

## The Historical Currents and Characteristics of Korean Protestantism after Liberation

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### Abstract

Protestantism is a dominant religion in Korea. It is seen as has an image of being the religion of the middle class, of youth and intellectuals, and of urbanites. And It is in inseparablye relationship with related to Korea's pursuit of modernity. Protestantism provides an important clue to understanding the Korean society. Designed to help understand the Korean Protestant church in transition, this paper reviews the historical trajectory of Protestantism from the nation's liberation in 1945 to the present and examines some key issues such as exclusionist faith and pro-U.S. inclination.

Keywords: Korean Protestantism, anti-communism, exclusionism, pro-U.S. inclination, internal other, separation of church and state, awakening of lay members

### Introduction

Statistics on the religious population are good indicators for understanding the overall characteristics of Protestantism in Korean society. According to the Korea National Statistical Office,<sup>1</sup> 53.9 percent of the population aged 15 and over reported having a religion in 2003. Of those, Buddhists accounted for 47.0 percent; Catholics, 13.7 percent; and Protestants, 36.8 percent. By region, there were more Protestants than Buddhists in Seoul and Capital region and Jeolla region.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, there were more Buddhists than Protestants in Gyeongsang,<sup>3</sup> Chungcheong (except Daejeon),<sup>4</sup> Gangwon, and Jeju regions. By age, Protestantism was more prevalent than Buddhism among those aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 29 and less so among those in their thirties and

<sup>1</sup> [http://kosis.nso.go.kr/cgi-bin/sws\\_999.cgi](http://kosis.nso.go.kr/cgi-bin/sws_999.cgi)

<sup>2</sup> The proportions of Protestants and Buddhists by region were as follows: 47.3 % and 32.9 % in Seoul, respectively; 46.6 % and 30.9 % in Incheon; 44.2 % and 37.2 % in Gyeonggi-do province; 43.9 % and 32.6 % in Gwangju; 55.1 % and 28.1 % in Jeollabuk-do province; and 48.9 % and 36.6 % in Jeollanam-do province.

<sup>3</sup> The percentages of Buddhists and Protestants by region were as follows: 72.0 % and 18.5 % in Busan, respectively; 76.2 % and 14.9 % in Ulsan; 74.2 % and 16.7 % in Gyeongsangnam-do Province; and 69.0 % and 20.3 % in Gyeongsangbuk-do Province.

<sup>4</sup> In Daejon, Protestants (42.7 %) slightly outnumbered Buddhists (41.7 %).

forties, which was the same in past years.<sup>5</sup> By education, there were more Protestants than Buddhists among college graduates.<sup>6</sup> By occupation, there were more Protestants than Buddhists among professionals and managers whereas there were more Buddhists than Protestants among farmers and fishermen.<sup>7</sup>

What we can glean from the statistics is that in Korea, Protestants are more likely than Buddhists to live in the Capital region and Jeolla region, to be young in their teens and twenties, highly-educated and hold professional jobs. These characteristics of Korean Protestants have important implications, given the fact that mainstream Korean society is centered around the Capital region, highly-educated elites and the younger generation. This points to the need to examine the influence of Protestantism on Korean society.

The above statistics show that Korea has fewer Protestants than Buddhists, but numbers alone do not fully speak of the influence of Protestantism. Judging from the two factors of personal religious consciousness of believers and the frequency of church/temple attendance, Protestants show stronger group cohesiveness than Buddhists. Among other things, Protestants have an overwhelmingly stronger sense of religiosity than Buddhists. In a Gallup poll in 1997, respondents were asked to report how religious they felt. 53.4 percent of Protestants reported they were religious, as compared to 28.4 percent of Buddhists. The percentage of Protestants who reported feeling religious went up, compared to the 1989 poll results, confirming a stronger feeling of religiosity among Protestants.<sup>8</sup> The frequency of church/temple attendance was very different between the two religions; only 1.2 percent of Buddhists reported that they attended services at least once a week, versus 71.5 percent of Protestants. This pattern can be confirmed by the 2003 KNSO statistics.<sup>9</sup>

These statistics demonstrate that Protestants strongly express their religiosity both personally and publicly, which implies that they have stronger group cohesiveness than Buddhists. Examining the demographic characteristics of Protestants by such criteria as region, age, education and occupation and the subjective and objective expression of their religiosity, Protestantism seems to be the most influential of all religions in Korean society, and thus, it provides an important clue to understanding the society. Designed to help understand the Korean Protestant church in transition, this paper reviews the historical trajectory of Protestantism from the nation's liberation in 1945 to the present and examines some key issues.

<sup>5</sup> There were more Protestants than Buddhists between the ages of 15 to 19 (50.2 % vs. 31.5 %) and 20 to 29 (44.7 % vs. 37.7 %), but this trend was reversed for the age groups of 30 to 39 (40.8 % vs. 43.6 %) and 40 to 49 (33.5 % vs. 50.5 %).

<sup>6</sup> Among high school graduates, Protestants accounted for 37.4 %; Buddhists, 46.5 %. Among those with college or graduate degrees, Protestants (44.5 %) were more prevalent than Buddhists (34.6 %).

<sup>7</sup> Among professionals and managers, Protestants (47.5 %) outnumbered Buddhists (32.0 %). Among farmers and fishermen, there were more Buddhists (67.5 %) than Protestants (21.8 %).

<sup>8</sup> According to the 1989 poll results on the same item, 48.0 % of Protestants reported being religious while 31.4 % of Buddhists did (Gallup Korea 1998, 25).

<sup>9</sup> In the 2003 poll, 1.8 % of Buddhists and 31.4 % of Protestants responded that they participated in religious activities at least twice a week, while 2.3 % of Buddhists and 40.6 % of Protestants responded that they participated once a week. In contrast, 33.1 % of Buddhists and 2.8 % of Protestants reported participating in religious activities once or twice a year (KNSO 2004).

## Historical Currents of Korean Protestantism after 1945

### *Memories of the Colonial Period and Division of the Church*

Upon liberation, the Protestant Church experienced intense conflicts over the issue of punishing ~~clergy~~members of the clergy men—or ministers who collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial era. The key collaborative behavior to be punished was Shinto shrine worship, a traditional religious ritual of Japan. Because Protestantism emphasizes monotheism, worshipping at Shinto shrines was paramount to committing the sin of idolatry. The Protestant Church seethed with ill feelings about people who had worshipped at Shinto shrines in collaboration with Japan's colonial policy and still held leading posts in the Church after liberation. These ministers who were the targets of severe criticism resisted in kind, and bitter conflicts ensued openly.

This conflict was most intense in the Presbyterian Church, a representative denomination of Korean Protestantism. It started at the Gyeongnam Presbytery, whose members included Minister Ju Gi-cheol who died in jail, persecuted for refusing Shinto worship, and many other ministers who had been imprisoned by Japanese imperialists for the same reason. **The so-called Jail Group (Churokpa), who suffered in jail because of their refusal~~ing~~ to worship at Shinto shrines,** was strongly opposed to the Presbyterian Church leaders for their Shinto worship. They founded the Goryeo Theological Seminary and applied pressure to the leaders of the Gyeongnam Presbytery. However, they were met with strong resistance, so they seceded from the presbytery and built a new one by creating the Goryeo Theological Seminary Group (**Gosin Group or Gosinpa**) within the Presbyterian Church. They formed an ultra-conservative camp, advocating the doctrine of verbal inspiration that states that the faithful must believe and accept everything in the Bible as the literal word of God.

Protestant ministers refused Shinto worship not for the sake of the national independence movement *per se* but rather to stronghold their monotheistic beliefs. That is, resistance was not their explicit intention; the refusal of Shinto worship merely took the shape of resistance against the Japanese imperialists as an unavoidable result.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, in the post-liberation era, the formation of the **Gosin Group** contributed to influencing a broader base of people to recognize the legitimacy of monotheism and strengthened extreme conservatism in the Korean Protestant Church. The division of the Presbyterian Church caused by the **Gosin Group**'s fundamentalism deepened the **extreme conservative** character of the Korean Protestant Church. Consequently, the Korean Protestant Church functioned as a staunch bulwark of conservative faith rejecting all other forms of belief. Even slightly different views were unacceptable in this rigid atmosphere. Although it had no direct relationship with Shinto worship, the division of the Presbyterian Church continued as the exclusionist attitude of the Gosin Group spread across Protestant churches and gained legitimacy. Most churches competitively endorsed exclusionism and **literalism**, with extreme “**fundamentalism**” becoming the character of the mainstream Korean Protestant Church.

Conflicts with the liberal theology of Minister Kim Jae-jun of the Joseon Theological Seminary can be understood in this context. The mainstream Korean Protestant Church, which was based on excessively conservative beliefs, could not accept any form of liberal theology. Confrontation between the Presbyterian

<sup>10</sup> On church historians' research of Shinto worship, see Kim S. (1991).

Theological Seminary Group (which was armed with the doctrines of absolute inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Bible and was centered around missionaries from the United States) and the Joseon Theological Seminary Group continued even amid the whirls of the Korean War, finally dissolving with the establishment of the Hanguk Gidokgyo Jangnohoe (Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea) in 1954.

Division of the Presbyterian Church did not stop even after this. In 1959, the Church was further split into the Tonghap and Hapdong groups over the issues of financial irregularities and power struggle within the Church and the position on the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the ecumenical movement (ecumenism). The Hapdong's effort to ally with the Gosin Group failed due to internal schisms within each. In the end, the Presbyterian Church was flooded with different groups.<sup>11</sup> Without a central controlling body like the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church was unable to control these divisions and ended up having a disorderly array of numerous groups, reinforcing the tendency among followers to orient themselves strictly to an individual church. Therefore, the ecumenical movement for seeking church unity was started for the purpose of healing internal divisions. However, these divisions did not only impact the Church negatively. The competitive atmosphere between groups actually contributed to the increase of overall church membership. Of course, it remains a serious issue to evaluate whether and how much the quantitative growth of membership corresponded with the primary objective of religion.

To summarize, negative memories about Shinto shrine worship during Japanese imperial rule reinforced the ~~fastidiousness~~<sup>stubbornness</sup> of fundamentalist monotheism in Korea. As such, purism was widely accepted in the Protestant Church, and the ultra-conservative faith that formed before liberation was reinforced to a degree that was without precedent in church history. Consequently, various groups were produced within the Protestant Church.

#### *Protestant Defectors (to South Korea) and Anti-communism*

During the Japanese imperial rule, Pyeongan-do and Hwanghae-do provinces were at the center of religious power in the Korean Protestant Church. The main religious characteristics of the so-called Northwest force were literal fundamentalism and the active role of missionaries. Its anti-communist sentiment was strengthened after undergoing severe conflicts with the communist regime of North Korea in the post-liberation period. Armed with a solid combination of extreme verbalist faith and experiential anti-communism, many Christians defected to South Korea when the communist regime scaled up oppression of their religion. In the south, the Protestant defectors actively cooperated with the U.S. military government and the Syngman Rhee regime, whose policy directives were based on anti-communism and pro-U.S. orientation. In return for their cooperation, many of the Northwest Protestant force succeeded in joining the ruling class of South Korea. Financial aid from mission works of the U.S. Protestant Church made a great contribution to the growing power of the Korean Protestant church.<sup>12</sup>

The ultra-rightism and pro-U.S. inclination of the Protestant defectors were further reinforced after the Korean War. They justified their position by claiming that

<sup>11</sup> For a summarized description on this, see Kim and Kim (1993).

<sup>12</sup> For the pro-U.S., anti-communist nature of Protestant defectors to South Korea, see Kang (2003).

“North Korea oppresses religion, but South Korea at least guarantees the freedom of religion.” The dichotomy of good and bad, which is ~~the~~—characteristic of ultra-conservative faith,—that “they” represent absolute evil and “we” represent absolute good,—worked effectively. Combining across-the-board conservatism with experiential anti-communism, ~~the Korean Protestant Church was armed with an unassailable fundamentalism, which was unassailable.~~ The Cold War regime, into which every part of the world was incorporated under the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, solidified the status of the Korean Protestant Church, a self-claimed spearhead of anti-communism. Against the backdrop of the Cold War regime on the international level and the hostile confrontation between North and South Korea on the peninsula, the South Korean Protestant Church, in which defectors from North Korea held a central place, enjoyed a privileged status.

#### *Rapid Growth of the Protestant Church*

The Park Chung-hee regime, which grabbed power through a military coup, tried to prove its legitimacy by achieving economic growth under the catch phrase, “Let’s have a decent life for once.” Owing to the government-led development drive, Korea experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization in the 1960s and the 1970s, and in the tide of social change, steady streams of people moved from rural villages to large cities to work as laborers. Forming the urban poor in their new locations, these migrants joined the Protestant Church in order to find a sense of belonging to a community, which they used to have in traditional rural life. Along with this, middle class people, who gleaned benefits from economic growth, sought to relieve their sense of insecurity from rapid social change by joining the Protestant Church. According to a survey,<sup>13</sup> the number of Protestants increased from 620,000 in 1960 to 3,190,000 in 1970 to 7,180,000 in 1980, recording remarkably high growth rates of 512 percent in the 1970s and 225 percent in the 1980s.

The main reason for the quantitative expansion and rapid growth of the Protestant Church during this period is that people found in the church a substitute for rural communities. However, it should not be overlooked that the church provided legitimacy for the accumulation of wealth in the capitalist economy as well. Yeido Full Gospel Church, which achieved fast growth in the 1970s, is often cited as an exemplary case to explain this phenomenon.

At the time, the developmentalist dictatorial regime suppressed the widespread discontent of workers with the ideology of “growth first, distribution later” and pushed forth the export-oriented growth drive. Yet the sense of deprivation among workers could not be easily eliminated and their discontent was riding high. The middle class, which emerged as a result of economic growth, internalized this tension and also felt insecure about their new-found material wealth. However, the Yeido Full Gospel Church defined material wealth as a blessing from “Hananin” (God) and helped the middle class to relieve structural insecurity derived from the growth-oriented policy of the developmentalist autocratic regime. Rev. Jo Yong-gi of Yeido Full Gospel Church was not very different from the conservative leaders of the Korean Protestant Church in the sense that they shared a rigid dichotomous belief system and a conqueror’s attitude.

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<sup>13</sup> No (1997, 122).

But he was clearly different from them in another aspect; he emphasized material success as a blessing from “Hannim.” His view was strikingly different from that of Protestant ministers who held an implicitly negative view of the pursuit of material possessions. His strategy of imparting a positive view of material growth proved very effective in that it functioned as a safety valve for relieving the structural insecurity of the middle class produced from the export-oriented growth drive of the developmentalist dictatorial regime. Yeido Full Gospel Church, which is the world’s largest individual church, enjoyed fast growth in the 1970s when the Korean economy was likewise experiencing rapid capitalist growth. But the church’s sudden expansion resulted in it being caught up in the pernicious effects of capitalism, which have always been the main source of internal conflicts. We can see this in the disruptions that are still occurring in the church today.

#### *Participation in the Democratization Movement*

The Park Chung-hee regime’s attempt to silence all social contradictions with the ideology of export-oriented economic growth was soon met with resistance from people. As the Yusin regime restricted citizens’ space of autonomy, reactive forces gradually grew stronger. People who held a critical view of undemocratic dictatorship began to organize and were joined by religious people. As the space of legitimate resistance was very limited, clergymen and religious space provided a useful base for activists. Participation in the democratization movement was even more pronounced in the Catholic Church, which realigned its church system after the Second Vatican Council.

Meanwhile, most Protestant churches, especially large ones, deployed a personal regeneration movement by holding massive revitalization rallies (*buheunghoe*) and prohibited participation in polities, including the democratization movement, asserting the separation of church and politics. However, some progressive Protestant churches allied with democratization activists and launched a social movement to defend human rights and social justice. A representative example of this is the Dosi Saneop Seon-gyohoe (Urban Industrial Mission, UIM). Established to preach to workers in the dark zone of industrialization, it intervened in labor-management disputes whenever it could to protect the rights of workers. The government branded it a pro-communist organization and exercised pressure on it both overtly and covertly. In order to oppress the UIM, the government even propagated the rumor that “Wherever UIM(Dosan, abbreviated name of UIM) goes, business failure (*dosan*) follows.”

Until democratization was achieved to some degree and the legitimate autonomy of civil society was secured in Korea, the religious space of Protestant organizations was utilized for the democratization movement.<sup>14</sup> The government avoided using physical force to control religious spaces as much as it could. Being virtually the only legitimate space not subject to government repression left at the time, religion was recognized for its usefulness. Because the separation of politics and religion was stipulated in the Constitution, the authorities were at a loss as to how to deal with ministerial involvement in the democratization movement. Until the expression of diverse views was guaranteed, a precondition for civil society, religious organizations continued to function as the center of the democratization movement, with the

<sup>14</sup> The symbolic status of the Myeong Dong Catholic Cathedral within the democratization movement was created in the process.

Protestant and Catholic Church played a leading role.

### *Declining Growth of the Protestant Church and the Awakening of Lay Members*

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Several factors worked in combination to affect the quantitative growth of the Protestant Church during the modernization period of Korea. As the pro-U.S., anti-communist regime was erected in South Korea after liberation, the image of Protestantism as a religion of civilization and of American power worked positively on those with vested interest in Korea. In the midst of rapid industrialization and urbanization during the 1970s, the Korean Protestant Church absorbed as its followers people living on the urban fringes after leaving rural areas. In addition, it also appealed to the middle class by abating or replacing the psychological and social instability caused by modernization. Transforming from a religion of civilization to that of modernity, the Protestant Church experienced unprecedented explosive growth in Korea.

But the amazing growth rate of the Protestant Church that continued for almost two decades has been slowing down since the 1990s. It is still growing in number, but the speed and scale of growth is on the decrease. According to the statistics released by the Protestant Church, which tend to be inflated to some degree, the growth rate hovered around 10 percent between 1990 and 1995. Compared to a rate of 92 percent that was reached between the 1980s and the 1990s,<sup>15</sup> it is clearly declining. Two factors may explain the decreasing growth rate. One is structural: the growth strategy utilized by the Protestant Church in response to the rapid social and cultural changes taking place from the 1960s to the 1980s has now reached a limit. Recreation of the atmosphere of a kin community in urban life and the image of sophisticated Western lifestyle, which appealed to followers in the past, is now insufficient for further growth. When civil society was still underdeveloped in Korea, the Protestant Church served as a venue for social gatherings and the location of the democratization movement, which could not be found in other places. But today there are many places that can fulfill this function.

The second factor is that many negative aspects of the Protestant Church have been disclosed after its remarkable growth spurt. They have become more noticeable today, given wider media coverage, and they are criticized strongly both inside and outside the church. Some examples of these negative aspects are the privatization of the Church as evidenced by the inheritance of the ministry in large churches, internal conflicts caused by ministers' misdemeanors, and financial irregularities (as happened in the Geumnan Methodist Church and Yeido Full Gospel Church).

Protestant churches collect a sizable amount of money every week in the name of offerings, but most do not reveal any information on how much money is collected or how it is used. Huge amounts of untaxed money, very little of which is donated to the needy, are left to the hands of church leaders, so the danger of financial mismanagement is very real. Negative views of the Protestant Church like those mentioned here contribute to the slow-down of Protestant membership growth.

Under these circumstances, new trends are emerging in the Protestant Church. Lay members have begun to raise critical voices regarding the undesirable behavior of the religious elite. It is noteworthy that lay members, who used to absolutely revere the

<sup>15</sup> No (1997, 125-126).

authority of the religious elite, now criticize the authority structure of the church. Although institutionalized religions that enjoy all sorts of vested rights have deep-rooted problems, the fact that lay believers, who used to be minorities within the church, are raising their voices indicates possible transformations of the Protestant Church. It seems that the establishment of internal mechanisms to ensure active participation by laity will prove very instrumental in a new beginning for the Protestant Church.

#### Directions for the Future: Three Significant Events

The declining growth rate of the Protestant church has created a sense of crisis within the church that further growth will not follow accustomed patterns. Three recent events in the Protestant church occurred because of this sense of crisis. The first was massive political rallies organized by conservative groups of the Protestant church and the creation of the **Korean Christian Party** (KCP) for the general elections of 15 April 2004. The second was the foundation of the Labor Union of the Christian Church (LUCC). The third was the so-called Daegwang High School Incident, in which a mission high school student refused to take the mandatory Christianity class, asserting freedom of religion.

In recent years, it has not been uncommon to see conservative forces of the Protestant church participating in political rallies as key figures. One example was the “March 1st National Congress,” held in the open field outside Seoul City Hall on 1 March 2004, commemorating the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919. Right-wing politicians and conservative ministers of the mainstream Protestant church, who have enjoyed infinite privileges from faithfully following anti-communism and a pro-U.S. orientation, stood shoulder to shoulder at the demonstration. This was a rare sight. These were the people who had no need to stage political protests in the past because the anti-communist and pro-U.S. military autocratic regimes simply did what they wanted for them. The conservative ministers, who helped justify the autocratic regimes while superficially claiming separation of politics and religion, revealed the expediency of their claim by holding the political rally. The creation of the KCP is closely related to those political rallies.

The KCP earned about 230,000 votes, or 1.1 percent of valid counts, in the 2004 general elections. After the elections, however, the party was forced to dissolve for failing to produce any elected representative or to earn the minimum 2-percent valid vote counts required to prolong its existence. Despite open support and endorsement by Rev. Jo Yong-gi of Yeouido Full Gospel Church, which is known as the largest individual church in the world with an estimated 800,000 members, the number of votes the KCP earned in Seoul was less than one-tenth of the Yeouido Full Gospel Church membership.

The creation of the KCP was not welcomed by most Protestant churches (including the Presbyterian, Methodist and **Holiness Church**), Protestant civil organizations, and the two major Protestant church councils, the National Council of Churches in Korea and the Christian Council of Korea. This was mainly due to concerns over the church's participation in politics and the ultra-right propensity of the party leaders. Nevertheless, the KCP went ahead and entered the elections, expecting that many conservative Protestants would vote for them simply because they were on the

“same side.” Their over-confidence seemed to have been heightened after attending several massive demonstrations, including the March 1st demonstration outside Seoul City Hall. The experience of attending political demonstrations, shouting anti-communist and pro-U.S. slogans side by side with right-wing politicians, led to the foundation of the KCP. Furthermore, the party founders were agitated over the rumor that the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church) would establish the **Family Party** and enter the elections. The KCP was created on a combination of these factors, but had to disband after the elections, ending in a fiasco.

The LUCC was founded when the Gyeyang-gu Office of Incheon City issued the local labor union establishment notification on 29 April 2004.<sup>16</sup> It was the first labor union created by a religious organization. Those who worked on its creation claim that exploitation of labor committed by the Protestant church has long been ignored in the name of religious community, and that churches are hotbeds of social injustice. Furthermore, problems of the Protestant churches as a whole, including the bad practices and ministry inheritance in large churches that were covered by the media for a while, are closely linked to the exploitation of labor and the structure of systematic concealment of it inside and outside the churches. Church leaders sometimes openly expressed their aversion to the establishment of the labor union while at other times declining to show any response. The incident clearly revealed that the church’s claims to “mutual equality for the benefit of all concerned” and the “**well-being of a big family**” within the religious community were only fabrications. The creation of the labor union confirmed that the “ruling class” of the church deepened and prolonged the structure of inequality within the church, while employing the florid rhetoric of the religious community.

The third incident began when a high school student refused to attend class, claiming that mandatory Protestantism class required by his school violated his right to “freedom of religion” as stipulated in the Constitution. Expelled for violating school regulations, he filed a petition with the National Human Rights Commission. This captured media attention and became well publicized. The central conflict in this case was between the school’s freedom of mission and the student’s freedom of religion. Similar incidents had taken place in mission universities in the past, but school authorities had managed to contain them before they rose to the surface. This time, the incident reminded people of the need to reflect on church practices that are done in the name of freedom of mission, with little thought to other issues. It provided an opportunity firstly for people to realize that freedom of mission does not excuse violations of freedom of religion, and secondly for the Protestant church to review previously practiced mission methods. It was once again noted that missions characterized by brainwashing and an aggressive conquest mentality ultimately negatively affect the Protestant church. This is true for both domestic and overseas approaches, as the Korean Protestant church is notorious for its aggressive overseas missions.

This sense of crisis within the Protestant church took the form of self-assertion through political participation on the one hand and self-introspection on the other. The Protestant church’s attempt to establish a political party failed, but an alliance between

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<sup>16</sup> Kim T. (2004).

Christian conservative and reactionary social forces will no doubt continue. Though internal conflicts are inevitable, reflection on and correction of the negative aspects of the Protestant church are also likely to be looked at more closely. It is unclear where exactly these trends will lead, but one thing that is certain is that the Church will not enjoy the kind of explosive growth it achieved in the past. The time for the Korean Protestant church to seek quantitative growth has passed; the core agenda it is now faced with is how to create qualitative growth. If qualitative growth is not realized, it is likely that the self-claimed “blessing of God” will fade out like an ebbing tide.

Rather than seeing the conservative elements within the Protestant church exploiting the ideology of separation of church and state, it would be better to see the creation of a Protestant party that would assert its public responsibilities. The Protestant church would have a more hopeful future if the labor union seeking justice within the church and a Protestant party fulfilling public responsibility were able to counteract the problems of collective selfishness and pursuit of personal greed. The Protestant church has to change. The times call for it. In this regard, it is necessary to review the key problems within the Church and try to overcome them.

#### Two Negative Characteristics of the Korean Protestant Church

In this section, I review the negative characteristics of the Korean Protestant church, which formed from the late nineteenth century, in light of its uncompromising exclusionism and pro-U.S. inclination. The extreme exclusionism of the Protestant church has propagated hostility and a desire to “destroy the other” inside and outside the church, further resulting in self-destructiveness. The pro-U.S. proclivity, in turn, has created an unrealistic and illusionary view of the other and internalized it as a part of the self, hindering true self-reflection. Exclusionism and a pro-U.S. propensity may appear contradictory to each other, but they have nevertheless merged, preventing the Protestant church from maturing. Therefore, these negative characteristics must be overcome.

##### *Uncompromising Exclusionist Faith*

Imported to Korea at the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism adopted two strategies to distinguish itself from other religions and build a solid foundation in the new soil. One was to assert superiority based on its differences from traditional Korean religions; the other was to stress its fundamental difference from Catholicism. In regards to the former, Protestantism deployed two strategies for distinguishing itself from traditional religions. For Confucianism and Buddhism, it stressed those features of Protestantism not found in either, and made its stronger potential evident. For indigenous beliefs, such as shamanism, which were devoid of organized power, Protestantism launched an uncompromising attack in the name of “uprooting superstition.”

From the early days of missions, it emphasized its fundamental difference from Catholicism. Among other aspects, it proclaimed its non-interference in politics in contrast to the Catholic Church. The Protestant church also relied on indirect channels for missions, such as health service and education, knowing that the Catholic Church

was in political conflict with Korean authorities. Accusing Catholicism of idolatry, it claimed adherence to true monotheism. Accordingly, idolatry was the basis of the Protestant church's criticism and exclusion of other religions. The concept of idolatry is established when monotheism is regarded as a normal, desirable form of belief; further, it is a relative concept defined by the degree of monotheism adhered to by religions. Just as Protestantism accuses Catholicism of idolatry, Islam can accuse Protestantism of idolizing the cross and the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When Protestantism was established as a dominant religion in Korea, the concept of idolatry took on a negative meaning across society. It was also used within the Protestant church as an effective label to eliminate competing factions during internal divisions.

While criticizing indigenous religions as irrational and superstitious, the Protestant church denigrated Confucianism and Buddhism as being "religions of deficiency," that is, as being merely ethics or philosophies and not true religions. It criticized Catholicism as having lost true faith and being obsessed with idolatry and formal ritual. The Protestant church strived to present itself as the symbol for and the basis of Western civilization. It claimed it was not an old but a new religion, not a superstition that deluded the world and deceived the people but rather the most "advanced" religion. Its emphasis on the rhetoric of "**discontinuity**" and of a "new religion" annihilating old customs, as opposed to the "old religion" (Catholicism), was made in this context.

The Protestant Church's strategy to distinguish itself from other competing religions took a concrete form through its active attempts at demonstrating superiority. The mainstream Protestant Church's hostility towards other religions it was in competition with was also applied to sects within the Church. That is, conquest of the "external other," which became a solid ideology for mainstream Protestant groups, was applied to the "internal other" as well. In fact, hostility towards the "internal other" became even more intense than to the "external other." The mainstream Protestant church tried to construct its religious identity by excluding other religions. Thus, when the religious other appeared within the Church, which was expected to remain homogeneous, it was even more severely excluded. This was precisely a manifestation of the mainstream Protestant church's hostility toward any so-called heresy. For example, the mainstream Protestant Church defined the boundaries of personal faith while adhering to inflexible moral principles by emphasizing strict "observation of the Sabbath" or applying a literal interpretation of the Ten Commandments. With such uncompromising religious standards, Protestantism divides and excludes other religions outside the church and heterogeneous parts within the church. The term "heresy," as it was used to single out these disparate sects within the Church, simply referred to groups holding unorthodox points of view. Mainstream Korean Protestantism is notorious for assuming a hostile attitude towards different religious perspectives both inside and outside the Church, which means that more heresies cannot help but be produced. The more the mainstream church adheres obstinately to the boundaries of its identity, the more such heresies are created.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sometimes, even the so-called orthodox groups are divided over the determination of heresy. A good example is the conflict between the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), a representative council of conservative Protestant churches and organizations, and Korean Presbyterian Church Evangelism (KPCE), a church council of 120 or so relatively small Presbyterian churches, on the issue of defining some religious groups as heretical in July 2004. Claiming that the five churches and institutions—including

### *Pro-U.S. Propensity*

As an envoy to Japan in 1880 to examine international affairs, Kim Hong-jip received the book, *Zhaoxian zhanlue* (Korean Stratagem) from Huang Zunxian, a Chinese diplomat, and gave it to King Gojong upon returning. The book, which earned more fame for the Korean Confucians' strong rejection of the contents, had a consistently favorable view of the United States. One of Huang's recommendations that appeared in the book was for Korea to ally with the United States. According to Huang, the United States was the only trustworthy country and not only had no intention of harming Korea but rather sought to help Korea. His argument was bolstered by the fact that the United States is considered a Protestant country.

What is practiced in the United States is Protestantism (*yasogyo*). Protestantism shares the same roots as Catholicism, but they are different from each other. It is no different from the many branches of Confucianism, such as Zhu Xi's philosophy and Lu Jiuyuan's thought. One of the main tenets of Protestantism is non-interference in political affairs. Many of the believers are honest and good-natured. Since China opened the door to the world, missionaries have been murdered. But none of them—the murderers(?) were Protestants, which goes to show that there is nothing to worry about Protestants. The religion urges people to be good. Is it not thousand times better than the *dao* of Zhougong (Duke of Zhou) or Confucius in China?<sup>18</sup>

This favorable view of Protestantism, which was considered the religion of the United States in the book, continued in Korea as well. *Dongnip simmun* (The Independent), known for its positive view of Protestantism, lauded the United States as an utter paradise.

For the 100 or so years since its foundation, the United States, unlike other nations, has not waged war, . . . occupies vast empty land on a big continent peacefully, and governs with law, seeking peace and happiness. It is a paradise, therefore . . . all the island nations in the Pacific want to be subject to the United States. But the United States does not allow it and tells them to be self-dependent. If a weak country is rudely oppressed by a powerful country or stripped of its liberty and rights, the United States helps the weak country to defend itself, which is America's overarching strategy.<sup>19</sup>

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in Korea, Protestantism was more than just a new religion. To many Koreans, as the religion of civilization and

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Seoul Sungrak Church led by Min. Kim Gi-dong and Manmin Joongang Church by Min. Yi Jae-rok—which had been defined as heretics, were “not heretic,” the KPCE ran into serious conflicts with the CCK. Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church are still regarded as “unquestionably” heretic. See Hankook Ilbo (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Huang (2001, 25).

<sup>19</sup> “Gakguk doryak” (Strategies for Countries), *Dongnip Simmun* (The Independent), 27 February 1899.

of the United States, it was considered an important tool that could save the country from collapse. Moreover, as the Japanese imperialist invasion of the peninsula grew more severe, Koreans came to count on the United States as the only power that could hold Japan in check. This can be identified in the March 1 Independence Movement in 1919, which was inspired by then U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of self-determination. Wilson's doctrine strengthened the image of the United States as a sympathizer with and a protector of the weak. Protestantism, as the so-called religion of the United States, accordingly enjoyed increased hospitality.

Of course, the United States' vulgar materialism and pleasure-seeking lifestyle were criticized in the 1920s and the 1930s, and people held different views on Protestantism as a religion of civilization. But the negative views of the United States and Protestantism abated with the decline of socialist forces in Korea. After liberation and the establishment of the U.S. military government followed by the post-Korean War, pro-American, anti-communist regime in the South, and under the continuing Cold War system, criticism of the United States was suppressed and made taboo. Together with this, the identification of Protestantism as the religion of the United States was further reinforced, allowing the Protestant church to enjoy all sorts of official and unofficial privileges. As the influence of the United States grew stronger in South Korea, the connection between Protestantism and the U.S. was strengthened in every way, economically, politically, culturally and so on. Protestants and the Protestant church were considered symbolic of modernization and representative of Western refinement. As North Korea became a communist country, many Protestants defected from the North and were incorporated into the leadership of churches in the South, further intensifying the pro-U.S. and anti-communist disposition of the Protestant church.

That conservative Protestant forces took a leading role in recent pro-US rallies just goes to show that their historically-formed pro-American propensity continues even today. Yet the pro-U.S. inclination is no longer taken for granted, and conservative groups have to stage rallies in order to express it, which implies that a change in attitudes are underway. That is, the pro-U.S. disposition held by conservative groups within mainstream Protestantism is being challenged to change.

## Conclusion

Protestantism is a dominant religion in Korea. It has an image of being the religion of the middle class, of youth and intellectuals, and of urbanites. It wielded great influence over Korean society in the 1980s, when Protestants accounted for about 20 percent of the population. The Protestant way of thinking has infiltrated the Korean subconscious, even regardless of whether all Koreans are Protestant or not.

Therefore, it is not surprising at all that under this Protestant hegemony, other religions in Korea should strive to be like Protestantism. Nearly all religions in Korea have modified themselves after the Protestant model. They have reorganized their churches to mimic that of the Protestant church, imitated the ritual system, compiled scriptures in keeping with the Bible, devised membership growth plans following Protestant precedents, and adopted an aggressive exclusionist attitude towards other religions. They even set the price of churches, based on the size of membership, and trade them like real estate. Almost all religions in Korea have unconsciously engaged in

a campaign to “catch up with Protestantism” on the basis of historical experiences reaching back over a century. In the process, religions in Korea now take after Protestantism even in the practices of membership-oriented growth, aggressive missions, and exclusion of other religions. Because of this immense influence, we cannot turn our attention away from the Protestant church in a transitional period.

The image of Protestantism linked with urban, highly educated, younger people working in professional jobs has developed based on its image as a religion of civilization and modernization. Protestantism is in inseparable relationship with Korea's pursuit of modernity.

In this context, the great difference in the proportion of Protestants between Jeolla and Gyeongsang regions needs further examination. The existing researches argue that the higher proportion of Protestants in Jeolla region was due to a rapid dismantle of the traditional Confucian order in the region. Protestantism filled the vacuum created by the failed Donghak, a powerful alternative to the traditional religions. Meanwhile, Gyeongsang region, having a strong Confucian foundation, have fewer Protestants than Jeolla region.<sup>20</sup> However, these arguments cannot be taken at a face value because various factors need to be considered for different historical stages.

Considering the immense influence of Protestantism on Korean society, in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the significance of Protestantism in Korean society is rare to find. Analysis of Protestantism is essential to understand Koreans' lives after the liberation and more studies on this issue are urgently needed.

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