

# **KOREAN PROTESTANTISM PAST AND PRESENT**

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## **Introduction**

In the one hundred years since its introduction, Protestant Christianity has grown to become the second largest religious group in Korea. In 1984, Korean Protestant churches celebrated their centennial year. Membership in the churches has rapidly grown to seven million persons, one in every six south Koreans. Presbyterians are the largest Christian denomination, with more than three million members and some current projections suggest that by the 1990s there will be more Christians than Buddhists in Korea. The influence of the Church is apparent everywhere in Korea today.

The Full Gospel (Pentecostal) Church of Paul Yonggi Cho on Yöüido Island in Seoul has over half a million members; 1,000 full-time staff; 50,000 house groups meeting regularly throughout Seoul; 10,000 new members a month; multiple services each Sunday; a domestic radio and television ministry and a regular religious telecast for the Korean community of

Los Angeles. It is already the world's largest church and reaches out to many lands in Asia and even Europe.

The numerical growth of Korean Protestant churches is itself compelling evidence of the American missionary contribution to Korean society. The explosive growth of Protestantism is an undeniable force in the country. However, such dynamism is often criticised as a "sleeping tiger" because the conservative churches whose influences have expanded rapidly through the Pentecostal movement invariably lack social or political concerns. For too long, described as "the most active Christian churches in Asia", south Korean churches have equated Christianity with an anti-communist political structure. Hence they served as supporters of the Syngman Rhee regime, the short-lived Chang Myŏn government, the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime and the Chŏn Tuhwan regime. In short, conservative churches supported the political status quo and failed to regain the social vitality which had characterised earlier Protestantism during days of national hardship. Whilst liberal Christians who are fighting for the recovery of the Korean church tradition are a minority group, conservative churches still boast nearly ninety-five per cent of Christian followers and continue to extend their influence at a rapid rate. As David Kwang-Sun Suh (1983) rightly points out, the major tone of Korean Protestantism was and is emotional, conservative, pentecostal, individualistic and other worldly.

Generally speaking, Korean churches have the same difficulties as churches in other countries with regard to non-Christian tradition and culture. Their major problems are syncretism, subjectivism and escapism. A prominent form of syncretism is nature worship combined with Christian teaching in which emphasis is placed on healing and ecstatic experience. Sound theological thinking is despised or ignored, leaving religious fanatics and emotion-ridden leaders with a strong sense of egotism and dogmatic subjectivism. Biblical interpretation is individualistic, not historical or theological. Some Korean Christians try to escape from the realities of life, placing their hopes on life after death; because of this their sense of participation in history and their social consciousness

is very weak. As a result, the church has lost its leadership in society. Recognising these difficulties, Korean churches since 1963 have felt it necessary to make Christianity more indigenous.

Since the 1960s, dissenting elements within the church have brewed a unique Korean theology called "*Minjung* theology". The word *minjung* means "masses" or "the people of God", and *Minjung* theology is decidedly populist, even proletarian. Its association with the working class gives it a political ring that contrasts with the relatively apolitical ideology of mainstream Korean Christianity. The government sees a clear connection between *Minjung* theology, student activism, labour unrest and overseas criticism. The Urban Industrial Mission, the interfaith ministry to factory workers, is the quintessence of *Minjung* activism. *Minjung* activism is particularly popular among university students, who freely mix political and religious symbols.

*Minjung* theology is reminiscent of liberation theology in Latin America, but asserts the uniqueness of Korea. It holds that the history of the Korean people is a history of oppression, of sadness and frustration, which has given rise to a unique mind-set called *han*. *Han* is a pent-up anger mixed with depression over situations that cannot be changed: the unfairness and injustice of life, the disappointments and disillusionments of history and politics.

One key point of *Minjung* theology is that it is non-Marxist. This is, of course, a requirement in the anti-Communist south. By stressing the unique Korean roots of its theology and by emphasising a relationship with contemporary life in south Korea, *Minjung* theologians have avoided the taint of communism which the government and ultra-conservative churches would no doubt like to attach to it. Hence *Minjung* theologians reject the heavy reliance of liberation theologians on Marxist social theory.

The number of people involved in *Minjung* theology is tiny by comparison with the theology taught in more conservative churches. Even where *minjung* churches are well established,

the number of people connected with them are few. In a way this is a self-consciously chosen reaction to the emphasis on growth of conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals. *Minjung* activists assert that they are more interested in quality than quantity, yet the power of *Minjung* theology is undeniable.

### The gospel of blessings and the gospel of *minjung*

Charles Elliott, in his *Sword and Spirit* (1989), stresses that south Korea has two faces, the face of success and the face of suffering. He, as a theologian and academic specialising in the social and economic development of the Third World, classifies Korean Protestantism into the gospel of blessings and the gospel of *minjung*. The gospel of blessings, represented by the Full Gospel Church, emphasises a God who guarantees success, while the *minjung* gospel starts by identifying Jesus with the poor and the oppressed. According to Elliott, whilst the gospel of blessings emphasises the resurrection to the neglect of the cross, the *minjung* gospel emphasises the cross to the neglect or misrepresentation of the resurrection.

The Korean Presbyterian Church, the largest Christian denomination in the country, now has four major divisions caused by the issue of fundamentalism versus modernism. Other Protestant denominations suffer from similar fractious tendencies. In general, since their centenary celebrations in 1984, Protestant churches have been troubled by growing confrontations between conservative/evangelical and liberal/activist wings and between church and state over human rights. Most Korean Christians are apolitical or politically conservative, but an articulate minority believe in a Christian struggle for economic and social justice. Troublesome though it may seem to the authorities, D.N. Clark comments that the liberal/activist minority is a sign of the vitality of Christianity in Korea. Nevertheless I would argue that the possibility of rapprochement between two seemingly irreconcilable understandings of the Christian faith is low for

four reasons: (1) shamanism; (2) American fundamentalism; (3) the Shinto shrine issue; (4) the Korean war and national division. I will discuss all four in turn.

### The roots of *minjung* theology

Korea's basic religious tradition is shamanism. Traditionally the ordinary Korean looked to a shaman—a sorceress or priestess—to help him cope with his *han*. Central to shamanism is the idea that the *kut*, the ceremony of invitation to the spirits, will bestow such blessings as earthly success and a long life. On the basis of this kind of shamanistic thinking, Pentecostal churches give their people what they most earnestly search for—blessings. To people battered by economic, social and political changes in the fastest growing world economy, blessings are a means for dealing with the *han* which change itself imposes. The very speed of change brings both insecurity and opportunity. In this context the Reverend Yonggi Cho emphasises that there are three kinds of blessing which are popular in any society at any time, but which have a particular appeal in south Korea today. Like the shaman, he offers success, health, and long life.

To the shaman, misfortune and misery are the results of the activities of malevolent spirits. You have no personal responsibility, and society has no responsibility. Corrective action starts in the realm of the spirit. Here we can detect a direct parallel between this amoral, apolitical and ahistorical world-view and the conservative Pentecostal Korean churches. In contemporary Korea, conservative, evangelical Christians insist that conversion changes people, that people change societies and that without conversion, attempts at change will merely substitute one evil for another. This argument, claimed by the great majority of church leaders, is closely linked to American fundamentalism, a force which has influenced Korean Protestantism from its outset.

Early American missions gave Korean Protestant churches an American brand of fundamentalism. Missionaries, trained in conservative and fundamental theology against the background of rigidly sectarian ethical views, preached love and perseverance to Korean Christians burning with resentment over the loss of national sovereignty. At some points, there are cases where Korean Christians accused missionaries of being traitors and even threatened them with death. Certainly, missionaries led a revival movement in 1907 in an attempt to steer the Korean church towards non-politicisation and, as they intended, the nature of the Korean church switched to revival. Furthermore, missionaries, who had checked the theological growth of the Korean church, hoped to confine Korean clergy within their own theological and socio-ethical boundaries. The intellectual level of Korean clergymen was extremely low. When the first World Mission Council met in Edinburgh in 1910, the theological destitution of the Korean church therefore emerged as a major issue.

The typical missionary in the first quarter of the century was a man who still kept the Sabbath much like his New England forebears a century earlier. He looked upon dancing, smoking, card-playing, and the drinking of liquor as sins in which no true follower of Christ should indulge. In theology and biblical criticism he was strongly conservative, and he held as a vital truth the pre-millenian view of Christ's Second Coming. Thus, higher criticism and liberal theology were deemed dangerous heresies. The dichotomy of literal biblicism and the social gospel, a mark of Protestant missions in China (and for that matter, Japan), never found a place in Korea. Under the impetus of a programme directed by American missionaries for "Puritanic zeal and Wesleyan fervour", fundamentalism held sway. For example, in the case of baptised members, failure to keep the Sabbath or to attend worship regularly without legitimate excuse was considered sufficient reason for discipline, and members were debarred from taking part in the communion service.

As a result of fundamentalism, the Korea mission programme was indifferent to the social application of Christian theology. From the beginning, American missionaries consciously made the lower-class population, together with children, their sociological target for evangelism. This led to an increase in church membership and fixed Christian thought on another world. For the deprived and the oppressed, the present world was regarded as so utterly lost that it could not possibly be saved. The duty of Christianity was to preach deliverance; to exhort, baptise, and gather the elect for Christ's Second Coming. Community reform and social betterment were regarded as a waste of time and energy that could be more gainfully employed in evangelism. "What are you doing in the way of social reform?" a Korean missionary was asked. "Nothing", was the reply, "we are too busy preaching the gospel."

The non-intellectual, indeed almost anti-intellectual, approach of American missionaries became quite apparent when they began to reflect on the question of theological education, that is, the training of Korean church leaders. As is well known, the most important principle for the training of Korean ministers was a restriction on higher education. The initial low standard of theological education has hindered the educational level of Protestant missions ever since. In this regard, Yi Kwangsu, a writer of the modernist school, in 1918 addressed himself to "Defects of the Korean Church Today":

To say that the church which founds schools despises learning sounds like a contradiction; but a real Christian treats learning with the greatest contempt, calling it 'worldly knowledge'. Arguing that it weakens faith, he regards learning as a temptation of the devil and an enemy of the soul ... In church schools no attention is paid to natural science, geography or history—the essential subjects in a modern curriculum. The most surprising thing is the opposition of church officers, pastors and elders, to 'worldly knowledge' ... Whatever the cause, to despise knowledge is a sure road to destruction. It is indeed regrettable (1918: 254).

The anti-intellectual approach of fundamentalist missionaries was the root cause of the long criticised anti-

intellectualism in Korea Protestantism. It choked the development of Protestant theology until the 1970s.

In brief, the outstanding characteristics of the early Korean church were its inherent conservatism, its lack of social application, and the low intellectual standard of Christians. In L.G. Paik's view, these features were transitory, but in contrast to his optimism it is generally accepted that these defects have remained unchanged in mainstream conservative churches.

It is generally accepted that the Shinto Shrine Issue has substantially influenced both the character and direction of the Christian movement in post-liberation times. In this context, D.N. Clark notes the negative effect of the issue in the Korean church:

During World War II, the resisters [to Japanese shrine worship] suffered severe persecution and even martyrdom, while others who cooperated suffered comparatively little. By 1945, deep schisms had developed all across the Christian community that reflected conflicting strains of nationalism, religion and collaboration. In the emotions of the period just following the war, even questions of atonement and forgiveness became controversial. The Shinto shrine issue can be taken as a starting point for the study of the fractiousness which is so evident in the Korean church today (1986: 13).

As he suggests, when the Pacific War ended, bitter disputes erupted between those who had collaborated with the Japanese and those who had resisted. In churches across Korea the shrine issue has contributed to greater cleavage within the Presbyterian community than other Christian groups, because leaders of this denomination were more active in resisting the Japanese.

In the history of Korean Christianity before liberation, conservative fundamentalists resolutely resisted Shinto shrine worship. In contrast, liberals and Catholics as a whole acquiesced to Japanese pressure, and so lost credence in the eyes of the Korean population. Since the 1960s and especially during the 1970s, however, the latter began a political struggle against successive military regimes. Ironically, after liberation from Japanese rule, the Koryo Seminary Faction (Koryöp'a; former members of the Non-Shrine Worship Movement) have

shown a rather conservative conformity. I would therefore dispute the assertion of a leading *minjung* theologian, Kim Yongbok, who suggests that there is a historical connection in motivation between the Non-Shrine Worship Movement in the 1930s and the recent political struggle for justice led by liberals. The ordeal of the Shinto shrine controversy in the 1930s remains an obstacle for reconciliation between ultra-conservative theology and liberal *minjung* theology.

Finally, unlike *minjung* activism, the majority of the Korean church—Catholic and Protestant—is loyal to the anti-communist government in Seoul. The government, in turn, invites and welcomes church support. The reason for this lies in the effect of national division and the Korean War on the church. After liberation in 1945, both Protestants and Catholics suffered terribly in the north. By 1949, Christian congregations in the north were shattered and persecuted by Kim Il-sŏng, a leader thoroughly opposed to the Christian faith and its supposed links to imperialism. As the 38th parallel hardened into a political boundary, Christians joined the spectacular exodus to the south. The Korean War hardened forever the enmity of Christians toward the northern regime. During the war, Christians were often killed by invading communist troops for being "running dogs" of the American and Japanese and for being enemies of the people. The missionary community also suffered as foreign workers were captured and forced to march from camp to camp. In this context we can understand why most Korean Christians support an alliance with America and are satisfied with American assurances of protection. Other liberal Christians decry the militarisation of Korea, the endless tension caused by confrontation with the north, and the tendency towards military rule. They charge that America's preoccupation with the Cold War means automatic American support for any anti-communist regime in Seoul no matter how dictatorial.

At present the Protestant church in general seems content with overall trends in Korea, including political liberalisation. No church leader speaks out against so-called democratisation—that is, the reinstatement of an elected

government. But whilst they accept the moral validity of democratisation, they are squeamish about other changes in the Korean political and economic system, such as labour's right to organise or to strike. Many conservative church leaders may not be aware of how political they are. Charles Elliott warns as follows:

... In Korea to talk of national prosperity, of the Japanese model, of the need for a quiescent labour force, to use the threat from the North as justification for caution in the restoration of freedom of speech and political activity is, precisely, to make religion the opiate of the masses.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Christianity in Korea is controversial. I believe that the split between the gospel of blessings and the *minjung* gospel cannot be overcome easily in the near future because of the legacy of American fundamentalism, the Shinto Shrine Issue and the Korean War. The mainstream of Korean Protestantism is not likely to soon develop into an organised political force.

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