

**Politics and Truth:**  
***An Analysis of Richard E. Kim's Novel,***  
**The Martyred**

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**Abstract**

*In his novel, The Martyred, Richard E. Kim, a Korean-American novelist, raises fascinating questions with regard to politics and truth: (1) Is it possible to uphold Christian truth in the contemporary condition? And, (2) is it desirable to reveal the ugly truth to the masses regardless of its possible impact upon our political community? While the first question is concerned with religious, transcendental truth, the second takes issue with factual truth. These two questions are intertwined in such a complex and intricate way in the novel that it is difficult to unravel the two in a compelling way. This essay analyzes the relationship between politics and truth in terms of these two issues that have been addressed throughout the novel.*

**Keywords:** politics, truth, justice, symbolic action, *The Martyred*, deception, self-deception, lying, theodicy

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## Introduction

In his novel, *The Martyred*, Richard E. Kim, a Korean-American novelist, raises fascinating questions with regard to politics and truth: (1) Is it possible to uphold the Christian truth in the contemporary condition? And, (2) is it desirable to reveal the ugly truth to the masses regardless of its possible impact upon our political community? While the first question is concerned with religious, transcendental truth, the second takes issue with factual truth. These two questions are intertwined in such a complex and intricate way in the novel that it is difficult to unravel them in a compelling way. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the relationship between politics and truth in terms of these two issues that have been addressed throughout the novel. From these issues arise a series of additional, important questions. What has been the relation of truth to politics in the Western political tradition? What is the status of truth in the contemporary political world? What is the value of truth for the political community? How has the conflict between politics and truth been manifested and resolved? Why do our political leaders have to deceive people in their name? What kind of contribution does deception make, in its best form, to our political community? How can we confirm the sincere motives that underlie the deceptions of our political leaders? I may not be able to discuss all these questions fully in this essay, but I will attempt to examine them insofar as they illuminate Kim's novel, *The Martyred*. Though my purpose is not to provide answers to all of them, I would be satisfied if my serious engagement with them through analysis of *The Martyred* could raise the quality of the questions for thoughtful readers.

### A Brief Summary of *The Martyred*

Before entering into this analysis, a brief summary of *The Martyred* seems mandatory for those who have not read it. The basic question, the magnetic center of the novel, is whether it is desirable to reveal

the truth about twelve ministers who were executed by North Korean communists on the day the Korean War started. Fourteen prominent ministers in North Korea had been arrested by the communists a week before the war broke out. After the United Nations forces and the South Korean army captured Pyongyang [Pyeongyang], the capital city of North Korea, South Korean army intelligence started an investigation of the missing ministers with the motivation to exhibit to the entire world a grave case of religious persecution by the communists. That is to say, it was initiated with the political purpose of revealing communist atrocities and inhumanities.

But as the investigation was to ultimately show, the twelve martyred did not die saintly and heroic deaths, contrary to initial assumptions. According to Major Jung, a North Korean communist involved in the execution who was later captured by South Korean army intelligence, these so-called great heroes and martyrs died like dogs, denouncing their God and one another and submitting to the torture and interrogation of the communists. Only two ministers, Mr. Hann and Mr. Shin, escaped execution. Mr. Hann was the protege of Reverend Park, the leader of the fourteen ministers, who was executed with the eleven ministers. Reverend Park, however, refused to pray to an unjust God just before the execution when the ministers asked him to pray for them. When Hann saw Park betraying his God and later heard from Shin about the secret of his faith—atheism—Hann collapsed in devastated despair, and lost his mind. This is the primary reason “the Reds” spared his life. But Shin put up a good fight, never submitting to the Reds’ torture, and was spared the executioners’ bullets out of their admiration for his courage.

Here arises a problem. For, despite the surprising discovery of the unheroic deaths of the twelve ministers, the military authority represented by Colonel Chang did not flinch from the original plan for the joint memorial service for the martyred, but continued to carry it out. Main characters in the novel were thus divided into opposing camps; Colonel Chang, the Chief of Army Political Intelligence, was the primary proponent and executer of the service. He thought that, in the end, both Christians and the military fought the

communists. He liked to use the twelve martyrs as a symbol of suffering Christians and their eventual triumph over the Reds. He sought to use them as tools of political propaganda, having little interest in their martyrdom itself. To the surprise of all the characters, Shin would ultimately approve the joint memorial service and willingly cooperate in the plan. Chaplain Koh, Captain Lee (an Army Intelligence officer and narrator of the novel), and Captain Park (son of Reverend Park) were vehemently opposed to the plan, asserting that religious martyrdom could not be manufactured by political fiat. But later, both Park and Koh, deeply moved by Shin's exemplary actions and sermons, changed their minds and joined the memorial service. Captain Lee remained the most adamant opponent to the plan, advocating that the truth should be revealed regardless of its consequences.

After the announcement of the joint (military and religious) memorial service for the martyrs was made, the martyrdom of the twelve ministers became a *fait accompli* and the presence of Shin at the scene of the execution became known to the public. As a consequence, Shin's fortunate survival became an object of growing suspicion by the Christians and angry Christian crowds rushed to his house and mocked him, surrounding it and chanting "Judas!" Therefore, he withdrew at once to another local city and declared that he would resign from his ministry. But as he continued to witness the suffering and misery of people in the countryside during his retreat, he changed his mind and decided to join the memorial service. In that service and a series of following revival services, he glorified the twelve martyrs and humiliated himself as a sinner who had not been strong enough to endure the torture and follow their example.

Shin, Chang, and Captain Park died at the end of the novel. After the Chinese intervention in the war, the U.N. and South Korean armies retreated from Pyongyang. Shin refused to leave Pyongyang, despite Lee's repeated admonitions to do so. Thus, he was arrested and thrown in jail after the Chinese arrived. But there were conflicting rumors about his last days. Some said that he was executed in Pyongyang, while the majority of North Korean refugees said they

had seen him almost everywhere in North Korea. Colonel Chang, too, died a heroic death. He sacrificed himself to save his raiding party and went beyond the call of duty during a secret operation in North Korea. Park was severely wounded on the front and died in a hospital. Chaplain Koh, after being discharged from military service, opened a church in Pusan [Busan] for North Korean refugees. Lee, the most adamant truth-teller throughout the novel, went outside after a visit to Koh's church to attend his service, and while watching the night sky, experienced a mysterious feeling of re-enchantment with the universe, similar to the way Meursault did in Camus's *The Stranger*.<sup>1</sup>

Even if I tried to make this short summary more intelligible, ambiguity and haziness would still remain about the genuine circumstances under which the twelve were murdered and the two survived. This may show Kim's literary genius. The truth about the twelve martyred was gradually revealed, albeit in a fragmentary form. How the fourteen ministers conducted themselves in the face of torture and execution was never clearly revealed. What a reader can do to comprehend the whole situation is to patch together fragments of the truth, which are unveiled in conversations between the main characters—in the form of subjective opinions, memories, and political propaganda—rather than through detached objective observation. This shows how fragile and perishable factual truth really is and how much it depends upon human memory, as I shall discuss later.

As a novelist, Kim describes the mysterious nature of truth in a literary form, i.e., symbolically in the form of a clanging bell, the bell tower, and various characters' attitudes towards them. The bell tower was located in Reverend Park's church, the Central Presbyterian Church, which was almost completely destroyed by bombing. It brings different meanings and messages to the characters in the novel, depending upon their position towards the truth. The lonely

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1. Actually, Richard Kim dedicated his novel to Albert Camus, "whose insight into 'a strange form of love' overcame for me the nihilism of the trenches and bunkers of Korea."

clanging of the bell sounded mysterious and revelatory about the martyred to Captain Lee, who was curious about it as a truth-seeker. The clanging of the bell invoked a sense of religious awe and worship to ordinary people who did not know about the martyred. Also, a man, during his conversation with Lee, unwittingly suggested the symbolic relationship between the bell tower and the truth about the twelve martyred, saying "Nobody touches it [the bell]. The wind comes and rings the bell. . . . You can't get up there [to the bell tower]. The stairway is almost gone, and it's too dangerous to use a ladder. The tower may crumble at any moment" (Kim 1964, 24).

However, the clanging of the bell sounded intolerably irritating to Colonel Chang who tried to present the twelve ministers as religious martyrs by any means necessary in order to use them for political propaganda. Hann, the crazy young minister, visited this place to pray, a scene that would remind us of the fact that his mentor, the Reverend Park, had refused to pray in his final moments. Later, when the twelve martyred became known to the public, the Central Presbyterian Church became a pilgrimage site for Christians. But when the Chinese and the North Korean communists took over Pyongyang, it was completely destroyed. Moreover, the contrast between Mr. Shin's church, which had been preserved almost intact, and Reverend Park's church, which had been all but destroyed, seemed to symbolize the differences between Park and Shin in their faith and fate. Thus, in a literary and symbolic form, Kim describes the predicament of the religious and factual truths in the contemporary world, the topic to which I now turn.

### **Truth and the Modern Predicament**

Before we analyze the relationship of truth to politics, I would like to divide truth into three categories: rational, religious/philosophical, and factual.<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between rational

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2. I shall use this distinction for the sake of convenience without examining its intrinsic legitimacy, insofar as it is useful to my analysis in this essay.

and factual truths in her famous essay, "Truth and Politics." But I would like to add one more category of truth, religious/philosophical truth, for the purpose of this essay. According to Arendt, rational truth includes mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truths. For example, Euclidean mathematics, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Plato's doctrine of ideas belong to the category of rational truth. For Arendt, rational truth can be arrived at by solid reasoning and experiment. Factual truth is concerned with everyday events, historical facts, and our opinions, all of which are dependent upon memory, either collective or personal (Arendt 1977, 231).<sup>3</sup> Finally, religious/philosophical truth is disclosed or known to humans by philosophical speculation and divine revelation. Although Arendt classifies philosophical truths as part of rational truth, it seems to me that most philosophical truths form another independent category. For although some philosophical truths may approach "rational" truth, most of these—for example, one might recall Plato's doctrine of ideas, social contract theory, or natural law doctrine—and so-called religious truths cannot be verified by solid reasoning and experiment. Thus, they rather belong to an independent category, which might also be called truths that are transcendental or metaphysical.

If we consider the relationships of the three kinds of truths to political power, we find that political power cannot do away with rational and philosophical/religious truths such as Newtonian physics, Plato's doctrine of ideas, or the Christian doctrine of salvation. Yet factual truth is less able to survive the distortions made by political power. According to Arendt, "Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories—even the most widely speculative ones—produced by the human mind: they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men . . ." (Arendt 1977, 231). Thus, she notes, "The chances of factual truth surviving the

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3. Thus, Arendt attributes the origin of Western historiography to humans' attempt to preserve factual truth—the spoken words, all the actions and deeds that go on between mortals directly—from vanishing from our mortal memories (Arendt 1977, 41-43).

onslaught of power, therefore, are very slim; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever" (Arendt 1977, 231). Once facts and events are lost, no rational effort will bring them back. Of course, the chances of recovering rational truths, in case they are lost, may not be good, either. Yet they have far better chances of recovery than do factual truths, for the former are rational, and depend upon solid reasoning, while the latter are contingent in nature and depend upon ever-shifting memories for their existence (Arendt, 1977, 231-232).

In the modern age, while rational truth has been widely welcomed and respected with the impressive development of modern sciences and technologies, transcendental and factual truths have been confronted with unprecedented difficulties. Then what is the modern predicament of truths, both transcendental and factual? In the premodern age, humans believed that their universe was created, ordered, and guarded by God (a transcendental Being) and that political society was embedded in that universe. And they placed themselves at the center of the universe as a partaker in a stable, divine order. In other words, they thought that if only they could pattern their political society after metaphysical principles such as Platonic ideas, the *tao* (道), the Mandate of Heaven (天命), the law of nature, absolute reason, and other transcendental truths/principles, they would secure a stable and harmonious political order that had been found to always be in constant flux and subject to ever-shifting change. For premodern humans, such metaphysical truths meant discovery of a pre-established order that existed outside humans independently. Since they held the notion that "man's cognitive apparatus did not itself basically condition the quality and nature of what was known, . . . discoveries made by the methods of science, philosophy, and theology were not fabrications of the human mind, but faithful reflections or representations of an order independent of the discoverer" (Schaar 1981, 28).

But the unprecedented growth of secularism, science, and technology since the nineteenth century have unmasked and eclipsed all illusions about ourselves, metaphysical truths, and any transcenden-

tal order. It has exposed ourselves and the world we inhabit to stark nakedness. Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein have also led us to entertain a profound distrust of all religions, ideologies, and other metaphysical absolute standards. All truths, including scientific ones, are no longer “discovered” and are not free from the suspect of the fabrication of the human mind. Today, hardly anybody takes such metaphysical or transcendental truths seriously enough to stake one’s life on or to interfere with worldly affairs.<sup>4</sup> Rather the poignancy of the modern predicament lies in the paradox that human experiences suddenly become divested of their stable meaning and chaotic as a result of the loss of our belief in metaphysical truths that used to provide stable settings and standards for our actions. Despite our craving for order and transcendent meaning, we have to accept that the world has no absolute God-given meaning. After all, our world itself is dependent upon our fragile practices and conventions (Pitkin 1972, 316-319). This predicament of the transcendental truth in a post-Nietzschean, godless world is presented vividly in *The Martyred* as well, as I shall examine later.

On the contrary, the tension between political power and factual truth has been on the rise in the contemporary world. The deliberate lying about factual truth by political leaders is not new to modern society. Their lies were, however, made regarding particular facts and towards their enemy (Arendt 1977, 253). But the trend in lying about the factual truth with the advent of mass society is, as Arendt points out, the prevalence of “organized lying,” “defactualization,” “rewriting contemporary history,” and “image-making of all sorts” by political power (Arendt 1977, 251-252). Modern political lies deal with “things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody” (Arendt 1977, 252). In short, they are made for domestic consumption. All these lies are intended as full-fledged substitutes for reality, through constant indoctrination and mass propaganda. It is

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4. Therefore, we might say that the age-old conflict between philosophy and politics—between the two opposed ways of life—which had persisted since the beginning of political philosophy has been resolved by the sheer impotence and irrelevance of metaphysical truths as the guide of human action (Arendt 1977, 232-236).

the development of modern communications technology and the mass media that makes possible such systematic destruction of factual truths or the very texture of our life. Such need for massive political lies is particularly strong during wars or revolutionary struggles for the purpose of attracting mass support or deluding people. *The Martyred* deals with the precarious fate of factual truth at the hands of modern political power in a Korean context, that is, during the Korean War.

### **The Tension between Politics and Transcendental Truth in *The Martyred***

The tension between unjust politics that plague the world and transcendental (Christian) truth permeates *The Martyred*. Indeed, this main theme of the novel constitutes its dynamic tension. All the main characters were fundamentally disturbed witnessing the horror and injustice, hunger and sickness, and sudden meaningless death that the war brought to the Korean people. Whether they were Christian or not, they were struggling with the question, "Why must there be so much injustice and misery in the world? Why must we suffer?" as Captain Park put it (Kim 1964, 227). Mr. Shin was also deeply agonized by the injustice plaguing his country. Thus, the Christian truth that we have to suffer to prove our faith in God was on serious trial during the war, confronted with the stark injustice suffered by the Korean people. Thus, when Lee asked on their first meeting, "your God—is he aware of the suffering of his people?" Shin could not answer (Kim 1964, 37).

Furthermore, Shin simply attributed his survival to "divine intervention" and then had to immediately amend that, saying "Then call it luck," if Lee did not believe in God (Kim 1964, 33-34). On another occasion Shin told Lee that his fortunate survival was a "near-miracle," but he conceded that "miracle is a difficult word to understand these days" (Kim 1964, 55). What makes a certain event a miracle in the eyes of a Christian is her faith—"Faith will move a mountain." So

he implicitly suggested that his faith was not solid. He may have even been scornful of his survival. In his later encounter with Lee, Shin finally confessed to Lee the secret of his faith, "All my life I have searched for God, Captain, but I found only man with all his sufferings . . . death, inexorable death! . . . Nothing! Nothing!" (Kim 1964, 256). Thus, beneath the immeasurable serenity he maintained in appearance lay a terrible agony tormenting him.

Mr. Shin had actually revealed his un-Christian faith to his wife and Hann before, albeit to disastrous effect. He once resented his wife's slavish devotion to God and her pitiful prayers, when after the death of her child she blamed the loss on her sins, spending all her time praying and fasting. Thus, he told her that they would never see their child again and that there would be, indeed, no afterlife. She could not bear his horrible remark and died in despair. Despite his pledge never to reveal his secret, however, he again revealed his doubts about God to Hann, again with disastrous results. After making two fatal blunders, it was natural that he should decide never to disclose his personal doubts.

While continuously praying to God, Shin seemed to despair that God's truth seemed irrelevant to justice in the world, that is, sufferings here and now. If the injustices plaguing the world were not connected to the ultimate and eternal justice (truth) of God through our unshakable faith, then the sufferings of this world lose much of their meaning. In other words, Shin was suffering from what Max Weber has called the "age-old problem of theodicy," that is, "the very question of how it is that a power which is said to be at once omnipotent and kind could have created such an irrational world of undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice, and hopeless stupidity" (Weber 1958, 122). Thus Shin was possessed of a fundamental skepticism about the inscrutability of God's justice. Out of despair, he had lost his faith and ceased to believe in God, as he confessed to Lee.

However, the fact that Mr. Shin remained a minister despite his skepticism and doubt about God, shows that he acted like Camus's Sisyphus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tries to overcome the modern predicament of the world of godlessness and to reinstate the dig-

nity of humankind by assuming an attitude both absurd and heroic:

If the myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. . . . Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (Camus 1955, 119-121).

Camus's Sisyphus represents mortals' tragic awareness of universal pain in life. His Sisyphus conquers an unintelligible and cruel fate by consciously scorning it. Camus even goes so far as to cry, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1955, 123). He also provides Sisyphus with the unequivocal strength to stand alone.

Then, are the masses capable of bearing this enormous burden of absurd truth—the tragic awareness of the universal pain and suffering in life—and standing alone? Should Shin let the masses face such a universe, one torn apart by a meaningless internecine war and a maddening ideological confrontation, without illusions? On this issue, Shin, Koh, and Chang parted company with Captain Lee. When he returned to Pyongyang from the countryside and joined the joint memorial service, resuming his ministry, Shin had already decided to actively lie to his congregation in order to give them the illusion of eternal hope—that there is an eternal kingdom of God, and ultimate justice. Now his main concern was switched from God's eternal life to the life here and now, i.e. his people's survival during a devastating war. The salvation of human souls by God became much irrelevant a scheme to Shin. Thus, in his case, the tension between humans' craving for justice here and now and the Christian truth that one must suffer to prove one's faith in God was resolved only by giving humans the illusion of eternal justice, instead of telling the horrible truth of his atheism.

In contrast, Lee stubbornly insisted that the ugly factual truth about the twelve murdered ministers, which might ultimately undermine Christian faith in God, be exposed to the public, regardless of

the impact such exposure would have upon the masses and Christianity itself. Lee was also suffering from the naked brutality of the war whose purpose he could never justify. He was questioning the justice of God, horrified by the meaningless, devastating war. But he was enduring the sufferings without relying upon the illusion of an afterlife or transcendental truth. Therefore, he insisted that all human beings, without exception and exemption, must equally learn to live with and face a godless world and meaningless life. He wanted to believe that the masses were capable of doing so. He was quite suspicious and critical of all pretensions, noble lies, and myth which, cloaking harsh reality, made life appear softer, tolerable, and even meaningful. He might have argued that it was this pleasing illusion that justified and perpetuated human suffering, misery, and self-deception. The first step to put an end to them, he would assert, was to liberate the masses from such illusions and pretensions.

Basically Lee argues that all people must act like Camus's Sisyphus. In making such arguments, however, Lee does not consider the frailties and weakness of human beings or their differing capacities to meet such heroic tasks. His assertion does not take concrete situations into consideration. Whenever he was asked what he would do if he were in others' situation, he merely said that the "Truth must be told." There is no reference to concrete human actors in the flesh or particular circumstances in his assertion. Thus, Lee's uncompromising attitude was made clear in Captain Park's accusation: "You only say you understand them. You view their sufferings and their despair in a detached, intellectual way precisely because you are merely a sympathetic observer" (Kim 1964, 159). Lee tries to keep himself moralistic by leaving himself out of the picture. His attitude, when introduced to the public realm, may become apolitical or anti-political.

Shin would agree with Lee on all points but one: the masses are not capable of facing the truth without illusions, nor standing alone like Sisyphus, while only a few such as Lee and himself are so able. As I discussed earlier, Shin's experiences of having revealed his atheism to his wife and Hann were traumatic. He found that they were

not able to withstand the absurdity of suffering. When Lee exasperatedly insisted that Shin tell the truth about the twelve ministers to the people, he only said suggestively, "My young friend, has it ever occurred to you that they may not want the truth?" (Kim 1964, 103). Instead of telling the truth, therefore, he decided to lie to the people to give them some hope and to prevent them from falling into bottomless despair.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while divine justice turns out to be highly inscrutable at best and seriously doubtful at worst, we may find the principle of existential justice still working in Shin's selfless devotion to the suffering masses. In order to understand this, it seems useful to note what Tarrou, the narrator in Camus's *The Plague*, says to Doctor Rieux, the hero:

That's why I say there are pestilences and there are victims; no more than that. . . . I grant we should add a third category: that of true healers. But it's a fact one doesn't come across many of them, and anyhow it must be a hard vocation. That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done. Among them I can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category; in other words, to peace (Camus 1947, 230).

Mr. Shin in *The Martyred* is actually Dr. Rieux of *The Plague* in priest's dress. For both Shin and Rieux, the role of justice is, therefore, relegated from the once crowning principle of our political community—distribution of reward and punishment to the members of the community in accordance with their achievement or dereliction—to a more modest status of sharing and reducing the suffering of mortals.

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5. Shin's remark, "That [his own despair] is my cross" in his reply to Lee's question, "What about your despair?" is reminiscent of Camus' Sisyphus as well (Kim 1964, 256-257).

### Deception as a Symbolic Use of Politics: Lying in Politics

In *The Prince*, while debunking Platonic utopianism, Machiavelli scornfully stresses that “a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation” (Machiavelli 1981, 91). Therefore, in order to maintain his rule, Machiavelli says, a prince “must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need” (Machiavelli 1981, 91).<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, Machiavelli even twists the meaning of the word, “virtue.” His concept of virtue (*virtù*) is totally separated from the Christian or Cicero’s meaning of virtue. He uses the word “virtue” to mean something akin to manliness, energetic strength, military valor, or prudence. Thus, his prince must not mind carrying out some cruelties, being miserly, or not honoring his word, whenever conditions dictate.

But the prince should know how to escape the evil reputation attached to those vices, as well as the hatred and derision of the populace. For Machiavelli, such a reputation is more likely to lose him his state. Therefore, he claims that the prince has to maintain a good appearance as much as possible, while not refraining from committing those vices necessary for the safeguarding of the state. He even says, “He [the prince] should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless, and devout” (Machiavelli 1981, 100). Since everyone “sees what you appear to be [and] few experience what you really are,” appearance is more important than being in maintaining the good will of the people (Machiavelli 1981, 101).

The gist of Machiavelli’s argument is that the prince should be hypocritical. As goes the old saying, “Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue,” hypocrisy has a stabilizing effect upon society by confirming and reinforcing the mainstream values of a society so that it is less dangerous to society than a Socratic kind of direct challenge to the prevailing norms. Hypocrisy acknowledges the ethical superi-

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7. Machiavelli’s insight into the prince is also applicable to Christian leaders including the Pope, as well as political leaders in contemporary mass society.

ority of virtue over vice, just as blasphemy confirms the existence of God rather than denying it. Therefore, even though the action of a prince is liberated from the regulation of moral precepts, it is restrained by his constant need to maintain a good appearance.

As Plato points out, appearance resides in the realm of opinion, which is always shifting, temporary, and capricious. Since maintaining a good appearance depends upon the opinion of the people who watch from a distance, the prince, while trying to disguise his actions under the guise of looking good, has to pay vigilant attention to what the public thinks of him. This can still be an enormous burden to the prince, because he is torn between Machiavelli's dictum that he must be willing to commit those vices necessary to the safeguarding of the state, and the other precept, that he must appear to possess all the virtues people praise (Machiavelli 1981, 92, 100).

But Machiavelli does not think it too difficult to maintain a good appearance. In his discussion of cruelty and compassion, he says, "By making an example or two he [the prince] will prove [himself] more compassionate than those who, being too compassionate, allow disorders which lead to murder and rapine" (Machiavelli 1981, 95). Here, he recognizes the symbolic dimension of politics. Political analysis is not only concerned with how political actions bring tangible rewards to some groups—"Who gets what and how?"—but also with how these same actions placate or arouse the mass public (Edelman 1985, 12). Political acts are not only instrumental, but also symbolic.

Thus we can make an interesting observation about the relationship between "what ought to be," "what is," and "what seems" in Machiavelli's thought. While he is willing to prescribe anything for the sake of his prince being able to seize and maintain power according to the dictate of what is, he is keenly aware of what the populace wants and what the moral precepts demand from his prince. He makes the strongest case ever for the separation and autonomy of politics ("what is") from ethics ("what ought to be"). Yet he did not ignore the ethical dimension of politics as we are liable to assume. He has his own way of meeting moral precepts by manipulating what

the prince seems to be. What seems to be—the prince’s symbolic action—would satisfy what ought to be. In short, for Machiavelli, the form (or the symbolic dimension) of political action which consists of maintaining a good appearance and using manipulative symbols would satisfy what ought to be, while its substance is designed to meet what is or what circumstances dictate.

Drawing upon Murray Edelman, let me briefly elaborate on the theme of politics as symbolic action in contemporary mass society in order to shed light on Mr. Shin’s action. Politics distributes goods, services, and power to specific political actors or groups. But it also conveys symbols that large masses of humans need to believe about the state to reassure themselves. According to Edelman, basic to the recognition of the symbolic dimension of politics is a “distinction between politics as a spectator sport and political activity utilized by organized groups to get quite specific, tangible benefits for themselves.” However, for most humans most of the time, “politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines, and discussion” (Edelman 1985, 5). In other words, politics is for most of us like a passing parade of abstract symbols like the images and shadows of the Platonic cave. In these activities, we are not able to check our acts and assumptions against the consequences and subsequently correct errors. There is no feedback, unlike in our everyday routine activities. Thus, Edelman stresses that the symbolic dimension of politics becomes all the more crucial in a contemporary society, in which humans are alienated from politics, because politics “is remote, set apart, but omnipresent as the ultimate threat or means of succor, yet not susceptible to effective influence through any act as we individuals can perform” (Edelman 1985, 5-6). Thus, the political process becomes the arena in which we displace private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes. In this way, for most of the mass public, the political process is bound to become symbolic and emotional in impact, calling for conformity to promote social harmony and serving as the focus of psychological tensions. Especially when the people are suffering from war, revolutions, and deaths, there is a much greater need for reassuring sym-

bols. Political symbols bring out in concentrated form those particular meanings and emotions which the members of a community create and reinforce in each other (Edelman 1985, 7-8).

Our brief examination of the symbolic dimension of politics will shed some meaningful light on Mr. Shin's selfless involvement in the joint memorial service and a series of revival services. In those meetings, Shin glorified the twelve martyrs and humiliated himself as the sinner who succumbed to torture, and thereby betrayed God. That was, no doubt, a distortion of the factual truth he himself witnessed. Why did he voluntarily cooperate in manufacturing the martyrdom and enhancing the political cause, while willingly humiliating himself before the public? How could he preach that God's truth and an afterlife in the eternal kingdom of God existed, while he himself seriously questioned God's existence and ceased to believe in the said afterlife?

In order to understand this paradox, we need to briefly examine the meanings of war for the political community in general and of the Korean War for Koreans in particular. Humankind has experienced two world wars in which millions of people had to die without knowing the reason for their deaths. The unprecedented scale of violence in the two world wars and the subsequent invention of the nuclear weapon render war an utterly futile human enterprise, overshadowing the possibly positive functions it may have performed in the past, because the waging of war itself now runs the risk of wiping out all the members of the human community, not to mention the specific political community in whose name the war is waged.

Koreans had to participate in World War II under the Japanese banner and, soon after the liberation from Japanese colonial rule, had to undergo the Korean War during the period of 1950-1953, the most devastating war in the history of Korea, one that claimed millions of lives. How meaningless and absurd was the internecine civil war had been was vividly described in the novel, first, through Captain Park's account of his hand-to-hand combat and, secondly, via Colonel Chang's sarcastic remark in response to Major Lee, who insisted that the truth about the twelve ministers be revealed:

The trouble was that it was pitch-black night and that we all spoke Korean. Devil only knew which side we were killing. Everyone was shouting in the same language, "Who are you? Who are you?" . . . then something—panic, terror, you name it—snapped, and everyone was killing everyone else (Kim 1964, 45-46).

Or would you rather tell them this war is just like any other bloody war in the stinking history of idiotic mankind, that it is nothing but the result of a blind struggle for power among the beastly states, among the rotten politicians and so on, that thousands of people have died and more will die in this stupid war, for nothing, for absolutely nothing, because they are just innocent victims, helpless pawns in the arena of cold-blooded, calculating international power politics? (Kim 1964, 172-173).

As the war went on, Mr. Shin was constantly agonized by witnessing his poor, suffering people who were tortured by war, who were hungry, cold, sick, and weary of life. Therefore, he took one step further from his original position that he should never reveal his personal truth about faith—passive silence—and decided to actively lie to the people about the twelve murdered ministers, God's justice, and the afterlife in order to give them the hope needed to survive the horrible despair brought by the war, even if this might turn out to be sheer illusion. In order to breathe hope into despairing souls, he had to give symbolic reassurance to those masses that were suddenly forced to face suffering and hardship in the name of the political community, but who were helpless in controlling their fate. Especially during war, when the very survival of the political community is at stake, the symbolic use of politics is urgently needed, because the political community is too strained to provide the same tangible benefits as they do so in peacetime. The masses may remain apolitical as far as security is provided, but once war breaks out, they are fundamentally mobilized and uprooted, and politics once distant becomes omnipresent in their everyday life. All the values and morals that have hitherto held the community together are threatened from the root, as war is protracted without victory in clear sight.

Thus, by deliberately using the twelve martyred as the sacrifice for their sins, a unifying symbol in a series of revival services, Shin wanted to renew the faith of Christians and rekindle the feelings of the community that was torn apart and warped by the devastating war. He usually began his sermons saying “. . . I belong to you and you belong to me. I am you and you are me, and we are one. . . . We are here together as one to worship our God and praise him” (Kim 1964, 193). He stressed that they were all sinners, including himself, who had betrayed the twelve martyred—a community of sufferings and sin—and told them to repent. Here the use of “we” represents the fact that Shin participated in the same sufferings of the masses and shared their fate.<sup>7</sup> The use of “we” is the beginning of politics, showing the recognition that we share in the same fate and we collectively take charge of our destiny to whatever extent that is within our power. According to Hanna Pitkin, political discourse is not “a matter here, as in becoming a moral agent, of relating ‘I’ to ‘you’ or even ‘I’ to ‘thou,’ but of relating ‘I’ to ‘we,’ in a context where many other selves also have claims on that ‘we’” (Pitkin 1981, 345).

In this sense, Shin’s revival ceremonies and joint memorial service may turn out to be political rituals rehearsed in religious dress. Such rituals are motor activities that symbolically involve its participants in a common enterprise, calling their attention to their relatedness and mutual concern in a compelling way. It thereby both promotes unity and evokes satisfaction and solace in this unity. Humans instinctively seek meaning and order when placed in a confusing, ambiguous situation. This motor activity, performed together with others, reassures everyone that there are no dissenters and brings a sense of community in a collective enterprise. Signs and symbols—the martyred, in the novel—are the only means by which the masses not in a position to analyze a complex situation rationally, may adjust themselves to it and thereby reconcile with a stark reality. By using “we,” Shin also maintained the appearance that he was not a

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7. As I shall discuss later, this might be the ultimate reason for Shin’s refusal to retreat from Pyongyang with the South Korean troops.

manipulator of the symbols but their partaker. But in order to know whether this was really anything more than a rhetorical device, we need to examine the meaning of his death, the topic we now turn to.

### **Conclusion: the Meaning of Shin's Death**

In an era of rampant mass propaganda and manipulation, those who speak to the people do not tell the truth, but only what they want their people to believe. Thus we trust no one and become cynical. Mr. Shin and Colonel Chang told the people what people wanted to believe and what they wanted people to believe; one for the sake of his religion and the other for his state. Can we condemn them for telling lies to their own people? If so, how do we deal with the people who were susceptible to their lies? Are people blameless in their naive attitude of succumbing to them? After all, it was not only Chang and Shin but also the very people that were responsible for the seemingly ridiculous but desperate play in which Lee felt cheated. When what the authorities want people to believe coincides with what people want to believe, we cannot place blame on one group only. When the victims of the deception willingly accept it, the deception becomes reciprocal in its nature and what begins as a deception ends up becoming collective self-deception. The appearance of the community might be retained by this collective ritual, since "[i]n its political aspect, a community is held together not by truth but by consensus," which the members of a given community express by participating in the ritual (Wolin 2004, 58). Such participation reinforces the sense of belonging and protects the community from the forces of anomie.

There thus may be little difference between the joint memorial service, the election in contemporary democratic societies, and the rain dance or other seemingly irrational primitive rituals in the sense that all these collective activities partake of a symbolic dimension of our communal life. As Machiavelli uncannily notes, this symbolic dimension of politics will always be with us and occupy our political

space, so long as there remains a gap between what ought to be done and what is actually done. So the twelve martyrs fill this gap and do at least tell us what we want to believe about ourselves, our religion, and our political community.

But we have to take note of the cost this symbolic aspect of politics incurs on our political community. When our political action becomes purely ritualistic, it may be dramatic in its form by entertaining spectators, and yet, at the same time, empty in substance. Politics will mainly supply symbols without meeting our tangible collective needs, through endless manipulation of abstract stereotypes, images, and words, and mass propaganda. This point is made poignantly by Lee, when he says to Captain Park:

You say you give them what they want? How do you know that a pack of lies is what they want? Are you sure that is what they need? They need truth. It may be painful, but truth is what they need and what you must give them. . . . I am tired, I am sick of all this pretension, all these noble lies, all in the name of people, for the people. And meanwhile the people continue to suffer, continue to die, deceived from birth to death (Kim 1964, 212-213).

In other words, the symbolic dimension of politics serves to dull the critical faculties of the members of the community rather than arouse them. Lee makes this point, when he says as follows:

You say you do all this for them, for their happiness. But no! You do it because you want your propaganda. You do it because you wanted to save your church from being scandalized. You do it because you wanted to deceive the people into believing that everything is going to be all right, that a god in heaven takes good care of them, that a state sincerely worries about their lot, and all this in the name of the people (Kim 1964, 212-213).

From another perspective, we may examine Lee's position—that the truth should be revealed—more positively. As Hanna Pitkin points out, "What distinguishes politics . . . is action—the possibility of

a shared, collective, deliberative, active intervention in our fate” (Pitkin 1981, 344). In order to render such action possible, we need a correct understanding of our reality, however painful it may be. Even the rulers in totalitarian and dictatorial regimes who mobilize each and every means possible to deceive their own people, still need to collect information about reality in order to remain in power, continue to deceive the people, but to escape self-deception. Therefore, it is only on the basis of true knowledge and information about what is true, that we, or even the worst tyrant, can decide what is to be done. Lee seems to represent this attitude.<sup>8</sup>

All this said, the final question remains to be answered. Were both Shin and Chang sincere in their motives when they “manufactured” the martyrdom? Did they not have some sinister motives of serving their own narrow religious or political interests? It would be almost impossible to penetrate into the innermost human psyche with definite certainty. However, their death is significant and suggestive. Even if they manufactured noble lies to keep the people from falling into a bottomless abyss of despair, they vindicated their cause, breathing the breath of life into their noble lies by their exemplary action and noble death, Chang as a soldier and Shin as a minister. When the situations demanded, they were willing to offer themselves for the political community and religious truth. Chang fulfilled his role as a member of the political community by dying for the community—possibly the ultimate expression of the unity of the self and the political community. Shin refused to leave Pyongyang with the retreating South Korean troops and nobody knew about his last days. There were only conflicting rumors, and his martyrdom was never confirmed by a human witness. As Kenneth Burke points out, martyrdom is “vanity when addressed not to the Absolute Witness, but to human onlookers” (Burke 1969, 222). All in all, the actions of Chang and Shin seem to suggest the paradoxical yet enigmatic predicament of the contemporary world, in that “even if there is no

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8. It is regretful that I have not pursued this line of argument fully.

truth, humans can be truthful, and even if there is no faith, humans can be faithful.”<sup>9</sup>

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9. Here I have made a modification of Arendt's remark: “. . . even if there is not truth, man can be truthful, and even if there is no reliable certainty, man can be reliable” (quoted from Arendt 1958, 279).