief; challenge the principalities and powers that feed fear and callousness; and work for community.”

It was a sign of redemption community when my friend watched the news in that morning, paid attention to the pain of human life, and prayed with tears; when I asked God’s presence in the midst of the incident; when believers of different religions went to Paeng Mok

30 Seymour, 14.
Harbor for worship and support; when leaders of various religious traditions gathered to make a collaborative statement and to take actions accordingly; when Christians parents of Sewol survivors attended the Buddhist service for 49th day funeral memorial. Here, religions encounter each other and the world for cooperative work for compassion and justice. Here, educating for redemptive community means to help people to do such things for reconciliation. The approach of Madang is for this redemptive community. Madang is therefore my vision of the redemptive community that communicates with people and inherits culture and heritage in the Korean context. Based on this understanding, I have summarized the principles of Madang approach as follows.

1. **Mutuality.** This communal space is based on interrelationships. It is important to acknowledge and respect conversation partners. Only with the mutually influential beings, Madang can be established. If there is only you, an individual or one religious body, Madang cannot exist. Madang is therefore based on mutual invitation, respect, and interdependence.

2. **Mediation.** Madang is not for a discussion to draw one correct answer, but is a place of intervention that reveals various aspects of life of each other to enhance mutual understanding and to reflect one own interpretation. It is a compromise rather than a confrontation. Rather than making one’s own argument, it should be preceded by an attitude of listening to the others.

3. **Movement.** The purpose of all dialogue and meeting is toward a common action. Whether you are gathering for a pre-determined act or setting up an action plan for a common good based on the results of the conversation, the purpose of Madang is to learn and fulfill social justice through solidarity. Opening the doors of churches and temples for interreligious dialogue, and designing programs for believers in other traditions are good examples of activism of Madang. Leading a campaign for global climate change or offering trauma counseling opportunities to Sewol survivors can be also a good way of movement.

**Ending as a Beginning**

This essay follows my reaction and reflection on the Sewol incident. It reveals how I encountered and struggled through the incident. Just as Sewol arrived to a new shore, just as the truth comes out, the suffering Christ should not be confined to death, which means theology not related to life or social isolation of the church. Just as God has opened the path of reconciliation and salvation by participating in human suffering, we must resurrect Christ by following such God. Eventually I came out of the water of despair. And now, it is my hope and faith as small as a mustard seed that Madang, the Korean redemptive community with interreligious solidarity spreads and multiplies beyond frustration and hatred among people after Sewol.

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32 Seymour, 16.
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