

# Sociological Implications of the Roman Catholic Conversion Boom in Korea\*

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## Abstract

*Both South and North American countries, as well as other traditionally Catholic states in Europe, have been seeing sharp declines in their ranks in the past few decades, especially in the number of people entering the priesthood and in the falling attendance of members of the congregation at Mass. The Catholic Church throughout the world is in a state of radical transition and is experiencing profound and dramatic changes following the close of the Second Vatican Council II 40 years ago. In contrast, the Catholic Church in Korea is thriving. This study examines the possible causes connected to the increase in membership in the Catholic Church, focusing on sociocultural factors and exploring questions of how these aspects of unique development have been historically and structurally related to the dynamics of Catholicism in Korea and the disparity between external growth and internal maturity.*

**Keywords:** Catholicism, Protestantism, modernization, industrialization, secularization

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## Introduction

Catholic Churches in Latin America, Europe, and North America (e.g., the United States and Canada) have seen sharp declines in their ranks in the past few decades, with a dwindling priesthood and falling attendance at Mass. Contributing to this decline have been allegations of sexual abuse of young people and subsequent cover-ups (some well-founded, others not). Allegations of pedophilia committed by Catholic clergy severely tarnished the authority and the clerical image of the Church. Subsequent to the close of the Vatican Council II (1962-1965),<sup>1</sup> the Catholic Church has been in a state of radical transition and has experienced profound and dramatic changes, over the past 40 years. However, in marked contrast, the Catholic Church in Korea has thrived. Korea National Statistical Office (2006) reported that membership in the Catholic Church has increased by 74.4% in the last ten years (1985-1995), while membership in Buddhism increased by only 3.9%, and the Korean Protestant Church, mired in various controversies of its own, has been struggling with a slow decline in numbers (-1.6%).

In Korea, the growth of Christianity coincided with modernization and industrialization, which have led to economic prosperity. Classical theory of the sociology of religion (Inglis 1963, 90) argues that modernity is accompanied by a general curtailment of traditional religious belief and practice. The explosive growth of Christianity in Korea challenges this theory, and the notion that the social environment influencing social development is unique for each country supports this claim. Many contemporary theorists, including Scott M. Thomas (2005), have critiqued this thesis on secularization, asserting that the revival or

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1. The Second Vatican Council was opened on October 11, 1962 and closed on December 8, 1965. Attendance included a total of 2,600 bishops from all over the world and over 3,000 additional participants including theologians and observers from other religions and non-Catholic Christian denominations. This council introduced the most up-to-date reforms in the Roman Catholic Church since the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as a response to the Protestant Reformation that took place in 1517. See Abbott (1966).

resurgence of religion—including that of evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians in the developed world—is part of a more wide-ranging, global phenomenon that represents a crisis of modernity itself. At the same time, rapid social change during the modernization period led to social anomie (Durkheim 1989). The Catholic Church was perceived as a shelter, or provider of a clear direction, during a time in which violent armed regimes ruled Korea.

Any explanation of the recent trend seen in Korea must take into account a number of factors without overemphasizing any single component. As religious conversion consists of changes in a multifaceted nature of the individual's meaning system and self, it has social, psychological, and ideational components (McGuire 1992, 74). For example, critical factors contributing to this trend include the radical political, economical, and social transition Korea has undergone in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Roof (1979) offers explanations of church growth through statistical research, stating that the “contextual factors” (the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the communities surrounding a church) have a 56% influence and “institutional factors” that a church might hope to control have a 44% influence, in determining church growth.

This study<sup>2</sup> examines the possible causes related to the recent increase in membership in the Korean Catholic Church, exploring how aspects of growth have been mutually and structurally related to the dynamics of Catholicism in Korea.

## **Christianity and Social Change**

Korea is one of most rapidly industrializing and urbanizing nations in the world. As such, Christianity has been profoundly influenced by the onrush of modernization and, at the same time, there has been

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2. This paper and study are elaborations of a paper titled “The Flourishing Roman Catholic Church in Korea: Why?” presented at the 5th International Conference of Korean Studies in Taipei, Taiwan on October 27, 2010.

astonishing growth in the number of converts to Christianity. This is a rare case in the history of Christian mission work around the world. The question arises, then, of how these two trends—modernization and rapid growth of religion—acted together in Korea. What propelled this dramatic growth, especially the explosive growth of Protestantism during the 1970s and massive migration into Catholicism recently?

Religion in the West, especially in Europe, stood on the periphery in the modern world and traditional beliefs were scorned by modern scientists and intellectuals. In contrast, modernization was introduced and developed by Christian missionaries in Korea. Koreans “viewed the acceptance of the Gospel not only as a means of entry into modern society but also as an access to what is believed to be a more advanced civilization” (A. Kim 2000, 114). For Koreans, the notion of Western modernization was associated with freedom, democracy, and process. People wanted to associate themselves with modernity, and insofar as Christianity was a source of prosperity, they were more likely to accept it as an important influence in their lives.

Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization are intertwined and have contributed to rapid social changes globally in the last few decades. They also have contributed to the increase in the number of local conflicts (wars) around the globe. Émile Durkheim’s theory of social anomie can be applied in understanding the many consequences and demands of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, especially the social demands on religion. Anomie is a sociological term meaning “an absence or diminution of norms (standards) or values—a state of ‘normlessness,’ leading to feelings of alienation and lack of purpose.”<sup>3</sup> For Durkheim, social anomie arises from incongruence between the individual and social norms or an absence of a standard of social ethics or moral regulation.

Numerous theories have been put forward to explain the occurrence of such phenomena, the entire scope of which cannot be

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3. “Anomie,” *New World Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Anomie> (accessed November 14, 2010).

reviewed here; however, several of the more popular explanations deserve mention. Any explanation of a complex social and political phenomenon always presents a dilemma between the presentation of generalizations and exceptions. In scholarly discussions, the varied historical meanings and social contexts of religion as a phenomenon are the concerns of those favoring a socio-historical approach, and hence should be understood in terms of real society, theology, and the culture in which such meanings and contexts were born and play an active role.

The influence of religious fundamentalism has been seen not only in domestic politics but also in international affairs agenda. After 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, no one is in doubt anymore that religion is high on the agenda of political affairs. As Casanova (1994, 6) notes, such surges in participation in religions in modern society are fueled by a process of “deprivatization” by the religions to engage “in the public sphere of modern societies” and, as such, privatization is a historical option, not a necessary structural trend. Thus, religion is seen as a cultural defender or as helping people “cope with the shift from one [sociocultural] world to another” (Bruce 1996, 96), which is inconsistent with the views offered by the “secularization theory.” Religion, like other institutional realms, is embedded in a broad process of sociocultural, political, and economic changes and in this process religion is not passive, as is so often depicted in secularization or modernization theory.

### **Main Factors of Roman Catholic Church Growth in Korea**

Ever since the introduction of Christianity into China by Nestorian missionaries in 635 C.E. (Ching 1993), the population of Christians in China still remains at about 3 percent of the population of China.<sup>4</sup> In

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4. Amy Patterson Neubert, “Prof: Christians Remain a Small Minority in China Today,” <http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2010/100726T-YangChina.html> (accessed June 15, 2010).

contrast, in South Korea, there has been explosive growth of the Christian population in the twentieth century, being recognized as the most successful case of evangelization in the world. In the era of premodern Korea, religious tradition had been dominated by Buddhism and then later by Confucianism, up until the nineteenth century. In modern Korea, Christianity is the foremost religion of choice (29.2% of the population, of which 18.3% are Protestants and 10.9% Roman Catholics), displacing Buddhism, which maintains 22.8% of the religiously affiliated population (KNSO 2006).<sup>5</sup>

Reliable data pertaining to religious affiliation and the Korean population can be obtained from the Korea National Statistical Office. Data from the 2005 census is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Religious Affiliation in Regard to Population*

(Units: 1,000 and %)

	1995		2005		Growth	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Total Population	44,554	100.0	47,041	100.0	2,488	5.6
Religion indicated	22,598	50.7	24,971	53.1	2,373	10.5
Buddhism	10,321	23.2	10,726	22.8	405	3.9
Protestantism	8,760	19.7	8,616	18.3	-144	-1.6
Catholicism	2,951	6.6	5,146	10.9	2,195	74.4
Confucianism	211	0.5	105	0.2	-106	-50.4
Won Buddhism	87	0.2	130	0.3	43	49.6
Other	268	0.6	247	0.5	-21	-7.7
No religion	21,953	49.3	22,070	46.9	117	0.5

Source: KNSO (2006).

The Protestant Church witnessed an explosive growth in membership in the 1970s and 1980s, while the Catholic population remained relatively static. However, since the 1990s, there has been a reverse in

5. Figures compiled by the Korea National Statistical Office (current Statistics Korea) in KNSO (2006).

this trend with the Catholic Church rapidly growing while the Protestant Church remained static. What factors came into play for this to have occurred?

The growth or decline of any organized religion cannot be explained adequately without reference to a large number of internal and external factors. Taxonomy of factors needs to be developed and then applied in appraising South-Korea's third-largest religious group, the Roman Catholic Church. It is thought that the interactional effects of internal (i.e., institutional) and external (i.e., social/cultural) factors have led to a rapid growth of the Catholic Church in Korea recently.

#### *Christian Contributions to Korean Modernization*

Korea has witnessed remarkable economic growth sustained in an increasingly modernized, industrialized, urbanized, and secularized Korean society. Christianity in Korea, even in its early stages of development, has taken on a vital role in introducing new, modern thoughts and ideas. Upon closer examination of this development, it is clear that the vitality of Christianity in Korea was primarily due to the Christians' role as a principal agent in promoting economic, political, and social modernization.

Even though Protestantism was introduced a century later (1884) than Catholicism (1784), Protestantism flourished and experienced greater growth. Faced with problems and external threats, Korean society of the time was plagued by political, social, and economic chaos. From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, there was a period of culmination of political and social instability in the Joseon dynasty, which eventually fell under the power of Japanese colonization in 1910. Traditional society crumbled and many Koreans defended their nation's independence with hopes of modernization. The Christian missionary movement in the third world, especially during the late nineteenth century, was criticized as serving as a front for Western imperialists. In fact, colonialism afflicting the Koreans did not stem from a Western power, but an Asiatic one, Japan. As Min

Kyoungbae (2005, 311) observed, “The (Protestant) missionaries, however, contributed to a tremendous extent for the cause of the achievement of the ideals of the Independence Movement.”

One century of persecution resulting in the death of close to 10,000 martyrs strengthened the faith of Korean Catholics, but at the same time greatly obstructed the steady development of the Catholic Church in Korea. As a result, at the end of the nineteenth century, following the establishment of greater religious freedom in Korea, Catholic missionaries, mostly of French origin, showed little interest in their own promotion within the ranks of society and hesitated to take leadership roles during this time of rapid modernization. French missionaries were theologically very conservative<sup>6</sup> and maintained dualistic worldviews which demarcated the sacred from the secular. They experienced a great reduction in and secularization of their institutions by anti-religious movements in the rapid transition of modernization that came about through the French Revolution during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries (Ro 1988). In addition, 100 years of extreme persecutions in Korea led the French missionaries to seek solace in the transcendental and other-worldly oriented piety as well as to have a sense of contempt for the secular world, rather than to actively engage society (Ro 2004). The Catholic Church was founded by lay people but, once missionaries entered Korea, clericalism dominated the church hierarchy and led to the devaluation of the lay leadership. In contrast, the Protestant churches quickly adopted the Nevius method,<sup>7</sup> which stressed a self propagandizing, self-governing,

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6. Many French missionaries were deeply influenced spiritually by extremely rigorous Jansenism. *De imitatione Christi* (The Imitation of Christ)—whose probable author is Thomas à Kempis—reflecting a Jansenistic point of view and offering a pessimistic view of the world was a popular spiritual reading material among Catholics, almost as popular as the Bible, some would say. See Jong Rye Gracia Song, “Confession: Fidelity to God or Spiritual and Emotional Healing?” <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr006/song.htm> (accessed December 10, 2010).

7. John Livingston Nevius (1829-1893) was an American Protestant missionary active in China and Korea and took up the Venn-Anderson principles of “self-propagation, self-government, and self-supporting” in 1885 (Weber 2000, 350).



and self-supporting mission (B. Kim 2007). This strategic mission policy led the Korean Protestant churches to become independent from the missionaries and the lay person became heavily involved in preaching and Bible classes. The pioneering goals of the Protestant missionaries were to establish schools, hospitals, and other social works and organizations as effective tools towards evangelization (H. Kim 1983). Thus, Protestant missionaries, most of them from the United States, were more likely to actively engage in society, equipped with abundant financial support from their respective countries.

The Catholic Church established schools, but those were limited to elementary schools and a few vocational schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions. They were very slow to establish secondary- or university-level institutions or to recruit young intellectuals. The Protestants established five universities, including the first medical college and one women's college (Institute for Korean Church History 1985, 322-324). In the context of social anomie, Protestantism was quickly adopted by the progressives and elites, who were "attempting to solve social and political problems" (M. Yi 2004, 41). After young intellectuals were educated in Protestant mission schools, they continued to become respected national leaders, representative of whom were Rhee Syngman, Yi Sangjae, Jo Mansik, An Changho, etc. Moreover, Protestant missionaries sent the young elites to study abroad, mainly to the United States. Those students later became pioneers for modernization and social reform in every sector of Korean society. Later, this disparity in establishing higher-level educational institutions proved to be a decisive difference between Protestants and Catholics in influencing the growth and social prominence of the Protestant church.

At its inception, Christianity appealed to Korean intellectuals not only because it was a new religion from the West, the developed world, but also because of its association with civilization, namely modernity. To become a Christian, as A. Kim noted, was considered by Koreans as "a gateway to modernity and success, both personal and national . . . Koreans' admiration of Western culture and its eco-

conomic achievements played a decisive role in encouraging such identification [with Christianity]" (2000, 113). Until recently, or at least since the 1970s, modernization, Westernization and Americanization have been considered synonymous terms in Korea, and the explosive growth of Christianity has been associated with these social changes. With the help of Western missionaries especially from the United States, Christianity played a significant role in the process of modernization as well as other relevant social changes in Korea during the last two centuries. This contribution later preludes rapid growth of Christianity in Korea.

### *Religion and Social Anomie*

Throughout the twentieth century, Korea experienced one of the most radical and unstable times in its history—colonization, wars, coup d'états by military juntas, and rapid social changes through the process of modernization and industrialization, etc. When people are living in a continuous situation of social disorganization, extreme social disasters or disorder, religion often plays a distinct role in offering comfort and sanctuary from frustration, alienation, or social anxiety not provided by other existing social institutions. The Korean War (1950-1953) caused many traumatic experiences, as B. Kim noted: "Massive population mobility produced rootlessness and anomie. Many refugees, especially those from the North, felt a keen sense of frustration and alienation, wishing to belong to a community where they could find comfort and directions for life" (2007, 319). Moreover, material aid pouring in from Christian countries accelerated religious conversions, so-called "rice Christian,"<sup>8</sup> which led the time of peak of conversion by 16.5% during the 1950s. It illustrates ambivalence for the war and religious conversion.

Prior to the 1950s, Korea was primarily an agriculturally-based economy. The push toward industrialization brought rapid growth

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8. After the Korean War, many people converted in order to receive material aid from missionaries. This kind of convert was called a "rice Christian."

and urbanization. Between 1945 and 1985, the urban regions of the country experienced massive immigration from the rural regions (countryside) to the urban regions. The urban population grew from 14.5 percent to 65.4 percent of the total population of Korea and reached 75.4% in 1990.<sup>9</sup> Industrialization was born of capitalism and the economy grew rapidly. Rapid industrialization and concentration of population in urban areas accompanied many social changes. During this period of rapid urbanization, Christian churches were established in urban areas. Industrialization led to people moving from farms into cities where jobs were more readily available, consequently resulting in the deterioration of traditional face-to-face social interactions and relations and the loss of a sense of community and belonging. Christian churches seem to have filled the void as substitute communities, providing a strong sense of belonging that ameliorated migrants' feelings of anxiety and suffering.

The economy grew rapidly under a series of military dictatorships throughout the industrialization periods. Meanwhile, Koreans were engaged in protests demanding democracy, restoring social justice and human rights. This struggle took the form of “*minjung* theology” or indigenized liberation theology. *Minjung* (grass roots or people) theology emerged in the 1970s among the progressive theologians in the struggle for social justice and human rights. The movement encouraged the development of the sociopolitical hermeneutics of the Christian Gospel and applied Christian ethics to social problems. It is a grass-roots theology, based on the image of God as shown in Genesis 1:26-27, but also incorporates the traditional Korean concept of *han*. Suh Namdong (1983, 55) noted, “*Han* is an underlying feeling of Korean people. On the one hand, it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness. On the other, it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings.”

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9. Based on information from the Korean Institute for Population and Health, *Journal of Population and Health Studies* 8.2 (December 1988), pp. 19, 22, [http://www.mongabay.com/history/south\\_korea/south\\_korea-urbanization.html](http://www.mongabay.com/history/south_korea/south_korea-urbanization.html) (accessed August 15, 2010).

The emerging social justice movement gave rise to several Christian social missions in the 1960s, such as the Catholic Farmers Movement and the Protestant Urban Industrial Mission, which sought better wages and working conditions for laborers. Cooperating with *chaebol* (alternatively *jaebeol*; “business conglomerates”), the military government imprisoned many of their union leaders and activists, denoting the movement a threat to social stability. Mostly pro-American and conservative Protestant leaders organized National Prayer Breakfast Meetings for the president and praised the notorious dictators, often acting as an ideological bulwark against Communism and largely ignoring demands for social change.

This oppressive social structure was radically challenged by the Catholic Church along with a few progressive Protestants. Under the rule of missionary bishops in the Catholic Church until the 1950s, the missionaries had advocated a policy of separation of church and state. The Roman Catholic structure is hierarchical, dominated by the clerics, and thereby discourages lay participation in church governance. When Ito Hirobumi was assassinated by An Jung-geun, a Korean independence activist and devout Catholic at the Harbin Railway Station on October 26, 1909, Archbishop of Seoul, French missionary Gustave Charles Mutel (1854-1933), did not permit pastoral visits to An in prison and moreover suspended Father Wilhelm, French priest, who defied the order and visited An Jung-geun (Ro 1988). No Catholic was listed among the 33 leaders who signed the Korean Declaration of Independence in 1919.

The Second Vatican Council (known as Vatican Council II) sought greater church openness to the modern world. Korean bishops and priests outnumbered the missionaries in the 1960s. Since then, the Catholic Church has become actively involved in social reform, social justice, and the democratic movement. The first clash with the government occurred, when Bishop Ji Hak-sun, the bishop of Wonju, was arrested by the Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) in 1974, charged with aiding dissident students and activists. While in custody at the Catholic hospital in Myeong-dong Cathedral, he issued public statements denouncing the Yusin Constitution, which bestowed

enormous powers to the president. The arrest of Bishop Ji outraged the Catholic Church and, as such, progressive and younger priests formed the “Catholic Priests’ Association for Justice” (CPAJ) that same year, fully engaging themselves in the movement for justice.

The Catholic Church had, by this time, committed to championing the causes of social justice, human rights, environment, ethical standards, and various other social issues. The Catholic Church was also experiencing intense internal conflict between the conservative (mainly senior priests and bishops) and progressive young priests. The conservatives established the “Catholic Priests’ Association to Save the Nation” in 1977, in opposition to the “Catholic Priests Association for Justice” (G. Yu 1987, 161-162). Only 49 senior priests signed on to the association, which did not engage in organized activities and so did not gain public attention from society. The chair, Cardinal Kim, of the Leadership of Korean Bishops’ Conference was replaced by conservative Bishop Kim Nam-su and Archbishop Ri Moun-hi<sup>10</sup> in 1987.<sup>11</sup> This action, along with others, was seen to suppress the progressive factions of lay and priest activists, by the church hierarchy. Although there was internal fragmentation and disputes within the church, the message to society at large was united through the representative spokesperson of the Korean Bishops’ Conference thanks to the bishop’s collegiality.

The Catholic Church, third in population to the other major religions of Buddhism and Protestantism in Korea, has operated with one central body, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea, along

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10. Archbishop Ri Moun-hi of the Archdiocese of Daegu was a son of Ri Hyo-sang, a former speaker of the National Assembly who was closely allied with the Park regime. Archbishop Ri Moun-hi’s diocese was a political stronghold for the Park regime, as well as for Presidential successors Chun and Ro. The region was known as the TK (Taegu-Kyungbuk area) political powerhouse for conservative politics in Korea. See “Daegu daegyogu seoljeong 100 junyeon, seongnyeong sageon bal-saeong-haryeona?” (Centenary Celebration of Archdiocese of Daegu, Will it Happen Pentecostal?), *Gatolik nyuseu, jigeum yeogi* (Catholic News, Here and Now), August 10, 2010, <http://www.nahnews.net/news/quickViewArticleView.html?idxno=3875> (accessed December 15, 2010).

11. The Conference has since been dominated by conservative chairs to date.

with ties worldwide and to the Vatican. As such, it maintained a strong united voice, often the loudest voice that opposed the dictatorship in Korea. During this period, Cardinal Kim Suhwan arose as one of the most respected leaders in Korea, even among other religious affiliations. The progressive leader Cardinal Kim stood at the forefront of the social justice movement, helping protect student activists from the police and speaking openly against the government and its use of secret police methods to silence critics and opposition. The strong message of the Catholic Church opposing the corruption and oppression of the military regime and its accompanying social campaigns culminated in nationwide street protests that led to the epoch of the Park Jong-cheol incident, which was revealed by the Catholic Priests' Association for Justice and eventually led to the end of military rule in 1987. Over the next two decades, the Myeong-dong Cathedral became a sanctuary from police arrest and became known as "the sanctuary of Korean Democracy." Since then, the Catholic Church became known as a "patron of human rights and social justice" (Chu 2009, 285).

The impact of such rapid social change, political unrest, the corruption of values driven by an "economy first" system, and the relative sense of deprivation resulting from a widening socioeconomic gap brought turmoil, social disorder, and anomie. As Durkheim (1989) said, "From top to bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold." A sense of fierce competition in the capitalist market led to significant social and economic consequences. Korea has witnessed a rise in the rate of suicide and ranked first in this category among OECD member countries.<sup>12</sup> With an intensifying sense of social anomie, the Catholic Church provided moral standards in recent decades.

Ironically, membership in the Catholic Church in Korea increased

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12. *OECD Fact book 2009: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics* (ISBN 92-64-05604-1), <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/fulltext/3009011ec005.pdf?expires=1299820003&id=0000&accname=freeContent&checksum=24B9FC13E94EF21C893E790425BCDAB5> (accessed December 15, 2010). Durkheim suggests that a country's suicide rate is a measure of social pathology.

dramatically during this period of social anomie. Koreans experienced extreme social anomie derived from the Korean War and the ensuing political and social instabilities. Rapid industrial and post-industrial societies brought about the social turmoil and anomie of the 1970s and 1980s and caused problems of social justice due to their relative deprivation of individuals and ill retributions in the course of economic development (Hirschman 1981, 39). Social anomie arising from these factors provided the major impetus for the rapid growth of the Catholic Church, which met the social needs and expectations of the time. The growth rate of the Catholic Church in Korea was recorded at 16.5% in the 1950s, 6.2% in the 1960s, 5.2% in the 1970s, 7.5% in the 1980s, and 7.4% during the period of 1995-2005.<sup>13</sup>

### **Institutional Factors**

Institutional factors that influence both the internal and external factors promoting the growth of the church need to be taken into account. The influence of any given factors also depends upon their relation to the other factors that happen to be present at the same time (G. Lee 1961, 10).

#### *Moral Authority*

Religion is a source of moral authority and provides moral guidelines for society to follow. The form and perception of moral authority is extremely complex in a multi-religious society like Korea. Koreans have been seeking authority to give direction to their lives and society. The Catholic Church fulfilled the need of Korean society.

According to Durkheim (1989), anomie is a breakdown of social norms and thus, a condition or malaise in which social and or moral norms are deregulated, unclear, or simply not present; this normless-

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13. Refer to Oh (2007) and KNSO (2006).

ness led to deviant behavior, conflict and dissatisfaction. The justice movement of the Church in the 1970-1980s attempted to uphold moral restraints in the face of deteriorated traditional social rules arising from economic centered policy and the capitalism of the time. The Catholic Church continued to take a public stance as a defender of social justice known to Korean society and its strong voice continued to be heard in the society. From this standpoint, the Catholic Church has built up social credibility and moral authority from adherence to specific social teachings.

A clergy is the formal leadership of any given religion, and its role and spiritual maturity as a religious leader, guider, and teacher are often decisive factors for the growth or decline of religions. The Roman Catholic Church has a body that is united worldwide and uses a universal training system for clergy. Anywhere in the world, the selection criteria of candidates such as academic coursework and spiritual formation are meticulously regulated. Thus, the Catholic Church in Korea has maintained a strict and well-organized formation system for clergy and religious personnel (nuns and priests). Catholic clergy and religious persons take a vow of celibacy, which is seen as an expression of total devotion or total self-sacrifice to God. Celibacy is the renunciation of personal marriage and family, and it is thought, consequentially, that Catholic priests and other religious officials who practice celibacy are relatively freer from financial greed and other secular affairs. Traditionally, Koreans hold more respect towards celibate priests and monks than towards those ministers and monks who are married. According to a survey conducted on this issue, an overwhelming majority of Catholics (90.4%) staunchly supported the celibacy of priests and religious purity (Kang 2007). The habits of priests and nuns often seem sacred and mystic in the eyes of the laymen.

Many public social welfare institutions transferred the management of various social welfare programs to the Catholic Church. There were 56 institutions that had done so in 1976 and 524 by 1999, showing a nearly tenfold increase in 30 years. This accounted for 11.3% of the total social welfare institutions in Korea (Park 2006).



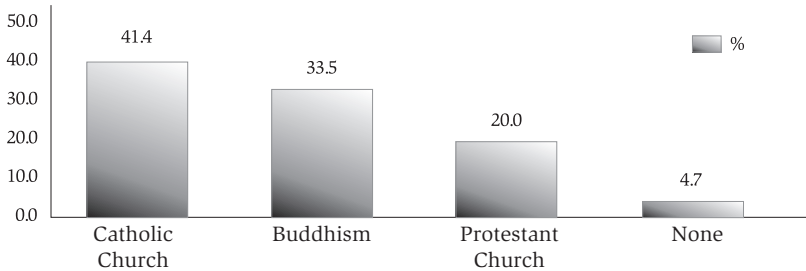
The parishes are strictly controlled by the diocese, and the faithful must attend their local parish. Not more than one parish is established in any district. All pastors are to be transferred to another parish every 5 years, except those involved in a special ministry. The finances of the parish are transparent and reported in detail to the parishioners. And the Catholic Church does not demand a tithe from its membership.

The clergy and religious personnel are relatively uninvolved in scandals related to sex or money and shown to be devoted to social work, welfare, and justice. Catholic churches are required to report their financial matters publicly to the congregation. This transparency helped the Church to be received positively by Korean people and gain a great deal of social credibility and moral authority. In 2008, the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) and the Global Research Institute jointly conducted a nationwide survey among 1,000 people aged 19 and over to identify the religion most trustworthy as perceived by the public. It showed that “35.2 percent chose Catholicism and 31.1 percent chose Buddhism. Protestantism was the choice of 18.0 percent, while 15.7 percent said ‘no religion.’”<sup>14</sup> According to the same survey conducted in 2010, “41.4 percent of respondents selected Catholicism followed by Buddhism with 33.5 percent, Protestantism with 20.0 percent, while 15.7 percent indicated no religion” (CEMK 2010, 17). Figure 1 shows the response rate of credibility ratings among religions.

A survey investigating the perceived influence of religious leaders in Korea conducted by the leading South Korean news magazine *Sisa Journal* in 2010 asked the question “Who moves Korea?” It included 1,000 respondents, of which 845 were male, 155 were female, and ages ranged from people in their 20s and 30s (280

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14. A report on a survey conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) and the Global Research Institute. “Local Protestantism Suffers From Lack Of Credibility, Survey Indicates,” <http://archive.ucanews.com/2008/11/27/local-protestantism-suffers-from-lack-of-credibility-survey-indicates/?key=korea+protestant> (accessed August 7, 2010).



Source: CEMK (2010, 17).

Figure 1. Credibility ratings by religion

respondents), 40s (395 respondents), and 50 and over (325 respondents). It was administered by the Media Research on July 22-30, 2010. Table 3 shows the results of the survey:

Table 2. Perceived Influence of Religious Leaders: Who Moves Korea?

	(Unit: %)
1. Cardinal Kim Suhwan	29.4
2. Cardinal Cheong Jinsuk	24.2
3. Jaseung Buddhist monk	13.2
4. Beopjeong Buddhist monk	12.6
5. Rev. Cho Yonggi, Protestant minister	11.0

Source: *Sisa Journal*, August 18, 2010.

Over 29% of surveyed Koreans perceived Cardinal Kim as the religious leader exerting the most significant influence in Korea even though he passed away in 2009, and another 24.2% indicated Cardinal Cheong as the most influential. Together the opinions indicating the two cardinals as the most influential religious leader totaled over 50%, suggesting a strong influence of the Catholic Church on Korea.

### *A Multi-Religious Society and the Need for Dialogue*

Christianity is often accused of making the exclusive claim that its teachings only are the sole way to salvation. Traditionally, Catholicism has advocated the belief that “Outside the Church, there is no salvation” (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*). However, the turning point away from this was the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra Aetate*), which stated that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.”<sup>15</sup> The Vatican Council II in 1965 and Catholic Church officially began to support ecumenical dialogue among Christian denominations and inter-religious dialogue with other religions. Given the current state of globalization and the tendency towards a multi-religious society in the world, such dialogue was a critical step toward better relations with other religions. Table 3 shows the tolerance rate for other religions among three major religions in Korea.

According to this survey, Protestants are the most exclusive and that tendency is increasing. Buddhists and Catholics possess more or less similar attitudes toward other religions and seem more “open.” While some hard-line evangelicals have aggressively opposed other religions, especially street missions that often resort to picketing and shouting “Kingdom of Heaven with Jesus, hell with non believers!” have angered and drew criticism from non-Christians and atheists. Non-Christians are frustrated by evangelical’s aggressive approach and their militant goal for evangelizing Korea. The Catholic Church has not developed much theology of religious dialogue yet. Catholic fundamentalists<sup>16</sup> also existed in Korea but never expressed antago-

15. “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” <http://ccj.org.uk/NostraAetate.pdf> (accessed November 21, 2010).

16. This term refers to fundamentalists whose beliefs are self-righteous and marked by paranoia toward the outside world. They claim to return to pre-Vatican II ideals

Table 3. Rate of Religious Tolerance in Korea

	(Unit: %)		
Religious Tolerance	1997	1989	1984
Doctrinal difference*	80.0	76.8	77.6
Buddhism	87.0	78.6	80.1
Protestant	61.7	63.7	64.6
Catholic	85.4	80.0	86.4
No religious affiliation	84.2	80.7	79.9
Necessity of religious practice**	68.1	66.8	63.8
Buddhism	75.4	69.6	70.0
Protestant	36.7	41.3	39.8
Catholic	65.7	56.4	47.2
No religious affiliation	78.3	67.6	71.3
Salvation for other religion***	69.0	69.7	66.4
Buddhism	79.1	75.7	73.2
Protestant	31.6	38.9	37.1
Catholic	73.2	69.3	61.2
No religious affiliation	79.5	79.0	73.7

Source: W. Lee (1998, 194).

\* Respondents answered “yes” to the question of whether all religious doctrines are basically similar.

\*\* Respondents answered “no” when asked if attending religious services was a prerequisite to salvation.

\*\*\* In this instance, respondents answered “no” when asked if salvation could only be found through their religion.

nistic attitudes against other religions unlike Protestant fundamentalists.

The interfaith movement, initiated in the 1960s by distinguished religious leaders such as Cardinal Kim Suhwan, Protestant minister Rev. Kang Won-yong and renowned Buddhist monk Venerable Beopjeong, to aim for mutual respect and cooperation among religions but

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that are believed to have been in ideologically pristine state. See Richard P. McBrien, “Fundamentalism: The Real Problem, in Any Religion,” <http://www.the-tidings.com/2004/0924/essays.htm> (accessed October 12, 2010).

was unsuccessful. On an interpersonal level, interfaith dialogue is still active, but nothing substantial has been done at the official level. The Catholic Church has been engaged in dialogue with other religions. For this reason, Catholics and Buddhists have invited each other to talk in their temples or churches and have even been known to present congratulatory placards to other religious organizations at times such as Christmas or Buddha's birthday. As a result, there exist friendly sentiments between Catholics and Buddhists. The open attitude of the Catholic Church to other religions has given a favorable impression to the general public.

### *Cultural Adaptation and Ancestral Rites*

Even though Confucianism has not been a state religion or ideology ever since the end of the Joseon dynasty, the influence of Confucianism is still deeply ingrained in Korean thinking, philosophy, values, social relations, and traditions in general. In the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filiality), which greatly influenced Korean thought: "the duty of children to their parents is the foundation whence all other virtues spring, and also the starting-point from which we ought to begin our education" (Chen 1908, 16-17). Thus, the value of filial piety is considered the greatest of among the virtues, and must be shown towards living parents as well as to deceased parents and ancestors. The veneration of deceased ancestors is still considered an important duty for children, especially of sons. The performance of ancestral rites or ancestor worship is still practiced in many Korean families.

The severe persecution against Catholics came about because of the ancestral rite controversy. In the earlier period of Catholicism in China, Jesuit missionaries adopted the performance of ancestral rites as ceremonies in honor of ancestors, non-religious in nature. But in this regard, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries accused the Jesuits of idolizing Pope Benedict XIV, who in turn also condemned the Jesuits for committing idolatry and prohibited ancestral rites in 1742. Such prohibition later provided China and Korea the motivation to persecute Catholics. But on December 8, 1939, Pope Pius XI

acknowledged the practice of ancestral rites under limited conditions (those in which all superstitious elements are removed from the ceremony) and stated that “Chinese customs were no longer considered superstitious, but an honorable way of esteeming ones relatives, and therefore permitted by Catholic Christians” (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide 1940, 24-26; Pope Pius XII 1939, 269). The New Catholic directory for funeral and ancestral rites<sup>17</sup> allowed traditional rites, including displaying food and name tablets on the altar, bowing in veneration of one’s ancestors, among other acts, and added Christian-style prayer for one’s ancestors. This directory advises that ancestral rites are permissible but should not be considered a duty for all. It also recommends attending Mass in memory of one’s ancestors after conducting ancestral rites in the house on traditional Korean festive days such as the Lunar New Year and Full Moon Harvest Holiday (Chuseok).<sup>18</sup>

Inculturation is the transformation of a local culture by the Christian faith and the cultural re-expression of faith in forms and terms befitting of the local culture. Church Fathers in Vatican II were aware of the variety of cultures of the “legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in the mission countries.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, local churches needed to engage in dialogue between the overarching Christian message and individual cultures, further encouraging “imitation of the plan of Incarnation, the young Churches, rooted in Christ and built upon the foundation of the apostles, take to themselves, in a wonderful exchange, all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance.”<sup>20</sup> The contemporary Catholic Church in Korea molded Christianity to adhere with the signs and symbols of the cultures at hand and a breadth of tolerance was allowed. This cultural adaptation was greatly praised

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17. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea presented a sample of ancestral rites in 2003. Father Kim Suchang and Choi Ki-Bok. also presented similar samples of Christianized ancestral rites. For further detail, see Choi (1986, 20-32).

18. *Pastoral Directory of the Catholic Church in Korea*, Article 135, Nos. 1-2.

19. See “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, SC 38,” in Abbott (1966).

20. See “Ad Gentes 22,” in Abbott (1966).

by the general public and funeral services were well organized in each parish, leading to admiration of many participants in funeral.

The ancestral rites controversy remains a contentious issue in Korea, especially between Protestant and non-Protestant family members. Hard-line evangelical Protestants condemned any ancestral rites as acts of idolatry, which led to heightened tension and arguments among family members, especially during the traditional ancestral memorial days and other events such as New Year's Day and Full Moon Harvest Holiday. According to Keum Jang-Tae (1987, 31), ancestral rites can be integrated harmoniously into Catholic practices. For Koreans ancestral rites serve as a valuable tradition. Through ancestral rites family members solidify their unity as a family. The Catholic Church has incorporated the spirit and practice of ancestral rites in some way. This tendency toward enculturation has received a positive response from non-believers. In the traditions and religions of Korea, Christianity, including Catholicism, is seen as a heterogeneous. One of most urgent problems in the Korean Catholic Church regards how to relate the Christian Gospel to Korean culture. Starkloff (1994, 72) notes that "no human phenomenon can escape some determination as part of a cultural system." Needless to say, much more remains to be done by Korean Christianity in the area of Korean expression of liturgy and theology.

### *Reappraisal of Catholic Church Growth in Korea*

Statistics on religious adherence have often fallen prey to statistical pitfalls, making it difficult to gather accurate data; statistics for the change of religious adherence are even more so in a multi-religious society like Korea. Between 1995 and 2005 the number of Buddhists increased by 3.9%, and Protestants saw a decrease of 1.6%, while the Catholic Church alone has seen prodigious growth during the period, increasing its membership by 74.4% in the past ten years. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) reported that there were 4,667,283 Catholics in Korea (9.5% of population), less than the National Statistics figure of 5,146,000 (10.9%), as of Decem-

ber 31, 2005. National statistics only reflect the official position of the government. The CBCK's report is the most accurate data as all parishes report their yearly baptismal numbers to the CBCK, and the count is performed twice a year. Confession is an obligation for Catholics in Korea, if the faithful fail to attend 3 years in a row, then they are considered non-practicing or tepid Catholics. Oh Kyung-Hwan (2007, 159), priest and sociologist, interpreted this discrepancy as arising from "national statistics derived from those who self-identified in a questionnaire including those who were preparing for baptism and potential candidates who were thinking of converting in the future," and does not include a large number of non-practicing baptized Catholics, who identify themselves as Catholics but do not attend church.

Recent remarkable increases in conversion to Catholicism were the result of a very complex process of external and internal factors working together. Growth, in part, can be attributed to the Catholic Church's positive perception by the general public. The numerical growth, however, does not automatically translate into the spirituality and maturity of Catholics. The Catholic Church of Korea can be pleased with the growth in numbers, but the numerical growth alone may not necessarily be associated with success. After the end of World War II, the Catholic Church grew tremendously. Today, Roman Catholicism in Korea faces different circumstances with different challenges. Recently, the stagnation or decline of the Protestant Church can be seen as a counter-effect to the growth of the Catholic Church. However, negative sentiment towards Protestantism could be directed towards the Catholic Church someday if the Catholic Church fails to meet the needs and expectations of society.

Unlike Western and Islamic countries, Korea is a multi-religious society, and it is not uncommon for people to change their religious affiliation. According to a survey about personal religious beliefs conducted by the National Statistics of Korea in 2005, 46.9% of respondents indicated no affiliation to a religion. Among them, many responded that they had switched from Buddhism (23.2%), from Protestantism (74.5%), and Catholicism (10.0%) (Korea Gallup Re-



search Institute 1990). Religious identity often coincided with family tradition in the West, but often multi-religious adherences within the same family unit can be seen in Korea. This compartmentalization of religious affiliation within the family unit creates a type of “market situation”<sup>21</sup> in which religions compete within the family unit and even in the choice of recreational activities, similarly to the secularized mechanisms of “consumer preference” (Berger 1990).

Religious mobility does not seem to be purely religious but can have business, political, and social networking reasons. Koreans who left previous religions are not necessarily actively atheist in belief, but rather can also simply be people who have been disappointed with their former religion. Lifelong commitment to one religion is now challenged by the readily available multiple religious or spiritual movements, such as the New Age movement; thus all religions, including Catholicism, are facing endless competition in this religious “market situation.”

The Catholic Church in Korea is also faced with many internal problems. The number of Catholics going to Sunday Mass is less than 25% of the number of Catholics in Korea, and this percentage continues to decline. The number of non-practicing Catholics is increasing from an average of 23% in the 1980s to 36.4% in 2005, especially among the youth, who are turning away from church life. Moreover, the number of seminarians, nuns, and monks is declining, especially the number of nun candidates has sharply declined from 1,073 in 1995 down to 456 in 2005 (Kang 2007). In the West, the declining number of those entering the nun’s vocation mirrors the decline seen in the number of those entering the priest’s vocation, both of which are seen as presenting a serious problem for the future of the Church. At the same time, lay people who are highly educated want to be

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21. The theory of “market situation” by Peter Berger (1990) states that, under a multi-religious and secularized society, religions are demonopolized in an open market system and individuals have the freedom to choose a religion according to taste. The market situation of religions was represented in Korean society, where religions were left to compete with each other, similarly to the choice of recreational activities by consumer preference.

actively involved in the ministries, but such demands are still being ignored by clergies, especially issues such as the permanent diaconship<sup>22</sup> and woman priesthood. Clericalism, especially male dominant clericalism, will be an ongoing problem in the modern Catholic Church.

Although the Catholic Church has greatly contributed to the restoration of democracy in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, their ecclesial operation is ironically authoritarian, hierarchical, and not democratic at all. Appointment of bishops depends solely on the Pope's discretion and, once appointed, bishops hold their positions until the retirement age of 75. The authority of the clergy is considered absolute and is seldom challenged by lay people. The pastoral committee in the local parish is organized, but only at an advisory level, and final decisions are made by the pastor alone. Two newspapers, *Pyeonghwa Shinmun* and *The Catholic Times*, both printed by the Catholic Church, are controlled by the Church authority and do not print criticism of Church leadership or articles covering internal scandals. The layperson educated in a contemporary democratic system may not adhere to this type of one-sided obedience, and forcing it may provoke internal conflicts against the autocratic leadership within the church. Tangible opposition to this authoritarian Church leadership can be seen in the form of the Catholic Internet News *Jigeum yeogi* (Here and Now), which was established by progressive lay people in 2009. The feminist movement is another challenge to the exclusively male dominated Church hierarchy, and the ever increasing call for an inclusive priesthood. Thus, the Catholic Church in Korea may face worldwide pressures on these issues in the near future.

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22. According to canon law, Catholic clergy members are considered exclusively to include only bishops, priests, and deacons. While the permanent diaconate was maintained from the earliest apostolic times, it gradually disappeared in the Roman Church. The transitional diaconate continued in a vestigial form, the final step along the course to ordination to the priesthood. In the twentieth century, the permanent diaconate was restored in many Roman Catholic dioceses in order to combat the shortage of priests. Lay candidates are usually trained in the seminary on a weekend basis for three years but the Catholic Church in Korea does not yet accept permanent diaconship.

The Catholic Church has assumed a vital role in re-establishing democracy in Korea, and championing social justice and actively participating in the human rights movement of the 1970s-1980s. However, its social role has been restricted since the 1990s as a result of the rapid democratization of Korea. Moreover, the leadership of the church has become more conservative and has often been called a “Rome more than Rome,” and members are mostly from the upper and middle classes, as seen in Table 4.

*Table 4. Religious Belief and Socioeconomic Class*

(Unit: %)

	Protestant	Catholic	Buddhism	No Religion	Total
Upper Class	3.5	11.3	2.4	3.3	3.6
Middle Class	63.1	64.8	48.3	51.0	53.4
Lower Class	33.3	24.0	49.3	45.8	42.9
Total	99.9	100.1	100.0	100.1	99.9

Source: Recited from Han and Kwon (2006).

As shown in Table 4, there is a proportionally larger membership in the middle and upper classes, which usually support for conservative ideology in Korea, seen to support conservative lines, opposing and protesting the progressive Church’s message in the society, especially the Catholic Priests’ Association for Justice. Such dominance of middle and upper-middle classes and the heavy concentration of Catholics in urban areas led to the alienation of the lower classes often at the fringe of industrialized societies. Because such ideological conflicts, on the part of both the right and left, could cause tension within the Catholic Church, the Korean Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a public statement in 1987 announcing the Church as a non-political organization, stating that it should maintain neutrality and limiting the involvement of the Church in social movements and reaffirming the policy of separation of State and Religion (Chu 2009). Since then, the two factions have been engaged in intense opposition regarding

the level of involvement in social movements in Korea which the Catholic Church should take. The majority of bishops now hold a conservative line, including Cardinal Cheong who has had acrimonious disputes and conflicts with progressive priests and laypeople, especially during recent conflicts regarding the national Four Rivers Project.

Korean society is rapidly changing and diversifying, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are emerging. These NGOs conduct professional research and present ideologically alternative ideas or visions to advocate progressive social and economical views, replacing the Catholic Church in leading society on these issues. Moreover, dominant clericalism discourages the promotion of lay leadership, even with regard to secular issues, leading to frequent conflicts between the two groups. Although the Catholic Church is still highly revered and is perceived to possess high social credibility, the Church's social influence is waning (Kang 2001).

A new paradigm is needed to lead the Church in this rapidly changing society, particularly in regard to the role of religion in the lives of the alienated classes, politics, and attitudes toward social values. Modern Korea has achieved formal democratization, and has established social and economic stability. The Catholic Church faces new challenges in these times, both from outside and within the church. Christianity has yet to establish firm roots on Korean soil, thus is still in process of enculturation into Korean society. The Catholic Church is still a foreign, or "imported," religion in the eyes of Koreans. The Catholic Church faces the challenge of stimulating new visions, and injecting a new energy into Korean society, and perhaps the prodigious growth witnessed at this time will become a transitional boom in the future.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Explanations of the recent growth of the Catholic Church in South Korea should recognize that the present "successful evangelization"

can be attributed to a multiple of factors. The influence of religion on society should be examined in the context of the multitude of changes society has taken. The Christianity that developed in Western society evolved in a different context and a different period in history, whereas in Korea, Christianity dates back to the early years of the Christian mission in Korea. Christianity originally developed in conjunction with social enlightenment, “inspiring the proselytized to do away with many superstitious or backward aspects of their traditional worldview and behavior” (Phan 2010, 225). Thus, classical social theory regarding religion and modernity can be wholly applied neither to contemporary Korean Christianity nor to other religions found on the peninsula. To do so would mean that, as Peter Berger (1999, 18) states, “those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril.”

The growth of Christianity in Korea occurred in an anomic social condition up until the 1980s but patterns of religious practice are varied in modern Korea. Due to secularization inside and outside of the churches, Roman Catholicism in Korea faces new challenges in dealing with the process of dehumanization, and widely spreading religious indifference, especially among the younger generations.

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