

It is not certain whether Kim Dong-ni intended this novel to be an explicitation of the pastoral difficulties that beset Christian inculturation in Korea. If he did, this would be a good example of “theology fiction” and can, like science fiction, become a source of creative insights. The complexity of the conflicts between Asian shamanism and Christianity demands creative insights.

The meanings and values of Korean shamanism are concretized in the person of Euhlwa, a mad woman, an unwed mother of two children, and conversant only in the dialect of her small village community outside Seoul. In contrast, the meanings and values of Christianity are concretized in her son Yongsul who, after being educated in a Buddhist monastery, is disillusioned about the holiness of some monks, and later accepts the Christian beliefs of a western missionary he happens to meet.

Yongsul feels called to cure his mother of her shamanic superstitions and to convert her to Jesus. But communication problems arising from Yongsul’s “strange accent” impede the flow of salvific meanings. Euhlwa perceives Yongsul’s Jesus as a “spirit-child” whose role is no different from her shamanic role except that Jesus is “from the farthest reaches of the West.” For Yongsul to prefer Jesus to herself as an ancestral “spirit-child” is to renounce his love for his own mother and to be guilty of impiety. Deep in his heart, Yongsul knows that this is not true but fails to prove it even with tender and loving words with which he hopes to purify his mother of her superstitions.

In an incantation hinting at Yongsul’s impious bibliolatry, Euhlwa curses the bible that Yongsul wears on his breast like an amulet, and threatens to “roast you (the bible) in an iron cauldron.” Yongsul tries to rescue the bible and, in the frenzied struggle, gets stabbed with a kitchen knife ceremonially held in Euhlwa’s hand. The ritual exorcism ends with Euhlwa hugging her son’s bleeding body to her.

Interwoven with this main plot are several sub-plots. Some of these are dramatic anecdotes about the growth of Euhlwa’s popularity as village healer and exorcist, richly adorned with many magic incantations, whose poetic beauty, now tender, now ferocious, shines through even in this English translation. Another sub-plot is about Yongsul’s step-sister Wolhie, whose loyalty to Euhlwa is unflinching and whose concern for her step-brother is frustrated by unreasoning fear of her mother’s anger. Still other sub-plots
depict the superior attitude of the Christian relatives of Yongsul’s natural father.

A preliminary synthesis of this reviewer points to the book’s main value: the anthropological data presented here are important for the task of Christian inculturation among Asians. At a deeper level, a reader may ask if Kim Dong-ni intended the final tableau — of Eulhwa hugging the bleeding body of her son — to evoke the image of salvific sacrifice symbolized in the thirteenth station of the way of the cross.

It is interesting to observe some similarities between Kim Dong-ni and Michael Harner in their respective attitudes towards shamanism. Both include poetry and drama in their descriptions of shamanic rituals. Indeed it is a matter of general consensus that health and joy are somehow associated.

Harner elaborates this consensus with seven chapters fantasizing dream-like journeys, power animals, healing plants and ritual extractions. He is honest about calling them “fantasies” but less than honest by so relativizing the term as to make it hard for a reader to distinguish between his descriptions of facts and of fancies.

His division of the book into seven chapters gives the impression of being systematic, but they merely contain an unsystematic mishmash of “first-hand accounts” of “middleclass Americans from a variety of backgrounds” (p. 41).

One saving feature is his Afterword wherein he calls for “mutual respect” (p. 176) between scientists in the civilized West and shamans in primitive cultures. However he betrays a fundamental disrespect for scientific and religious groups tasked with alerting their members of the schizophrenic dangers of confusing fantasy with reality. The book and its blurb also betray a pecuniary motive in their reference to the sales of Castañeda’s book on sorceries.

For this reviewer, Kim’s theology fiction is a better guide to salvific healing than Harner’s anthropological posturing.

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These two books address a grave concern for world peace during this final decade of the millenium. Two distinct modes of communication are observed.