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Is Christianity a Korean Religion? One Hundred Years of Protestant Churches in Korea

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THREE RELIGIONS have played major roles in moulding Korean culture. Buddhism and Confucianism have powerfully worked to produce Buddhist or Confucian states for more than one thousand five hundred years. Shamanism failed to produce a certain form of state although it has dominated Korean people's lives for more than two thousand years. Korean Protestantism has existed in the midst of such a religious situation for more than 100 years. Apparently the historical process of incarnating the gospel in Korean society has been a rough road.

Nevertheless, Christianity has enjoyed unique success in Korea. Since the introduction of Roman Catholicism in 1784 and Protestantism in 1884, Christianity has become Korea's second largest religion after Buddhism. Recent statistics show that membership in Protestant churches is nearly ten million out of 47 million South Koreans. Certainly, Christianity in Korea is not only highly visible, but also dynamic in mission activities as well as in the political life of the Korean people. Even if the influence of Christianity is apparent everywhere in Korea today, it does not necessarily mean that Christianity is a religion which is characteristic of Korea. This paper traces Korean Protestant church history in order to answer whether Christianity in Korea is a Koreanized religion.

Protestant Beginnings

With the opening of the nation to foreign interests, foreign missionaries have poured into Korea since 1884. The first Protestant missionaries to begin evangelizing efforts in Korea

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came from Presbyterian and Methodist churches in the United States. Later the Church of England (1890), Australian Presbyterians (1889), Canadian Presbyterians (1898), and the Russian Orthodox (1898) arrived in Korea before the turn of the century. It is due to the early mission activities of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches that the majority of churches existing in Korea today are Presbyterian and Methodist.

By the time the first western missionaries came to Korea, it had become axiomatic that a church that was 'self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating' was, by definition, an 'indigenous church'. Such an indigenous church was the goal of Christian missions. This missionary thinking was made clear in the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 in which the leading purpose of the missionary enterprise was to bring into being self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches in every region.[1]

The model of indigenous church was also the goal of early missionaries who worked in Korea. As early as the 1890s, missionaries, especially Presbyterians, established a set of mission principles called the Nevius Method. The method was named after John L. Nevius, a missionary to China who visited Korea in 1890. Nevius established the following principles for missionary work: (1) emphasis on spreading the faith by individual Christians, not professional evangelists; (2) emphasis on self-government; and (3) emphasis on self-support. Added to these principles of promoting indigenous evangelistic work on the part of the Korean church was the focus on women and the working class.

Although American missionaries in Korea stressed these 'self' elements in missionary work, they were not necessarily taken as diagnostic of an indigenous movement. In the earlier stages of evangelistic work, American missionaries launched a spiritual crusade against Korean traditional religions which continued for several decades.[2] Arthur Judson Brown, the executive secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. from 1895 to 1929, reported that American missionaries also imposed on Korean churches an American brand of religious fundamentalism. The typical missionary of the first quarter century after the opening of Korea 'was strongly conservative in theology and biblical criticism, and he held as a vital truth the pre-millenarian view of the second coming of Christ. Higher criticism and liberal theology

1 William A. Smalley, 'Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church,' in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 494; *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), p. 325.

2 Sung-Deuk Oak, 'The Indigenization of Christianity in Korea: North American Missionaries' Attitudes Towards Korean Religions, 1884-1910' (Th.D. diss., Boston University School of Theology. 2002), p. 472. Of course, the crusade against Korean religions is not the whole story. Some of the missionaries viewed Korean religious history as a part of the divine salvation history.

were deemed dangerous heresies.'[3]

At the early stage of Protestant history in Korea, theology stressed heavily the exclusiveness rather than the inclusiveness of the gospel, especially among Presbyterian churches. This type of theology, however, appeared to be comparatively indifferent to the social and cultural applications of the gospel. Accordingly, the breach between the traditional religious culture and the Christian gospel was more emphasized than the possibility of finding some point of contact between them. Although there were exceptional missionaries and institutions, broadly speaking, the general type of Korean Christianity during the early period was individualistic rather than social. This shows that American Protestantism in its first Korean incarnation was apolitical, individual, and exclusive. From the earliest days to the present this type of American Protestantism has formed the main currents of Korean theology.

Historical Background of Korean Theology

Around the time that Christianity was being introduced into Korea, the country was in danger of being invaded by Japan. Japanese colonizers were distrustful of the church from the outset because nationalist sentiments were strong in Christian circles. Missionaries counselled moderation and sought to avoid involvement in the anti-Japanese movements. Finally they were successful in de-politicizing the Korean churches through the emotion-laden revival meetings of the early 1900s. The revival meetings were designed to be a search for purely religious experiences, an attempt to spiritualize the Christian message and, thus to denationalize Korean Christianity.

Many Korean Christians, however, participated in anti-Japanese struggles, and were arrested and tortured. On March 1, 1919, a nationwide independence movement was formed against the Japanese colonial government. The movement was organized by Korean laypersons and pastors, together with *Chondogyo* followers, a new religion growing across the Korean peninsula in the late nineteenth century. Sixteen of the thirty-three signatories of the 'Declaration of Independence' were Christian leaders. Christian groups organized 25-38% of the rallies and demonstrations across the country.[4] At that time Christians composed only 1.5% of the population of Korea. The Independence Movement of 1919 was the culmination of the political application of the Christian message. In this regard, Protestantism in Korea can be explained in some measure by the association of Christianity with a sense of Korean nationalism.

Following the Independence Movement of 1919 and its subsequent failure, Christians lost their leading roles in anti-Japanese struggles, so

3 Arthur Judson Brown, *The Mastery of the Far East* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), p. 540.

4 Lee Man Yol, *Hankuk Kidokkyowa Minzokyiesik* (Korean Christianity and National Consciousness) (Seoul: *Zisiksanupsa*, 1991), pp. 349-350.

churches had to face a series of internal and external crises. Internally, young people and other politically aspiring groups left the church, as church leaders were becoming more and more apolitical and religiously conservative, although there were minority followers of Christian socialism and social gospel within the church. The unusual phenomenon of mysticism swept Christian circles during the late 1920s and 1930s. Externally, after 1935, the church faced a serious problem with the demand by Japan for it to embrace Shintoism.

Since gaining independence from Japan in 1945, churches have again suffered, this time because of the Korean War in 1950-1953. The Korean War was one of the most disastrous events in Korea during the twentieth century. Koreans went through what social psychologists describe as a 'disaster syndrome' as a result of the war and widespread destruction and loss of life. Having suffered as much as they did, many Koreans came to count on the Christian faith to save them from any disaster, and churches gave them messages of comfort and material blessing. Many hundreds of thousands took refuge in the churches that gave the message of comfort. These groups continued the utilitarian tradition of Korean shamanism, a religious phenomenon that developed in the cultural and psychological milieu of post-war Korea. The Full Gospel Church in Seoul, the largest congregation in the world, represents this type of Christianity. Its founding pastor, Paul Yonggi Cho, imparts a message that stresses God's material blessing and health in the present life. The church is aggressive in its mission and emphasizes the pastoral theology of church growth.

While the majority of Christians have remained in the fold of churches with little concern for society, Christianity in Korea has been identified with nationalism and democratic development. A new page of political resistance and engagement began when the Rhee Syngman regime was overthrown in 1960, following a corrupt election. Park Chung Hee took control of South Korea through military rule, which began in 1961. Park, however, did not alienate Korean Christians. Opposition developed when the oppressive military dictatorship silenced nearly all of its political opposition, using national security as a pretext to limit the freedom of Park's critics, many of whom were in the church.

Much of the opposition of the church to Park turned on human rights issues and development ideology, which created a wide gap between the rich and the poor. The church, particularly its dissident wing, maintained its active opposition to Park and his successors. Park was assassinated in 1979. The Korean Christian Declaration of 1973 and the Theological Statement of Korean Christians of 1974 were representatives of the church's dissenting movement. The dissident community in the 1980s was linked with the church leadership and often used church facilities. Thus, this minority community of Christians believed in a Christian duty to struggle for economic and social justice, and was involved in politics. The struggle produced a new Korean-style theology called *Minjung* theology.

Liberation, the taste of independence, and the Korean War provided

Korean theologians with the opportunity to reflect in a new way on Korean society. Some theologians debated Korea's distinctive cultural characteristics, and this became even more evident in the early 1960s.[5] In particular, they have been wrestling with the question of how to approach the study of theology in the predominantly non-Christian culture of Korea. This question developed into an indigenization of theology, which encouraged theologians to study their own traditional religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism.

Theological Trends in Contemporary Korea

Current theological endeavour in Korea may be divided into two streams, namely, one following the traditions of western theology, and the other attempting to develop a Korean theology. The latter is subdivided into indigenization theology, *Minjung* theology, and pastoral theology of church growth.

Indigenization Theology

As noted, there was no indigenous development of Korean theology in the pre-war period. Even in the post-war period, theological liberals of Methodist and Presbyterian seminaries were busy introducing western theologies and translating the writings of western theological authors into the Korean language. In the 1960s a movement to seek an understanding of the gospel more in terms of the Korean situation and less in terms of the western tradition was born. Methodist theologians were pioneers in the formation of indigenization theology, especially in the studies of Korean Confucianism and Korean Shamanism. They were concerned about how the seed of the gospel can become implanted and grow in the cultural soil of Korea. Professor Pyun Sun Whan, for instance, is well-known for his insistence on a Christian-Buddhist dialogue and religious pluralism. This led to accusations of heresy by a number of leading Methodist evangelists in 1982, and resulted in the Whan's expulsion from the Methodist church in 1993.

Indigenization theology is an attempt to Koreanize Christianity, thereby making it relevant to the cultural environment of the country. The development, however, of indigenized theology appears dangerous to conservative theologians. They warn against the introduction of liberal theology, which, according to their logic, requires Christianity to adjust to situations, histories and local cultures. They contend that dialogue with other religions and learning about other religions is important only in so far as proselytizing and conversion may follow.

Minjung Theology

While the indigenization of theology mainly concerns Korean culture, *Minjung* theology grew out of the socio-political situation of Korean society in the middle of 1970s. *Minjung* is a

5 Ryu Tong Shik, 'Rough Road to Theological Maturity,' in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 171.

Korean word for 'people' or 'mass,' but it refers specifically to the oppressed, to the poor, or to the marginalized. It is a theological response to the oppressors, and a response of the *minjung* to the Korean church and its mission. While *minjung* theology as a Korea-made theology is a minority movement even among contemporary intellectuals, it has exercised a far-reaching effect upon Korean Christianity.

Minjung theology holds that the history of the Korean people is a history of oppression and frustration, which has given rise to a unique mind-set called *han*, a pent-up anger mixed with the suffering and hopelessness of the oppressed *minjung*. Minjung theologians read and interpret the Bible, church history, and Korean history out of the experiences of suffering and *han*, and with the eyes of the poor and the oppressed, thereby finding *minjung* as the subjects of history. Of central importance to *Minjung* theology is the concept of the *minjung* as the subjects of history and as messiah. In addition to history, minjung theologians also consider Korean culture such as music, drama and masked dances as a source of power for people's liberation. *Minjung* theologians, however, are less concerned about the religious culture of Korea when compared to the theologians of indigenization.

Pastoral Theology of Church Growth

While *minjung* theologians are advocating the church's involvement in social change, *minjung* of the Korean churches would rather choose a comforting and reassuring message of Christian religion in this troubled society. This tendency on the part of Christians to expect comfort rather than justice is encouraged by the shamanistic orientation of Korean Christianity as well as Robert Schuller's notion of 'positive thinking'. Missiologically speaking, the expansion of the Christian population in the country is rooted in Donald A. McGavran's pragmatism of the church-growth school associated with Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, USA.

It should be noted that in the early 1970s the number of Protestants across the nation was about two million, but by the early 1980s the number had risen to nearly ten million. The stress on positive thinking and 'this-worldly blessing' is an important addition to the previous character of conservatism. Thus, the new groups promise not only victory in the world to come, but also material success in the here and now. Unlike *Minjung* theology, no connection is made with the root causes of poverty and alienation in the church-growth strategy. The church-growth school of the Fuller Theological Seminary takes on somewhat different meaning in Korea when this shamanistic orientation is understood.

Conclusion

Christianity experienced remarkable growth in Korea and has produced even a Korean-style theology, namely, *Minjung* theology. In the eyes of foreign observers, Christianity seems to be now a Korean people's religion and no longer a foreign import. Writing in 1986, Donald Clark noted, 'Today's church is a Koreanized church with theological and organizational under-

tones that echo Korean traditions.'[6] These traditions, of course, are Shamanism and Confucianism. Min Kyung Bae, a well-known Korean church historian, in *Hankuk Kidokoehoesa* (Korean Church History) describes the Korean church as an example of a national church in a sense that it was dynamic in the political struggle of the independence movement from Japanese colonial rule.

This essay pointed out that the history of the Korean church is the history of living together with the oppressed Korean people. Thus *Min* emphasizes the national identity of the church as a Korean religion. Yong-Bock Kim argues that the Korean church is a *minjung* church and can be rightly understood from the perspective of *minjung*. He stressed that the Christian 'message as received by the people was historicized and became the religio-political language of an oppressed people' from the beginning of Christianity in Korea.[7] It cannot be denied that Christianity is now a Korean religion, based on the fact that it has served the Korean people both as a national church and as a *minjung* church, and that it has been reshaped in the image of Korean Shamanism. Christianity in Korea has produced a theology, i.e., *Minjung* theology, on its own terms.

Although Christianity is now a Korean religion in a number of ways, the question remains as to what degree it has formed and developed the personality of the Korean people. Ryu Tong Shik, for instance, claims that the religions that formed the personality of the present-day Koreans are Shamanism and Confucianism. Ryu's view represents the theologians of indigenization. This writer argues that Christianity *is* a Korean religion, but it remains foreign to the Korean people because of its alien creed and its exclusive attitude towards Korean culture. Thus, the majority of the Korean churches are concerned mainly with the task of fishing out souls from a non-Christian society. In this case, it does not matter whether Christianity is culturally and theologically a Korean religion. This calls for a continuing debate on the issue.

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6 Donald N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), p. 51. See also David Martin, *Tongues of Fire* (Oxford, UK/ Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

7 Kim, Yong Bock. 'Messiah and *Minjung*: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messiahnism', in *Minjung Theology*, ed. Kim Yong Bock (Singapore: CCA Publications), 1981.