

WILLIAM JAMES, CHOE JE-U, AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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1. Introduction

Like other countries of East Asia, in Korea, one finds a modern interest in the study of religion although very little attention has traditionally been paid to questions which ask about religious experience, though accounts about such experiences are found in the writings of newly converted Christians and also in the founders of a number of Korean New Religions.

The most often discussed materials which directly deal with religious experience are the writings of Lee, Yong-do in Christianity, and Choe, Je-u (최제우, 崔濟愚, 1824-1864) in the most original Korean form of New Religion known as Chondogyo (天道教). The latter case, in its subject matter, is commonly regarded as one of the most important instances of religious experience in Korea. However, until recently, most of the study which has been given to the religious experience of Choe, Je-u has focused on his struggle to overcome the political risks which he faced at a certain time in the history of Korea. Such studies were largely limited to some form of sociological or political analysis.¹ Not much attention was paid to his experience in terms of any psychological or spiritual dimensions except for several analyses in relation to C.G. Jung's analytical psychology.²

To develop a critical spiritual study of Choe Je-u's religious experience James's perspective and his language about religious experience could be most helpful. Thus, in this paper, I will sketch the

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¹Western scholars have tended to engage in the same kind of interpretation. One of the first Western works on the thought of Choe Je-u focused more on social and political dimensions than on religious dimension. See Benjamin Weems, *Reform, Rebellion, and The Heavenly Way*, Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1964, 1-6.

²Several Korean Jungian depth psychologists have analyzed Choe Je-u's experience in relation to Jung's notion of a collective unconscious and religiosity as *numinosum*.

understanding of these two thinkers with respect to how, in their key works, they both understood religious experience. Especially in terms of a comparison, I will look at James's psychological study of religious experience given in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and at how Choe Je-u speaks about his direct experiences in his *Donggeryong Daejeon*. By this means, I test James's understanding to see if it can be applied to the religious experience of Choe Je-u.

2. Experiential Dimension of Religion and its Study

Religion as a human reality, with multi-dimensional aspects, is best understood as an organism. Various components can be detected: liturgical, doctrinal, ethical, social, mythical, institutional, and experiential dimensions.³ Though these various dimensions exist in religion, many scholars of religion try to specify or to determine a species of religious essence as this would relate to the experiential dimension of religion. For these scholars, the experiential aspect of religion is primary. It functions as an authentic source from which all other dimensions are derived. These subsequent dimensions all refer to secondary dimensions. For example, Buddha's experience of enlightenment and Paul's conversion experience ground the other dimensions which respectively exist in Buddhism and Christianity. The experiential dimension can be identified as a fundamental category which exists in every religion from which all other things flow.⁴

In the United States, concrete discussions about the centrality of religious experience gave rise to the study of the psychology of religion since the late 19th century.⁵ Jonathan Edwards, in his book, *Religious Affection*, sees religious experience as an essential feature of religious life in connection with the religious revival movements of the day. His thought about religious experience can be seen as a stepping stone or forerunner for the later research which occurred about the role of experience within religion. A more developed discussion about the experiences of various religious and non-religious persons can be found in the works of William James. His discussion of religious experience was a unique event in the

³Ninian Smart, *World Views: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983, 7-9.

⁴Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 1-2.

⁵Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 18-9.

intellectual history of America. In the late 19th century and the earlier 20th century, in contrast to the present situation, it was very common for many European intellectuals to come to American universities to deliver papers (but not the reverse). However, after James's *Principles of Psychology* was published as the first complete book about psychological studies in English in 1890, his psychological studies were well received in the intellectual world of Europe. At that time, this book served as a source of pride for many American intellectuals, giving them an intellectual identity.

After the publication of *The Principles of Psychology*, the committee of the Gifford Lectures invited James as the first American intellectual to give lectures on religion in 1900. He prepared lectures about issues relating to religious experience and later published a book on the basis of these lectures titled: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. Since the publication of this book, it has become a classic in the study of religion and also in psychology and philosophy. The book's title has also contributed to promoting discussions about religious experience within academic circles that want to move toward a greater understanding of human experience. As a consequence of this book, the psychology of religion and the study of religious experience have undergone a unique development in America.⁶ Among circles which have an abiding interest in understanding the nature of religious experience, James's concerns continue to be critically well received.

3. Phenomenological Features of Religious Experience

James's desire to understand all human experience is extended to his understanding of religion. He did not simply reject religious phenomena as a species or realm of data for understanding the experience of human beings. In fact, in the 19th and earlier 20th century, as a consequence of intense conflict between religion and science or religion and rational philosophy, religious experience as a species of human experience was not only not focused upon but it was also deliberately ignored. Against this trend, James's effort to understand human religious experience moved in an experiential direction. On the basis of human experience, he tried to establish his own unique perspective with respect to religious experience.

⁶See the first chapter of David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Views*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991 and Lynn Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 1-4.

James, among other comments about religion, very succinctly spoke about the religious interiority of the human subject as key in his working definition of religion:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*⁷

After his working definition of religion, James articulated the four phenomenological features of religious experience more concretely in the later chapters of the Gifford Lectures.

First, for James, unlike current critics, religious experience does not exist as a strange human abnormal neurological phenomenon. It exists as a normal human experience which occurs by way of a relationship with the divine whenever it can be identified in person's human life. Hence, it exists as more than a neurological event. The general perception of religion, in James's day, was quite different. It was extremely bipolarized between two interpretations. One offered a purely apologetic theological interpretation; the other, a materialistically neurological interpretation. James thought that both interpretations were not helpful in understanding the variety of religious experience. James, in his first lecture 'Religion and Neurology,' criticized not only the theological understanding of his day as a form of doctrinal conceptualism but also the popular neurological understanding of his time as a form of "medical materialism."⁸

Second, religious experience does not primarily occur through some kind of social setting but more frequently in an individual way, within a person's individual life in a context of solitude and withdrawal. Due to James's emphasis on the individual aspect, his understanding of religious experience has been frequently misunderstood as individualistic (ignoring social or communal dimensions). James, however, does not talk about a socially isolated human being but a socially embodied human being. His subject is not a static and disconnected human being but a dynamic and connected human being (someone who is connected with other beings in the world). This ongoing, dynamic connection with other beings exists as a basis for continuously having new experiences.

⁷William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, New York: The Modern Library, 1902, 32-33.

⁸James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 11.

For James, the consciousness present in an individual human being does not exist in a totally independent way; rather as part of a flow (a flow of consciousness that is connected with a previous consciousness and which anticipates a coming consciousness). It exists as a flow through dynamic combinations of past, present, and future. This notion is developed in James's first major work, *The Principles of Psychology*. Later, it is expanded on in his last philosophical analysis of religious experience as this is given in his *A Pluralistic Universe*.⁹

Third, religious experience does not exist as some kind of abstraction since one finds a deep dynamic feeling that is carried by religious experience. James referred to the qualities of this religious feeling in terms of “the solemn.”¹⁰ The solemn contains a mixture or a composite in a kind of feeling which consists of both fear and joy. These two qualities always dwell within a subject's interiority and through the expressions of this interiority as this exists by way of expansions and contractions. Feelings of fear function to effect ‘moods of contraction’ and feelings of joy, ‘moods of expansion’ of one's being.¹¹

Fourth, religious experience does not exist as an enclosed subjective state. It is always pointing to some kind of transcendent reality which exists beyond anybody's subjective state. The intentionality of religious experience recalls how symbols function to communicate meaning. Most of the experience, as it occurs, points to an ultimate point of reference which moves a person toward an encounter with divine things. Hence, James' understanding of religious experience cannot be naively referred to as a species of psychological reductionism. To the contrary, the manner of his analysis recalls the methodology of a phenomenological approach in the study of divine reality.

James's four features of religious experience can be compared to the main features of Choe Je-u's religious experience.¹² His religious experience was described in the *Donggyeong Daejeon*.

⁹James originally thought to plan such a project as a second volume of the Gifford Lectures. But, he could not fulfill this plan as a consequence of failing health.

¹⁰James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 74.

¹¹James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 74.

¹²Choe Je-u's religious experience is frequently referred to in most Korean studies as the most important Korean experience in modern times. On the basis of his religious experience, Choe Je-u founded a New Religion, known as Donghak (동학, 東學, Eastern Learning) in 1860. It functioned as a kind of New Religious Movement

First, like James, Choe Je-u's experience of divine reality pointed to normal human experience. For him, it should not be seen as abnormal. Choe Je-u believed and trusted in the fact that the invisible reality (as God) communicates itself through ordinary human life experience. Most especially, by attending to the cosmos (studying it, meditating on it, and observing it), and through his own personal experience Choe Je-u came to know about how unseen reality functions in nature and human life. He wrote:

The four seasons rotate without a change of order, and wind, dew, frost, and snow appear in a timely manner. Many people do not understand the reasons for it. Some people say that it is God's grace, and others say that it is work of nature. However, even though some people say that it is grace of God, it cannot be shown, and even though others say that it is the work of nature, it is difficult to prove. Thus, from the ancient times to the present time, people do not know exactly the real presence for it.¹³

Second, his dramatic religious experience gave him an interior conviction about the truth of unseen reality. After his experience, although he could not provide any proofs about something that no human eye could see, he did not hesitate to identify this reality as a normal concrete fact of human life. He could not doubt the reality of what he had come to experience given the living testimony that he could provide about this experience. The only question which existed for him was to ask if he could sincerely abide by the teaching of his experience.¹⁴ He later identified the name of this unseen reality as Hanulim (한울림)¹⁵ or *Sanje*.¹⁶

Third, Choe Je-u's religious experience is akin to James's description about how a person's human experience occurs in solitude. Choe Je-u did not have his religious experience amid comfortable or busy conditions as

against Christianity which was referred to as Seohak (西學, Western Learning). It was not only perceived as a religious movement but it was also perceived, within academic circles, as largely a socio-political movement. In order to revive what was explicitly religious within this movement, in 1905, the followers of the movement renamed it as Chondogyo (천도교, 天道教, as the Religion of the Heavenly Way).

¹³Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon* (Great Scripture of Eastern Learning) translated by Yong Choon Kim and Suk San Yoon with Central Headquarters of Chondogyo, New York: University Press of America, 2007, 8.

¹⁴Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 19

¹⁵Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 3.

¹⁶Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 5.

these existed in the circumstances of his personal life;¹⁷ nor did it happen within a group meeting. He did not simply follow the dominant religious traditions but tried strongly to overcome them by himself in his own way.

The context of his experience was something which can only be understood if one attends to the unique circumstances of Choe Je-u's personal life. He was born to a widowed mother. His father had already lost his first wife and so Choe Je-u was born of the second wife who was herself soon widowed. However, according to the Yi dynasty as this was understood within Confucian ideology, while the children of a widower were to be accepted as legitimate in a yangban (양반, aristocratic) family, the children of a widow could not be so accepted. They were to be treated as illegitimate. They could not live as legitimate children and this cast a shadow in Choe Je-u's life. Through his experience of exclusion, he came to discover the demonic injustice of Korean society. Initially, to overcome these trials, he left home to seek “the Way” for almost ten years. But, he failed and returned home. Then, near his home, he found a quiet place and built a hut for meditation “in the nearby mountains and the river banks.”¹⁸ In 1855, he met a Buddhist monk and cultivated meditation more deeply and then, in 1860, after about 20 years of searching and looking, he had a pivotal religious experience which has become known as the Great Awakening of Realization.¹⁹ After his religious experience he had more confidence in himself and so could begin to walk his own path. He would not simply walk in the way of a deteriorated form of Confucian collective life nor would he walk in the new way presented by Christian missionaries. He was not satisfied by either tradition and resisted them.

Thus, on the basis of his religious experience, Che Je-u proclaimed a new way of life that could transcend the two major religious traditions which were then current in Korea. He realized that Korea needed a new life (something which realized that all human beings are equal). In the Yi dynasty of Confucian ideology, Choe Je-u's experience and thought was very revolutionary in its implications: breaking through the stable socio-political hierarchical order of things which then existed in Korean society. Moreover, in his teaching, Choe Je-u used current Korean religious terms in his writings of testimony about his religious experience. Shamanistic,

¹⁷Yong Choon Kim, *The Chondogyo Concept of Man: An Essence of Korean Thought*, Seoul: Pan Korea Book Cooperation, 1978, 3-4.

¹⁸Kim, *The Chondogyo Concept of Man*, 7.

¹⁹Kim, *The Chondogyo Concept of Man*, 8.

Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and even Christian terminologies can easily be found in his writings. The color of his experience was quite pluralistic. On the basis of this tendency, his experience-based new religion could be identified as the first Korean form of syncretistic religion.²⁰

Fourth, Choe Je-u's experience also evidenced a fearful or mysterious feeling which is akin to James's understanding of what is meant by "the solemn." But, comparatively speaking, an equivalent expression for talking about the feeling of joy is not to be found in Choe Je-u's experience and in how he spoke about this experience. In his later teaching, he would advert to a sense that his experience gave him release from an experience of illness.²¹ However, in his accounts, no word can be found which can be equated with aspects that relate to experiences of joyful feeling. This omission points to a key difference between James and Choe Je-u in their understanding of religious experience.²²

Choe Je-u's narratives about his experience would, however, point to this difference. According to the Chondogyo tradition, Choe Je-u had his pivotal religious experience at eleven o'clock on the morning of April 5, 1860.²³ It was described in the first part of the *Donggyeong Daejeon*. It was entitled 'Podeok-Mun, 布德文) and it is about propagating Truth. First of all, he begins by describing his physical condition and then his emotions. The feeling is almost identical to a feeling of fear.

Unexpectedly, in April, my mind felt chilled and my body shook. I felt ill but did not know exactly what was wrong and I could not describe the condition of my feeling. Then, suddenly, a mysterious voice came to my ear, and I was frightened and woke up and asked "Who are you?"

The voice said: "Do not fear and do not be afraid. Humankind calls me *Sangje* (God); don't you recognize *Sangje*?"

²⁰James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, 234.

²¹Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 5.

²²I think that expressions pertaining to experiences of joy in religious experience within the context of Korea were added by Christians living and working in Korea. This matter should be more thoroughly looked into in terms of possible comparisons that could be made.

²³Park In-ho, *Chondogyoso* (A Record of Chodogyo), Seoul: Chondogyo Central HQ, 1921, 5-9.

I asked, “Why do you reveal yourself to me?” God said: “I have not been able to find anyone to teach the Truth. Thus I am sending you to the world to teach the Truth. Therefore, do not even doubt it.”

I asked God, “Shall I teach the Western truth?” God said, “No, I have a talisman (spiritual symbol) which is called mystical medicine. Its shape is like the Great Ultimate and its form is also like *gung gung*. Receive this talisman and cure humankind’s illness. Receive also my incantation and teach people to honor me. Then, you too shall become immortal and the Truth shall spread to all the world.”²⁴

4. Matrix of Religious Experience

The study of religious experience developed in two distinct lines of inquiry. One pertains to the issue of whether religious experience should be viewed as a historical/cultural phenomenon or as a transcendental/ahistorical phenomenon. Steven Katz emphasized the fact that all religious experience, including mystical experience, exists essentially as a historical and cultural phenomenon. He rejected any hint of a transcendental dimension in religious experience as this could exist (distinct from historical and social relationships which can be attended to from viewpoints that are grounded in analytic philosophy and studies of culture).²⁵ In contrast, Robert Foreman emphasized the fact that, though religious experience exists as a historical and cultural artifact, it should also be understood as something which transcends historical and social relations. On the basis of his long practice of meditation and the study of mystical literature, he came to realize that transcendental experiential moments are possible and that such an aspect should be emphasized in one’s academic studies.²⁶ However, in contrast to Foreman’s, Katz’s opinion has become more widely accepted in current academic study as these kinds of study relate to the development of postmodernism and the role which is played by analytic philosophy.

The second issue which pertains to the locus of religious experience is not separated from the first issue discussed above. On the one hand, a

²⁴Choe Je-u, *Dongggyeong Daejeon*, p. 5.

²⁵Steven Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology and Mysticism’ in Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticisms and Philosophical Analysis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 65-6.

²⁶Robert Foreman, ‘Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity and the Perennial philosophy’ in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology and Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 33-4.

chief question is whether religious experience is grounded in historical conditions or in transcendental conditions which work through historical and cultural conditions. However, if one wants to speak about transcendental conditions, a subsidiary question arises about concrete points of entry as these relate to transcendental experience. In other words, does transcendence emerge within the interiority of a human subject or does it emerge in an external way? Does an external transcendent source act apart from the subjectivity of a human subject or the psychology of a person's psyche? This is one of the main issues in a comparative study of religious experience within a context which attends to encounters between Eastern and Western religious traditions.

Among Western thinkers, William James's works are still frequently referred to with respect to two key issues (regardless of what perspective might be taken). James, in his lecture on conversion, indicated that religious experience as conversion exists as a healing phenomenon. In conversion occurs the healing of a "self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, consequences of its firmer hold upon religious entities."²⁷ In proceeding to describe religious experience, James accepted current psychical research materials and he also directly came to know about the experience of Mrs. Pieper, a medium, through a séance that James participated in with her.²⁸ As part of his own spiritual journey, James became involved in the development of psychical research and he later helped to found the American Society for Psychical Research.²⁹

James received many creative insights through his research about the scope and depth of psychical research. He especially accepted what two key figures had to say about the deeper regions of the human psyche. Frederic Myers spoke about a region which exists beyond consciousness: a region which he called the subliminal or the subconscious.³⁰ Richard Buck, a Canadian depth psychologist, spoke about a cosmic consciousness which exists beyond the field of consciousness. Apart from these two men and the ideas that they proposed, James noted a number of other ideas which

²⁷James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 187.

²⁸William James, *Essays in Psychical Research*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, 15-9.

²⁹Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998, xviii.

³⁰James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 228.

were compatible with what was known about religious experience within many religious traditions.

On the basis of these works James argued that religious experience is not derived from consciousness but from an inner, deeper dimension that is present in the human psyche. This subconscious region exists as the source of religious experience:

... we cannot, I think, avoid the conclusion that in religion we have a department of human nature with unusually close relations to the transmarginal or subliminal region. ... It is also the fountain-head of much that feeds our religion. In personal deep in the religious life, as we have now abundantly seen, - and this is my conclusion, - the door into this region seems unusually wide open; at any rate, experiences making their entrance through that door have emphatic influence in shaping religious history.³¹

James's understanding about the matrix of religious experience and its features can be applied to the religious experience of Choe Je-u. According to Choe Je-u, in the universe, the human being exists as the most spiritual kind of being that constantly searches for “the Truth” in human life.³² However, human beings cannot fulfill themselves in their spiritual journey unless they have a new religious experience. To him religious experience exists as a kind of breakthrough. It comes as a great event to herald the proclamation of a new age.³³

Because of the radicalism of religious experience, Choe Je-u noted that his religious experience, as the source of his teaching, was something that could not be derived from current religious traditions nor from some kind of religious consciousness since it must come from something within his own internal mind which transcended what had existed before in terms of a previously existing or a previously acquired form of religious sensitivity. In this context, he emphasized that his experience came to him suddenly, beyond his will and thought.³⁴ Things happened through the hearing of a “mysterious voice”³⁵ and feeling “the vital force of contact with the Spirit.”³⁶

³¹James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 473.

³²Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 7.

³³Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 6.

³⁴Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 4-5, 8.

³⁵Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 4.

³⁶Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 8.

In coming to realize that his experience came to him through an interior, deep region of his psyche, he was able to equate this region with the depth of his mind. It could be related to James's reference to the *subliminal* or *the unconscious*. For Choe Je-u, subliminal religion does not exist simply as a place for religious experience since it also exists as a source of everything in the universe. It exists not as a means that is needed for the experience but as an end or a matrix. According to Choe Je-u, this subliminal region exists as the inner, deep mind of the human subject. In this sense, the deep interior region present in a human subject does not exist as a mediating locus of religious experience. It exists rather as the Spirit or God that a human subject experiences and which Choe Je-u also experienced.

The divine answer was, "My mind is your mind. How can Humankind know it? People know of Heaven and earth, but they do not know the Spirit. I am the Spirit. As I am giving you the eternal Truth, cultivate and refine it, write it down and teach it to the people. Establish the laws of practice and propagate the Truth (virtue). Then you will have eternal life and will brighten the world."³⁷

After this sudden, transitory, and passive experience, Choe Je-u did not initially know how to express his experience. He could not find a proper language to describe his experience in any language that he was familiar with. For almost a year, Choe Je-u practiced the teachings of his experience by himself and he meditated on them to cultivate his experience and also in order to discover how to communicate his teachings to the general public, to encourage them to follow the Way.³⁸

In the *Buryeon Giyeon* (불연기연, 不然基然, Not so, Yet so) of *Donggyeong Daejeon*, he apparently expressed the notion that the Divine or God does not exist as an abstract doctrine but as "a source of all lives and all things."³⁹ He noted that ultimate reality cannot be experienced simply by studying the current religious texts of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and the New Western Religion of Christianity. Instead, for him, the most important thing to have and to experience is to have faith and an attitude of sincerity towards God as this can only be known through the practical way of *Chodogyeo* (the Eastern Learning).⁴⁰ To create this kind

³⁷Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 9.

³⁸Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 9.

³⁹Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 23.

⁴⁰Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 23.

of disposition in believers, he made a simple *Jumun* (주문, 呪文, an incantation) as a technique for his followers to repeat so that they would have the same experience as he had had. The apex of his argument with respect to this technique is his teaching that God does not exist externally as “the transcendental being” but as “the inner transcendental” or, in other words, as “God within me.”⁴¹

Given this emphasis on the nature of this immanent transcendent reality, critical discussions ensued about what kind of relation can exist between a human being and God. Is God a different kind of being or is his being identical with the kind of human being that a human being is? In response, Choe Je-u taught that an identity or unity exists between a human being and God. This is a central doctrine of his New Religion and, in the way that Choe Je-u named this unity or identity, he referred to it as *In Nae Ch'on* (인내천, 人乃天, Man is God).⁴²

For both James and Choe Je-u the experience as such cannot be precisely identified in terms of some kind of positive or negative nature. Rather they both thought that subliminal religious experience should be seen as something neutral. Depending upon interior psychic or spiritual conditions and circumstances, this religious experience manifests different features. Sometimes it comes in an extreme, intense form and sometimes, in an opposite, contrary way (with ordinary, simple features). Such variation can be found not only in the so-called institutionalized World Religions and in New Religions but also in non-religious places or at secular meetings. Every place is open to religious experience: sometimes through conditions that operate positively and negatively. In addition, the experience means different things at times for the same subject. For instance, an original experience is both good and beautiful although, later, the experience transforms itself into something which has many destructive consequences. Thus, as James put it in the book title of his Gifford Lectures, one key feature present in religious experience as a phenomenon is the varieties of experience which are present in it.

James, in the latter part of his lecture on mysticism, described the fact that mystical experience can function constructively as one's main source for living a fully human life although this experience can also function in a destructive fashion. Positive experience can give human life a

⁴¹Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 26.

⁴²Yi Ton-hwa, *In Nae Ch'on Youi* (The Essential Meaning of ‘Man is God’), Seoul: Ch'ondogyo Central HQ, 1968, 24.

deeply optimistic form of consolation although it can also produce something which is entirely opposite in terms of pessimistic anxiety. James identified negative mystical experience as “*diabolical* mysticism.”⁴³ He thought that these experiences could not be separated; they all derive from the same source (a subliminal region in the human psyche).

It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classical mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: “seraph and snake” abide there side by side. To come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense.⁴⁴

Choe Je-u also described his religious experience in a similar way. He also recognized that the experience may not exist as a comforting, optimistic experience. He knew that inner depth human experience could occur destructively in human life. He concretely expressed his opinion when his disciples asked him about how the human mind as God’s mind is able to produce wrongdoings in human history. He spoke about a reason which he gives in connection with the presence of vital force or energy.

The disciple asked, “If the mind of God is identical with the mind of humans, why is there good and evil?” I answered: “God ordains the standard of high and low qualities of life, and God determines the principle of joy and sorrow. The virtues of the superman consist of right energy (vital force) and a stable mind and, therefore, his virtue is one with the virtue of the universe. However, the inferior man has wrong energy and an unstable mind and therefore violates the will of God. Isn’t this the principle of success (good) and failure (evil)?”⁴⁵

Here, James and Choe Je-u both emphasized the fact that subliminal experience itself cannot be easily identified as either good or evil. However, the fruits of the experience should indicate the presence of either good or evil. In this sense, James argued that mystical experience by itself does not exist as an “infallible credential.”⁴⁶ It should be tested to see if a

⁴³James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 417.

⁴⁴James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 417-418.

⁴⁵Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 11.

⁴⁶James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 417.

given experience is truly authentic or not in terms of how it relates to the living of one's practical life. Theoretical or doctrinal criteria should not be used to evaluate any claims about religious experience unless one sufficiently attends to how any alleged experiences can be properly tested within the context of one's concrete human life. In speaking about saintliness, James spoke about the place of right judgment, moving toward a philosophy of pragmatism which emerged later on in the development of his thought. As James argues:

We have merely to collect things together without any special *a priori* theological system, and out of an aggregate of piecemeal judgments as to the value of this and that experience – judgments in which our general philosophic prejudices, our instincts, and our common sense are our only guides – decide that *on the whole* one type of religion is approved by its fruits, and another type condemned.⁴⁷

Choe Je-u also realized that experience cannot be simply viewed as the right source that one should follow in one's human life since it must always be assisted through a ceaseless form of training that seeks to test the good or the value of one's life. The process does not operate in a simply cognitive manner since all of one's being is involved in an assemblage of many variables which, together, are constitutive of a person's personality and character.

Thus, after his religious experience, Choe Je-u pondered about the simple but the most effective way for recognizing and developing a uniquely distinct form of training as *Jumun* which markedly differed from what one could find in the established religious traditions which already existed. In developing this, he attempted to create new terminologies, new incantations, and new poems for his followers to utilize in practicing the Way concretely in their lives. He developed an outline of spiritual training⁴⁸ as this existed in relation to his earlier religious experience. Although his experience would criticize Christianity, in actual fact, his training program resembled mission programs as these existed then and were practiced among the Protestant missionaries who labored in Korea.⁴⁹

⁴⁷James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 19.

⁴⁸Choe Je-u, *Donggyeong Daejeon*, 18.

⁴⁹James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, 239.

5. Conclusion

In my paper, I have tried to indicate a number of applicable comparative points for judging how William James spoke about religious experience in his Gifford Lectures and how Choe Je-u spoke about his religious experience in *Donggyeong Daejeon*. I have especially concentrated on two aspects present in religious experience.

First, I have tried to show how religious experience can be understood in terms of how it relates to a number of phenomenological variables. Their understanding is almost identical except for the joyful component which James identifies as a key constituent of religious experience in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. While, on the one hand, this variable needs to be further examined within the context of Korean classical literature, until now, in Choe Je-u's work, I have not been able to find an equivalent word for James's "the joyful."

Second, I have described the matrix of religious experience. James and Choe, Je-u both located God within the human subject. James was very aware of two current dangers, medical materialism and psychologism which threatened how religious experience should be properly interpreted. To counter these dangers, James emphasized the implications of speaking about "the subliminal" as the matrix of religious experience. In conjunction with this kind of analysis, James avoided engaging in any efforts to identify the locus as God.

Similarly, for Choe Je-u, religious experience points to an inner depth dimension, but his "subliminal region" as his followers interpreted later, is not to be interpreted as referring only to a locus where religious experience resides since it is also to be identified as God or the Divine Being. This stands as another key difference which distinguishes how James and Choe Je-u understood religious experience.