CHRISTIANITY in Modern Korea

By Donald N. Clark



A SURPRISING PREVALENCE

Any visitor to South Korea today is struck by the sheer number of churches everywhere, from great cathedrals in big cities to humble village churches visible from any train or bus in the countryside. Christianity has a long history in Asia, beginning in India and reaching China and Japan in

Warming up the congregation before a Sunday service at Seoul's Yoido Full Gospel Church. The mega church claims the largest membership in the world with 700,000 members. Photo by Donald Clark.

the 1500s. In China and Japan, however, Christians never numbered more than a small percentage of the population. Though individual Christians have been important in shaping the modern histories of both countries, Christianity has never enjoyed truly mass appeal, and the percentage of Christians in China and Japan historically has ranged in the low single digits. Only in the most recent reports from China, where Christianity is enjoying a surge in membership of "house churches" has the estimated figure risen to three percent. Korea, on the other hand, as is plain from the number of red neon crosses glowing all across the urban landscape on church steeples at night, presents a different picture.

Korean Christianity began growing from seeds planted by Catholic converts in the 1780s, who learned about Christianity in China during tribute missions to the court in Beijing and returned home with religious texts and started meeting secretly. Christianity was outlawed at the time because of the "rites controversy," the argument over whether Christians could observe Confucian memorial ceremonies to the spirits of ancestors. In Korea the fragile Catholic community suffered bitter persecution and frequent martyrdom through the 1870s. In fact, Catholicism did not begin to spread in significant numbers until the dawn of the twentieth century. Japanese imperialism and the collapse of the Korean monarchy. When Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910, Christianity was not part of the program of conquest as it was in many other colonies. Rather, it was an alternative to what the colonial power was trying to impose. Thus, the appeal of Christianity in Korea was partly spiritual, partly economic, because of its association with Western modernity (including modern education), and also partly nationalist, because it served as an expression of Korean civil society that was not completely under Japan's control.

These early currents were elaborated upon after World War II, in the national crisis brought on by the division of Korea into north and south and the strong anti-communism of South Korea after the armistice in 1953. The "success" of Christianity in Korea from that time forward, therefore, is a reflection of events and trends in Korean history, leading to the phenomenon that upwards of thirty percent of the South Korean population today identifies itself with Christianity, both Protestant and Roman Catholic.¹

MISSIONARY INFLUENCES The Korean Reform Movement

Because missionary efforts were a major reason for the spread of Christianity in Korea, it is important to begin with what they did to

Likewise, the first Protestant communities in Korea were indigenous churches founded by Korean merchants who had encountered Christian teachings on their travels in Manchuria in the 1860s. In the 1880s, however, there followed a surge of Protestant missionaries from the West, mainly from North America, just as Korea was experiencing a national crisis brought on by attract the interest of Koreans in what had previously been an isolated, even somewhat xenophobic, society. By the 1880s, Koreans themselves were already embroiled in a furious debate over "reform," turning in large part on the knowledge that Japan after the Meiji Restoration was using "reform" to transform itself into a strong and wealthy state. Many Koreans, some of them clinging to the traditional loyalty of Korea to China within the Chinese tribute system, resisted the impulse to emulate Japan. A few who had already traveled to the West were in favor of seeking relations with and inviting business investments from Western interests, hoping to establish a third kind of foreign influence in Korea that might counteract Japan and replace the obviously waning power of China. This group was open to Western education and welcomed both Western missionaries and Western investments. The investments never amounted to much, but the missionaries arrived in numbers and set to work.

Evangelism, Education, and Medicine

The Protestant missionary enterprise in Korea, as in China and other mission fields, consisted of a "triad" of efforts: evangelism, education, and medicine. Evangelism—the founding of churches and the training of local pastors and leaders-was always the prime focus. However, it was important that Christian believers be able to read the Bible, and so primary schools were begun, along with the churches, to teach literacy. In the beginning, the missions mainly wanted to teach reading and the schools were little more than Biblereading classes. However, the hunger of Korea's Christians for more and more education made these schools expand, with demands for classes in many other things. Soon there were middle and even high schools that taught a variety of Western-style subjects including science, world history, and English. By 1910, when the Japanese took over, there existed a network of Christian schools and academies that functioned, usually under Korean Christian leadership, as an alternative to the nascent colonial education system. As Japan started building elementary schools in Korea, many Korean Christians opted to stay with their church-related academies.

The third leg of the "triad" was medicine, which originated with Christian healing as a value representing the healing ministry of Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament. Indeed, the first Protestant missionary in Korea, Horace Allen, was a medical doctor, not a preacher, and his work eventually led to what is now Severance Hospital and the Medical School of Yonsei University, the premier Christian university in Korea. The medical school that he founded, and the nursing school that followed, with many others coming thereafter, represented modern science in the minds of Koreans. The obvious benefits of scientific work, of modern medicines, of studies in biology and anatomy, of optometry, and of safe maternal and child health created enormous respect for Christian hospitals as modern institutions, and enhanced the identification of Christianity with modernity.

KOREAN RESPONSES

The Response to Christian Education

Christian education also grew, dividing into two streams: the original basic literacy education aimed at familiarity with the Bible, and an impetus, for which there was a strong demand from secular Koreans as well, for modern education in other fields. Yonsei University, for example, was founded as a Christian college with a goal of sending liberally educated Christian graduates to claim leading positions not only in the church but also in business and other walks of secular life. Yonsei (then known as Yŏnhi College), taught literature, engineering, foreign languages, and Korean studies as well as Christianity. As such it attracted numbers of non-Christian students, some of whom became Christian of their own volition while attending. In this way, Yonsei followed the pattern established by many other Christian colleges in Asia, and its graduates emerged early as leaders in many sectors of Korean society.

Democracy, Autonomy, and Nationalism

The representation of Christianity as an influence for modernity in Korea also had a political component. First was democracy, consciously or unconsciously taught by Western missionaries. Presbyterians, the leading Protestant denomination in Korea, govern themselves through elected representatives. Their boards of deacons and elders give many church members leadership positions and prestige in their communities. Pastors are subject to the control of "presbyteries," and all are subject to a national Presbyterian assembly of elected delegates. This structure has always been a practicum in the politics of democracy.

Autonomy—self government—was also a key component of the strategic plan for mission work in Korea known as the "Nevius Method,"² a development plan that pushed early independence for Korean Christians from missionary support in the form of urgent development of a Korean pastorate, autonomy for Korean churches, and complete responsibility for self-financing. Protestant Christianity was identified with democratic practice and autonomy. The process took more than a generation, but by the late 1930s, the major Protestant denominations were self-governing, the Presbyterians with their own General Assembly and the Methodists with their own Korean bishops.

Christianity, like all else in Korea, was forced to make its compromises with Japanese colonialism between 1910 and 1945. This unequal contest challenged the church in many ways, subjecting services to police surveillance, seeing leaders jailed and subjected to many kinds of threat, and forcing Christian organizations to adjust so that they supported, or appeared to support, the colonial government. Christian resistance was apparent in the 1919 Independence Movement; fifteen of the thirty-three signers of the Declaration of Independence were national Christian figures. Christians clashed with the colonial government in the 1930s when they resisted worshipping the spirits at Shinto shrines. The pressure continued through the years of the Second World War. The missionaries left, more and more local leaders and Christian intellectuals were made to choose between prison and open support for Japanese aggression, and there was a dramatic drop in the number of avowed Christians.

The Appeal to Women

Women have been the mainstay of Korean Christianity since the earliest beginnings in secret Catholic congregations. When the Protestants arrived a century later, they included women missionaries whose aim was to attract women to Christianity by every means available. Mary F. Scranton founded the Ewha School for Girls in 1886 as part of this; the Methodists started a women's hospital in the same vein; and evangelism for women, in Sunday schools and churches, was a main thrust of the entire missionary effort.

Though Mary Scranton had to start her school with a single destitute Korean child because no one else would come to be taught by a foreign barbarian, the response that followed was nothing short of phenomenal. The idea that girls could—even *should*—be schooled was simply revolutionary. As a result, women of all ages took advantage of every kind of opportunity to learn and develop their abilities as leaders in the church and ultimately in society.

Mary Scranton's little school grew into a girls' academy, then a

college, and now Ewha Womans University, the largest school for women in Asia, with graduates who enjoy enormous social prestige. Alumni have served in the national cabinet and even as Prime Minister. And Ewha is but the most famous of dozens of schools and colleges for women that started out as Bible literacy classes or modest institutes for church women to sharpen their leadership skills, and grew, mostly through the ambition and determination of their graduates, into accredited schools and, then, finally, into colleges.

One prime example of this is the beginning of the Korean YWCA, which began as an idea in the minds of two Korean girl students attending conferences of the World Christian Student Federation in the 1920s, first in Peking and then in Washington, D.C. They founded and obtained recognition for a Korean YWCA, and by 1926 had YWCA chapters in several major cities hard at work on many kinds of projects, from pig-raising to fund women's evangelism efforts, holding temperance meetings to fight alcohol abuse and family violence, to running classes from kindergartens all the way up to night schools for working women. The YWCA started hostels-safe places for women to stay when



Jesus Loves Me, a much-loved children's hymn in Protestant churches and Sunday schools around the world in many languages, was first translated into Korean in the 1880s. Source: National Christian Council of Korea, *Chansong-ga* [Hymnal] (Seoul: Hymnal Compilation Committee, 1967), 484

traveling or away from home attending school. It ran leadership workshops for YWCA members. Both before and after the Second World War, it enjoyed a high reputation as a bastion of civil society values and human rights.

In the 1950s, during the dark days that followed the Korean War, the YWCA ran widows' homes, orphanages, rural training centers, and job centers. In ensuing periods of military dictatorship it was frequently the scene of meetings promoting democracy. In the story of Korean Christianity there is hardly a better example of Christian theory in practice.

The Spiritual Appeal in Theory and Practice

Historical circumstances and social factors help explain the growth of Korean Christianity during the twentieth century. But religious responses to external circumstances also have to be understood as authentically spiritual, as matters of the human soul. The spirituality of Korean Christians is plainly seen in their practice. The fervent prayer, the faithful church attendance, the sacrificial giving, and the bonds that tie Christians together are all signs of lives transformed. In Richard Kim's famous novel *Lost Names*, the story of a boy growing up in a Christian family under Japanese rule, Christian iden-

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tity is a key to the family's ability to overcome political pressure and to win respect in their community. Christianity has everything to do with their education, reputation, and social standing. Some have suggested that the deliverance that comes with liberation from Japan at the end of the novel can be read as a metaphor for Christian redemptionunearned yet repayable, at least partly, through the living of a virtuous life. This comprehension of Christianity as a commitment to live a redeemed life is a central tenet of Korean Christians.

The "redeemed life," however, has to be lived in a temporal world subject to distractions, temptations, and daily dilemmas. After the division of Korea, as early as the period of US military occupation in the south (1945–1948), Christians appeared to come into their own as Englishspeaking members of the occupation regime. When the Methodist Syngman Rhee became president of the new Republic in 1948, many Christians were appointed to high office. Their time in power, much affected by the Korean War and the grinding poverty that resulted from it, was not exemplary of the "redeemed life," but was marked by corruption and abuse of power. Rhee's Christian government failed the

test of the "redeemed life," and Christianity as an ideology lost much in the eyes of many Koreans. The military rulers who succeeded Rhee in the period 1961 to 1993 further manipulated the situation, coopting the natural anti-Communism of South Korea's Christians to support their dictatorships in the name of national security.

HOW HAS CHRISTIANITY INTERACTED WITH KOREAN CULTURE?

Inasmuch as Christianity has functioned as an important part of modernization in Korea, it can be said to have "changed" Korea. However, the responses of Koreans to the Christian message, and to the opportunities that came with it, reflect values that are deeply Korean: the hunger for education, the deep concern that came with their national collapse in 1910, their need for affirmation and respect in the independence movement, and their struggle to deal with national division and democratic development in the second half of the century. These circumstances created the fertile soil for growth.

The interaction, for example, is evident in the use of language how the Christian message was communicated to Koreans. The early Catholics read Chinese-language texts, since Classical Chinese was the written language of the Korean *yangban* upper class. Matteo Ricci's pioneering The True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven, imported from China where Ricci had been a Jesuit missionary, was a basic text. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Protestant missionaries sorely needed Christian literature in Korea, they imported works that had already been translated into Chinese by missionaries to China. They then set about learning enough Korean themselves to manage publications of their own. Immediately finding that the Koreans had *Han'gŭl*, an easy-to-learn alphabet that upper-class Koreans shunned in favor of the more elegant Chinese, they took the easy route and began writing and translating in the vernacular Han'gŭl. This put the missionaries' texts within reach of barely-literate commoner Koreans, appealing to their thirst for education and associating Christianity with literacy for the masses. The adoption of Han'gŭl was an adaptation: a conscious decision to communicate Christianity not in the higher culture of classical Chinese, but in the lower culture of common Han'gŭl. The use of the Han'gŭl alphabet in Christian churches and schools across Korea boosted both Christianity and mass education.

Christianity also had to find its peace with Confucianism. The Catholic experience in this regard had been particularly traumatic, with many early Christians being put to death precisely over the ancient "rites controversy": the refusal of Christians to worship spirits, including ancestral spirits, a prime requirement of Confucian orthodoxy. This conflict more than any other estranged Christianity from traditional Korean culture.

Protestant missionaries likewise wrestled with this conflict. Early Protestant missionaries actually required new converts to renounce not only gambling, liquor, tobacco, and concubines, but also the *chesa*, the annual memorial rite honoring dead ancestors. For an individual to renounce the chesa by becoming a Christian was a profoundly unfilial act, and many families broke apart because of it, with the new Christian being cast out, in effect. Or, it meant in practice that the whole family had to convert to Christianity to remain in agreement.

This awkward circumstance took a very long time to resolve, and different denominations of Christians resolved it differently, at different times. Eventually, Christians developed the custom of a memorial service for parents and ancestors that expressed filial devotion without ceremonies of offering food or prayers to the spirits of the ancestors. This seems to have finessed the question, showing respect without violating the tenets of Christian faith.

Many observers have commented on the mingling of other religious traditions with Christianity in Korea, such as the ecstatic modes of worship that manifest themselves especially in Korean Pentecostalism. Speaking in tongues, it seems, is uncomfortably close to shamanist spirit possession. Korean Protestantism has a rich history of revivalism, with famous episodes of mass expression bordering on hysteria. The most famous of these was in 1907, when Korea's early churches were gripped by a movement of mass prayer and confession that set the tone for much of followed, including the energy and passion with which Koreans often proclaim their faith.

To witness a Pentecostal service today in a church like the Yoido Full Gospel Church, reputedly the biggest church in the world with more than 700,000 members, in an auditorium that holds as many as 25,000 for each of the seven Sunday services, is to witness waves of this emotion in the mass singing and the moments when the pastor summons the congregation to simultaneous prayers out loud. The huge number of people create a sound that is awe-inspiring. Individuals in the congregation begin shouting, crying, jumping,

and moving their bodies in a kind of frenzy—until the organist plays a chord, the signal for silence, all at once restoring decorum. There is a spirited argument in Korea over whether this is a throwback to ancient Korean spirit worship, or simply something basic to Korean culture that comes naturally, or a moment of communication with the Holy Spirit, as is taught in Pentecostal theology.

WHY DID CATHOLICISM LAG BEHIND PROTESTANT GROWTH IN KOREA?

Catholic Christianity is twice as old as Protestant Christianity in Korea, but it was overshadowed in the twentieth century by the spectacular growth of Protestant denominations. Donald Baker has carefully considered the reasons for this, which begin with the history of suppression in the nineteenth century. Another reason is the much stronger organizational effort by cooperating (and competing) Protestant denominations and the prominence of the institutions that they created, such as Yonsei University. The fact that the Catholic mass was said in Latin by foreign priests until the 1960s meant that the liturgy was inaccessible to all but the most educated Catholics, while Protestants pushed the use of Han'gŭl and the training of Korean leaders at all levels. Catholic and Protestant Christianity are regarded as separate religions in Korea, as in many countries, and there was considerable ill-will between them in the early 1900s. Catholics appeared to accept Japanese rule more readily than Protestants, or at any rate did not develop a comparable reputation for resistance, as in the 1919 Independence Movement. By 1960 there were twice as many Protestant churches as Catholic, with nearly five times as many clergy. It is remarkable, then, that since 1960, Catholics have gained a great deal of ground, so that the membership ratio today is about $8:5.^3$

One reason for the recent popularity of Catholic Christianity harkens back to the elevation of a Korean archbishop, in 1962, who then was made a cardinal. With the mass being said in Korean, and missionary priests being replaced by Koreans, membership began to swell. The history of the church was remembered with great respect, and in the 1970s, especially, Catholic leaders established themselves as fearless human rights advocates, standing up to the military regime and distinguishing themselves not only as churchmen, but in the fields of letters and politics as well. The Catholic poet Kim Chiha became a virtual martyr for the cause, imprisoned for writing poetry critical of the Park Chung-hee regime. The Catholic politician Kim Dae-jung became famous for his quiet strength, campaigning for president against President Park and nearly winning, then suffering periods of imprisonment, exile, attempts at assassination, trials for sedition, and even a death sentence. Kim Dae-jung became "Korea's Mandela," eventually prevailing in 1997 to be elected president himself.

CHRISTIANITY IN KOREA TODAY

Today, Christianity remains a vital force in South Korea. In the north, it is strictly limited to a handful of government-recognized church congregations that are always under tight surveillance. Nobody knows how many illegal "house churches" there are in the north, or what their influence is in the area whose capital, Pyongyang, was once the center of Christianity on the peninsula, known as the "Jerusalem of the East."

President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy," the policy of reconciliation with North Korea that he promoted with his famous visit to Pyongyang in year 2000, has removed much of the anti-Communist fervor from political discourse in South Korea. Young people those who do not remember the miseries of the Korean War—espe-

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cially support new approaches to the north and to the unchanging national goal of reunification. Nevertheless, there are many South Koreans, particularly those who had to flee their homes, farms, and businesses in the north after the Communist takeover (so-called wölnamin Christians), who yearn for the complete defeat of the Kim Jong-il regime in Pyongyang and envision a kind of conquest. Godless communism is their enemy, the church militant is their army, and the Christian "occupation" of North Korea is their strategic objective. This triumphalist drumbeat is common in the most evangelical South Korean churches, even evincing a kind of nostalgia for the national security state of the 1980s. On the other hand are churches and organizations that take up collections for relief activities and humanitarian assistance to the north, engaging in a kind of material missionary work that is aimed at expressing Christian caring. The fact that these efforts are controversial is typical of the political rifts in South Korea, as conservative Christians accuse the helpers of prolonging the Kim Jong-il dictatorship.

It is now a subject of some comment that the spectacular growth in Protestant Christianity that brought millions to mass meetings in Seoul to hear from Christian megastars like Billy Graham, is waning. In the 1990s, the rate of growth among Protestants slowed, and by the early 2000s the absolute number had actually begun to shrink.

It is no surprise that the dramatic growth rates of the 1980s proved impossible to sustain, and there is much discussion about the reasons. Some writers point to the lessening sense of national emergency in South Korea. Others point to a complacency that has come with rising living standards. Demographic analyses point to the fact that the rush to join urban churches was a byproduct of the mass movement of the population to Korea's cities between 1960 and 1990, which is now more or less completed.

Deeper analyses reflect on the stresses and schisms in the Protestant communities, mostly Presbyterian and Methodist, that have involved much bickering and scandal. The influx of North Korean refugee Christians (the wolnamin) created regional stresses in the Presbyterian church which were later aggravated by rivalries between southwest (the Honam region) and southeast (Yŏngnam) church leaders quarreling over everything from theology to power to money. Scandals of the most common type-embezzlement, sex, and other forms of betrayal-have besmirched the reputations of church leaders. And the zealous evangelism of the more mission-oriented Christians have put many fellow-citizens off, creating an anti-Christian backlash against Christian activists who attack Buddhist temples and Christians who denigrate Korean tradition in favor of "foreign" religion. Korean Christians are proud of their numbers and love to point to the red neon crosses that dot the landscape at night as proof of their success. But the fact is that these many churches represent a splintering into scores of rival denominations, all with "seminaries" turning out pastors to start new congregations in a self perpetuating process that runs like a church growth machine. Indeed, one reason South Korea has 10,000 missionaries serving in foreign countries may be the lack of professional opportunities for all the newly-minted ministers within Korea itself. The fact is that corruption afflicts leaders in the church just as it afflicts those in all walks of life.

CONCLUSION

Religious institutions are an important part of the vibrant civil society that has created a healthy democracy in South Korea. After a period of missionary influence which saw the laying of a strong institutional foundation, Christianity is now well established as a Korean religious tradition, long independent of foreign control, yet part of the world Christian movement. Its shape is the direct result of the historical forces and trends that have shaped Korea, mainly South Korea, as a whole. Thus the regionalism that divides Korean Christianity—northerners vs. southerners, and southwesterners vs. southeasterners, is typical of Korea's political culture as a whole. It is also natural for a movement that has grown so fast to undergo periods of retrenchment and consolidation, and this is what appears to be happening in Korea today.

And as for the future, as in all aspects of Korean life, the big unanswered question remains the manner and timing of Korea's eventual north-south reunification. The division of the country in 1945 sundered the church and shaped its development in the south, and Korea's Christians are sure to play a central role in the eventual solution to this overarching national tragedy.

NOTES

 According to the Korea National Statistical Office in 2003, 53.9 percent of the South Korean population over the age of fifteen reported a religious affiliation. Of those, 47 percent were Buddhists, 36.8 percent were Protestants of various denominations, and 13.7 percent were Roman Catholics. The concentration of Christians in the general population also varied by region, with more Christians in Seoul and the southwestern Chôlla provinces, and more Buddhists in other regions. (Cited in Jang Sukman, "Historical Currents and Characteristics of Korean Protestantism after Liberation, *Korea Journal* XLIV:4 (Winter 2004), 134–135). Though the percentage of Christians in South Korea has been given in the mid to high-twenties for the past two decades, statistics for church membership must always be taken with caution. See James H. Grayson, "Religious Adherence and the 1985 and 1995 Censuses: What They Tell Us and Don't Tell Us about Korean Christianity," a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, March 2005.

Don Baker explains why claims may be inflated by pointing to some of the drivers for church growth in his chapter, "Sibling Rivalry in Twentieth Century Korea: Comparative Growth Rates of Catholic and Protestant Communities," in Robert E. Buswell, Jr., and Timothy S. Lee, (eds.), *Christianity in Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 283–308.

As for North Korea, the number of Christians is unknown. There are state-recognized churches that hold services, and it is believed that there are "house churches" in the North, but no one has been able to ascertain anything approaching reliable numbers for Christian believers.

- 2. The Nevius Method was named for John L. Nevius, a missionary in China who invented it as a development strategy for missions. Missionaries in Korea invited Nevius to visit and speak at a conference in Seoul in 1890. The Presbyterian Mission adopted his recommendations, which boiled down to (1) Self governmentturning leadership and control of Korean churches over to Korean pastors and congregations as soon as possible; (2) Self-support-weaning Korean churches off financial support from the missions as soon as possible, and challenging them to pay for their own salaries and buildings as part of governing themselves; and (3) Self-propagation-recruiting new members and spreading Christian beliefs in their communities and even overseas, in missionary efforts of their own. In keeping with the Nevius method, the first Presbyterian pastors graduated from the theological seminary in Pyongyang in 1907, and one of the graduates was assigned to be the church's first missionary on Cheju Island. By the end of the decade, Korean missionaries were at work near Vladivostok, and in Japan as well, all of them supported by Korean church communities. The basic work on the Nevius method in Korea is Charles Allen Clark, The Korean Church and the Nevius Method (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1930).
- 3. Baker, "Sibling Rivalry," 298 and passim.

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