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Comparative and Historical Analysis of Early Donghak: Cross-Religious Dialogue between Confucianism and Catholicism in 19th-Century Korea

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to characterize early Donghak thought as the fusion of two horizons, one Confucian and the other Catholic. In particular, the study divided the Donghak founder Su-un Choe Je-u's view of divinity into three stages, and showed how the evolution of his thought through these stages can be explained as the product of a dialogue between the Confucian monist tradition based on *qi* or vital energy and the Catholic dualist tradition based on Thomistic scholasticism. The study adopted a comparative and historical methodology, whereby comparison was limited to similarities and differences between Su-un's works and sources in the Confucian or Catholic tradition that we can reasonably assume to have been available to Su-un. It was found that Su-un's thought in the early stage was marked by theistic features similar to the scholastic view of God, and that in the middle stage Su-un sought to accommodate this theism within a pantheistic framework based on the Confucian monist tradition. For convenience' sake, this theism-within-pantheism can be referred to as Su-un's "panentheism". It is suggested that the creative tension within this panentheism motivated Su-un to introduce innovations in his thought. First, in the middle stage, Su-un rejected the monism of *li* or pattern that was prevalent in the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy of his day, reverting to the older tradition of *qi*-monism. Second, in the late stage of his thought, he appears to have rehabilitated *li* as intelligent pattern that is the source of all signs of intelligence in the natural and moral order. As for the value of the approach adopted in this study, it enables us to make better sense of obscure details in Su-un's works by placing them in their proper historical context, as evinced by the reading of Su-un's late stage work "Buryeon Giyeon" presented herein. It is hoped that this approach will be applied more rigorously in future studies to deepen our understanding of the intellectual history of Donghak and Cheondogyo, along with various other new religions that emerged in Korea's modern history.

Keywords: Korean philosophy; Donghak (Eastern Learning); Cheondogyo; Choe Je-u (Su-un); Confucianism; Catholicism; panentheism

1. Introduction

In the Joseon Dynasty of Korea, the mid-19th century was marked by widespread poverty and misery among the people except for a privileged few. This was the result of a collapse of the sociopolitical order at the time, involving the arrogation of royal power by in-laws of the king that indulged in cronyism, the weakening of state-controlled infrastructure such as irrigation and granary systems, and the relentless exploitation of the people by rapacious officials. Even Confucian ideology and institutions that had sustained the social cohesion of the Joseon Dynasty had lost the confidence of the people, resulting in a state of anomie. In addition, mounting anxiety and apprehension about

the incursion of Western powers across East Asia deepened the general sense of crisis (Beirne 2009, pp. 15–17; Yoon 2000, p. 5; Young 2014, p. 23).

Against this historical background, Choe Je-u (崔濟愚, pen name Su-un 水雲, 1824–1864)¹ from Gyeongju in the province of Gyeongsang-do founded Donghak (東學, “Eastern Learning”) in 1860, claiming that he had received a revelation from a divine being. There has long been a consensus among scholars that Donghak was an indigenous religion with an ideology strongly opposed to foreign aggression, mainly because the name of Donghak itself is suggestive of its emergence as an ideology of resistance to Catholicism or Western Learning (西學, Seohak)² (Seong 2020, p. 1).³ For example, Su-un declared, “I was born in the East and received the Way (道) in the East. So, it is named ‘Heavenly Way’ (天道), but it is referred to as Donghak because it is in essence a learning”. He also claimed that only Donghak could counter Western aggression, saying, “It stands to reason that the East must overcome the West, and the West is bound to be defeated by the East” (Bae 2003, p. 197). Despite his avowed opposition to Western Learning, however, Su-un was accused of being a follower of Western Learning, that is, a Catholic believer, and executed by the government in 1864 (Yoon 2001, pp. 224–25).

The Joseon government’s reasons for executing Su-un were as follows. First, Su-un and his followers appeared to worship the same God that the Catholics worshipped, using the same name for God that the Catholics used, and therefore they were considered to be Catholic adherents. Second, the government regarded Catholic doctrines and practice as a threat because they challenged the ritual hegemony of the state (Baker 2006, pp. 262–69). Following the papal ruling that ritual sacrifice to ancestors is idol worship,⁴ Korean Catholics refused to perform such sacrifices,⁵ and consequently faced recurrent government persecution from 1785 to 1871 (Finch 2015, pp. 676–77).

From the foregoing, it is evident that Su-un’s view of God was close enough to the Catholic view to be mistaken for the latter. This suggests that there are similarities between Catholicism and Donghak, and that Su-un’s doctrines were likely influenced by Catholic theology. Regarding Catholicism, Su-un himself remarked, “their Way (道) is similar to ours, but their principles (理) are different”.⁶ On the other hand, Su-un also noted the similarity of his doctrines with those of the Confucian tradition in the Donghak text “Sudeokmun” (修德文) included in the *Donggyeong Daejeon* (東經大全): “When one realizes the Way of Confucius, one sees that it is determined by a single principle; when it comes to my Way, it is largely similar to that of Confucius and the differences are minor”.⁷ Accordingly, researchers have noted either the similarities between Catholicism and Donghak, or the similarities between Confucianism and Donghak, drawing conclusions about the influence of Catholicism or Confucianism on Donghak.⁸

¹ Hereinafter referred to as “Su-un”. More generally, this paper will follow the standard practice of referring to well-known Korean thinkers by their pen names.

² For the purpose of this paper, “Western Learning” can be treated as referring to Catholicism, except in contexts where it has different or wider connotations. Catholicism was also called the “Learning of the Heavenly Lord” (天主學, Ch. Tianzhuxue, Kr. Cheonjuhak). It was around the early 18th century that Jesuit missionaries’ first books on Catholicism and Western Learning began to spread among Joseon intellectuals (Chung 2018, p. 1).

³ Ahn (2006) classifies Donghak as emergent Minjung (民衆, “the people’s”) liberation theology. He suggests that Donghak’s success was due in large part to Su-un’s creative fusion of shamanistic religiosity with religious doctrines drawn primarily from Korean Neo-Confucianism, and also from Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity.

⁴ This was the denouement of the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy, a dispute that was waged among Catholic missionaries to China in the 17th and 18th centuries, which embroiled several popes and the Kangxi Emperor as well. The dispute concerned ancestor rituals among other issues, with the Jesuits largely in favor of accommodating such rituals, and the Dominicans and Franciscans largely against. Practice of ancestor rituals among Catholics was definitively banned by Pope Benedict XIV in 1742 (Rule 2009, p. 300).

⁵ Korean Catholics were apprised of the ban on ancestor rituals in 1791 through a letter from Bishop de Gouvea of Beijing (Finch 2015, p. 676).

⁶ “洋學... 道則同也 理則非也” (“Nonhakmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 71; cf. Choe 2007, pp. 70–72).

⁷ “覺來夫子之道則一理之所定也 論其惟我之道則大同而小異也” (“Sudeokmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 134; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 164).

⁸ Studies on the relationship between Donghak and Catholicism or Western Learning can be classified into two types. The first type of study examines the relationship between Donghak and Catholicism from a theological perspective. Examples here are Kim (2003a) and Kwon (2004). The second type of study argues that Catholicism was the first to introduce the

The present study will examine the specific ways in which early Donghak is similar to both Catholicism and Confucianism, with a view to showing that Su-un's doctrines derived from a fruitful dialogue between Catholicism and Confucianism. Historically situated in the Confucian tradition, Su-un likely encountered the Catholic tradition through the catechisms and songs that were used by Korean Catholics. This encounter shaped Su-un's revelatory experience in May 1860, in which a divine personal being ordained him to teach the world, and he asked whether he should teach it through the Western Way.⁹ This strange experience frightened and disconcerted Su-un, and it took him almost one year to internalize it in the form of the doctrine of a vital energy that can become immanent in each and every person, and identical with their inmost being (Seong 2009, pp. 282–84; Kim 2009, pp. 57–59). This process of internalization constituted what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 2004, pp. 305, 370, 390), a hermeneutical process of understanding in which Su-un negotiated the unfamiliar ideas of Catholicism in terms of the familiar language of Confucian tradition.

To exhibit this process of hermeneutic negotiation, the present study will divide Su-un's study into three stages of development and examine how Su-un's view of divinity interacted with his monism of vital energy over time. This study is organized as follows. First, Section 2 spells out the comparative and historical approach that will be used in this study. Namely, the approach restricts comparison of Su-un's thought with those parts of the Catholic and Confucian traditions that we can reasonably expect to have been available to Su-un in mid-19th century Korea. Section 3 situates Su-un's thought within the Confucian tradition of monism based on vital energy. Section 4 provides some background on Catholicism in Korea and compares Su-un's thought with the view of divinity found in the Catholic sources available to Su-un. Finally, Section 5 discusses the results of the comparisons in earlier sections in terms of the creative tension between the Catholic view of divinity and the Confucian monism of vital energy. We will see how Su-un understood and resolved this tension in his late stage essay “Buryeon Giyeon”. The study then concludes with some reflections on the limitations of this paper and the potential value of the approach adopted herein for understanding Donghak and subsequent religious developments in modern Korea.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopts a comparative and historical approach to understanding early Donghak thought, i.e., Su-un's doctrines as they were formulated between 1860 and 1864.¹⁰ To begin with, the present study employs a comparative method. It compares Su-un's thought with both Catholic and Confucian traditions so as to examine the ways in which these traditions shaped Su-un's thought. Early Donghak thought exhibits similarities not just with Catholicism or Confucianism, but also with Daoist, Buddhist, and shamanistic traditions in Korea.¹¹ Therefore, similarities between early Donghak and any given tradition known to Su-un can be assessed adequately only if they are appraised against the background

idea of monotheism into the religious landscape of Korea, and that the monotheistic elements in Donghak are due to this influence. Notable studies here are Baker (2002), Baker (2006), and Moon (2017). On the relationship between Donghak and Confucianism, Shin (1979), Park (2000), Kim (2002), Lim (2003), and Lee (2007) compare Confucian ideas with early Donghak doctrines. The influence of Confucianism on Donghak populism and egalitarianism is explored in Cho (1990) and Setton (2000).

⁹ “西道以教人乎?” In reply to this question, the supernatural being answered “No (不然)”. See “Podeokmun” (布德文) in the *Donggyeong Daejeon* (Choe 1996a, p. 25; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 158).

¹⁰ Subsequent developments in Donghak in the latter half of the 19th and its continued growth as Cheondogyo (天道教, “Religion of the Heavenly Way”) in the 20th century fall outside the scope of this paper.

¹¹ The elements in Su-un's thought that may be attributed to Buddhist, Daoist, and shamanistic influences are as follows. First, regarding Buddhist influence, the Korean monk Wonhyo (元曉, pp. 617–86) in his *Commentary on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (大乘起信論疏) wrote of “not being-so's great being-so (不然之大然)”, which may have influenced Su-un's essay “Buryeon Giyeon” (不然其然, “It Is Not So and It Is So”). Of course, we cannot conclude that Su-un was influenced by Wonhyo on the basis of this phrase alone, but it can be surmised that Su-un was familiar with Buddhist thought. Second, regarding Daoist influence, Su-un's writings in the *Donggyeong Daejeon* and the *Yongdam Yusa* contain references to popular Daoist practices such as the use of spiritual talismans (靈符) and incantations (呪文), along with emphasis on “long life” (長生) and talk of “celestial immortals” (神仙) and the “elixir of immortality” (不死藥) that bear the imprint of popular Daoism (Kim 2012, pp. 50–51). Lastly, regarding shamanistic influence, the trembling in his entire body that Su-un experienced just

of all the other similarities that early Donghak thought bears to the other traditions. Given the daunting nature of such a wide-ranging comparison, however, the present study will limit itself to a three-way comparison of early Donghak thought with Catholicism and Confucianism. However, this is not meant to imply that Buddhist, Daoist, and shamanistic influences are not significant. It only means that the focus of this paper will be on the influence of Catholicism and Confucianism upon Su-un's thought, which Su-un himself recognized and addressed in his writings. In particular, the focus will be on how Catholicism and Confucianism influenced Su-un's view of divinity, and we will proceed by first locating Su-un's thought within the Confucian tradition, and then comparing Su-un's thought with the Catholic tradition.

More importantly, the point of comparing early Donghak with Confucian and Catholic traditions in this study is to show that these other traditions have influenced early Donghak thought by coming into dialogue with one another in Su-un's historically-effected consciousness.¹² There are two issues here that require explanation. First, how do we operationalize the idea of Confucian and Catholic traditions coming into dialogue within Su-un's consciousness in terms of the similarities and differences between them? The answer is this. The similarities and differences between Catholicism and Confucianism constitute the points of agreement and disagreement between them. The points of agreement would have reinforced one another and become stable fixtures in Donghak thought. The points of disagreement, coexisting in Su-un's thought, would have played off of one another in a "creative tension"¹³ that Su-un and his successors would have sought to resolve in one direction or another, resulting in an evolution of Donghak thought over time.

Second, how do we derive historical influence, which is a causal notion, from a comparison of similarities and differences? Just as correlation is not causation, so similarity need not imply historical influence. Therefore, we shall distinguish between ahistorical similarity and historically mediated similarity and rely on historically mediated similarities rather than ahistorical ones to argue for historical influence.

To illustrate the distinction between ahistorical similarity and historically mediated similarity, consider the claim that Su-un's idea of the presence of the divine spirit within us (内有神靈) is similar to the Christian idea of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, i.e., the "Pauline idea of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19) (Moon 2017, p. 227). By itself, this is an observation of ahistorical similarity, because it is not based on any consideration of whether sources containing this Pauline idea were available to Su-un or not. However, if the Pauline idea is found in sources that were available to Su-un, then the observed similarity between the Pauline idea and Su-un's idea becomes a historically mediated similarity.

We cannot know for sure which Catholic sources were actually consulted by Su-un and influenced his thought. Nevertheless, we can make a reasonable guess on the basis of the most influential sources of Catholicism that were available in Korea by the mid-19th century. These include Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) *Tianzhu Shiyi* (天主實義, *The True Meaning of the Heavenly Lord*) written in Classical Chinese prose; Jeong Yakjong's (1760–1501) *Jugyo Yoji* (主教要旨, *The Essentials of the Lord's Teaching*) written in vernacular Korean prose; and *Sahyangga* (思鄉歌, *Song of Longing for Home*) composed in vernacular Korean verse form,¹⁴ which is often attributed to Choe Yanggeop (1821–1861). The first two of these are catechisms, while the last adapts the content of Catholic catechisms to the vernacular genre of *gasa*

before his encounter with divinity bears resemblance to the phenomenon of spirit possession in shamans, and the use of talismans is also similar to shamanistic practice (Hwang 2015, p. 197).

¹² Gadamer (2004) uses the term "historically-effected consciousness" ambiguously to mean both "the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined" (p. xxx). Here, I use it in the first of these two senses.

¹³ I borrow this term from Seong (2017), who uses it to mean a mismatch between experience and interpretive framework (p. 290). Seong argues that the mismatch between Su-un's experience of a higher personal being in 1860 and the East Asian religious framework that he used to interpret his experiences led to his creative development of early Donghak thought.

¹⁴ The various versions of *Sahyangga* fall into two types, the short versions consisting of roughly 400 lines, and the long versions consisting of roughly 700 to 800 lines. The long versions exhibit sharper conflict with Confucian critics of Catholicism,

(歌辭) or verses that were chanted or sung.¹⁵ As to the nature and purpose of these works, the *Tianzhu Shiyi* was written with the aim of persuading Confucian literati to accept Christian doctrines on the basis of reason rather than faith,¹⁶ and therefore employs scholastic philosophy with little mention of the specific contents of the Christian faith as revealed in the Bible. The *Jugyo Yoji* is designed to instruct women, children, and commoners in the Christian faith, and is divided into two parts, the first part covering those aspects of Christianity that can be grasped by reason, and the second part summarizing revealed contents of the Bible such as the creation of the world, original sin, and the life and salvific work of Jesus Christ (Torrey 2012, pp. 136–37). Lastly, the *Sahyangga* was composed in the midst of severe government persecution of Catholics during the mid-19th century when Su-un was also active, and it emphasizes the otherworldly orientation of the Christian faith, identifying heaven as one's original and eternal home, and life in this world as a brief sojourn in a “vale of tears” (Torrey 2012, p. 138).

If we consider these three Catholic sources in relation to the Pauline idea of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us, we find that this idea is absent in them, and therefore that Su-un was probably not influenced by the Pauline idea in formulating his own idea of the divine spirit that is immanent in us. The *Tianzhu Shiyi* does not mention the doctrine of Trinity or the Holy Spirit at all. The *Jugyo Yoji* explains the doctrine of Trinity in Thomist terms, according to which the Holy Spirit is the love that proceeds from the Father and the Son (Jeong 1998, pp. 94–95; Emery 2012). This Thomist understanding of the Holy Spirit does not correspond in any obvious way to Su-un's understanding of the immanence of divinity. Lastly, the *Sahyangga* mentions the Holy Spirit descending (降臨) in the form of fire (Acts 2:3–4) and shining with a divine light (神). This description of the descent of the Holy Spirit does bear some resemblance to the idea of the “great descent” (大降) of “ultimate energy” (至氣) in Su-un's incantation for the descent of the spirit (降靈呪文), though it does not suggest the kind of intimate connection between the Holy Spirit and human beings conveyed by the Pauline idea.

Consideration of these Catholic sources suggests that if Su-un had any access to Christian ideas in the Bible, it was only through the scholastic tradition that the Jesuit missionaries transmitted in China. In the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, Ricci criticizes the monistic tendency of Confucianism according to which human beings form one body with everything in the universe including God, and thus harbor the divinity of God within their own hearts. Ricci regards this as sinful hubris (Ricci 2016, paras. 207–8), and he emphasizes the dualistic nature of the relationship between divinity and human beings. Also highlighted is the duality of the eternal soul and the mortal body, and consequently the welfare of the soul in the afterlife. This otherworldly orientation becomes more pronounced in the *Sahyangga*, given the background of persecution in which it was composed. Su-un reacted against the dualism and otherworldly orientation of these Catholic texts by embracing the monism that prevailed in Confucianism.

The monistic worldview in Confucianism is based on the concepts of *qi* (氣, Kr. *gi*, “vital energy”) or *li* (理, “pattern”). The Cheng–Zhu school, which was accepted as the orthodox school of Neo-Confucianism by most of the Korean literati in the Joseon Dynasty, upheld a *li*-based monism, according to which everything in the world is patterned on and generated from a single ultimate

especially over the issue of ancestor rituals (Kim 2003b). Because the long versions appear to contain later accretions, the present paper will rely on the short version of *Sahyangga* given in Ji (2010).

¹⁵ The *gasa* genre became popular among women and commoners by the 18th century, and it was especially prevalent in the southeastern region of Korea where Su-un was based (Beirne 2009, pp. 7–8).

¹⁶ Ricci himself describes the *Tianzhu Shiyi* in the following way:

This catechism does not treat all of the mysteries of our holy faith ... but only of certain principles, especially such as can be proved and understood with the light of reason. Thus it can be of service to both Christians and to non-Christians and can be understood in ... remote regions ... , preparing the way for those other mysteries that depend upon faith and revealed wisdom.

(Ricci 2016, p. 23).

principle called the Supreme Ultimate (太極). Present in each and every thing, the Supreme Ultimate is manifested as various different principles in multifarious things according as their endowment of *qi* is coarse or refined, turbid, or clear (Yi 1988, pp. 37–50; Lee 2007, pp. 294–96). We may refer to this as a qualified monism of *li* and *qi*. By contrast, it has been noted that Su-un rarely mentioned *li* as the metaphysical counterpart of *qi* (Kim 2002, p. 40, n. 23), and that he held a *qi*-based form of monism (Lee 2014, pp. 234–35). This is a significant aspect of Su-un's thought, and one that separates his thought from that of his successor Choe Sihyeong (崔時亨, pen name Haewol 海月, 1827–1898), the second Donghak leader. While Su-un studiously avoided reference to *li* as the metaphysical counterpart of *qi*, Haewol reverted to the Neo-Confucian usage (Setton 2000, p. 138).¹⁷

Here, we should ask which Confucian sources possibly influenced Su-un's *qi*-based monism. Nothing is known for certain about Su-un's early education, but we do know that his father Choe Ok (崔沃, 1762–1840) was a well-known scholar within the Toegye (退溪) school of Neo-Confucianism. Su-un's father arranged for his son to learn Korean and then Chinese characters from an early age (Beirne 2009, p. 20), and this is likely to have occurred at local village school (書堂, Kr. *seodang*),¹⁸ where students were taught the basic Confucian curriculum culminating in the Four Books and the Three Classics (四書三經).¹⁹ The Four Books are the *Analekts* (論語, Ch. *Lunyu*, Kr. *Noneo*), the *Mencius* (孟子, Ch. *Mengzi*, Kr. *Maengja*), the *Great Learning* (大學, Ch. *Daxue*, Kr. *Daehak*), and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸, Ch. *Zhongyong*, Kr. *Jungyong*), which are associated with the early Confucianism of Confucius (孔子); his grandson Zisi (子思); and Mencius (孟子), who is said to have studied under Zisi. The Three Classics are the *Classic of Documents* (書經, Ch. *Shujing*, Kr. *Seogyaeong*), the *Classic of Poetry* (詩經, Ch. *Shijing*, Kr. *Sigyaeong*), and the *Classic of Changes* (易經, Ch. *Yijing*, Kr. *Yeokgyeong*), the earliest portions of which date back to early Zhou and represent a proto-Confucian tradition that venerated a divine personal being named Shangdi (上帝, “Lord on High”) or Tian (天, “Heaven”) as the source of natural and moral order. These were the texts that late Joseon Dynasty Silhak (實學, “Practical Learning”) scholars, disillusioned with the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy, turned to under the influence of Catholic texts such as Ricci's *Tianzhu Shiyi* (Baker 1983, pp. 318–319). Those who were receptive to Catholic ideas, such as Yi Ik (李穡, 1681–1763) and Jeong Yagyong (丁若鏞, 1762–1836), based their theistic version of Confucianism on the idea of Shangdi found in the ancient Classics (Baker 1983, pp. 329–32). Even Sin Hudam (愼後聘, 1702–1761), who was critical of Catholic doctrines, exhibited a preference for early Confucianism over that of the Cheng–Zhu school (Jin 2013, pp. 21–22), and this may in part be due to the influence of *Tianzhu Shiyi* that argued for a return to the original Confucianism of the ancient Classics (Ricci 2016, p. 29). Su-un, in rejecting the qualified monism of *li* and *qi* found in Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism, likewise appears to be harking back to earlier

¹⁷ This is also noted by Park (2000), p. 177. For example, Haewol writes in the “Cheonji Igi” (天地理氣) chapter of *Haewol Sinsa Beopseol*:

化生天理 運動天氣 以理化生 以氣動止則 先理後氣 亦是當然 合言鬼神氣運造化都是一氣也 . . . 氣則理也 何必分而二之 氣者造化之元體根本也 理者造化之玄妙也 氣生理 理生氣 成天地之數 化萬物之理 . . .

Heaven's *li* (天理) is that which generates through transformation, and Heaven's *qi* (天氣) is that which moves . . . Properly speaking, it is indeed the case that *li* (理) is prior and *qi* (氣) is posterior, but they can be combined to say that the ghostly and spiritual (鬼神), the vital energy (氣運), and creative transformation (造化) are all one *qi* . . . *Qi* is *li*, why must they be separated and regarded as two? *Qi* is the original substance and basis of creative transformation, and *li* is the abstruse mysteriousness of creative transformation. *Qi* gives birth to *li*, and *li* gives birth to *qi*, forming the division of heaven and earth, and transforming into the individual *li* of all things in the universe . . .

¹⁸ By the late Joseon Dynasty period, government support for traditional village schools decreased, and they were increasingly run by local clans. There were also village schools that provided education for people of lower classes, commoners, and children of concubines and remarried widows (Sim 2005, p. 1). Although Su-un's father was from an aristocratic family, Su-un's mother was a remarried widow, and thus Su-un was not eligible for civil service examinations according to the law code of the Joseon Dynasty (Beirne 2009, p. 20).

¹⁹ There are actually Five Classics (五經), but in the curriculum used in the traditional village schools of Korea, this was reduced to Three Classics (Rutt 1960, pp. 29, 40).

Confucianism, specifically to the Mencian tradition represented by the *Mencius* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, which are the main sources of the doctrine of unity of Heaven and human beings. In particular, *Mencius* 2A:2 outlines the *qi*-based cultivational regimen for achieving union with the Way that may have influenced Su-un's *qi*-based monism.

It is also possible that Su-un was educated by his own father in the Neo-Confucian tradition beginning with Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian thinkers (Kim 2008, p. 133). Because Choe Ok belonged to the Toegye school, the basic text that could have been used here is the *Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning* (聖學十圖, Kr. *Seonghak Sipdo*), the most popular work by Yi Hwang (李滉, pen name Toegye 退溪, 1501–1570) that went through 29 printings during the Joseon Dynasty (Yi 1988, p. 24). The first two diagrams in this work introduce, respectively, the monistic cosmology of Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤) and the monistic ethics of Zhang Zai's (張載). Because their doctrines are undergirded by *qi*-monism and predate the introduction of qualified *li*-*qi*-monism by Cheng Yi (程頤) and Zhu Xi (朱熹), these will also be discussed as possible Confucian sources of Su-un's *qi*-based monism. It should, however, be noted that extracting the *qi*-based monism from the works of these two early Neo-Confucian philosophers and the *Mencius* is no mean feat, as it requires stripping away from the original texts the accretion of later Neo-Confucian commentaries couched in *li*-*qi* terminology.

Thus far, we have identified the Catholic and Confucian sources that were accessible to Su-un and could have influenced his thought. The present study uses these sources to identify historically mediated similarities between Su-un's thought and Catholic and Confucian traditions. This historical approach is intended to uncover the historically effected nature of early Donghak thought as the fusion of Catholic and Confucian horizons. The approach is meant to exclude comparison of Su-un's thought with the ideas of other religious or philosophical traditions to which Su-un had no access.²⁰ This is not to discount the value of such comparative approaches, whose aim is to bring temporally or geographically removed ideas and traditions into dialogue with Donghak thought. Rather, it is to emphasize, somewhat at odds with our use of Gadamer's hermeneutical terminology,²¹ that there is a truth of the matter about how Su-un's thought was effected by the traditions in which he was situated or that he encountered, independently of our own understanding of Su-un's thought. Even if this historical truth is forever inaccessible to our own historically conditioned understanding, it can nevertheless guide our inquiry as a regulative idea (Kant 1998, p. A644).

One implication of this historical approach is to avoid reading subsequent developments in Donghak doctrines back into Su-un's thought, unless those developments are prefigured in the evolution of Su-un's own ideas. It has been observed in several studies that Donghak thought evolved over time (Setton 2000, pp. 132–33; Kim 2011, p. 50). For instance, it is said that Su-un's own view of divinity has two poles, the supreme being with personal attributes that he encountered in his revelatory experience as the "transcendent" pole, and the ultimate energy that is said to descend into each person as the "immanent" pole, with both poles being identical in some sense with one another (Lee 2014, p. 217). This view is referred to as panentheism (Seong 2009, p. 289), which seeks to overcome the polarization between theism that emphasizes the transcendence of ultimate being and pantheism that stresses the immanence of ultimate being (Kim 1999, p. 35). By contrast, Su-un's successor Choe Sihyeong (崔時亨, pen name Haewol 海月, 1827–1898), the second Donghak leader, deemphasized

²⁰ Examples of such comparative studies are Seong (2020), which approaches Donghak from the perspective of Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy; Hong (2010), from the Kierkegaardian perspective; Cho (2010), from the Hegelian perspective; Yim (2010), from the Schelerian perspective; Huh (2008), from the Foucauldian perspective; and Kim (1999) and Lee (2014), from the Whiteheadian perspective. The last two studies combine the Whiteheadian approach with panentheism, and in my view this is a fruitful approach that captures the creative tension in early Donghak thought.

²¹ As Kim (1999) rightly observes, "the limits and distortions of hermeneutical understanding cannot be avoided ... these are limitations that not only the present author, but all humans must cope with ..." (p. 25).

the transcendent pole of divinity along with its personal attributes, moving toward immanence and pantheism with his statement that “humans are Heaven” (人是天)²² (Cha 2002, p. 23; Kim 2011, p. 50).

Moreover, several studies have noted that Su-un’s own thinking underwent constant development between 1860 and 1864 (Lim 2003; Beirne 2009; Seong 2009; Kim 2009). Su-un’s encounter with the transcendent personal being in 1860 resembled encounters with God in monotheistic religions, but this was followed by six months of conversation with this being, which ended with Su-un’s realization that the heart of this higher being was identical with his own heart (吾心即汝心) (Kim 2009, p. 57). From this point on, the voice that Su-un had heard outside of him resounded from within his own heart (Seong 2009, pp. 285–286), and after six more months, he was able to formulate the following 21-character incantation for summoning this higher being as an immanent presence within one’s own heart (Kim 2009, p. 57):

至氣今至願爲大降

Ultimate energy (至氣) being here and now, I long for its great descent.

侍天主造化定永世不忘萬事知

Serving/bearing (侍) the Heavenly Lord (天主), the creative transformation of nature (造化) will become settled in me, and by remembering this forever, I shall know all things.

(“Jumun” [呪文], *Donggyeong Daejeon*)²³

In the above incantation, “ultimate energy” refers to the immanent presence of ultimate reality within and all around us, whereas “Heavenly Lord” is the Catholic term used in Chinese and Sino-Korean to refer to the supreme and personal being that is God. Here, we see the Heavenly Lord, the transcendent being that Su-un first encountered in 1860, become immanent in the form of ultimate energy, the vital essence of reality that fills and animates all things. This suggests that the later movement toward immanence in Donghak theology under Su-un’s successor Haewol tracks the same movement in Su-un’s own thought over time. However, the question remains whether the evolution of Su-un’s theology *toward* immanence also implies a move *away* from the transcendence, and the answer to this question will also decide whether Su-un’s thought evolved toward pantheism or remained panentheistic.

A word of caution is needed here on the imprecision of the terms “transcendence” and “immanence”, and consequently “panentheism” itself, as they are used in the literature on the supposed panentheism of Su-un’s thought. For the Catholic scholastic tradition, the transcendence of divinity is salient, and God is transcendent in the sense that God stands outside the world as its efficient and final cause. On the other hand, the scholastic tradition also admits a sense in which divinity is immanent, namely, God as non-physical spiritual being that is omnipresent permeates the entire world and is therefore within and all around us. Likewise, for the Confucian monistic tradition the immanence of divinity is salient, divinity being the refined form of *qi* or the unitary pattern of the Supreme Ultimate that resides in the heart as one’s own inmost being. However, the Confucian tradition also recognizes that this divinity is transcendent in the sense of being something higher than human, the Heaven in oneself that is worthy of reverence and elicits a sense of numinous awe. So, in some sense, both the scholastic tradition and the Confucian monistic tradition agree that divinity has two poles, transcendent and immanent. Where they disagree is that according to the Confucian monistic tradition divinity cannot be transcendent in the sense of being an outside cause of the world,

²² This statement is found in the “Daein Jeopmul” (待人接物) chapter of *Haewol Sinsa Beopseol* (海月神師法說). This is immediately followed by the statement, “Serve humans as you would Heaven” (事人如天). Setton (2000) credits Haewol with bringing out the ethical implications of Su-un’s doctrines (p. 133), so this is one further way in which Donghak thought evolved over time.

²³ In this paper, I provide my own translations for passages quoted from Su-un’s writings. For various other translations of this incantation, see Choe (2007), p. 27; Beirne (2009), pp. 117–18; Kallander (2013), p. 168; and Lee (2014), p. 213.

and according to the scholastic tradition God cannot be immanent in the sense of being identical to one's own deepest self. From this, we may infer two additional senses of transcendence and immanence: transcendence in the sense of being a dualistic other that is not identical to one's own being, and immanence in the sense of being an internal cause of the world.

With respect to the observation that Su-un's theology evolved from transcendence to immanence of divine reality, what will be meant in this study is that it evolved from transcendence understood as causal agency external to the world to immanence understood as causal agency internal to the world, and from transcendence understood as dualistic otherness to immanence understood as identity with oneself.

Another issue with applying the term "panentheism" to Su-un's thought is that it limits the possibilities that were available to Su-un. As indicated by the term itself, pan-en-theism nests pantheism within theism, and thus when we apply the term to Su-un's thought we neglect the possibility that he may have attempted to nest theism within pantheism. As can be seen from the discussion above, the existing literature on the panentheism of Su-un's thought avoids this issue by using the term "panentheism" loosely to refer to the identification of the transcendent and immanent poles. Such usage deviates from that which is found in the general literature on panentheism, where panentheism is characterized roughly as the idea that "the world is contained within the divine, though God is also more than the world" (Clayton 2010, p. 183). In Su-un's context, I believe it would be more helpful to refer to either pantheism-in-theism or theism-in-pantheism, with the "theism" part referring to ideas of divinity that resemble the scholastic ideas found in the Catholic sources available to Su-un, and the "pantheism" part referring to Confucian monistic ideas about divinity that were embraced by Su-un and criticized in those Catholic sources, notably in the *Tianzhu Shiyi*. However, as a concession to the usage that prevails in the literature on Su-un's "panentheism", the present study will use the term to refer to either theism-in-pantheism or pantheism-in-theism that attempts or manages to overcome the polarization between the transcendent and immanent poles of divinity.

The question remains as to whether Su-un moved away from theism in the evolution of his thought. This question will be answered in the concluding section of this paper, but in order to do so, we need to arrange Su-un's writings in chronological order. Moreover, if Su-un's thought evolved over time, the comparison of Su-un's thought with Catholic and Confucian sources must take account of these changes in Su-un's thought. The brief account of the development of Su-un's thought given above indicates that there are at least two stages: the early stage when Su-un externalized God as a transcendent Other, and the middle stage when he also came to internalize God as an immanent presence identical with his inmost being. Below, we sort Su-un's writings into these stages.

There are two sets of writings or compositions by Su-un. The first is his compositions in vernacular Korean *gasa* verse form contained in the *Yongdam Yusa* (龍潭遺詞, *Remnant Verses of Yongdam*), addressing women, children, and commoners with little educational background, like the Catholic song *Sahyangga*. The second is Su-un's writings in classical Chinese prose and poetry contained in the *Donggyeong Daejeon* (東經大全, *The Great Collection of Eastern Scriptures*), which addresses the literati, quite like Ricci's *Tianzhu Shiyi*.²⁴ There is no agreement on the exact dating of Su-un's works contained in these two sources, but we may assign relative dates to some of the representative works in terms of the two stages partly on the basis of Beirne (2009) dating (pp. 9–11) and partly on the similarity of content and terminology:

²⁴ All of Su-un's writings were reportedly destroyed after his execution by the authorities. Fortunately, Su-un's successor Haewol had memorized Su-un's works, and published them as the *Donggyeong Daejeon* and the *Yongdam Yusa* in 1880 and 1881, respectively (Beirne 2009, p. 6).

	Early Stage	Middle Stage
Yongdam Yusa	“Yongdamga” (龍潭歌) “Ansimga” (安心歌)	“Gyohunga” (教訓歌)
		“Dosusa” (道修詞)
		“Gwonhakga” (勸學歌)
		“Mongjung Noso Mundapga” (夢中老少問答歌)
Donggyeong Daejeon	“Podeokmun” (布德文)	“Dodeokga” (道德歌)
		“Jumun” (呪文)
		“Nonhakmun” (論學文) “Sudeokmun” (修德文)

In the table above, the works listed in the early stage precede those listed in the middle stage. The early stage works emphasize God’s transcendent nature, whereas the middle stage works introduce God’s immanent nature. Su-un’s works in the early stage mention Su-un’s encounter with God, but without using the term *qi* (氣) in the sense of spiritual energy that fills the universe and unites him with God. Su-un’s works in the middle stage do use the term *qi* in this sense. Moreover, these middle stage works also make much greater use of Confucian terminology (Lim 2003, pp. 128–32). We can also discern a third stage of Su-un’s thought shortly before Su-un was captured and executed by the authorities. Representative works from this final period include “Tando Yusim Geup” (歎道儒心急) and “Buryeon Giyeon” (不然其然). These late stage works start using the term *li* (理) alongside *qi* (氣) in the sense that these terms are used in Neo-Confucianism, which is a feature that we find also in Haewol’s writings.

3. The Confucian Background of Su-un’s Thought

The present section provides an overview of the Confucian tradition that upheld the thesis of the unity of Heaven and human beings (天人合一) and the thesis that everything in the world forms one body (萬物一體). This tradition was founded on a monism of vital energy (氣, Ch. *qi*, Kr. *gi*) that emerged during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE) in ancient China. Then, during the Song Dynasty period (960–1279), this older form of monism was supplanted by a qualified monism of pattern (理, Ch. *li*, Kr. *li*) and vital energy under the influence of two Neo-Confucian philosophers, Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200), whose school we shall refer to as the Cheng–Zhu school. The Cheng–Zhu school became the orthodox form of Neo-Confucianism in Korea during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). However, Su-un in his early and middle stage works appears to have reverted to the older form of monism based on vital energy. Here, we will briefly trace the development of this monistic tradition, constructing an account of the “Transmission of the Way” (道通, *daotong*) for Su-un’s “Ultimateless Great Way” (無極大道, Ch. *wuji dadao*, Kr. *mugeuk daedo*), similar to how the Cheng–Zhu school provided such an account for their system of thought.

The Warring States Period in ancient China was a time of great intellectual ferment, giving rise to various contending schools of thought and practice such as Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism that offered their own systematic approaches to matters of self-cultivation for the emerging class of *shi* (士) who sought government office, and on matters of governance and bringing order to the chaotic world for rulers of states. By the 4th century BCE, there emerged a shared cosmological and psychophysical framework that can be found in various texts dating from that time, that is, a common discourse on “vital energy” (氣), a term that appears to have been originally associated with vapors of clouds, breath, and the nourishing vapors of boiling rice or grain (Schwartz 1985, pp. 179–80).

According to this shared framework or common discourse, vital energy fills and quickens everything in the universe. In its active form it is known as Yang (陽), and in its passive form as Yin (陰). It is the primordial substance out of which all things condense, and into which they dissolve. Vital energy in its gross form settles to become earth and in its refined form rises to become the sky. Humans are a mixture of the grosser and more refined forms of this vital energy, with the body consisting of the grosser form, and the vitalizing breath and blood that circulate the body being the more refined forms. The purest form of vital energy is called “vitalizing essence” (精, Ch. *jing*, Kr. *jeong*).

jeong), which illumines the sky as the heavenly bodies, circulates between heaven and earth as the ghostly and spiritual (鬼神). The vitalizing essence settles in one's heart as the spirit (神), which, when properly cultivated, enables one to become a sage (聖) who is spiritual and clear-seeing (神明), and can thus perceive all things with clarity (Lau 1970, p. 24; Graham 1989, pp. 100–1).

Much of this cosmological and psychophysical framework is presented in the “Neiye” (內業, “Inward Training”) chapter of the *Guanzi* (管子), a miscellaneous anthology that is associated with the Jixia Academy (稷下學宮) in the state of Qi (齊). Graham (1989) considers “Neiye” to be a fusion of Confucian and proto-Daoist ideas, along with ideas stemming from the ancient shamanistic practice of calling down spirits during sacrifice.²⁵ “Neiye” combines the abovementioned framework with a self-cultivational regimen leading to a meditative state of communion with all things and union with the Way that is at once mystical and moral.

The self-cultivational practice in the “Neiye” involves aligning the body (正形) with the four limbs placed in a firm and fixed posture, and conducting a breathing exercise that circulates one's vital breath until it becomes calm and regular. More importantly, the practice involves cultivating the heart (修心). The heart is made tranquil (靜) by clearing it of all emotional disturbances and unifying one's attention. Then the heart will become a suitable lodging place for vital energy that will naturally settle in it as vitalizing essence (精) or spirit (神), which one must preserve with a reverential attitude (敬). Stored in the heart through this practice, the vitalizing essence becomes a fount of flood-like (浩然) vital energy that circulates through the nine openings of the body and unites one with the Way (道), the macrocosmic vital energy that fills the universe and quickens everything in it. Through this union, one would attain an intuitive knowledge of all things, and it would be as though all things are completely contained in oneself (萬物備存). To round up this account of self-cultivation, it should be noted that the settling of vital energy and its flood-like outpouring cannot be achieved through force (力)—one should not pull or push it (勿引勿推)—but by the inner power (德) that comes from aligning oneself with the Way (道), which spontaneously generates all things and brings them to completion (Roth 1999, pp. 48–97).

Mencius (孟子, active 4th century BCE) served for some time as a Minister in the state of Qi under the reign of King Xuan (齊宣王, 319–310 BCE). King Xuan had restored the Jixia Academy from a state of decline, and it is likely that Mencius came into contact with the scholars that produced the “Neiye” there (Graham 1989, p. 112). The *Mencius* refers to cultivational practice and mystical experience in terms very similar to the “Neiye” (Graham 1989, pp. 103–5, 126). Expressions such as “flood-like” (浩然) vital energy, not pulling at this vital energy to force it to grow, and “all things being complete” (萬物備) in oneself are common to these two texts, and not found in other texts dating from the Warring States Period.

In *Mencius* 2A:2, Mencius says that he is good at nourishing his flood-like vital energy (浩然之氣). A disciple then asks him what this flood-like vital energy is, and Mencius replies:

[It is a] hard thing to speak of. It is the sort of [vital energy] which is utmost in vastness, utmost in firmness. If by uprightness you nourish it and do not interfere with it, it stuffs the space between heaven and earth. It is the sort of [vital energy] which matches the right [義] with the Way (道); without these it starves. It is generated by accumulation of rightdoing, it is not that by sporadic rightdoing one makes a grab at it. If anything in conduct is dissatisfying to the heart it starves There must be work for it, but do not adjust its course; do not let your heart forget it, but do not help it to grow (Graham 1989, p. 127).

²⁵ To support this last point, Graham quotes the following passage from the *Guoyu* (國語) that dates from the Warring States Period: “Their wisdom could compare what was due to those above and those below, their sagehood could illuminate them in the distance and expose them to full view, their eyesight could see them brightly lit, their hearing could discern their voices distinctly. Consequently the luminous [spirit (神)] descended on them, on men called shamans and women called shamanesses” (Graham 1989, pp. 100–1).

Mencius then provides an anecdote of a farmer who tugged at his grain plants to help them grow, as a result of which they withered and died. Thus, for Mencius, as in the “Neiye”, self-cultivation is a spontaneous process that aligns one with the spontaneous transformation of vital energy. That is, self-cultivation is a matter of channeling the spontaneous transformation of vital energy through one’s heart and allowing it to grow as one’s inner power that pours out into the world and unites one’s self with the Way. Moreover, for Mencius, this is a moral process. In the above passage Mencius mentions only rightness (義), but in *Mencius* 2A:6 he mentions the four virtues of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom (仁義禮智). These virtues are present as innate moral inclinations in the heart that are spontaneously elicited in appropriate situations before any rational calculation kicks in. For instance, there is the famous thought experiment of what we would feel if we were to suddenly see a baby about to fall into a well. We would immediately feel alarm and distress. This spontaneous empathetic response is a moral sprout (端) that can grow into the virtue of benevolence, and there are other moral sprouts, i.e., the heart of shame, the heart of deference, and the heart of approval and disapproval that correspond, respectively, to the three remaining virtues of rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom. When these sprouts are being developed, they are “like fire catching alight or a spring as it first bursts through”, and when they are fully developed, one’s moral influence will be able to extend to the entire world (Graham 1989, p. 126).

According to Mencius, these virtues are an essential part of human nature (性) (*Mencius* 6A:6). And human nature is what Heaven (天) has bestowed upon us. By the time of Mencius, Heaven came to represent the natural order, and the Decree of Heaven (天命), which conferred a divine mandate to rule on the virtuous kings of early Zhou, was understood in two ways, either as the spontaneous inclinations given to us innately as human nature, or as fate that lies beyond human control. Nonetheless, there was a vestige of the older usage of “Heaven” to refer to a higher being worthy of veneration. These themes about how human beings are related to Heaven are explored from the perspective of cultivating the spontaneous inclinations in one’s heart in *Mencius* 7A:1–4. Mencius says,

One who gives full realization to one’s heart is one who knows human nature, and one who knows human nature will know Heaven. By retaining one’s heart and nurturing one’s nature, one is serving Heaven (事天).²⁶

That is, one serves Heaven not by offering sacrifices to Heaven in the older theistic sense used in proto-Confucianism, but by cultivating the spontaneous moral inclinations in one’s heart, which derive from the natural order and unite one with that order when fully developed. Mencius’s use of the term “serving Heaven” here expresses the sense of numinous awe and reverential attitude preserved from the older usage Heaven to refer to the highest divinity. Next, in 7A:4, Mencius describes the mystical experience of union with the macrocosmic order as follows: “All things are complete in me (萬物皆備於我). There is no greater joy than to find upon self-reflection that I have been true (反身而誠)”.

The meaning of “being true” here is explained in *Mencius* 4A:12, where it is said that “being true” (誠) is the Way of Heaven (天之道), and reflecting on “how to be true” (思誠) is the way of human beings (人之道). Another late Warring States work that falls under the Mencian school of Confucianism, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, provides a similar formulation as the one given above: “Being true (誠) is the Way of Heaven, and making it true (誠之) is the way of human beings”. This shows the relationship between Heaven and human beings. Heaven in its spontaneous transformations follows a course that is unerringly true. Humans can deviate from this course, and their task is to reflect on aligning themselves with this course and channeling its spontaneous transformations so that they can become one with Heaven. This, we may say, expresses the thesis of the unity of Heaven and human beings.

During the Han and successive dynasties in China, the *Mencius* was neglected until Han Yu (韓愈, 768–824) rescued it from obscurity along with the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*

²⁶ Cf. Lau (1970), p. 182.

(Chan 1963, p. 450). Thus, Han Yu paved the way for these texts to become part of the Four Books in the curriculum established by the Neo-Confucian thinkers during the Song Dynasty period. Among the latter thinkers, we discuss some representative works by Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤, 1017–1073), Zhang Zai (張載, 1020–1077), and Cheng Hao (程顥, 1032–1085) as representing a monism based on vital energy prior to the establishment of the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy that prioritized a qualified monism of pattern and vital energy.

Zhou Dunyi is best known for his work *Taijitu Shuo* (太極圖說, *Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate*). This work explains how everything in the world emanates from the Ultimateless (無極, Ch. *wuji*, Kr. *mugeuk*) and the Supreme Ultimate (太極, Ch. *taiji*, Kr. *taegeuk*). Here, the Ultimateless is the primordial undifferentiated source of everything, which is placed prior to the Supreme Ultimate. The Supreme Ultimate generates Yang through activity, and this activity, reaching its limit, generates Yin through tranquility. Then, through the interaction of Yang and Yin, the Five Agencies (五行) of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth are produced, and these Five Agencies, which are five forms of vital energy, are harmoniously arranged to produce the four seasons. Next, the reality of the Ultimateless (無極之真) and the vitalizing essence of Yang and Yin and the Five Agencies (二五之精) mysteriously combine to produce heaven and earth, the way of heaven bringing masculinity to completion and the way of earth bring femininity to completion. Finally, these two forms of vital energy interact to produce all things in the world, which produce and reproduce other things in an endless process of change and transformation. Among all the things in the world, human beings receive the Five Agencies in their finest form and are thus the most spiritual (最靈) (Chan 1963, p. 463; Yi 1988, pp. 37–38).

Here, several references to vital energy, vitalizing essence, Yin and Yang, and the Five Agencies all suggest that it is vital energy that constitutes everything and generates the transformations in this cosmology. Zhu Xi, however, identifies the Ultimateless with the Supreme Ultimate, and the Supreme Ultimate with the unitary pattern (理) that is metaphysically prior to vital energy, and becomes differentiated in different kinds of things through the variegation of vital energy (Yi 1988, pp. 44–45). Later, we shall see that Su-un in his middle stage works identifies his way as the “Ultimateless Great Way”, and this with the spontaneous transformation (無爲而化) of vital energy.

Unlike Zhu Xi who came after him, Zhang Zai identified the Supreme Ultimate with vital energy, and the ghostly (鬼, Ch. *gui*) and the spiritual (神, Ch. *shen*), respectively, as negative and positive forms of spirit, or as contraction (歸, Ch. *gui*) and expansion (伸, Ch. *shen*) of vital energy (Chan 1963, p. 495). Thus, he embraced a monism of vital energy which is explained eloquently in his celebrated *Ximing* (西銘, *Western Inscription*):

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

The great ruler (the emperor) is the eldest son of my parents (Heaven and Earth), and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged—this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak—this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. The sage identifies his character with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the most outstanding man. Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives, or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to (Chan 1963, p. 497).

Zhang Zai here presents a monistic reinterpretation of Confucian ethics, which was to become the basis of Neo-Confucian ethics just as Zhou Dunyi’s *Taijitu Shuo* became the basis for Neo-Confucian metaphysics (Chan 1963, p. 498). It draws out the ethical implications of the thesis that I am one with all the things in the world (萬物一體).

Cheng Hao draws out these implications even further, dispensing altogether with the non-monistic conceit that we are all brothers or companions. Unlike his younger brother Cheng Yi who made the innovative proposal that human nature is pattern (Graham 1986, p. 413), Cheng Hao is known for his thesis that human nature is vital energy (Chan 1963, p. 521). Below, in a passage drawn from “Shiren Pian” (識仁篇, “Understanding Benevolence”), Cheng Hao provides an account of Confucian ethics based on a monism of vital energy:

A book on medicine describes paralysis of the four limbs as absence of [feeling] (仁). This is an excellent description. The man of [benevolence] (仁) regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body. To him there is nothing that is not himself. Since he has recognized all things as himself, can there be any limit to his humanity? If things are not parts of the self, naturally they have nothing to do with it. As in the paralysis of the four limbs, the vital [energy] (氣) no longer penetrates them, and therefore they are no longer parts of the self. Therefore, to be charitable and to assist all things is the function of a sage (Chan 1963, p. 530).

Although this passage discusses only the virtue of benevolence, Cheng Hao takes all the other virtues to be expressions of benevolence (Chan 1963, p. 530). We will have opportunity later on to refer back to this passage, because Ricci criticizes the Neo-Confucian monistic tradition in the *Tianzhu Shiyi* for overlooking the distinction between self and other which he takes to be necessary for the enactment of traditional Confucian virtues.

Given this overview of the Confucian monistic tradition based on vital energy, it now remains for us to place Su-un’s thought within that tradition. Because this Confucian influence is clearly discernible only from the middle stage of Su-un’s thought onward, we will here discuss only the middle stage works. First of all, we can see what Su-un himself says in the “Sudeokmun”: “Benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom (仁義禮智) are what the former sages have taught, while cultivating one’s heart and aligning one’s vital energy (修心正氣, Kr. *susim jeonggi*) are what I have amended”.²⁷ In the “Dodeokga”, this is stated in a slightly different way as “sustaining benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom by cultivating one’s heart and aligning one’s vital energy”.²⁸ However, what we can see from the above account of the Confucian tradition is that Su-un’s talk of cultivating one’s heart and aligning one’s vital energy is similar in broad outline with the corresponding ideas found in the “Inward Training” and *Mencius* 2A2. Then why did Su-un claim that this was his innovation? Perhaps the answer is that he really did come up with the idea on his own. It should be noted that Mencius’s account of nourishing one’s flood-like vital energy is gappy and laconic, thus being difficult to understand unless we fill in the gaps and supply the requisite details from the “Inward Training”. Now, although the *Mencius* was part of the village school curriculum as one of the Four Books, the book *Guanzi* that contained the “Inward Training” was not, and thus it is likely that Su-un had to piece together his own account and practice of self-cultivation from the *Mencius* and other eclectic sources.

Now, we may recall that Su-un’s 21-character incantation involved calling down the ultimate energy (至氣) that is all around us, having the creative transformation of nature (造化) settle in us by serving the Heavenly Lord (侍天主), and coming to know all things (萬事知) by always keeping in mind (永世不忘) the foregoing. First, in regard to serving the Heavenly Lord, we may note its similarity with the Mencian idea of “serving Heaven” (事天). In the “Nonhakmun”, Su-un provides the following explanation of the term “serve” in the phrase “serve the Heavenly Lord” contained in his 21-character incantation:

²⁷ “仁義禮智 先聖之所教 修心正氣 惟我之更定” (“Sudeokmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 143; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 165).

²⁸ “수심정기 하여 내어 인의예지 지켜 두고” (“Dodeokga”, Choe 1996b, p. 218). There has been some debate over the meaning of the Sino-Korean word *su* (수) in the phrase (수심정기). When spoken or written in Korean, it could be either the Chinese character 修 (Ch. *xiu*, Kr. *su*) or the character 守 (Ch. *shou*, Kr. *su*). The first means “cultivate”, and the second means “guard”. An overview of the debate over the correct reading of this word is presented in Yoon (2003), pp. 105–7.

“Serving” means having (i) the divine spirit within (内有神靈), and (ii) the transformation of vital energy without (外有氣化), and all the people in the world (iii) knowing this and not deviating from it (各知不移).²⁹

This explanation has three components marked as (i), (ii), and (iii). The first component expresses the idea that the Heavenly Lord is served not by worshiping or sacrificing to some higher being external to oneself, but by reverencing the higher presence within oneself. For Mencius, this higher internal presence is the natural moral inclinations derived from Heaven that are present in one’s heart. The second component describes the outpouring of vital energy as a result of self-cultivational practice that nurtures the divine spirit within, an outpouring that unites one with the macrocosmic ultimate energy (至氣). This is similar to Mencius’s idea of nurturing the moral inclinations so that they grow into flood-like vital energy that fills the world and unites one with the Way. Finally, the third component observes that human beings can deviate from the natural course of the Way, and that they need to return and remain true to that course. This corresponds to the Mencian idea that Heaven’s Way is to be true, and the human way is to reflect on how to be true or to make it true.

Several middle stage vernacular works pair reverence and being true, the two inner attitudes mentioned above, as essential to self-cultivation. For instance, the “Dosusa” says, “If we cultivate gradually and steadily by keeping to the two characters ‘reverence’ (敬) and ‘being true’ (誠), would we not attain the Ultimateless Great Way (無極大道)?”³⁰ The Ultimateless here is the “ultimate energy” (至氣) that is explained as the “unitary vital energy of the undifferentiated source (渾元之一氣)” in the “Nonhakmun”, which is associated with spontaneous transformation (無爲而化). The reverential attitude is related to the settling of this ultimate energy as a higher spiritual presence in one’s heart, and the attitude of being true is related to the channeling of this energy through one’s heart into an outpouring of spontaneous transformation without deviating from its course. One deviates from this course through self-interested concerns (各自爲心) that set one’s self apart from others and from the undifferentiated source of all the things in the world. However, by staying true to the course of spontaneous transformation channeling through our hearts, we can become united with the Ultimateless Great Way, which is described as “reverting together to form one body” (同歸一體). Then, we can attain the inner power (德) that comes from the Way, which Su-un’s 21-character incantation describes as becoming settled in the creative transformation of nature (造化定).

In the explanation of the incantation provided in the “Nonhakmun”, the creative transformation of nature (造化) is glossed as “spontaneous transformation” (無爲而化), and becoming settled (定) is glossed as “uniting with its inner power and becoming settled in its heart” (合其德 定其心) (Choe 1996a, p. 83). Here, it is unclear whose inner power and whose heart “its” refers to. Given the context, the referent is the Heavenly Lord or the person reciting the incantation in both or either one of the occurrences of “its”. The most plausible reading takes “its” as referring to the Heavenly Lord on both occurrences, namely, “uniting with the Heavenly Lord’s inner power and becoming settled in the Heavenly Lord’s heart” (Choe 1996a, p. 86). On the one hand, this reading strongly suggests that the Heavenly Lord is a personal being that possesses both inner power and a heart. On the other hand, we may recall how serving the Heavenly Lord is identified with having the divine spirit within and transformation of vital energy without. Here, it may help to compare Su-un’s thought with the Neo-Confucian tradition of the “Learning of the Heart” (心學) that Zhen Dexiu (真德秀, 1178–1235) presented in his *Xinjing* (心經, *Heart Classic*), and which Toegye inherited. This tradition speaks of “the heart of the Way” (道心) and “the human heart” (人心), but these refer to the same heart bifurcated with respect to the impartiality of Heaven’s pattern in human nature and the selfishness of human desires (De Bary 1981, pp. 73–74). In an analogous way, the inner power and the heart of the Heavenly Lord in Su-un’s thought may refer to the Mencian virtues of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and

²⁹ “侍者 内有神靈 外有氣化 一世之人 各知不移者也” (“Nonhakmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 83; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 161).

³⁰ “성경 이자 지켜 내어 차차차차 닦아 내면/무극대도 아닐런가” (“Dosusa”, Choe 1996b, p. 150).

wisdom, present in our hearts as innate moral inclinations, and distinguished from our self-interested concerns (各自爲心), these being bifurcations of one and the same heart. This would also explain why Su-un believed that his method of cultivating one's heart and aligning one's vital energy would sustain the four Mencian virtues.

The last part of Su-un's incantation is about coming to know all things by always keeping in mind the earlier parts of the incantation. We have seen earlier that, in the cosmological framework of vital energy accepted by the "Inward Training" and also by Mencius, vital energy can settle in the heart as spirit, which when properly cultivated enables one to become a sage who is clear-seeing (明). Thus, the sage can enter into communion with all things and get to know them, and it would be as if everything was complete in oneself. Su-un provides the following explanation of the last part of the incantation in the "Nonhakmun":

"To know" is to know this Way and to receive its knowledge. Therefore, if we shine forth this luminous inner power and always bear it in mind without forgetting it, then we can engage in the utmost transformation of ultimate energy and attain utmost sagehood.³¹

Anyone who has read the Four Books will know that "shining forth luminous inner power" (明明德) is borrowed from the beginning of the *Great Learning*. But here it is related to the sage's ability to see everything clearly (明), that is, by entering into communion with all things through the shining forth of inner power nurtured to the fullest.

Let us conclude this section by returning to Su-un's Ultimateless Great Way. It is noteworthy that Su-un mentions the Ultimateless without the Supreme Ultimate in his middle stage works. By his time, the Supreme Ultimate was associated with the unitary pattern as the source of all things through the ascendancy of the Cheng-Zhu school as the orthodox form of Neo-Confucianism. Therefore, the lack of reference to the Supreme Ultimate in his middle stage works indicates that Su-un upheld a monism of vital energy during this time. The Supreme Ultimate is mentioned once in the early stage work "Podeokmun" as the form of the talisman that Su-un received from God, but in all the other early and middle works Su-un reports that he received the Ultimateless Great Way. In Section 5 below, it is suggested that Su-un also came to accept the existence of the Great Ultimate, understood as the unitary intelligent pattern that is the source of all signs of intelligence found in the natural order.

4. Catholicism and Su-un's Thought

The relationship between early Donghak and Catholicism must be understood in the context of the latter's introduction and spread in Korea. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Korean scholars were introduced to Western Learning and Catholicism through books that Jesuit missionaries wrote in China, including Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu Shiyi*. By the late 18th century, Catholicism came to be practiced as a religion in Korea, and this happened not through the efforts of Western missionaries, but through the initiative of Confucian scholars who had converted to Christianity and brought Catholic treatises and catechisms back from China (Finch 2000, p. 556). It quickly spread from elite Confucian converts to the middle and lower classes, and from the capital of Seoul to the provinces south of Seoul. The Catholic community in Korea grew to about 1000 people in 1790, about 4000 in 1784, and about 10,000 in 1800 (Yoon 2007, p. 360), taking on the character of a popular religious movement and spreading among the general public. It was during this time that Jeong Yakjong composed the vernacular catechism *Jugyo Yoji* (Jeong 1998, p. 91).

Over the same period, the Joseon government started prohibiting Catholic religious practices and persecuting Catholic converts in the wake of the Jinsan Incident in 1791. This incident involved a Catholic believer by the name of Yun Ji-chung (尹持忠), who obeyed the papal ruling against the

³¹ "知者 知其道而受其知也故 明明其德 念念不忘則 至化至氣 至於至聖" ("Nonhakmun", Choe 1996a, p. 83; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 161).

practice of ancestor rituals, and therefore did not conduct Confucian rituals in mourning for his deceased mother and had burned the ancestral tablets used in sacrifices to his ancestors (Yoon 2007, p. 356). Faced with increasing persecution, Catholic believers in the provinces south of Seoul fled to isolated mountainous regions in the southeastern provinces of Korea (Yoon 2007, p. 360). By the 1830s, believer groups had formed in southern Gyeongsang-do as well (Cha 1988, pp. 208–9), the place where Su-un was born in 1824 and had his religious encounter with God in 1860.

Thus, Su-un could have come into contact with Catholic believers near his ancestral home in Gyeongju, in southern Gyeongsang-do. It is also possible that he came into contact with them during his years of wandering across the country practicing spiritual discipline from 1844 to 1854 (Beirne 2009, pp. 22–26; Kallander 2013, p. 41). That Su-un was acquainted with Catholic practices is suggested by his freeing of two female bond servants after experiencing spiritual enlightenment in 1860, his selection of lowborn and nearly illiterate Haewol as his successor in 1863 (Lee 2014, p. 5), and his acceptance of people of all classes into his religion as noted in the testimonies given by Donghak followers under government interrogation in late 1863 (Kallander 2013, pp. 87–88). These egalitarian practices were first adopted by Catholic communities in Korea.³² Su-un's use of the vernacular verse genre of *gasa* to targeting women, children, and commoners also may have been influenced by the Catholic use of the same genre in works like *Sahyangga* composed in the 1850s.

Su-un explicitly discusses Catholicism in the “Podeokmun” and the “Nonhakmun”. In his early stage essay “Podeokmun”, he recounts what he heard about Westerners and Catholics in 1860:

According to what I have been told, Westerners say that they do not seek wealth and glory in obedience to the will of the God (天主, “Heavenly Lord”). But they invade and take over the whole world and build churches everywhere in carrying out their doctrines. I have wondered whether such things can happen, and how they can happen!³³

Su-un's critical tone here is no doubt connected to events taking place in China. The Second Opium War (1856–1860) was being waged at this time, culminating in the occupation of Beijing. News of the war spread to Korea and alarmed the Joseon court. Su-un comments on some of these events in his middle stage essay “Nonhakmun”:

In May 1860, when the world was chaotic and the people were utterly confused, not knowing what to do, strange and contradictory rumors were running rampant: “Westerners have achieved the Way and attained its Power, and through its creation and transformation they can accomplish anything. Thus, when they attack with their weapons, no one can withstand them. But if China collapses, how can there be escape for us? The reason for all this must be that, their Way being called the Western Way, their learning that of the Heavenly Lord, and their religion that of the sages, they know the Heavenly timing and received the Heavenly decree!”³⁴

Su-un appears to have believed part of these rumors, namely, that Catholicism was linked with Western aggression, perhaps because he associated Catholicism with “self-interested scheming (爲身之謀)” that has “nothing to do with the Heavenly Lord's teaching” (無天主之教) as he puts it later on in the essay. According to the “Podeokmun”, an important motivation for founding Donghak was to counter Catholicism and Western aggression under the banner of “helping the nation and comforting the people” (輔國安民).

³² According to Yoon (2007), the Catholics in Korea adopted egalitarianism in four ways, “(1) in choosing leaders during the initial formation of the church, (2) the acceptance of members from all classes, (3) the egalitarian nature of their gatherings, and (4) the slaves they released” (p. 357).

³³ “至於庚申 傳聞西洋之人 以爲天主之意 不取富貴 攻取天下 立其堂 行其道 故吾亦有其然 豈其然之疑” (“Podeokmun”, Choe 1996a, pp. 16–17; cf. Choe 2007, pp. 80–82).

³⁴ “夫庚申之年 建巳之月 天下紛亂 民心淆薄 莫知所向之地 又有怪違之說 崩騰于世間 西洋之人 道成立德 及其造化 無事不成功的 闢干戈 無人在前 中國燒滅 豈可無昏亡之患耶 都緣無他 斯人 道稱西道 學稱天主 教則聖教 此非知天時而 受天命耶” (Choe 1996a, pp. 58–59; cf. Choe 2007, pp. 208–9).

In his middle stage essay “Nonhakmun”, Su-un compares Donghak and Catholicism as follows:

In 1861, noble scholars from all quarters came to me and asked, “What do you mean by the heavenly spirit descending into you?” I answered, “I received the principle of nature that every departure is followed by a return”. They asked, “Then what is the name of that Way?” I answered, “The Heavenly Way”. They asked, “How is it different from the Western Way?” I answered, “Western Learning may look similar, but it is different from our Way, and what it calls prayer has no substance. They share the same propitious circumstances (運), and their Ways (道) are similar, but their principles (理) are different”.³⁵

In this passage, Su-un states that Donghak and Catholicism are similar in regard to propitious circumstances. That is, both religions shared the same historical circumstances described in the introduction of this paper, with the people in dire straits and the state-endorsed Confucian orthodoxy in decline, creating a sense of anomie and the need for a new ideology or spirituality to provide hope for the populace and restore order. The two religions are also similar in regard to the Way. That is, both profess the Heavenly Way that follows the Heavenly Lord or the Lord on High. However, they differ in regard to principles, that is, specific doctrines.

Below we examine and compare specific doctrines concerning divinity held by early Donghak and the Catholicism that Su-un encountered in the sources available to him. We will examine these doctrines across five axes of comparison, namely, (1) terms for divinity, (2) divinity as creator and controller, (3) divinity as personal being, (4) divinity as transcendent or immanent, and (5) dualism or monism. In particular, the last two axes of comparison deal with the three meanings of transcendence discussed in Section 2: transcendence as higher being, transcendence as external causality, and transcendence as dualistic otherness.

4.1. Terms for Divinity

As the title of Ricci’s *Tianzhu Shiyi*, indicates, the Chinese term that Ricci uses to refer to God is “Heavenly Lord” (天主, Ch. Tianzhu, Kr. Cheonju). This term was intended to be a neologism, but it had been used in China before Jesuit missionaries coined the term. Among the Eight Gods (八神) listed in the ancient Chinese history books *Shiji* (史記) and *Hanshu* (漢書), Tianzhu (天主) is mentioned first.³⁶ What is meant by “Tianzhu” here, however, is a tutelary spirit that has divine status, and not the one and only God of monotheism who is lord over all. Therefore, the Tianzhu mentioned in the ancient Chinese histories should not be associated with the Catholic concept of God.

Another term that Ricci uses for God is “Lord on High” (上帝, Ch. Shangdi, Kr. Sangje), which can be found in the earliest Confucian writings contained in the *Shujing* (書經, *Classic of Documents*) and the *Shijing* (詩經, *Classic of Poetry*), as well as in the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions that date back to Shang and early Zhou Dynasty Periods. In the Shang and early Zhou, “Lord on High” or simply “Lord” (帝, Ch. di) refers to the highest deity in heaven who controls the movement of heavenly bodies, the orderly procession of the seasons, and weather phenomena, and who also sends down blessings and calamities (Puett 2002, pp. 48–49; Allan 2007, pp. 7–8). In the early Zhou, the Lord on High is identified with Heaven (天, Ch. Tian), a supreme personal being whose active will (天命, Ch. tianming, “Decree of Heaven”) is politicized and moralized in the *Shujing* and the *Shijing* to justify the replacement of Shang by Zhou whose kings have demonstrated virtue (Schwartz 1985, pp. 50–53). This early Zhou idea of the Lord on High or Heaven gradually comes to represent the impersonal natural order and source of morality during the Warring States Period, but Ricci appealed to the theism found in the two

³⁵ “轉至辛酉 四方賢士 進我而問曰 今天靈 降臨先生 何爲其然也 曰受其无往不復之理也 曰然則何道以名之 曰天道也 曰與洋道 無異者乎 曰洋學 如斯而有異 如呪而無實 然而 運則一也 道則同也 理則非也” (Choe 1996a, pp. 69–71; cf. Choe 2007, pp. 70–72).

³⁶ The Eight Gods (八神) are 天主, 地主, 兵主, 陰主, 陽主, 月主, 日主, and 四時主, as mentioned in Sima (1979, p. 356) and Ban (1979, p. 319).

Confucian classics *Shujing* and *Shijing* to show the compatibility between Christian monotheism and “original” Confucianism (Ricci 2016, pp. 19, 29; Cawley 2013, p. 69).

Like the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, the *Jugyo Yoji* and *Sahyangga* also use the two Sino-Korean terms “Heavenly Lord” and “Lord on High” to refer to God. Turning now to early Donghak, we find that Su-un also used these terms in his early and middle stage works to refer to the supreme being that he encountered in his religious experience. In his vernacular Korean compositions, Su-un used the equivalent Korean term “Hanulnim”.³⁷ In addition, Su-un used a few other Sino-Korean terms to refer to divinity in his middle stage works, namely, “the ghostly and spiritual” (鬼神者) and “the divine spirit” (神靈) (Beirne 2009, p. 130). The Chinese term translated here as “the ghostly and spiritual”, *guishen* (鬼神), usually refers to ghosts and spirits, but in the philosophical parlance of Confucianism these are understood in naturalistic terms as vital energy in its refined form, or in its contracted (*gui* 鬼 interpreted as *gui* 歸) and expanded (*shen* 神 interpreted as *shen* 伸) forms. The *Tianzhu Shiyi* resists this Confucian understanding of ghosts and spirits, taking them to be incorporeal beings and referring to God’s divine and spiritual (神靈) nature as transcending that of ghosts and spirits (Ricci 2016, para. 58). In Su-un’s writings, the different terms for divinity carry different connotations in relation to human beings. “Heavenly Lord” and “Lord on High” imply distance and separation that inspires fear and reverence, whereas “the ghostly and spiritual” and “the divine spirit” imply the closeness and intimacy of the experience of mystical union with divinity (Beirne 2009, pp. 130, 132–33). This is because the monism of vital energy embraced by Su-un in the middle stage implies that the spiritual nature of divinity can reside in the heart as ultimate energy (至氣).

In short, the term “Heavenly Lord” was a neologism coined by Jesuit missionaries to refer to God that Su-un borrowed from Catholic texts. Su-un’s use of the ancient Chinese term “Lord on High”, found in the Confucian classics, to refer to this same being also evinces the influence of Catholic texts such as the *Tianzhu Shiyi*. However, Su-un’s use of the terms “the ghostly and spiritual” and “the divine spirit” to refer to divinity in his middle stage works suggests his adoption of the kind of monism based on vital energy that the *Tianzhu Shiyi* criticized.

4.2. Divinity as Creator and Controller

The *Tianzhu Shiyi* states the Christian belief that God, the Heavenly Lord, is both the source and controller of all things (Ricci 2016, paras. 32–33). Unlike insentient objects and sentient animals, humans are endowed with intellect that enables them to infer through the light of reason that God exists as the source and controller of all things (Ricci 2016, paras. 23–25, 28). The *Tianzhu Shiyi* and the *Jugyo Yoji* use two types of argument to show that the Heavenly Lord exists. One is the teleological argument, also known as the argument from design. Insentient objects such as the heavenly bodies and the four seasons revolve or alternate in orderly pattern, and sentient but nonrational animals know how to preserve themselves by instinct. These are taken to be evidence for the existence of an intelligent being who is responsible for such orderly arrangement or providence, just as a well-designed house must be built by a skilled artisan (Ricci 2016, paras. 30–31, 34–39; Jeong 1998, p. 93). The other argument for the existence of God is the cosmological argument, or the argument from first cause. Humans and other living things cannot produce themselves, but must have parents, and their parents in turn must have parents, and so on. But this regression cannot go on forever. When we trace every species back to their first ancestor, this ancestor too could not have produced itself, but must be produced by a self-existing cause, which is God (Ricci 2016, para. 40; Cho 2006, pp. 28–29).³⁸

It is certain that Su-un was influenced by these Catholic arguments for the existence of God. He employs a line of reasoning similar to the teleological argument in his early stage essay “Podeokmun”.

³⁷ Baker (2002) takes the term “Hanulnim” to mean “the Honorable Heaven”, and considers it to be a vernacular translation of the Sino-Korean term “Cheonju” (“Heavenly Lord”), which was the primary name that early Donghak used for God (p. 127).

³⁸ Roughly, the cosmological and teleological arguments correspond to the Second and Fifth, respectively, of Aquinas’s Five Ways of establishing the existence of God (Pawl 2012).

In the opening paragraph of this essay, he points to the unchanging regularity in the transformations of nature as indicating the presence of God:

From the time of high antiquity, the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter have succeeded one another without any change or deviation. This indeed makes it evident to the world that the Heavenly Lord is behind the creative transformation of natural phenomena (造化). But unaware of the providence behind the dew and the rain, the ignorant masses think that these transformations occur spontaneously (無爲而化).³⁹

Thus, Su-un identifies the Heavenly Lord, i.e., God, as the supreme being that generates and regulates every natural phenomenon and living being through the regular patterns of nature. Significantly, Su-un at this stage appears to reject the view that transformations in nature occur in regular patterns without any agent who brings it about. That view is only for the undiscerning masses.

In the middle stage, however, Su-un adopts a more ambivalent position, as can be seen in the following passage from “Nonhakmun”:

The four seasons wax and wane, and wind, dew, frost, and rain keep their proper season, never changing their sequence. The masses are unaware of the reason for this. Some say that it is by the grace of the Heavenly Lord (天主之恩). Others say that it indicates the mysterious knack of natural transformation (化工之迹). However, even if we refer to it as “grace”, it is still something that cannot be seen; even if we refer to it as “mysterious knack”, it is still something that beggars description (難狀).⁴⁰

This ambivalence derives from Su-un’s adoption of panentheism in the middle stage. In this stage, Su-un accepted the existence of the Heavenly Lord as the personal being that he encountered in his religious experience of 1860, and also came to regard this being as an immanent presence within his inmost being. Later on, in the same essay, we find that it is or vital energy (氣) that “beggars description”. Therefore, the “mysterious knack” mentioned in the above quotation is the mysterious way in which orderly patterns in nature are affected by vital energy through spontaneous transformation (無爲而化). Moreover, the spontaneous transformation that was derided in the early stage as an explanation of the natural order is openly propounded here as Su-un’s way (吾道 無爲而化矣), and the creative transformation that was ascribed to the Heavenly Lord in the early stage is now characterized as spontaneous transformation (造化者 無爲而化也).

4.3. Divinity as Personal Being

The Catholic catechisms introduce God as having personal attributes, such as intelligence, goodness, and grace, but to an infinite degree of perfection that we humans with our imperfect attributes cannot fathom (Ricci 2016, para. 61). God is referred to as the Ruler and Father of all, and as our Great Parent (大父母) who is compassionate and loving toward us, and whom we ought to honor and revere (Ricci 2016, paras. 115–16, 484, 565; Jeong 1998, p. 97). Moreover, because God is our compassionate Father, God personally intervenes in human history to guide the masses who have lost their way, as shown in the revealed truths of the Bible (Ricci 2016, paras. 574–90). These revealed truths cannot be known by the light of reason alone. Therefore, the *Tianzhu Shiyi*—which seeks to persuade the Confucian literati to accept Christianity on the basis of truths that can be discerned by reason alone—devotes only a few paragraphs to the revealed truths of the Bible. By contrast, the *Jugyo Yoji* is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the truths of reason, and the second dealing with the revealed truths contained in the Bible.

³⁹ “蓋自上古以來 春秋迭代 四時盛衰 不遷不易 是亦 天主造化之迹 昭然于天下也 愚夫愚民 未知雨露之澤 知其無爲而化矣” (“Podeokmun”, Choe 1996a, pp. 3–7; cf. Choe 2007, p. 3).

⁴⁰ “四時盛衰 風露霜雪 不失其時 不變其序 如露蒼生 莫知其端 或云 天主之恩 或云 化工之迹 然而以恩言之 惟爲不見之事 以工言之 亦爲難狀之言” (“Nonhakmun”, Choe 1996a, pp. 55–56; cf. Choe 2007, pp. 4–5).

Su-un's early and middle stage works contain accounts of his encounter with a divine being with personal attributes, whom he called "Heavenly Lord". In his middle stage work of "Nonhakmun", Su-un explains the meaning of the word "Lord" in the phrase "serve the Heavenly Lord" as follows: "it refers to the dignity (of the Heavenly Lord), and that we should serve (the Heavenly Lord) as we serve our parents".⁴¹ This is similar to the Catholic idea that God is our Father and that we should honor him. As we have already seen, the same work also mentions personal attributes such as "the grace of the Heavenly Lord" (天主之恩) at work in nature, which we may associate with "the providence behind the dew and the rain" (雨露之澤) mentioned in the early stage essay "Podeokmun".

Furthermore, Su-un's personal encounter with the Heavenly Lord suggests that this is a personal being that intervenes in human history and reveals truths to human beings, much like the God of Catholicism:

Suddenly I heard a celestial voice in my ear. Surprised, I woke up and asked who it was. The voice said, "Be not afraid, have no fear. The people of the world call me Lord on High. Do you not know who I am?" I asked him why he appeared to me. He said, "Because I have had no success, I am sending you into the world to teach this law/method (法) ...".⁴²

This is from the early stage work "Podeokmun", which also has a structure similar to Catholic catechisms like the *Jugyo Yoji*. Namely, "Podeokmun" has two parts, or two key passages at the head of these two parts, the first providing a rational argument for the existence of the Heavenly Lord, and the second providing an account of the Lord on High appearing to Su-un and revealing a law or method in the form of a talisman that can heal people and an incantation for serving the Lord on High.⁴³ The relatively simple bipartite structure of "Podeokmun" becomes more complicated and less discernible in the "Nonhakmun", which can be regarded as a middle stage reworking and qualification of the theistic themes in "Podeokmun" from a panentheistic perspective. In sum, it can be said that Su-un's conception of the divine being that he encountered in his religious experience is akin to, and likely influenced by, the Catholic idea of God as a being with personal attributes.

4.4. Divinity as Transcendent or Immanent

In the Catholic texts, there is discussion of three ways in which divinity can be understood as transcendent. The first is the sense in which God's nature is higher than human nature, the second is the sense in which God's causality is external to the causality of things in the world, and the third is the sense in which God is distinct from human beings and all other things in the world. These three senses of transcendence are based on scholastic philosophy. Accordingly, we will compare Catholicism and early Donghak thought in these three ways. The first two will be discussed in this subsection, and the last in the next subsection.

First, according to scholastic philosophy, there are degrees of reality or perfection, and God is the most perfect of all beings, possessing the highest degree of goodness, truth, nobility, and so on.⁴⁴ This view is reflected in the two catechisms, the *Tianzhu Shiyi* and the *Jugyo Yoji*. Thus, the latter work describes God as a being "whose loftiness is beyond measure, for whom there is none higher, and whose nobility is so exalted that it is without equal" (Jeong 1998, p. 95). The *Tianzhu Shiyi* says that God transcends all categories by which we can know the nature of things, and thus God's perfect nature can only be indicated via *negativa* (Ricci 2016, para. 55). This is the sense in which God's

⁴¹ "主者 稱其尊而與父母同事者也" ("Nonhakmun", Choe 1996a, p. 83; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 161).

⁴² "有何仙語 忽入耳中 驚起探問則 曰勿懼勿恐 世人 謂我上帝 汝不知上帝耶 問其所然 曰余亦無功故 生汝世間 教人此法" ("Podeokmun", Choe 1996a, p. 18, 21, 23; cf. Choe 2007, p. 8).

⁴³ Beirne (2009) provides a careful reconstruction of Su-un's talisman and incantations in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, which is especially well considered in regard to how Su-un's understanding and formulation of the incantations evolved over time.

⁴⁴ This is used to argue for the existence of God as the most perfect being that is the cause of less perfect beings in Aquinas's Fourth Way (Pawl 2012).

nature is higher than human nature. And because God is perfect, “the most noble and the most good”, God ought to be revered (Ricci 2016, para. 370).

Second, scholastic philosophy follows Aristotle in distinguishing between four kinds of cause: efficient, material, formal, and final. Here, the efficient and final causes of a thing, that is, the agent producing it and the purpose or end for which it is produced, are understood as being external to that thing. On the other hand, the material and formal causes of a thing, namely, the stuff or matter constituting it and its specific pattern that subsumes it under a given kind and distinguishes it from other kinds, are understood as its immanent causes (Ricci 2016, paras. 45–46). With respect to the world as a whole, God is outside it as its efficient and final cause, that is, God is the self-existent first cause that creates the world out of nothing, and serves as the ultimate end toward which all things in the world are directed (Ricci 2016, paras. 45–47).

Given this twofold understanding of the transcendent nature of God, the *Tianzhu Shiyi* criticized the identification of divinity with human beings suggested by the Confucian doctrine of the unity of Heaven and humans (天人合一), and the unity of humans with all things suggested by the Confucian and Daoist idea that human beings form one body with all things (萬物一體), which were based either on a monism of vital energy or pattern. First, the scholastic doctrine of the gradation of reality placed all things in a hierarchy of being, according to which identifying humans with the Heavenly Lord was to esteem them too highly, and identifying them with nonrational but sentient creatures or insentient objects was to demean them unduly (Ricci 2016, para. 239). Thus, the *Tianzhu Shiyi* criticized the abovementioned Confucian doctrines as constituting a form of pantheism with absurd implications, such as that God is on the same footing as wood and stone, or that we are sacrificing to ourselves when we are sacrificing to the Lord on High (Ricci 2016, para. 224).⁴⁵ Second, according to the Aristotelian scheme of four causes accepted by the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, *qi* would be the stuff or matter constituting the world, and *li* would be the patterns in things that distinguish them into different kinds. In other words, *qi* and *li* would be the material and formal causes of the world, i.e., its immanent causes, but according to the Aristotelian and scholastic way of thinking, this leaves out of account the efficient and final causes of the world, i.e., its transcendent cause, which is God (Ricci 2016, para. 234). Therefore, to equate divinity with *qi* or *li* was to conflate the immanent causes of the world with its transcendent cause.

Coming now to Su-un, let us first compare his view with the scholastic conception of God as the most perfect of all beings. In Su-un’s works, there is no passage that discusses the nature of the Heavenly Lord or Lord on High as perfect in terms of nobility and other positive attributes. In the passage from the “Podeokmun” quoted a few paragraphs above, and repeated in another early stage work “Yongdamga”, the Lord on High says that he has had no success in teaching humankind, which is why he has decided to send Su-un to complete this task. This suggests that the divine being that Su-un encountered was not entirely perfect, that is, did not have complete control over human affairs despite being able to govern the natural order with perfect constancy. Nonetheless, as Beirne (2009) observes, Su-un’s relationship with the Heavenly Lord as shown in his early and middle stage works is one of “reverential separation” (p. 132), and the feeling of fear and awe is a common element in his encounter with the Heavenly Lord as described in “Ansimga”, “Podeokmun”, and “Nonhakmun” (p. 138). Thus, in Su-un’s early and middle works, divinity is a higher being that is the object of awe. The opposite of transcendence in this sense is not immanence, but the intimacy and familiarity that can be had among equals. Even in his works dating from the middle stage, when Su-un introduces the idea of divinity as an immanent presence within us, this divine presence is not treated with familiarity. The term that Su-un uses to express our proper relationship with divinity here is “serving” (侍 or 事), which presupposes a hierarchical relationship between a lower and a higher being. That is to say,

⁴⁵ This last implication was one that Su-un’s successor Haewol boldly embraced in his theory and practice, as can be seen in his teaching of “feeding Heaven by means of Heaven” (以天食天), or in the celebrated episode of 1897 where he instructed those offering sacrifice to spirits as follows: “From now on, when you perform the ritual, set up the offerings to face yourselves” (Lee 2014, p. 1).

divinity is not debased by its identification with our inmost being, as the *Tianzhu Shiyi* alleged, but becomes an ennobling presence that is worthy of veneration. Thus, the middle stage work “Dodeokga” states that the proper attitude toward this being is the “feeling of reverence and fear” (敬畏之心).

Let us now compare Su-un’s thought with the Catholic conception of God as the transcendent cause of the world, that is, the first cause that has created the world out of nothing (Ricci 2016, para. 216), and the ultimate end toward which all things in the world are purposefully directed. For Su-un in his middle stage and the Confucian tradition that preceded him, vital energy is not just the stuff or matter that fills the world, but also the vitalizing agency of creative transformation (造化) that has no need for any external agent to launch or guide it. Moreover, Su-un does not appear to have believed that the divine being that he encountered had created the world out of nothing. Even in the early stage work “Yongdamga”, Su-un reports having received the Ultimateless Great Way of timeless antiquity (萬古 없는 無極大道) from Hanulnim or God, who says Su-un is the first person to be chosen by him since the unfolding of the world (開闢, Ch. *kaipi*, Kr. *gaebyeok*)⁴⁶ 50,000 years ago. It is unclear whether Su-un believed God to have existed prior to and played a role in the unfolding of the world, but it is clear that Su-un’s God could not have created the world out of nothing, because the world unfolded from the Ultimateless 50,000 years ago, and the Ultimateless has existed without beginning. Here, the Ultimateless (無極, Ch. *wuji*) refers to the primordial vital energy from which everything is generated, and into which everything returns. In his middle stage works, Su-un continues to refer to his way as the Ultimateless Great Way of timeless antiquity, and in his comment on vital energy (氣) in the “Nonhakmun”, he mentions the “unitary vital energy of the undifferentiated source” (混元之一氣). This is a reference to the primordial chaos of the Ultimateless, which is similar to Anaximander’s idea of the *apeiron*. Thus, according to Su-un, it appears that the first cause of world is not outside of it, but immanent in the world as its primordial source. In short, the vital energy that fills and vitalizes all things is both the material cause and the efficient cause of the world.

In regard to the final cause of the world, the term that Su-un uses to define “creative transformation” (造化) in his middle stage work “Nonhakmun”, i.e., “spontaneous transformation” (無爲而化, Ch. *wuwei er hua*, Kr. *muwi i hwa*), literally means transformation (無爲) through nonaction (無爲). “Nonaction” here is a term that is usually contrasted in the Chinese philosophical traditions with “purposive action” (爲, “Ch. *wei*, Kr. *wi*).⁴⁷ Moreover, it contrasts with the Chinese term that the *Tianzhu Shiyi* uses to translate “final cause”, namely, *weizhe* (爲者, “that which something is for”). Thus, spontaneous transformation implies lack of purposive action, and consequently the lack of any purpose or final end toward which it is directed. Therefore, there is no need to posit God as the transcendent final cause of things in the world in Su-un’s cosmology.

In short, Catholic and early Donghak views of the transcendence of divinity as higher being exhibit some similarities, but their views on the transcendence of divinity as external cause of the world are diametrically opposed. As in the Catholic tradition, Su-un accepted divine nature as higher than human nature, even when divinity was understood as an immanent presence in human beings in his middle stage works. In these works, however, Su-un pushed back against the Catholic view of divinity as transcendent cause of the world, instead favoring the idea of divinity as immanent cause of the world engaged in spontaneous transformation. This can be seen in Su-un’s critique of Catholics in the “Nonhakmun”, where he says that his way is that of spontaneous transformation (無爲而化), which is received through the instruction of the Heavenly Lord (天主之教), and that Westerners lack the spirit of the transformation of vital energy (氣化之神), thereby lacking the instruction of the Heavenly Lord.

⁴⁶ For a historical overview of this concept of “unfolding” in traditional Chinese cosmogony, as contrasting with the Christian concept of creation *ex nihilo*, see Shin (2015), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁷ As Graham (1989) puts it, “*Wei* [爲] is ordinary human action, deliberated for a purpose, in contrast with the spontaneous processes of nature which are ‘so of themselves’ [自然]” (p. 232). See also Fraser (2007), who says, “*Wei* [爲] probably refers to action undertaken intentionally, for some motive of the agent ... *wu-wei* [無爲] would then refer to not intentionally initiating action for one’s own reasons” (p. 99).

Lastly, it should be noted that while the transcendent nature of God is salient in the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, the work also accommodated a sense in which God is an immanent presence within us—i.e., internal to us or within us—because God as omnipresent spirit permeates all things (Ricci 2016, para. 147) without becoming one with them.⁴⁸ More precisely, God has the attributes of non-physicality and omnipresence. Because God does not have physical form and is everywhere present, God resides in all things like the light of the sun in a crystal (Ricci 2016, paras. 235–37). However, just as the light and the crystal remain distinct in their substance and nature, so divine substance and nature are distinct from the nature and substance of things in which God resides (Ricci 2016, paras. 235–37).

Divinity as omnipresent spirit that permeates all things is similar to the way in which Su-un talks about vital energy in his middle stage work “Nonhakmun”: “Vacant and spiritual (虛靈), and vast as the blue expanse of the sky (蒼蒼), there is nothing it does not engage in, and nothing it does not ordain”.⁴⁹ Further, because Su-un identifies the Heavenly Lord with vital energy in the form of “the ghostly and the spiritual” in his middle stage works, serving the Heavenly Lord is described partly in terms of “having the divine spirit within” (內有神靈) in the “Nonhakmun”. Also, in the “Gyohunga”, Su-un says, “Do not believe me at all, but believe God (Hanulnim); you bear God in your own body, so why do you seek what is near in what is distant?”⁵⁰ However, in thus pervading everything and being inside them, vital energy in its refined form also becomes the inmost heart of each thing, and does not remain separate or distinct from the things it pervades. Thus, we come to the issue of Catholic dualism and the Confucian version of monism that characterizes Su-un’s middle stage works.

4.5. Dualism or Monism

The Catholic texts adhere to several forms of dualism or pluralism involving distinct substances. We have seen above that (i) God as spiritual being is distinct from human beings and other spiritual and material beings in the world. Further, (ii) individual substances are distinct from one another, and consequently there is a distinction of “self” and “other” among human beings (Ricci 2016, paras. 245–46). Finally, (iii) spiritual beings in general are distinct from material things, and our spiritual souls are distinct from our bodies (Ricci 2016, paras. 134, 206).

Thus, Ricci opposes the monistic position accepted by Confucians that all things form one body, which is stated by his imaginary Confucian interlocutor as follows:

Our scholars in ancient China . . . held to the great and unchangeable principle that whether things are large or small, their basic nature is organically one (一體). It is possible, therefore, to say that the [Heavenly Lord] who is the [Lord on High] is within all things and that he forms a unity with all things.⁵¹

We have already seen some indication of how Ricci would respond to this position. First, to identify divinity with humans and other kinds of things is to raise them to the level of God, and that is sinful hubris akin to that of Lucifer, indicating a lack of humility that is a key virtue in self-cultivation, and contrary to serving the Lord on High that is the object of self-cultivation (Ricci 2016, paras. 208, 213–14). Second, to identify oneself with others obviates the need for Confucian virtues such as benevolence (仁) and rightness (義), since benevolence is “the extension of one’s own feelings toward others” (己及人), and rightness is “the treatment of others who are aged or elder with deference and

⁴⁸ Indeed, later on in the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, when discussing the Catholic view of self-cultivation, Ricci writes, “the [Heavenly Lord] is constantly within things, and should therefore not be regarded as something external (天主常在物內 自不當外)” (Ricci 2016, para. 457).

⁴⁹ “氣者虛靈蒼蒼 無事不涉 無事不命” (“Nonhakmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 80; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 161).

⁵⁰ “나는 도시 믿지 말고 한울님을 믿어스라 / 네 몸에 모셨으니 사근취원 하단 말가” (“Gyohunga”, Choe 1996b, p. 59; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 182). Kallander (2013) takes this to be the first reference in Su-un’s vernacular texts to the idea that divinity is immanent in us (p. 182, n. 15).

⁵¹ “吾古之儒者 . . . 以物有巨微 其性一體 則曰天主上帝 在各物之內 而與物一” (Ricci 2016, para. 207).

brotherly respect” (人老老長長). If one’s self is identical with others, however, benevolence is reduced to self-love and rightness to self-service (Ricci 2016, para. 246).

It is certain that Su-un would have agreed with Ricci’s imaginary Confucian interlocutor rather than Ricci himself. On the basis of the monism of vital energy that Su-un accepted in the middle stage, the Heavenly Lord declares to Su-un “My heart is your heart”.⁵² Moreover, in his middle stage writings, Su-un advocated the ideal of “reverting together to form one body” (同歸一體). Earlier, before his revelatory encounter with the God, Su-un had written a poem titled “Ipchunsi” where he expressed his unwillingness to compromise his principles, and his determination “not to revert together with the multitude to worldly ways” (世間衆人不同歸). Later, in his middle stage work “Gyohunga”, Su-un describes God as chiding him for writing this poem, and for not understanding that all the countless masses “revert together to form one body” (Choe 2017, pp. 64–65). Contrasting with this monistic ideal is the divisive ideal of “self-interested concerns” (各自爲心) that prevailed in the world, which was identified even in his early stage work of “Podeokmun” as a problem. In the middle stage work “Mongjung Noso Mundapga” as well, Su-un identifies self-interested concerns as a problem that divided communities on the basis of different popular religious movements of his day, including indigenous Korean millenarian communities as well as Catholic communities (Beirne 2009, p. 80). Su-un believed that it was by reverting to form one body through the practice of “cultivating one’s heart and aligning one’s vital energy” (修心正氣) that the Confucian virtues of benevolence, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom (仁義禮智) can be sustained.⁵³ Benevolence and rightness, then, would be sustained precisely as self-concern for parts of the same body, and self-respect toward the higher divinity permeating that body. This is how Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhang Zai and Cheng Hao that we have seen in Section 3, who adopted a monism based on vital energy like Su-un, would have responded to Ricci.

Let us now look at the soul–body dualism found in Catholic works. The *Tianzhu Shiyi* distinguishes between three kinds of souls or divisions in the soul following the scholastic tradition, namely, the vegetative, the sentient, and the intellectual. Of these, the first two are destroyed when one’s body is destroyed, and the last, possessed only by humankind, is the soul that is separate from the body and is eternal (Ricci 2016, paras. 133–34). It also criticizes the monistic view that the souls are forms of vital energy. Unlike vital energy, souls are not dispersed after death (Ricci 2016, paras. 188–90). Thus, it is clear that Su-un, given his monism of vital energy in the middle stage, would have rejected the scholastic view of soul-body dualism and the eternity of the soul. In his 21-character incantation, there is mention of remembering “forever” (永世) to serve the Heavenly Lord and to allow the creative transformation of nature become settled in oneself, but this “forever” is glossed as meaning “throughout one’s life” (平生) in the “Nonhakmun”. Su-un also mentions that he is “immortal” (不死 or 長生) in several of his early and middle stage works. In the early stage works, this talk of immortality is linked to elements of popular religious Daoism, i.e., associated with references to an “elixir of immortality” (不死藥) or “celestial medicine” (仙藥), and linked to the practice of burning talismans and drinking the ashes dissolved in water (Beirne 2009, pp. 77–79; Kallander 2013, p. 65). Although these elements are present to some extent in middle stage works, specifically the “Nonhakmun” and the “Sudeokmun”, in these works the talk of immortality appears to be linked to the following incantation labeled the “Master’s (Su-un’s) Incantation”:

至氣今至四月來

Ultimate energy being here and now, it arrived in the fourth lunar month.

侍天主令我長生無窮無窮萬事知

⁵² “吾心即汝心也” (“Nonhakmun”, Choe 1996a, p. 64; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 160).

⁵³ “수심정기 하여 내어 인의예지 지켜 두고” (“Dodeokga”, Choe 1996b, p. 218).

Serving the Heavenly Lord, I am granted immortality, and being limitless, I shall know all things.⁵⁴

Here, it is clear that Su-un's immortality, limitlessness, and omniscience is attained through identification with the divinity that indwells in him in the form of ultimate energy. They are not attributes of an individual soul that is independent of divine being in the dualistic sense accepted by the scholastic tradition.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study first divided Su-un's thought into three stages: early, middle, and late. The early stage is marked by an understanding of divinity that resembles the Catholic idea of God as the creator and controller of the natural order, and higher personal being that intervenes in human history out of concern for the world. This early stage was shaped by Su-un's encounter with the Catholic tradition available to him at the time through scholastic catechisms and vernacular songs, and through his theistic experience of meeting a divine being that chose him to carry out the mission of enlightening the people. The middle stage is marked by the emergence of a pantheistic understanding of divinity informed by a monism of vital energy (氣, Ch. *qi*, Kr. *gi*) side by side with the earlier theistic experience and understanding of divinity.

Next, the study associated Su-un's monism of vital energy with the Confucian tradition, and placed Su-un's thought in the context of this Confucian tradition of *qi*-based monism. Then, it compared Su-un's thought with the scholastic doctrines that were available to Su-un through his encounter with the Catholic tradition. This comparison explored similarities and differences between Catholic doctrines and Su-un's thought along five axes of comparison. It now remains for us to present the results of this comparison as a fusion of horizons, or dialogue between Catholic and Confucian traditions in Su-un's historically effected consciousness, identifying the points of agreement and disagreement between the two sides, and the creative tension that marked Su-un's thought in its late stage.

Among the Catholic text sources that were available to Su-un, Ricci's *Tianzhu Shiyi* is notable for engaging in dialogue with the Confucian tradition, explicitly noting similarities and differences with Confucian doctrines. The most notable similarity is belief in a theistic form of divinity, which on the Confucian side is represented by the idea of the "Lord on High" (上帝, Ch. Shangdi) or "Heaven" (天, Ch. Tian) found in the ancient Confucian classics, a supreme being that governs the natural order and confers political and moral authority to virtuous rulers and individuals. There are also similarities with the later Confucian tradition that naturalized the idea of divinity as immanent in the things of the world, as the Catholic tradition accepted that God, being spiritual and omnipresent, is present in all things. Moreover, even the later Confucian tradition understood the indwelling presence of divinity as a higher being, an ennobling presence that is worthy of respect.

Therefore, both Catholic and Confucian traditions agreed that divinity is both immanent and transcendent, immanent in the sense of being everywhere and indwelling in all things as spirit, and transcendent in the sense of being a higher presence worthy of reverence. Nonetheless, Catholic and Confucian traditions disagreed on two key points. First, the Catholic scholastic tradition held a dualistic or pluralistic view of substances, in particular accepting the duality of divine being and other substances, whereas the Confucian tradition accepted various forms of monism, in particular the unity of divinity with the inmost essence of humans and other things in the world. Second, the Catholic scholastic tradition maintained that divinity is the transcendent cause of the world, serving both as the intelligent agent that created the world out of nothing, and the ultimate end toward which all things in the world are directed. By contrast, the monistic Confucian tradition accepted a view of divinity as the immanent cause of the world, with the vital energy of the Ultimateless or the pattern of the Supreme

⁵⁴ In "Jumun", Choe (1996a), p. 197; cf. Beirne (2009), p. 117, and Kallander (2013), p. 168.

Ultimate naturally unfolding into all the variegated kinds of things in the world through spontaneous transformation, without the guidance of any preestablished end or purpose.

The points of agreement or convergence between Catholic and Confucian traditions remained fixtures in Donghak thought, being preserved in Haewol's writings as the ethical doctrine of serving other persons just as we would serve Heaven (事人如天). The points of disagreement or divergence between the two traditions became a source of creative tension in Su-un's thought, the nonoverlapping areas in the fusion of two horizons that broadened the sense of creative possibilities.

Why, for instance, did Su-un revert to a *qi*-based monism predating the introduction of the dualistic monism of *li* and *qi* by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, especially given that the Cheng–Zhu school was the dominant form of Neo-Confucianism in Su-un's day and age? Here, we can suggest that this bold move was made in order to overcome the creative tension between Catholic dualism and the Confucianism of his day. The *Tianzhu Shiyi* criticized the Cheng–Zhu identification of the pattern as the Supreme Ultimate, and this Supreme Ultimate with the divinity of the Lord on High (Ricci 2016, paras. 77–81). In the scholastic tradition, the patterns in different substances were considered to be accidents that depended for their existence on substances, and thus could not exist independently. If so, then the Supreme Ultimate as pattern could not be the source of all things. Su-un refers to the Supreme Ultimate only once in his early and middle stage works, and this is in the early stage work "Podeokmun". In his middle stage works, Su-un refers instead to the Ultimateless Great Way. Thus, it is possible that Su-un in his middle stage rejected the Cheng–Zhu identification of the Ultimateless with the Supreme Ultimate, and turned to the unitary vital energy of the Ultimateless to overcome the sort of difficulty noted in the *Tianzhu Shiyi*. As noted earlier, however, Su-un appears to adopt the *li*–*qi* talk of the Cheng–Zhu orthodoxy in his late stage works. For instance, the "Tando Yusim Geup" talks about reverting together to the one pattern (同歸一理), which sounds more like the Supreme Ultimate than the Ultimateless. This sudden change in Su-un's parlance may not bespeak a genuine evolution in his thought, but rather a felt need to toe the orthodox line in the face of increased investigation of Su-un's activities by government authorities. Or, perhaps, it reflects a creative reinterpretation of the Neo-Confucian concept of pattern as the intelligent first cause of natural and moral order. Below, it is suggested that the latter alternative is more likely.

Having discussed the creative tension between Catholic dualism and Confucian monism in Su-un's thought, we come now to the creative tension between the Catholic view of divinity as the transcendent cause of the world, and the Confucian monistic view of the same as the immanent cause of the world through spontaneous transformation. In the early stage work "Podeokmun", Su-un appears to have been particularly impressed with the Thomistic argument for the existence of God as the intelligent cause of the natural order found in the world. The middle stage work "Nonhakmun" expresses an ambivalence between the existence of a supreme intelligent being and the spontaneous agency of vital energy as the explanation for the orderly arrangement of the universe. In the late stage work "Buryeon Giyeon", this ambivalence is developed into an antinomy of "It is so" (其然, Ch. *qiran*, Kr. *giyeon*) and "It is not so" (不然, Ch. *buran*, Kr. *buryeon*).

On the one hand, when we seek the reason why something is so in terms of something else that is so, we must seek the reason why that something else is so in terms of yet another thing that is so, and so on through a chain of things that are so (其然其然又其然). It appears that this chain of things that are so can go on forever in prospect, e.g., I can bear human children that will bear human children that will bear human children, ad infinitum, but in retrospect there must have been some indiscernible point in the remote past when humans first arose out of non-humans to become humans. On the other hand, when we seek the reason why something is so in terms of something else that is not so, it is utterly mysterious how what is so can arise from what is not so. Something that is not so will only give rise to something else that is not so, and so on through a chain of things that are not so (不然不然又不然). Su-un illustrates this antinomy with the following example. From the Sinocentric point of view, when we trace the human rulers and teachers back into the past, we arrive at the first ruler and teacher who instituted and taught sociopolitical institutions, the Yellow Emperor (天皇氏). But how did he

come by this knowledge of sociopolitical institutions? When we provide an explanation in terms of what is so, we must say that he had it as innate knowledge, and when we provide an explanation in terms of what is not so, we must say the knowledge arose through spontaneous transformation.

Ultimately, this antinomy of “It is so” and “It is not so” pits the idea of the Creator (造物者) against the idea of spontaneous transformation (無爲化) as the source of all things in the world. Su-un cites examples of the natural order following unchanging patterns, insentient objects following natural inclinations, and nonrational animals and human babies displaying intelligence through innate knowledge or ability. These are exactly the sort of cases mentioned in the *Tianzhu Shiyi* to argue that a supremely intelligent creator and controller must have brought them about (Ricci 2016, paras. 29–31). In short, the scholastic reasoning here is that what is so cannot come from what is not so, and thus signs of intelligence cannot derive from what is non-intelligent. Therefore, there must be an intelligent creator. It appears that Su-un accepted this line of reasoning as one side of his antinomy. It should also be noted that the term “Creator” (造物者) that is used in the “Buryeon Giyeon” is also used in the *Tianzhu Shiyi*, suggesting that Su-un’s use of this term was influenced by the latter.⁵⁵

Therefore, in Su-un’s antinomy, the thesis of “It is so” is supported by scholastic reasoning that terminates in an intelligent Creator. The antithesis of “It is not so” is undergirded by Su-un’s version of Confucian monism based on the spontaneous transformation of vital energy. It is a pity that Su-un did not get a chance to fully develop a synthesis that overcame this antinomy, because he was executed a few months after writing the “Buryeon Giyeon”. Nonetheless, we may speculate on the synthesis that Su-un was working toward. Earlier on in the essay, while developing the thesis of “It is so” against the antithesis of “It is not so” based on spontaneous transformation, Su-un writes, “Even if we speak of it in terms of [spontaneous] transformation, there is pattern [理] far away in the vast expanse”.⁵⁶ Above we have mentioned Su-un’s talk of “reverting back to the one pattern” in another late stage essay, “Tando Yusim Geup”. This essay also makes a passing reference to “it is not so and yet it is so” (不然而其然), so the references to pattern in these two late stage essays are likely connected. In short, the pattern mentioned in these essays is the Supreme Ultimate conceived as a supreme intelligent being, the Creator at the remote source of the “It is so” series. But this Supreme Ultimate is nested in the vast expanse of vital energy,⁵⁷ which is the Ultimateless that exists prior to the Supreme Ultimate.

It was noted in Section 2 that Su-un’s successor Haewol reverted to the orthodox Neo-Confucian framework of pattern and vital energy. Here, we see a possible reason for this development: Su-un himself introduced talk of pattern in his late stage writings. Nonetheless, it appears that this pattern-talk was a reference to the intelligent first cause understood as the Supreme Ultimate, and that it was both temporally and metaphysically posterior to primordial vital energy conceived as the Ultimateless. Therefore, contrary to Haewol who stated that pattern is prior and vital energy is posterior (先理後氣),⁵⁸ it seems likely that Su-un would have stated the opposite.

This is an opportune moment to discuss the suggestion made by Kim (2011) that Su-un’s view of divinity is better described as pantheism rather than panentheism, and that all talk of divinity as “Heavenly Lord” or “Lord on High” should be construed as personification of ultimate energy (至氣). According to this suggestion, Su-un’s understanding of divinity matured from that of a transcendent and supernatural personal being to that of vital energy that permeates the world and is immanent in us as a spiritual presence. This maturation in understanding is achieved through self-cultivation. In

⁵⁵ *Zaowuzhe* (造物者, Kr. *jomulja*), the term used in the *Tianzhu Shiyi* to mean the “Creator”, literally means the “Maker of Things”. The *Jugyo Yoji* and the *Sahyangga* use different terms for “Creator”, the first using *changjoju* (創造主, Ch. *chuangzaozhu*), which means “Lord of Creation”, and the second using *jomul jinju* (造物眞主, Ch. *zaowu zhenzhu*), which means “True Lord of Creation”. This raises the likelihood that Su-un had in mind the arguments for the existence of God found in the *Tianzhu Shiyi* when writing the “Buryeon Giyeon”.

⁵⁶ “以化而言之 理遠於茫茫之間” (“Buryeon Giyeon”, Choe 1996a, p. 176; cf. Kallander 2013, p. 167).

⁵⁷ Recall the following explanation of vital energy from Su-un’s middle stage work “Nonhakmun”: “Vacant and spiritual, and vast as the blue expanse of the sky, there is nothing it does not engage in, and nothing it does not ordain”.

⁵⁸ See n. 17 above.

the beginning stage of self-cultivation, divinity is experienced as an external personal being, and in the later stages, as an immanent presence within oneself, then as sharing one and the same heart, and finally as one's own inmost spiritual being (Kim 2011, pp. 52–53, 55–57).

This suggestion is plausible especially because it takes into account the evolution of Su-un's thought over time, explaining it in terms of the developmental stages of self-cultivation. Nonetheless, Su-un's late stage work "Buryeon Giyeon" indicates that he was still attracted to the scholastic arguments for the existence of God as first cause and as intelligent source of things in the world. Thus, it appears that Su-un's position in the late stage is best described as a form of panentheism, and the hypothesis put forward in this paper is that Su-un's mature theology may have been a theism of intelligent pattern nested within a pantheism of vital energy. This intelligent pattern, the Supreme Ultimate identified with the Heavenly Lord, can be encountered as a higher being both outside and within oneself, outside as the first cause of signs of intelligence found in the world, within as the intelligent spirit that can enter into communion with the intelligible order of the world. This idea of intelligent pattern would have been surprising to Ricci, who argued in the *Tianzhu Shiyi* that pattern lacks intelligence and consciousness, and therefore the Supreme Ultimate as pattern could not have created all the intelligence and consciousness that we find in the world (Ricci 2016, para. 91).

The "Buryeon Giyeon" is perhaps the most difficult of Su-un's texts, and divergent readings of the essay have been offered by scholars, for instance by Kim (1999, 2008). Resemblance between this essay and Catholic catechisms or between the arguments presented in this essay and the cosmological arguments in scholastic philosophy have been noted in the literature (Kallander 2013, p. 75; Kim 1999, p. 39), but to my knowledge no attempt has been made in the literature to situate and explicate the contents of the essay in relation to actual sources in the Catholic and Confucian tradition that could have influenced Su-un's thought. The attempt provided here makes sense of most if not all of the obscure details in the text, and does so by placing it in its proper context both within Su-un's thought, and in relation to the traditions that shaped his thought. I suggest that this result provides a validation of the historical and comparative approach adopted in this study, namely, that of understanding Su-un's thought as the product of a dialogue between the Catholic scholastic and the Confucian monistic traditions.

There are of course some limitations to this study. As mentioned in Section 2, notable Korean Neo-Confucian thinkers in the 18th and the 19th centuries engaged in dialogue with the *Tianzhu Shiyi* and other Catholic works (Baker 1983; Chung 2018), and it is possible that Su-un was influenced by this literature as well. As potential proximal influencers of Su-un's thought, it will be worthwhile to examine the works of these Neo-Confucian thinkers in relation to early Donghak in a follow-up study. Meanwhile, the justification for focusing on sources in the Confucian tradition that are much further removed in time from Su-un's own day and age is that these are the sources that Su-un is likely to have encountered in the village school and under his father's tutelage, which continued only up to the age of 16 when his father passed away and his father's library was destroyed in a fire (Beirne 2009, p. 21). Further, Yi Tonhwa, a Cheondogyo leader and editor of *Cheondogyo Changgeonsa* (天道教創建史), mentions that both Su-un and Haewol practiced quiet-sitting (靜坐, Ch. *jingzuo*, Kr. *jeongjwa*), which was a Neo-Confucian meditational practice (Shin 1979, p. 16). Toegye practiced this form of meditation as part of a self-cultivational regimen called "abiding in reverence" (居敬, Ch. *jujing*, Kr. *geogyeyong*) (De Bary 1981, pp. 198–99), which in turn was part of the Learning of the Heart (心學) mentioned in passing in Section 3. It is possible that Su-un inherited this practice from his father Choe Ok who belonged to the Toegye school, and it seems worthwhile to investigate the possible connection between the Learning of the Heart tradition and Su-un's thought.

It is hoped that the present study provides a "proof of concept" of the comparative historical approach employed in it, and that ever more rigorous applications of this approach will lead to a richer understanding of later developments in Donghak and Cheondogyo, as well as various other

new religions⁵⁹ that emerged in Korea's modern history and the relationships between them.⁶⁰ Further, it is an essential task of any living tradition to engage in continuous dialogue with other traditions and with its own past in an ever-widening fusion of disparate horizons, and it is hoped that this study makes a small but significant contribution to this grand ongoing dialogue.

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⁵⁹ Representative new thought and religions that emerged in Korea since the mid-19th century include Donghak (Cheondoism) founded by Choi-Je-u, Jeongyeok (正易, "Right Changes") founded by Gim Hang (金恒), Jeung San Do (甌山道, "the Way of Jeungsan") founded by Gang Ilsun (姜一淳), Daejonggyo (大倥教, "Religion of the Great Progenitor") founded by Na Cheol (羅喆), and Won Buddhism (圓佛敎) founded by Bak Jungbin (朴重彬). See [Park \(2020\)](#), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Among comparative studies on the new religions that emerged in modern Korea, the most representative is [Park \(2002\)](#). In this study, Park compares Cheondoism, Jeungsanism, and Won Buddhism with a focus on rituals.

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