Religious Imagination and the Oppressed Emotion
Reading the Bible with Holistic Action

Abstract

According to social trends, the general population fixates on modern topics for multiple reasons. In the case of Christianity, the concept of “reason” was generated from the Reformation based on the rational trend of Western culture. While Christianity focuses on “reason,” other sides of human beings are devaluated. This research will shed new light on the hidden parts of humans such as imagination, emotion and body.

Imagination enables the reader to overcome their limitations when they use reason, emotion and body in the process of reading the Bible. From these recognitions, this research is reevaluating the possibilities of reading the Bible with body-centered movement as an effective way of religious imagination. This process is able to bring the biblical story to the lives of readers through imagination. Also, this experience is able to lead us liberation from the oppressed emotion with God-consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

People of the postmodern world are more familiar with emotional approaches to experiencing God rather than objectively reading the Bible. Also, the traditional interpretation is not meaningful anymore to postmodern people who focus on individual lives and applicable messages relevant to their situations. They want to know the meaning and the intention of God for their specific lives rather than the general meaning of the Bible. Maria Harris offers the following definition of religion in her book, *Teaching & Religious Imagination*: “Religion, with its ties to creation and feeling, is the cultural vehicle that gives people forms through which to express their relationship to divinity.”¹ Through religion, humans want to know God’s view and intention for their situations and world issues. In this respect, I plan to try a different approach from traditional ways of reading the Bible, namely through body-centered movement based on imagination. In this research, I will focus on the case of the oppressed emotions in Korean women and discuss the effectiveness of imagination with a body-centered approach to the Bible.

This research is connected to three approaches: religious imagination, spiritual-psychology, and holistic education. First, religious imagination is the central issue as one of the fundamental elements of religion. Most religions are based on the presence of the invisible god. Therefore, people must approach their invisible God by imagination. Moreover, imagination is an essential element to understanding religious narratives because these consist of stories that are

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coming from different cultural backgrounds to readers. The main purpose of this research is to discover an efficient method of religious imagination using the wholeness of human beings.

The second approach concentrates on spiritual-psychology as a way of understanding students as spiritual beings, and gives the students the opportunity to reflect on their sub-consciousness level. It is not possible to experience God before we meet ourselves, and transformation is possible when we confront our true selves in our sub-consciousness. Religious educators must consider students’ spirituality in order to experience God in their “inner self.”

Finally, the third approach will be to develop a new form of holistic education based on our emotions, bodies and spirituality. When we use our whole sense to approach the truth and God, the limitation will be minimized, and our religious imagination will be maximized through our wholeness.

PART 1: OPPRESSED EMOTION

THE OPPRESSION IN KOREAN SOCIETY

South Korean society allows various oppressions coming from its steady hierarchical and patriarchal culture. Therefore, the Korean language has various expressions for the negative and oppressed emotions such as “Han” and “Wha.” In particular, Korean women suffer from multiple oppressions in their families, social communities, and religions. Moreover, Korean society has undergone rapid changes through several historical events over the short period of one hundred years, such as the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, dictatorship, modernization, enlightenment, and industrialization. During the last one hundred years, Korean women were the greatest victims of these historical events. In World War II, Japanese soldiers forced them to serve as sex slaves, and the Korean War made them powerless along with the rest of the Korean population. Some people say that this is not meaningful to postmodern Koreans. However, the people are still alive with negative emotions caused by these issues; these are still on going in our lives, history and her story. How can religious educators approach these people who fall victim to multifarious sufferings?

OPPRESSED EMOTION AND RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

Sometimes, people meet themselves when they realize that they are oppressed by something or someone because they recognize themselves as a subject by recognition of the object. Like the skin of fruits, people’s true selves are covered with their negative emotions caused by oppressions and sufferings. When I did a silent drama in the class of Theology and Emotions I realized that there were lots of remaining emotions in my inner self. Our group designed a silent drama about the emotional transition of death and resurrection for the small

\[2\] Thomas Merton, The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (New York: HarperOne, 2003); According to Merton, “The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulate by anyone, even by the devil” (Thomas Merton, 5). Merton provides various explanations about the inner self: “contemplative and spiritual self, the dormant, mysterious, and hidden self, and the self as rooted in God,” (Merton, 2) “our inmost ‘I’ [that] exists in God and God dwells in it.” (Merton, 12)
project that was related to the theme of that class. At first, I had a plan to dance with the feelings of sadness, anger, disappointment, surprise and joy. However, when I thought about death, and saw the student who acted the part of death, I started to cry because I remembered my grandmother who died 15 years ago. It was my story, my life, and my emotion at the time, not just drama. Through that drama, I released my remaining emotions with crying out, and I faced myself. I named this kind of remaining emotion, “oppressed emotion.” This refers to unrelieved emotion in the sub-conscious that was caused by past experiences. This emotion is also related to our false mask of true self, a persona that is formed by our social positions and roles. In this respect, it is not only the emotion from past events, but also the feeling of true self.

Moreover, through this drama, I experienced the combination of my current and past remaining emotions, and I could not stop crying even though the drama was already finished. Interestingly, when I cried out, my classmates also cried, and we shared our individual stories related to this drama and sadness. I was surprised that one person’s crying could bring out the audiences’ own stories and oppressed emotions. Jerzy Grotowski states, “The actor who undertakes an act of self-penetration, who reveals himself and sacrifices the innermost part of himself – the most painful, that which is not intended for the eyes of the world – must be able to manifest the least impulse.”

According to Grotowski, an actor’s body language and expression reveal their inner self behind the persona, and this acting influences the audience to face their inner selves. From this experience and Grotowski’s statement, I recognized the importance and necessity of reliving our oppressed emotions in our sub-consciousness by body expression and empathy. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore discusses a similar experience in Teaching as a Sacramental Act: “This is what I learned from the student who cried out. With her cries ringing, together with painful cries from history, we analyze the power of remembering the dismembered.” Likewise, narratives and imagination have power for evoking memories and forming empathy, and this also has the potential to release oppressed emotion. This is the reason why the biblical narrative has the capacity of religious experience, which brings me to the second part: religious imagination and the Bible.

PART 2: RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION AND THE BIBLE

Religion has numerous words to express the invisible god. However, these words can limit our experiences of the ultimate god. For instance, the Bible limits God in the authors’ expression that was formed by their intentions and cultures. Moreover, the authority of the Bible as the canon of Christianity sets a limitation of individual interpretation. For these reasons, when a reader reads the Bible, their understandings are dominated by literal expression or former interpretation that was discussed by the scholars who are also dominated by their specific culture.

In this case, imagination enables the reader to overcome these limitations when they use their holistic senses: reason, emotion, and body in the process of reading the Bible. From these recognitions, the second part of research is reevaluating the possibilities of reading the Bible with body-centered movement as an efficient method of religious imagination. This process is

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4 Ibid., 35-36.
5 Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Teaching as a Sacramental Act (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 67.
able to bring the biblical story to the life through the reader’s imagination. Also, this experience is able to liberate the reader from oppressed emotions.

**BODY AND EMOTION**

Western culture is familiar with the division between body, mind, and soul. Moreover, the body, especially women’s bodies, has been devalued by Western philosophy and Christianity. Sondra Horton Fraleigh writes, “Dualism, which connotes the classic body-soul separation in Western philosophy (principally known as Cartesian dualism), views the body in a negative, mechanistic way and regards the soul as superior.” In addition, Marcia W. Mount Shoop states, “Women as a temptress, as unclean, as lacking in moral capacity, as irrational, and as inadequate to the task of church leadership are just some of the symptoms of how hatred, distrust, and negativity about the body have been particularly heaped onto female bodies.” Likewise, negative perspectives on the human body, especially women’s bodies, have lasted for a long time, and this has affected women’s oppression in Christianity.

On the other hand, Eastern culture traditionally thought that body, mind and soul are deeply connected. For example, traditional Korean medicine regards physical disease as originating from suffering in mind and soul. Therefore, a Korean traditional doctor might use acupuncture or prescribe herbal medicine to get the spirit flowing that was interrupted by shock. Identified with Eastern traditional medicine, the body and emotion’s possibilities are limitless for religious experience in soul. When people use body and emotion in the process of approaching God through imagination, they can experience a more plentiful revelation of God.

The most notable theologian who asserted the positive effect of emotion for God-consciousness was Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Schleiermacher, emotion is “an original way” to approach God. He states,

> In this sense it can indeed be said that God is given to us in feeling in an original way; and if we speak of an original revelation of God to man or in man, the meaning will always be just this, that, along with the absolute dependence which characterizes not only man but all temporal existence, there is given to man also the immediate self-consciousness of it, which becomes a consciousness of God.

For Schleiermacher, reflection on feeling is important for realizing the “consciousness of God” through the “self-consciousness” of human experience with God. His assertion was a transition of recognition for human feeling in the period of the Enlightenment. In this period, people tended to focus on human reason and dogma of religion instead of human emotion and feelings, and people considered emotion to be separated from human reason. According to Elaine Fox, “Historically, cognition and emotion have frequently been considered as separate entities. Contemporary research, however, suggests that the two concepts are actually closely intertwined and interdependent at both neural and psychological levels.” This statement applies not only to social trends but also to Christian culture. Until now, Christianity tended to devalue emotional reflection of religious experience related to a relationship with God. However, as Schleiermacher insists, our feelings and emotions are both important ways to approach our inner experience with

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God. If we miss the action of our feelings and emotions, we can easily overlook various layers of our inner self and religious experience that is related to God.

BODY-CENTERED MOVEMENT AND THE BIBLE

One of the main roles of religious educators is to provide the opportunity of finding connection between a biblical narrative and the life of a student. Moore asserts, “Reading and biblical exegesis are important skills to learn, but they can easily be disconnected from any meaning in persons’ lives.”10 Emotion and imagination can be a proper bridge between a biblical world and students’ lives. As I mentioned above, biblical narrative has lots of limitation to understand its context and situation exactly because the writer provided limited information. Moreover, this information was edited by their thought and view that is formed by their cultural backgrounds. Moore states, “Concepts and skills have actually been extracted from narrative contexts in the first place, so placing them back into these contexts is a way of sending them home.”11 This is the reason why religious educators have to consider imagination in their pedagogy with the Bible. Human beings have the capacity to access a truth beyond narrative through imagination. This imagination brings the individuals into a different world. Applying readers’ whole sense in this process will enlarge imaginative ability to understand a biblical narrative vividly.

For these reasons, body-centered movement can be an exceptional way to approach the biblical world. Body movement is a way to maximize the effect of emotion and thinking in the process of reading the text using the reader’s body to engage the biblical world such as motion with some part of the body, touching, dancing, acting, drawing or walking. Generally, we think that our emotions control our bodies according to our situations. However, the opposite direction, changing emotion through body movement, is also possible. The connection between our body and emotion is stronger than most people think, and body movement is a proper way to stimulate people’s emotions when they read the Bible. According to Andrew J. Strathern, “Emotions are basically irrational bodily reactions, transient surges of affect quite unrelated to cognition. Reports of an affective experience can be explained entirely in terms of physiological changes and outward bodily movements.”12 This assertion is the foundation of body-centered movement with the Bible. While acting out the biblical narratives, readers can reveal their oppressed emotions through their bodily expressions with the biblical stories and characters because the biblical world is similar to our world, and the character’s emotion is related to our emotion. Also, when people are liberated from their oppressions and oppressed emotions by body-centered movement, they are able to confront themselves coming from their deepest inner self: true self and their divine nature in superego. Peter Adam states, “If the Bible is a God-given resource for Christian spirituality, then the use of biblical theology will help us to derive as much spiritual benefit as possible from every part of that Bible.”13 When we try to read the Bible with body-centered movement, we can realize God’s message in our contexts through the hermeneutics of

10 Moore, Teaching as a Sacramental Act, 132.
11 Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Teaching from the hearts: Theology and Educational Method (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 132.
the biblical text. This process can be a useful way to retrieve inner experience and to reveal our oppressed emotions within God-consciousness.

CONCLUSION: HOLISTIC EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION

This research concentrated on three themes—religious imagination, emotion, and body—and expands the possibility of these themes in the religious education field by reading the Bible with holistic action, “body-centered movement.” The original meaning of “educate” is a combination of two words, “out,” “lead.” However, much of education still focuses on giving information instead of bringing out the student’s potential. This is the reason why this research discussed the possibility of self-education through imagination, emotion, and body as a way of respecting the individual student as a subject of religious experience. This form of education considers that everyone can produce knowledge coming from an individual experience within God-consciousness. Moore states, “Sacred teaching mediates God’s grace to people who search for God’s Goodness in a world oriented toward lesser goods and despair.”14 As Moore asserts, a religious educator is like a mediator between God and student rather than teachers, and Jesus was an exemplar of this model. The biblical stories portray Jesus as a liberator of the oppressed, and as an educator who liberated people’s imaginative power using parables and narratives. Religious educators should reconsider his teaching style as a mediator and liberator.

When I came to Boston to study, I was exhausted by the life of an ordained female pastor who suffered from people’s antipathy for female religious leaders caused by the strong patriarchal culture in Korean Christianity. I was a full time pastor of the biggest Methodist church in Korea for six years. There are more than one hundred full-time pastors, thirty part-time pastors and fifty staff members in that church, so the church has a strong hierarchical culture to manage them. Also, this church has a strong masculine culture that does not allow ordained female pastors to preach the sermon or lead Eucharist in public worship. In this hierarchical and patriarchal culture, women pastors are always subordinate to male pastors. One day, I gained an opportunity to pray alone in a small room, and I experienced an outburst of oppressed emotions through bodily prayer. This event was the awakening moment of my life in which I confronted myself behind my oppressed emotions. The enlightenment from this event was the first step of this research. I constantly seek the effect of bodily movement and emotion on religious experience. And while dancing with the biblical narratives that are related to women’s healing and liberation, I found the ability to relieve oppressed emotion through bodily expressions for God-consciousness.

When I started this research, my contextual issue was the oppressed emotions of Korean women. However, this approach can be applied to various contexts of religious education because everyone is oppressed by someone or something, even though they may not recognize their oppressions. I hope that religious imagination and reading the Bible through body-centered movement can be a way of relieving our oppression and oppressed emotions in various hierarchical and patriarchal societies.

14 Moore, Teaching as a Sacramental Act, 3
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