The Rationality of Myth: An Analysis of the Mythology in *The Canonical Scripture* through the Lens of Bronisław Malinowski's Functional Theory of Myth

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Abstract

While Western modernity saw the displacement of a myth-based worldview by reason, Asian cultures followed a different trajectory. There, myth retained the ethical and spiritual dimensions acquired during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE), continuing to serve as a foundational social force. The enduring power of this *mythos* is evident in the emergence of new religious movements (NRMs) in 19th and 20th century Korea and, moreover, it remains significant today, offering a necessary counterweight in a pragmatic world where *logos* alone is often insufficient and where the need for compassion is renewed. This study analyzes the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe's *The Canonical Scripture* (*Jeon-gyeong* 典經) through the lens of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, demonstrating how it shapes lifestyles, reinforces beliefs, justifies rituals, and codifies social norms.

Keywords: myth; functional theory of myth; Daesoon Jinrihoe's mythology; haewon sangsaeng; chiseong; ethics; ritual practice

Introduction

As European cultures transitioned through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment into modernity, the ancient concept of *mythos* evolved. More importantly, the worldview grounded in myth was largely displaced by one based on reason. In contrast, Asian cultures retained a vital role for myth, specifically in the sense acquired during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE),[1] defining it not only through ritual but also through values such as individual spirituality, morality, and ethical conduct.

The era of Axial Age was distinguished by the recognition that suffering is an inherent aspect of the human condition. Furthermore, there was an increasing emphasis on the importance of empathy, compassion, and justice. There was also an observable shift in people's tendency to rely on religious experts, with a concurrent effort to seek truth from within. Finally, anthropomorphic images of deities became less significant, and amorphous concept of a higher reality, "unattainable" to human reason, such as the Chinese Dao (道), gained in importance (Armstrong 2021, 95–98). If we look at the emergence of New Religious Movements (NRM) in 19th and 20th century Korea, and analyze their doctrine and mythology, it becomes evident that this *mythos* from the Axial Axe was not only still present but also gained a new significance at the time. Moreover, this continues today, and some of the Korean NRM that emerged in 20th century, such as Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡眞理會, The Fellowship of Daesoon Truth),[2] can serve as good example for this continuity of the *mythos* from the Axial Age in today's world.

As Karen Armstrong (2021, 156) has pointed out, we are living in a pragmatic and rational world where *logos* is not always effective, mostly because it is incapable of addressing profoundly entrenched, unrestrained fears, desires, and neuroses—this is the task of spiritually and ethically oriented mythology. Myth, as a way of thinking and practicing helps us to face the prospect of destruction, death and nothingness and, to some extent, to accept it (Armstrong 2021, 152). Consequently, its continued necessity is evident. In this sense, the *mythos* of the Axial Age offers a compelling framework for addressing contemporary global issues and challenges, particularly within the context of human conditions, but not limited to it. This type of mythology posits the notion that the cultivation of altruism and the recognition of empathy and compassion for others are of great significance. Such principles are elucidated in the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

This study will analyze the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe's *The Canonical Scripture* (*Jeon-gyeong* 典經) through the lens of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, demonstrating how mythology present in the religious doctrine shapes the way of life, reinforces beliefs, justifies rituals, and embodies social norms and moral principles.

Bronisław Malinowski's Functional Theory of Myth

Although many prominent anthropologists, such as James Frazer (1854–1941), Andrew Lang (1844–1912), Franz Boas (1858–1942), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), contributed significantly to the study of myth, it was the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942)—the founder of the study method known as "participant observation"—whose functional theory of myth helped shift the scholarly focus from the 19th century preoccupation with the origins of myth to a more practical concern with its functions within living societies (Dundes 1984, 194). Malinowski conducted his participant observation and research on mythology among the indigenous cultures of Melanesia, publishing his findings in numerous scholarly articles and books. His major contribution to the theory of myth was first presented as a series of lectures at the University of Liverpool in November 1925, later published as an essay in *Psyche* in April 1926 (Dundes 1984, 194), and subsequently released in London the same year as the book *Myth in Primitive Psychology*.

The central premise of Malinowski's cultural studies is the conception of culture as an "integrated whole," understood as "a complex of means of production, as well as means of consumptions, the rules of interpersonal interactions and the common social practices like reproduction of ideas, beliefs and customs" (Siedin 2021, 168). Malinowski further argues that culture emerges primarily from the fundamental biological needs of humans, such as nutrition, shelter, reproduction, health, and safety. To meet these needs, an "artificial environment"—which he identifies as culture – must be created. Moreover, the processes involved in satisfying these needs constitute the driving force of cultural change, initiating the assimilation of historical innovations. He also links cultural diversity to the specific regional conditions in which these needs are addressed (Siedin 2021, 168–169). From a functionalist perspective, however, a key consideration for this research is that mythology, alongside science, performs analogous functions by addressing the fundamental biological and social needs of human beings, and is, as a result, necessary. In the first chapter of *Myth in Primitive Psychology* Malinowski writes:

> Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage. (Malinowski 1926, 21).

Then he continues:

> Studied alive, myth, [...] is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertion, even practical requirements. Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of a man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. (Malinowski 1926, 23).

It is therefore essential to approach myth not as a static narrative preserved in textual form, but as a living reality—an integral component of every culture that shapes human ways of life, not solely the "primitives," as Malinowski terms them. The functionality of myth is manifested in its role across social, ritual, and ethical domains; consequently, the study of myth must focus on the specific ways in which societies utilize it to maintain cultural cohesion, regulate social relations, and reproduce collective values and beliefs. Although myths often refer to remote past and distinct historical contexts, the values they convey – such as social norms and moral principles—continue to underpin many cultures even nowadays, reinforcing traditions and shaping collective beliefs. Malinowski underscores this perspective at the conclusion of his work, noting that:

> Myth as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfils a function *sui generis* closely connected with the nature of tradition, with the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (Malinowski 1926, 124–125).

From the perspective of structural anthropology, as articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) in *The Savage Mind*, myth-makers operate as "bricoleurs." In this sense, rather than inventing entirely new narratives, they draw upon pre-existing motifs and, through their recombination, construct myths that are based on "reconstructed sets of events." Wendy Doniger (1998, 138) builds on this idea, observing that "cross-cultural themes of myth [...] can only be changed within the rules of the game—which often means inverting given patterns or breaking dichotomies down into continuums, rather than

creating new patterns with entirely different structures. Myth-makers know this, which is why all of them are bricoleurs rather than patented inventors." This structural interpretation, however, does not necessarily stand in opposition to Malinowski's theory. While myth-makers frequently borrow motifs and reconstruct them according to specific cultural needs, their aim, which is the rationalization of experience and the fulfillment of social and psychological needs, remains the same. In this way, myths continue to reinforce collective belief systems and ritual practices, which is also visible in other religious traditions of Korean people, like shamanism.[3]

To conclude, mythology for centuries functioned as a rational means of exploring the world, explaining social structures, moral behavior, and systems of belief. Although each historical era has generated its own myths, these narratives consistently emerged as responses to the particular needs of their time and society—"a constant by-product of living faith, which is in need of miracles; of sociological status, which demands precedent; of moral rule, which requires sanction" (Malinowski 1926, 125). As the following chapter will demonstrate, this is also evident in the mythology of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

Drawing Inspiration from the Past

For a religion to attract adherents, it must provide more than a compelling and persuasive solution to a significant existential problem. It must also present an object of ultimate concern – whether conceived as an anthropomorphic deity, an ultimate reality, or another transcendent principle – and articulate a moral framework that guides followers in cultivating virtuous lives (Baker 2016, 2). As noted in the introduction to this study, belief systems that emerged during the Axial Age, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, placed particular emphasis on morality, offering distinct sets of principles to enable individuals to live ethically. Daesoon Jinrihoe continues this tradition of moral cultivation, yet it distinguishes itself by grounding ethics in the specific incarnation of the Supreme God, Sangje (上帝). Central to Daesoon Jinrihoe's soteriology is the belief that Sangje incarnated into human history in 19th century Korea as Kang Il-sun (姜一淳; 1871–1909), best known by his honorific name, Jeungsan (甑山). In this sense, he is not merely a sage but the supreme object of faith and the focal point of worship within Daesoon Jinrihoe.

For his followers, Sangje is not only the source of moral instruction in daily life but also the embodiment of moral perfection itself. As Donald Baker (2016, 4) has pointed out, Daesoon Thought (*Daesoon sasang* 大巡思想) integrates ethical practice with devotion to a divine exemplar: "Daesoon philosophy combines traditional anthropocentrism and traditional anthropomorphism to create a new form of spirituality, one that is focused not just on God or just human beings but on both, recognizing the power of God but also recognizing the power of human beings to better themselves through their own efforts". In this respect, Sangje – and, by extension, his earthly life as

Kang Jeungsan – serves as a mythic paradigm of proper moral conduct. Moreover, *The Canonical Scripture* frequently depicts Sangje drawing upon diverse mythological narratives to elucidate his teachings, particularly those concerning the cultivation of a moral life.

Among the four tenets of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the third—known as "The Resolution of Grievances for Mutual Beneficence" (*haewon sangsaeng* 解寃相生)—is regarded to be the most important. This is because it emphasizes a system of mutual reciprocation through the resolution of conflicts, grudges, and grievances in the human and spiritual realms. By promoting reconciliation and harmony, both human and divine beings are able to communicate and cooperate, thereby attaining mutual benefit. Ultimately, this process culminates in the realization of the Dao within the world – a transformation of the present world into an earthly paradise of the Later World (*hucheon* 後天), which in Daesoon Thought corresponds to the last of four tenets, referred to as the "Perfected State of Unification with the Dao" (*dotong jingyeong* 道通眞境). In *The Canonical Scripture* (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020a) we read:

> One day in the seventh month, Sangje remarked, "Through this Reordering Work, I will resolve the grievances that have accumulated since time immemorial. I will remove all inauspiciousness resulting from grievances and thereby enable the realization of eternal peace. The grievance of Danzhu, the son of Yao, lies in the beginning of human history and marks the first chapter of the history of grievances. If that grievance is resolved, all subsequent grievances accumulated throughout history can gain eligibility for resolution. This is like leading the head to make the body follow. Yao deemed Danzhu unworthy and gave his two daughters to Shun and abdicated the throne to him. This caused Danzhu to form a grievance, which, in turn, caused Shun to die at a river near Cangwu County, and Yao's two daughters (wives of Shun) drowned themselves in Xiaoxiang River. This was the root grievance that entangled the world continually, generation after generation and caused Heaven and Earth to overflow with grievances and reach the brink of near disaster. Consequently, as I endeavor to rescue humanity from this state of destruction, I must undergo this Reordering Work of Grievance Resolution" (*Reordering Works* 3:4).

According to the teachings of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the origins of all grudges and grievances, as recorded in the history, can be traced back to the era of ancient Chinese dynasties and the time of the first legendary rulers. Within this narrative, the rivalry between the successors of the legendary Emperor Yao (堯; 2356?–2255? BC)—namely Shun (舜; 2294?–2184? BC) and Danzhu (丹朱; 2356?–2255? BC)—is understood to have given rise to the earliest recorded grudges and resentments. These initial hostilities are believed to have generated conflicts that accumulated and intensified over the centuries, eventually leading the world into a state of chaos. This narrative not only

functions as a mythological account of the beginning of accumulation of grievances and disorder but also carries a broader moral, social and religious significance.

The narrative of Yao and Shun was canonized in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), composed by Sima Qian (司馬遷, 145–86 BC), who integrated both written sources and oral traditions in the compilation of his historical records. Among his principal sources was likely the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), one of the earliest extant texts of Chinese historiography (You 2019, 122). The myth of Yao and Shun underscores the centrality of virtuous conduct in accordance with Confucian moral principles. In this sense it conveys one of the ultimate truths of moral order: those who live ethically are ultimately rewarded, whereas those who act immorally inevitably face punishment. By invoking this tradition, Sangje Kang Jeungsan is not only introduced as someone who instruct his followers in proper moral behavior but also as someone among the ranks of the great sages—comparable to those of the Axial Age, like Confucius or Buddha—who also frequently drew upon mythic precedents to convey and contextualize new doctrine (Armstrong 2021, 108), which eventually started to serve as a basis for newly created religious and moral systems and social structures.

As Karen Armstrong (2021, 104–105) has observed, the sages of the Axial Age maintained that a myth reveals its full significance only when it leads to the cultivation and practice of virtue in everyday life. Without ethical conduct and moral transformation, myth remains a mere abstraction, detached from lived experience. Myth, therefore, should not be regarded merely as a source of supplementary information or commentary; rather, it serves as "a warrant, a charter, and often a practical guide" (Malinowski 1926, 38) for human activity and moral orientation. This functional perspective is vividly realized in Daesoon Jinrihoe's doctrine.

In *The Canonical Scripture* Sangje often invokes moral principles according to which his followers should live in order to achieve the previously mentioned paradise of Later World. For example, in the chapter "Dharma 2," we find a reference to grievance and grudges, which became the basis for the third out of five precepts[4] of Daesoon Jinrihoe that all of its believers should follow in their life:

> There is a saying that "*mu-cheok jal sanda* (one lives very well)," which can also be interpreted as people can live happily only without *cheok* (grudge). Do not provoke grievances from others, or those grievances will turn into a *cheok* that will come back to you. Furthermore, do not hate others. Even if that hatred is not consciously known, their spirits will notice it first and return it back upon you as a *cheok*[5] (*Dharma* 2:44).

Other narratives, such as the one found in the chapter "Acts 4" of *The Canonical Scripture*, emphasize that only through devoted service to Sangje and adherence to his moral teachings can individuals participate in, and ultimately experience, his second coming.

> One day in the fall of that year, Sangje said to Ahn Nae-Seong, "Put your efforts into farming diligently. Externally, do not neglect to serve in the Reordering Works, and internally, you shall hold a memorial rite for your ancestors with sincerity, serve your parents with respect, and raise your children with care. Then, wait for Me to return" (*Acts* 4:44).

A virtue of sincerity[6] directed both toward Sangje and toward other beings is a recurring theme throughout *The Canonical Scripture*. Among the various narratives, the one presented in the chapter "Prophetic Elucidations" particularly underscores the reward bestowed upon those who faithfully embody this virtue:

> Sangje said, "Take a look at the example of how a man who had worked as a servant for ten years to attain the arts of immortality was elevated to Heaven due to his sincerity. The man tried to find a teacher in order to learn the arts of immortality, and in the end, he found one. The teacher asked him to show his sincerity first before teaching him. The man worked his fingers to the bone farming the teacher´s field for ten years. In the end, the teacher took the servant to a pond and said, 'Climb up the willow branch extending onto the water and then jump into the water, and you will become well-versed with the arts.' The servant trusted him and climbed up the tree branch to jump into the water. At that moment, auspicious, colorful clouds gathered as celestial music sounded, and a splendid palanquin took him up to Heaven" (*Prophetic Elucidations* 83).

All of the aforementioned narratives clearly articulate the moral principles that guide the daily lives of Daesoon followers. Moreover, by invoking the distant mythical past and the supernatural realm, these narratives lend authority and legitimacy to the moral values they convey, thereby reinforcing the continuity and strength of the tradition. However, the narrative of Yao and Shun further also implies that, throughout history, none of the major East Asian traditions present in Korea—whether Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, or shamanism—have offered a comprehensive solution to humanity's fundamental problems. Within Daesoon Thought, it is Sangje who transcends all other deities, sages, and their teachings, assuming the role of ultimate guide and instructor in the restoration of cosmic order—a status clearly illustrated by the following narratives:

> When Sangje stayed in the Ninth Heaven, divine sages, buddhas, and bodhisattvas gathered and petitioned Sangje, the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven, that Heaven and Earth in this state of calamities cannot be rectified by anyone other than Sangje. Thus, Sangje descended to the Tower of Heavenly Revelation in the Kingdom of the Great Law (Daebeopguk 大法國) in the West, and examined the

> Three Realms. He went on the Great Itineration (Daesoon 大巡) throughout the whole world and at last He reached this land in the East. And for 30 years, He spiritually entered the golden icon of Maitreya at Golden Mountain Temple (Geumsan-sa) of the Mount Mother (Moak-san). He caused Choi Suwun (Choe Je-u) to establish the great Dao by giving him the heavenly mandate and power of divine law. However, in the Gapja Year (1864), He withdrew the mandate and the power and decided to descend into the world Himself in the Shinmi Year (1871) (*Prophetic Elucidations* 1).[7]

> Sangje said to Kim Hyeong-Ryeol, "In the Former World, as all creations were ruled by the principle of mutual contention (*sanggeuk* 相克), grievances and grudges have been accumulating, condensing, and filling up the Three Realms. Heaven and Earth, losing the constant Dao, are overwhelmed with all kinds of disasters and calamities, and the world has fallen into wretchedness. To save all the people in the world, I will resolve the grievances and grudges accumulated from time immemorial by recalibrating the Degree Number of Heaven and Erath, harmonizing divine beings, and establishing the Later World's paradisical land of immortals which will be based on the principle of mutual beneficence (*sangsaeng* 相生). The grievances must be resolved by the Dao of gods in every small and large matter. If first I solidify and harmonize Degree Numbers, then human affairs shall naturally unfold in accordance with that action. This is indeed the Reordering Works of the Three Realms" (*Reordering Works* 1:3).

Sangje is believed to have descended to the human realm to deliver humanity from its profound misery by undertaking the monumental task of the Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth (*cheonji gongsa* 天地公事). This process, rooted in the resolution of grievances, is destined to culminate in the establishment of an earthly paradise. It is, therefore, no coincidence that this soteriological event is situated within a specific historical moment—the chaotic twilight of the Joseon Dynasty.

The end of 19th and beginning of 20th century in Korea was a period of acute crisis, marked by internal corruption, social decay, and the aggressive geopolitical intrusion of Western superpowers and imperial Japan, creating a desperate social climate in which people longed for salvation. It was also a time when traditional belief systems and "old ideas" no longer sufficed to address the sociological and psychological needs of many individuals.[8] Consequently, there emerged a demand for new mythologies, along with new cultural heroes and supernatural figures capable of fulfilling those needs. Within this historical and cultural context, new living myths were created and subsequently transmitted through both doctrinal teachings, moral conduct and the main focus of the next chapter, ritual practices.

Reinterpreting the Ritual

Another expression of sincerity and veneration toward Sangje, as well as other deities and ancestral spirits, are sacrificial rituals dedicated to them, such as *chiseong* (致誠)[9] and *jesa* (祭祀). Ancestor worship has a very long tradition in Korea, and long before the introduction of Confucianism to the country, it played a very important role in the religious life of the people of the peninsula. However, it was during the Joseon Dynasty (朝鮮, 1392–1910), which adopted Neo-Confucianism as its state ideology,[10] that based on Zhu Xi's (朱熹, 1130–1200) *Family Rites* (*Jiali* 家禮), rituals honoring ancestors became one of the foundations of the social order. This order was conceptualized as a family and governed by principles of propriety. Today, ancestral rites continue to play a vital role in Korean society.

Traditionally, various types of ancestral rites were practiced in Korea. In the old times some of them were performed not only for the deceased ancestors, but according to Confucian teachings also to the highest god—Heaven. Nowadays, some are held to commemorate deceased family members on their death anniversaries, known as *gijesa* (忌祭祀), while others, such as *jeolsa* (節祀), also referred to as *charye* (茶禮), are seasonal rites observed according to the agricultural calendar or traditional holidays. Although these rites may differ slightly in terms of their ritual sequence, the offerings presented, and whether a pre-composed ritual text addressed to the ancestor is recited, they all share a common feature: the consumption of the ritual food at the conclusion of the ceremony, a practice known as *eumbok* (飮福) (Sin 2010).

In accordance with Confucian tradition, Koreans consume the ritual food which has been sanctified by their ancestors at the conclusion of the ceremony, thereby symbolically internalizing the ancestors' blessings. Later, sacrificial food is also shared with other family members and, in smaller villages, with neighbors, reinforcing social bonds and communal participation in the ritual (Sin 2010). However, one of the stories in *The Canonical Scripture,* which refers to ancestral rituals, teaches a different order for the consumption of ritual foods:

> Sangje redefined for His disciples the seasonal rituals for ancestors. On a seasonal holiday, the following event occurred: Kim Hyeong-Ryeol prepared for his ancestral ritual. Following Sangje's order, he brought Him the food for the ritual. Sangje shared it with many disciples and said, "This is none other than a seasonal ancestral ritual." And Cha Gyeong-Seok, who prepared for his father's memorial ritual, also shared food with His disciples. Sangje explained to the disciples, "This is an ancestral ritual." From then, Hyeong-Ryeol and Gyeong-Seok offered Sangje food at every seasonal holiday and ancestral ritual (*Progress of the Order* 1:45).

This account clearly demonstrates that Sangje and his disciples did not adhere to the traditional sequence of ancestral rituals, consuming the offering food even before the

ceremony had commenced. Sangje further instructed his disciples that henceforth they should conduct the ancestral rites in this manner. According to the narrative, this practice ultimately resulted in a situation in which ceremonial food was offered to Sangje during every seasonal festival and ancestral rite. As Sin Seongmi (2010) has noted, this is because, within Daesoon Thought, Sangje is understood as "the Heaven"—the supreme deity above all others and the creator—for whom, in the Confucian tradition, the *jesa* ritual was originally conducted. In this regard, he is to be presented with ceremonial offerings prior to all other spirits. The narrative thus functions not merely as a justification for the associated ritual practice, but also as a reaffirmation of the doctrinal belief in Kang Jeungsan as the incarnate manifestation of the supreme heavenly deity, Sangje, who transcends all other divine beings. This narrative further relates to another story cited below, which may be interpreted as a mythological foundation for one of the most significant sacrificial rituals in the Daesoon Jinrihoe tradition, known as *chiseong*.

> While Sangje was staying at Cha Gyeong-Seok's house, the disciples came to have an audience with Him. At this place, Sangje drew the shape of a person on an entire sheet of paper, posted it on the wall, and located the offerings as if He had performed an ancestral rite. Sangje ordered them, "Bow deeply four times towards the picture, while moving as though you are grasping the authority of Heaven and receiving the energy of earth. While doing so, pray in your heart that your wishes may be granted." After the disciples did as Sangje had ordered, He stood in the front of the offerings and concluded the ceremony. He then asked, "To whom did you pray regarding your wishes?" One of the disciples replied, "I prayed to You inwardly." Sangje said with a smile, "I received a memorial ritual while alive. It shall be influential from now on. The mats made of cotton wool grass among the mats here are clean" (*Progress of the Order* 1:37).

This myth recounts the story of Sangje and his disciples performing an ancestral offering before a sheet of paper bearing a portrait drawn by Sangje himself. Of particular significance, however, is the form of prayer that Sangje instructed his disciples to carry out. The type of obeisance depicted in the aforementioned story—in which practitioners symbolically grasp the authority of Heaven from above and receive the vital energy of Earth from below (*sangakcheongwon haseupjigi* 上握天權 下襲地氣) while bowing to the deity—corresponds, within the Daesoon tradition, to a form of ritual prostration known as *beopbae* (法拜). In contemporary practice, this type of obeisance is performed by Daesoon adherents exclusively toward the Supreme Deity, Sangje, during temple prayers or the *chiseong* sacrificial rites[11] (Pak 2020).

As Gernot Prunner (1976, 18) has noted, *beopbae* symbolically embodies the doctrine of Daesoon Jinrihoe through the movements of the human body, in which the unification (*dotong* 道通) of the three fundamental principles—Heaven, Earth, and Humanity—is realized.[12] From the perspective of the present study, however, what is more significant

is that Sangje not only instructed his disciples in the "proper" manner of performing sacrificial offerings to Heaven and to the ancestors, but also imparted the most essential form of ritual obeisance, namely *beopbae* (Pak 2020). This, in turn, not only legitimizes the ritual practice itself but also reinforces the belief that its origin lies in a transcendent or divine authority.

A historical event cannot serve as a source of religious inspiration until it has been mythologized. A myth, by its very nature, cannot remain a singular occurrence; it must be liberated from its original temporal context and integrated into the lived experience of contemporary believers in order to sustain its influence (Armstrong 2021, 123–124). In the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the historical event was brought to life with the *chiseong* ritual,[13] and became a "living reality" that is ever-present in the lives of Daesoon Jinrihoe believers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how both ancient and more recent myths may be invoked and employed by Korean religious practitioners, in this case the followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe, to convey enduring moral principles that continue to shape human ethical life today. At the same time, it has illustrated how these mythological narratives can be instrumental in the creation, transmission, and articulation of new ideas, particularly when they are connected not only to the distant past but also to supernatural events or beings, thereby strengthening the religious tradition and enhancing their persuasive power.

Through the analytical framework of Bronisław Malinowski's functional theory of myth, the mythology found in *The Canonical Scripture* reveals itself as a "living reality" that not only preserves traditional values but also fulfills practical and moral functions within the Daesoon community. Myth, in this context, serves as a dynamic force that guides ethical conduct, legitimizes ritual practice, and sustains the cohesion of the religious and moral order. The teachings of Sangje—embodied in the narratives of grievance resolution, sincerity, and moral cultivation—operate as pragmatic charters for everyday life, exemplifying how myth fulfills a social and psychological necessity rather than existing as mere symbolic narrative.

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of traditional rituals such as *jesa* and *chiseong* underscores how Daesoon Jinrihoe reconfigures established cultural forms to articulate a renewed spiritual vision of ancestral worship. By situating these rituals within a mythological framework that centers on Sangje as the supreme deity, the movement revitalizes ancestral customs while infusing them with new theological meaning. In this way, historical events are mythologized and integrated into lived religious practice, transforming myth into an experiential and enduring dimension of faith.

In sum, *The Canonical Scripture* exemplifies how myth functions as a rational

instrument within religious life – a means of explaining human experience, moral order, and cosmic harmony. Daesoon Jinrihoe's mythology demonstrates continuity with the ethical and spiritual ideals of the Axial Age while adapting them to modern contexts, offering followers not only metaphysical insight but also moral orientation and social cohesion. Thus, myth in Daesoon Thought is neither irrational nor obsolete; rather, it represents a rational, functional, and indispensable element of human culture, bridging the ancient and the contemporary in the continual quest for meaning, virtue, and order in the world.

Conflict of Interest

Dominik Rutana has been a member of Editorial Board since July 2024 but had no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] The term "Axial Age" was first proposed by a German philosopher Karl Jaspers in his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte (The Origin and Goal of History)* published in 1949. According to Jaspers, the period between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC proved to be a turning point in the spiritual development of humanity. The transformations that occurred during the Axial Age exerted a profound influence on the evolution of religion, shaping it into the form we recognize today. It was also the time in which some of the most prominent religious and philosophical systems of Asia – Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, as well as monotheism in the Middle East, and Greek rationalism – emerged. See, Jaspers (1965).

[2] Daesoon Jinrihoe was officially established in 1969 by Wudang Park Hangyeong (牛堂 朴漢慶; 1917–1996).

[3] See Kim (2012), Rutana (2021), Walraven (2002).

[4] The five precepts are: 1. Do not deceive yourself, 2. Practice virtuous speech, 3. Do not provoke *cheok*, 4. Do not disregard the beneficence bestowed upon you, 5. Promote the betterment of others (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020b, 37–39).

[5] Traditionally, Korean people believed that if a person died while harboring a deep grudge or unresolved grievance (*wonhan* 怨恨) toward the living, their spirit would not depart peacefully. Instead, they transform into vengeful, wandering ghosts. Because they are unable to cross over to the otherworld, they remain trapped in the earthly realm and inflict misfortune and disaster upon the living, including their own relatives.

[6] Sincerity is one of the "Three Fundamental Attitudes" in Daesoon Thought. The other two are respectfulness and faithfulness (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2020b, 30-31).

[7] Another version of the narrative, recorded in *The Canonical Scripture*, chapter *Progress of the Order* 1:9, emphasizes the rationale for Sangje's withdrawal of "the mandate" from Choe Je-u (崔濟愚, 1824-1864) – a religious leader and a founder of Eastern Learning (*Donghak* 東學). According to this account, Choe's limitation lay in his inability to transcend the framework of Confucianism and to convey the "true meaning of the Great Dao."

[8] As Lee Gyungwon has already pointed out: "The dominant religions of the late Joseon period could not satisfy the basic religious need of the Korean masses or give sufficient meaning to peoples' live at the

time. The traditional religions of late Joseon were not prepared to digest and respond to the sunned cultural shock, the mature social consciousness of the Korean masses, and the people's desire to actively engage in a changing world." (Lee 2016, 160-161).

[9] Choe Gil-seong (n.d) defines *chiseong* as the ritual act of offering earnest prayer and sincerity toward a specific object of worship.

[10] Scholars of the Joseon period, influenced by the concept of the "Confucian transformation of Korea" presented by Martina Deuchler in her book in 1992, titled *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*, long adhered to the view that the Joseon society had undergone a total transformation under the Neo-Confucian state ideology. Since then, this concept has been widely adopted, particularly within Korean studies in the West. However, in her 2007 article "Is 'Confucianization of Korea' a valid concept of analysis?", Deuchler herself criticized the concept as unambiguous, self-evident fact. Through continued research, she reached the conclusion that Joseon society cannot be viewed as a completely "Confucianized". She argued that such a notion is incorrect, particularly when viewed from the dimension of the relationship between Confucian thought, society, and rituals. In other words, the changes that occurred at that time cannot be seen as having taken place solely in order to put into practice Confucian ideology. Furthermore, regarding certain changes, their causes also cannot be attributed simply to this ideology. According to Deuchler, there were other practical aspects to the social changes occurring at the time, and these must be taken into consideration. See Deuchler 2007. Regarding this point, Walraven, who studied the role of popular religion in Joseon's Confucian society, argued that among the reasons Neo-Confucian scholars rejected many aspects of Korean traditional culture, i.e., *musok* (shamanism) and *mudang* (shamans), practical aspects such as the proper order of society, the maintenance of social hierarchy, and ritual obligations according to social class were paramount (Walraven 1999, 170).

[11] For the full description of *chiseong* ritual in English, see Prunner 1976.

[12] "Thus, unification of the three separate principles heaven, earth and man is symbolically achieved in the Pŏpbae by rising both hands towards heaven as if pulling it down, then lowering them to the ground as if picking up earth and, finally, uniting them in front of one's chest as if taking possession of the powers of heaven and earth for man which, incidentally, is the essential meaning of tot'ong." (Prunner 1976, 18).

[13] The ritual itself was systematized by Doju Jo Cheolje (道主 趙哲濟; 1895–1958).

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