The Phenomenology of Suffering and Interreligious Education for the Transformative Self

Abstract

The main goal of this study is to explore the transformative self while enduring pain or suffering. The neuroscientific approach to explore the hermeneutical engagement of suffering experiences makes it possible to link the findings in this study with an interreligious dialogue. Korean religious philosophy as it pertains to Christian study is useful in constructing a model for interreligious education. The algorithm of the sign system to see religion in the creative tension between nature and civilization, the academic discussion between interreligious dialogue and psychology of the self, and a faith-based developmental insight about religious openness are meaningful resources to elaborate the encounter with the other.

Religious education provides the possibility to be a therapeutic space for learners experiencing pain or suffering. The self is continuously in the need of transformative construction in the face of pain and suffering. In my opinion, a transformative construction of the self relates to how we imagine God in our minds, relating the existential awareness of the self and the theological reflection of God in traditional Trinitarian Christian contexts. In this study, pain or suffering are seen as being able to provide transformative possibilities for the self and interreligious dialogue is seen as a new resource of theological reflection for understanding God. In other words, the characteristics of a transformative self takes shape where pain and suffering and interreligious dialogue meet. Here, a transformative self has the intrinsic capacity to encourage “complexity of relationships” such as “the self-in-relation” (Huffaker 1998, 48). In a transformative self the complexity of relationships realizes the initiative of interreligious dialogue. The main challenges are how the self’s rigidity while pain or suffering can be loosened and how a transformative self can be generated that realizes the learning possibilities in interreligious dialogue.

Two works of C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (1940) and A Grief Observed (1961), are exemplary cases for guiding the phenomenological journey of suffering. In each book, Lewis expresses his different interpretations of suffering. McGrath understands the existence of suffering in The Problem of Pain as a satisfactory framework of Christian theology through intellectual questions (2013, 344). However, Lewis’s rational framework about the existence of suffering is dismantled in depth during his emotional firestorms following his wife Davidman’s death. McGrath describes that in A Grief Observed Lewis dialogues with God who tests his faith and recovers a sense of spiritual balance in the depths of despair (2013, 346). Likewise, Lewis’s hermeneutical engagement with pain and suffering can be understood in the context of the selving process to be initiating the transformative evolution in the self. Religious philosopher Robert S. Corrington has argued that the transformation in human existence is reorganized in a kind of higher consciousness due to the significant impacts on the selving process (2016, 79). His idea provides a conceptual framework for analyzing religious phenomena using a sign system algorithm and suggests a meaningful horizon as the interpretive analysis for transcending the ordinary scheme of human consciousness on the grounds of transformation of the spirit (Corrington 1994, 73-74, 101).

For interreligious dialogue, I consider Ryu Yeongmo Daseok’s Korean religious philosophy. He was born in 1890 and died in 1981. He studied Christianity in the Asian religious context, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Daseok’s religious philosophy transcends various distinctive dualisms, such as those between the secular and the sacred, the good and the evil, and the infinite and the finite (2006, 518). Quite similarly, Daseok’s theological discourse shows how Derrida’s façon de parler has the potential to frequently cross the border between secular and sacred language without
considering the existence of sacred language as meta-language (Derrida 2002, 190). Daseok understood the maturity of human character in a meaning framework to move beyond the boundary of the self and to restore the original nature of the spirit, a pattern similar to the nature of the image of God in human beings. Concerning such a process of faithful development, Daseok suggested that the characteristic status of the self that the complexity of relationships among diverse and distinctive resources consisting of the selfhood is eliminated in Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection (1995, 86-87, 166). In other words, the maturity of the self is experienced “in the horizontal unity of ecstatic temporality” when the distinctive boundary between happiness and sadness, good and evil, and life and death is deconstructed in the selfhood (Heidegger 2010, 348).

Since the transformative characteristics of human existence emerges from “an integral part of the self” to absorb suffering and to transmute them in “the inner workings of a certain creative process” (Roebben 2017, 200), the “culture of embeddedness” that encourages virtues such as endurance and patience can be understood as an educational environment that can create a transformative self in our minds (Huffaker 1998, 136). In this study, I plan to look into the reality of suffering from a neuroscientific perspective. The book Pain and its Transformation: The Interface of Biology and Culture edited by Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay is useful for seeing multilateral sides of suffering in “the arenas of philosophy, psychiatry, theological and religious studies, anthropology, literature, musicology, art, and ritual theory” (2007, 2). Kurzweil’s How to Create a Mind is meaningful material for transforming neuroscientific ideas into educational insights. Lastly, Harvard University’s adult educator Robert Kegan’s work will likely also be a good resource for academic discussion about the interaction between interreligious dialogue and psychological theory of the self. The main axis for connecting interreligious insights with religious education will be mainly constructed using James Fowler’s insight to suggest that the conjunctive faith between his developmental levels can create open conversation with other religious traditions. The recent article about interreligious education in Religious Education will be a good resource for organizing the educational model for my study (Carmody 2015). In an interreligious educational model, for a transformative self to be purified through the phenomenology of suffering, I anticipate that the existential challenges of religious educators will help learners encounter existential possibilities and help them to generate hope to and vision for transcending the dark boundaries between suffering and happiness, good and evil, human and nature, and life and death in the encounter with other.

Selected References