



# Response to Angella Son's and Timothy Lee's Reviews of *Religious Experience and Self-Psychology: Korean Christianity and the 1907 Revival Movement* by Jung Eun Jang

Jung Eun Jang<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 4 October 2018

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

## Abstract

The author of *Religious Experience and Self-Psychology: Korean Christianity and the 1907 Revival Movement*, published in 2016, responds to reviews of his book by Angella Son and Timothy Lee. Son's review pays attention to the current crisis of the decline and stagnation of Korean churches and seeks to devise new strategies for their recovery. Lee states that the book's analysis of the Great Revival Movement of 1907 from a self psychological conceptual framework was careless and speculative. The author reports that their reviews have helped him develop his academic interest in religious experiences and their relationship to psychology and have made his psychohistorical methodology more sophisticated and refined.

**Keywords** 1907 Revival Movement in Korea · Heinz Kohut · Self psychology · *Jujahak* · Group self · Psychohistory

I would like to thank Angella Son and Timothy Lee for taking the time to read my book and make careful comments regarding their impressions of my work. Their comments have helped me to develop my academic interest in religious experiences and their relationship with psychology as well as my thoughts on Korean religiosity and the Great Revival Movement of 1907. What I intended to provide with this book is primarily a description and analysis of the religious experience of people during the 1907 Pyongyang Revival Movement from the viewpoint of Heinz Kohut's self psychology. In so doing, I sought to present new strategies, ideas, and directions for Korean Protestant churches that are currently experiencing a downturn and crisis (Jang 2016). This discussion inevitably entailed discussion of religious experience, mental health, and maturity. The two brilliant scholars who reviewed my book, Son and Lee, accurately grasped the interest and purpose of my research, based on which they offered helpful comments on my book.

---

✉ Jung Eun Jang  
jjang@ewha.ac.kr

<sup>1</sup> Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea

First, it is important to state that Son highlighted the crisis of the decline and stagnation of the Korean church in her commentary on my book and provided a constructive discussion of new strategies for the recovery of Korean Protestant churches. By presenting various facts and figures on the current situation of these churches, she confirmed that Korean churches are experiencing the crisis of a gradual decline. As I mentioned in Chapter 5 of my book, not only is Korean Christianity experiencing a deep recession and slowdown, but also Koreans are beginning to view Christianity as an unreliable religion. She attributes the crisis to the psychological and spiritual inexperience of laypersons and church leaders. In order to overcome this crisis, she says, we need to ponder how church leaders and lay believers can reach psychological and spiritual maturity. To this end, she specifically presents three strategies—(1) being agents of joy as a paradigm of pastoral care, (2) recapturing the Bible as the living word, and (3) developing a spirituality of joy—that can assist in recovering and coagulating hope in the awakening church.

In fact, these three strategies are based on important concepts in self psychology and their application to a religion and religious experience that can function as selfobject. As a result of the empathic response of the object, the human self-structure develops into a solid and cohesive state, and one of the main emotions that arises from such a solid and coherent self-structure is joy (Kohut 1966). Religion can enable the maturation and development of self-structure through its function and role as selfobject because it provides a unique pattern and form of experience—in other words, religious experience. Son's strategies can be said to be ways to further enhance religious experience as selfobject and, as a result, lead to psychological maturity. What is revealed through my book and Son's review is that the psychological maturity of church members is closely linked to the issue of when and how religion can function as selfobject. The Pyongyang Revival Movement of 1907 is a case in point that demonstrates the selfobject function of religion and religious experience. Therefore, investigating the Revival Movement of 1907 offers a broad frame for directions and strategies to be presented to Korean Protestant churches that are currently experiencing a recession and crisis.

From the standpoint of self psychology, which sees the robustness and cohesion of the self-structure as a critical measure of mental health, healthy self-organization is always dependent upon the assistance of empathic others. For the most part, Kohut understands that the enhancement and improvement of the sense of self always depend on the empathic response of the external object and the conceptualization of the object as selfobject. This shows that one's mental health and maturity can only be comprehended in the mutual relationships that exemplify connections with others. People's religious experience during the Revival Movement of 1907 has great significance in that it shows how religious experience creates mutual connectivity and relationships, which enable the continuing development of psychological maturity. In this respect, religious experience needs to be studied continuously, and I believe that this study will make the meaning of religious experience for psychological and spiritual maturity more visible to individuals in a society.

In particular, as Lee agrees, concepts of self psychology, such as selfobject, mirroring, idealization, twinship, and group self, provide crucial means of describing religious experience and its relationship with psychological maturity. For example, preaching is a unique experience that can be offered to congregants participating in a religion or a religious ceremony that features preaching to a congregation. The congregation gains

strength, inner calmness, and comfort through the act of hearing a preacher performing preaching. This may not bring about a radical change in life, but the self-structure of people gains increased inner calmness and stability during the process of preaching. This shows that preaching can act as a powerful selfobject experience, such as a mirror or idealization. Therefore, through my ongoing research, I believe that understanding and analyzing the religious experience from a self-psychological point of view will greatly contribute to developing a deeper and more comprehensive discussion of religion and mental health.

I am grateful for Lee's critique that I did not take Buddhism and Catholicism into consideration in my discussion of the constant search of the Korean people for substitute selfobjects. However, it is important to note that this would not have significantly changed the thesis of my book. What I wanted to talk about in my book is how Christianity affected Korean society and the Korean people in the early twentieth century from a self psychological point of view. My main interest in the book was to show how Christianity was able to perform the selfobject role mentioned in self psychology for the Korean people, who were seen to be suffering from severe narcissistic injuries due to their invasion and oppression by world powers at that time. It is not necessary for this work to deal with all of the selfobject functions of all Korean religions in history up to that time. However, I expect that I will consider the importance of the Korean traditional religions in my future discussions regarding the Korean religions and their selfobject roles.

It is necessary to examine the argument related to the position of *Jujahak* in Joseon society because, according to Lee, Confucianism did not have the support of the general public and, accordingly, *Jujahak* did not play the role of selfobject in Joseon society. *Jujahak* was at one time considered the ruling ideology of the Joseon dynasty. Of course, it would have taken a long time, as Lee explained, for *Jujahak* to become deeply rooted in Joseon society, especially where Buddhism had a strong influence on the general public. However, it is undeniable that *Jujahak* served as the main governing ideology from the beginning of the Joseon dynasty and that the Joseon political system was newly reorganized around *Jujahak*. This means that *Jujahak* played a part in the creation and maintenance of Joseon society as an important selfobject for the Joseon group self because political leadership has been discussed as a powerful selfobject in self psychology (Kohut 1976). In addition, I sought to pay attention to the ways in which *Jujahak* maintained and sustained the self-structure of the Joseon group self as the governing ideology and central culture pattern of the Joseon dynasty and to trace the history of its collapse in the late Joseon dynasty. I wanted to show how people's self-organization was shaken as *Jujahak* started to lose its influence on society due to the economic destitution and sociopolitical instability and corruption of that time.

It can be assumed that there is a psychic structure or system that connects each society and community with each other and strengthens the solidarity of the society and community. Kohut calls the assumed psychic structure or system sustaining a community as the meaning of its group self. This means that there is a certain psychological structure in the group similar to the individual self and that the individual self-developmental process and its malfunctioning can be applicable to the group self as well. In order for a community to be maintained as a cohesive group, there must be a mental component that leads and guides the community, as in the typical model of an individual's self-organization. The goals and ideals of a group can act as the mental component. Kohut's group self exists when a group pursues its own values and ambitions and attempts to achieve its goals and ideals.

Lee defines Joseon society as a highly inegalitarian society and contends that it was difficult for the members of society to feel a collective relatedness and solidarity in this type of social atmosphere. For that reason, Lee argues that it is inadequate to apply the concept of the group self to the characteristic Joseon society. However, the Joseon dynasty lasted for about 500 years, maintaining Confucianism as the political ideology and governing principle (Lee 1984). This fact itself proves that Joseon society formed a cohesive group self as its own model of society. As Lee says, it is true that the Joseon dynasty had slavery and that social conflict between the ruling and subjugated classes was present. However, it is a misunderstanding of the concept of group self to claim that Joseon society did not form a group self. Although conflicts are naturally inherent in an individual and conflicts are found in any society, a psychological structure does maintain and lead the society. Therefore, I assume that the Joseon dynasty, which existed for 500 years, formed a solid group self, and, in addition, that *Jujahak* as the ruling ideology offered powerful ideas and goals to justify and align with the Joseon society viewpoint.

Lee's point that the Revival Movement of 1907 was analyzed carelessly from a self psychological conceptual framework gave me the incentive to read my book deeply once again to review the perspectives I had chosen for the book. Rereading the book led me not only to discover new facts I had not seen before but also to realize that some aspects of my book can be seen as overly speculative and unclear from the historian's perspective and point of view. In that regard, I am grateful to Lee for his critique of my book on this point. However, the reason that historians might see my argument as a careless application of self psychology to the Revival Movement of 1907 partly lies, I think, in the possible unfamiliarity of these scholars with the psychohistorical methodology, or the "psychological study of history" (Noland 1977). Psychohistory is frequently criticized by traditional historians because of its disregard of the existence of a conscious purpose and the conjectural and reductionist nature of its explanations of historical causality based on incomplete evidence of psychological factors (Runyan 1982). I tried to choose a relevant psychological theory that seems most suitable to the themes of the Revival Movement of 1907. I chose Kohut's psychoanalytic self psychological concept of the selfobject in building a framework for psychologically analyzing the movement because this theory is closely related to the devaluation of the self due to the experiences of oppression by others and to the recovery of the self by means of religious experiences.

However, psychohistory basically focuses on psychological factors and inner experiences. In particular, when a psychoanalytical approach is chosen to describe a historical event or figure, it emphasizes the unconscious and hidden intentions of the inner world. Even though psychohistory seems to be a speculative and unclear methodology as a result of these characteristics, it contributes to shedding new light on historical events and figures. It is an undeniable fact that historical events are expressions of human inner psychology and internal motives, which psychoanalysis grasps better than any other discipline. Nonetheless, Lee's review suggests a new take on the psychohistorical methodology, one that offers insight into the external social, cultural, and historical influences on psychological factors and inner experiences.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Angella Son and Timothy Lee for their comments, which led me to conduct a thought-provoking analysis. For that opportunity, I am grateful.

## References

- Jang, J. E. (2016). *Religious experience and self-psychology: Korean Christianity and the 1907 revival movement*. New York: Palgrave.
- Kohut, H. (1966). Forms and transformations of narcissism. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 14, 243–273.
- Kohut, H. (1976). Creativeness, charisma, group psychology: Reflections on the self-analysis of Freud. In C. Strozier (Ed.), *Self psychology and the humanities* (pp. 171–211). New York: Norton, 1985.
- Lee, K. (1984). *A new history of Korea* (trans: Wagner E. W. & Shultz E. J.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Noland, R. W. (1977). Psychohistory, theory, and practice. *The Massachusetts Review*, 18(2), 295–322.
- Runyan, W. M. (1982). *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method*. New York: Oxford University Press.