

KOREAN PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY

Reasons for Success and Challenges for Future Research

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From 1 to 5 March 2013, four permanent fellows and three academic staff members of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture visited Seoul, Korea. The aim of the visit was to study Christianity in Korea today, as part of the project of the Nanzan Institute on the "Christianity in East Asia." A workshop, with three presentations, was held at Korea University on 2 March. Dr. Min Young-Jin, a former professor in Old Testament studies at Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, delivered a lecture on the history of how the Bible was translated into Korean by using traditional Korean religious concepts for God, human beings, and so forth.

The second lecturer, Prof. Kim Sung-Gun of Seowon University, analyzed the Pentecostal phenomena of the current Korean Church from the perspective of the sociology of religions. An abridged version of this lecture follows. Finally, Prof. Ahn Shin of Bajae University, showed us many interesting pictures of Korean Christianity, with his own theological critique. There was an animated discussion after each presentation, as well as time for a general discussion. On 3 March, we visited two Korean churches in Seoul: the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which has been a symbolic church for Korean Pentecostalism since the 1970s, and Saemunan Presbyterian Church, the oldest church in Korea. Before returning to Japan, we were grateful to have the chance to learn about interreligious dialogue in Korea by staying with Keel Hee-Sung at the Shimdo Haksa for two days. The lecture he gave at the opening ceremony of the Shimdo Haksa has also been included in this issue.

We are obliged to all the scholars we met during the study trip for their hospitality, and for their sincere and friendly reception during the presentations and discussions.

THE LARGEST Christian congregation in the world (as of 2006) is in South Korea: the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) claims about 750,000 members, including 136,600 cell leaders. Most of the urban mega-churches in South Korea are Pentecostal in theology and

worship. While previous Pentecostal churches in the country were famous for charismatic enthusiasm, there has been a significant paradigmatic shift in the spirituality, theology, practices, and programs of mainline churches in South Korea. This reflects the “pentecostalization of the churches” (SPITTLER 1988, Kim, S. 2007).

Among the main reasons for the Korean Protestant success, I have found that evangelical Protestant Christianity, particularly its Pentecostal form, successfully draws upon ancient forms of Korean shamanism as well as introducing modern American capitalistic materialism (KIM S. 2006). David Martin, an authority on global Pentecostalism has also explored the nexus between Pentecostalism and shamanism in the Korean context (MARTIN 1990, 140–41). With regard to the Korean Pentecostal success, he proposed that the combination of Christianity with an aura of the most archaic layer of Korean religiosity that is shamanism, appealed to the “upper lower” groups in the country (MARTIN 1990, 140).

Korean Shamanism and Pentecostal Christianity

In Korea, shamanism developed as the predominant religious ethos of the Korean people (ELIADE 1972, 461–62; CLARK 1961, 174). The core of shamanism is that of a polytheistic religion based on the animistic worship of spirit beings (KIM, S. 2006, 27). Spiritual exorcism, direct communication with the spirits, healing, and worldly blessings are crucial aspects of shamanism.

Harvey Cox, following his Korean visit, has asserted: “The Korean churches do preach against shamanism, but at the same time they incorporate and Christianize elements of the shamanistic world view and practice” (REYNALDS 2000, 16). Indeed COX (2006, 16–17) repeatedly emphasizes that one of Pentecostalism’s enormous strength is its capacity to integrate pre-Christian cultural expressions into Christian practice. This stance seems to be consistent with Liberation theologian Charles Eillott’s view on Paul Yonngi Cho as a Christian shaman: “The shaman offered catharsis, *jung* (heart), play and blessings. Cho and his many imitators offer an emotional release, sympathy, and blessings” (ELLIOTT 1989, 32). Shamanism is still “the spirit world of Korea” (GUISO and YOO 1988) and “the source of the Korean people’s spiritual energy” (KIM, T., 1972). Although Pentecostal Christianity “naturally” meets shamanism or belief in a world inhabited by spirits in the Korean context, a majority of Protestant intellectuals are still strongly against shamanism and dismiss it as mere superstition. This reflects the “cultural paradox” of Korean shamanism (KIM, C., 2003).

Meanwhile, as MARTIN (1990, 140) has stressed, shamanism and spiritualism are nearly everywhere, just below the surface or on the surface of contemporary life. Similarly, Donald Miller and Tetsunano YAMAMORI (2007, 24–25), in their four-year empirical research on global Pentecostalism, have pointed out that

one can find many functional parallels between Pentecostalism and animism (or shamanism). In Pentecostalism and animism, believers expel demons, people heal, and individuals possess spirits. Hence, the Pentecostal worldview is not remarkably different from what animistic believers have known, except that the former affirm that there is only one true spirit, the Holy Spirit (MILLER and YAMAMORI 2007, 24).

So believing as they do in the “universal presence of spirits” from indigenous shamanism, it neither was nor is difficult for Korean converts to Christianity to accept the doctrines of the spiritual nature of (a personalized) God (KIM, S., 2007, 153). Pentecostalism, like shamanism and the Korean worldview filled with spirits (HAHM, 1988), locates “evil”—which causes misfortune, traumatic disease, and even the vicious circle of poverty—“within” the spirit world (KIM, S., 2007, 153–4).

It would be unwise to try to understand the spread of Pentecostal Protestantism without reference to a sociological perspective. However, I would conclude that, despite South Korea’s extraordinary economic and social transformation in history, the country’s Pentecostal success vividly demonstrates the inner spiritual dynamics of the Shamanic religion.

Agenda for Future Research

In my view, there are two interrelated central agendas for future research with regard to Korean Pentecostal Christianity. First, we should delve into rediscovering the “positive” function of shamanism for Pentecostal growth in Korea. Second, we should assess the bright and dark side of a Korean version of the American “Prosperity Gospel” in relation to its influence in the believers’ thought, attitude, and behavior toward a market economy.

Regarding the first agenda, an important key to the appeal of Pentecostalism is its ability to take the indigenous spiritualistic and shamanistic traditions seriously (GRAYSON 1995). These traditions typically do not make a dualistic distinction between body and spirit, or between material prosperity and physical or mental health. Given the existence of predominant ethos of indigenous shamanism or spiritualism among “modern Koreans who care for worldly blessings such as wealth and particularly health” (Martin 1990, 155), the Pentecostal/charismatic movement will not decline.

Considering the natural interlocking relationship between surviving shamanism and dynamic neo-Pentecostal Protestantism, I would argue that the most crucial factor for the extraordinary growth of pentecostalized Korean Protestantism seems to be its “healing ministry” through spiritual exorcism or spiritual warfare (KIM, S. 2007, 158). As of 2006, according to *Ten Country Survey of Pentecostals* by the Pew Forum (<http://pewforum.org>), 90% of Pentecostals and

92% of Charismatics in South Korea wholly or mostly agree with the statement “angels and demons are active in the world.” Recent results of the Gallup Korea poll find nearly 30% of Protestants attest to some religious experiences including healing in their daily lives. This high figure contrasts markedly with 5% for Buddhists and 14% of Roman Catholics (GALLUP KOREA 2004, 72–75).

Regarding the second agenda: historically, the Christian church has always been ambivalent about the spiritual value of material wealth (PERRIMAN 2003). In its public statements, if not always in practice, it has usually stood on the moral high ground, promoting a modest and sacrificial lifestyle while renouncing excessive wealth. However, the shift from aristocracy to meritocracy in the nineteenth century and the consequent explosion in prosperity changed American public perception on relative virtues of the poor and the wealthy (TOWNS 2007).

The close relationship between Christianity—specifically, Pentecostal Protestantism with the newly emerging “Prosperity Gospel of health and wealth” (COLEMAN 2000)—and the rise of meritocracy in contemporary South Korea illustrates this transformation. The Prosperity Gospel sometimes works for self-betterment and as a catalyst for social progress and ultimately for the creation of wealth (MILLER and YAMAMORI 2007, 175–77). At the very least, neo-Pentecostalism in South Korea has not only provided meaning for living and succor to its adherents, but also has taught many of them the values of ascetic Protestantism, essential for social mobility in a capitalist economy (KIM, S., 2006, 35; WALKER 2007, 270). Though the correlation between Pentecostalism and economic advancement is opaque, following Peter BERGER (2008), I argue that the two go together.

Minjung (grassroots) theology as a Korean version of Liberation theology emerged from the oppressed political and economic situation of the Korean people between 1970 and 1980 (PARK 2013, 128). Some *minjung* theologians such as Nam Dong SUH (1981), who favor the Korean-style liberation from the experience of *han* (rancor against oppression), miss the point that Pentecostalism enables ordinary South Koreans to face painful social and economic transitions. Pentecostalism serves to develop attributes, motivations, and personalities requisite for troubleshooting the exigencies of the deregulated global market (WIEGELE 2005, 102–4). Unfortunately, however, it is also true that Pentecostalism has overstressed late modernity’s preoccupation with self-experience (CAMPBELL 1987).

Meanwhile, in the pioneering study of the contemporary explosion of Pentecostalism in Latin America, MARTIN (1990) says that the relation between Pentecostalism and economic culture deserves more attention. In line with this, BERGER (2008) has recently ventured the far-reaching proposition: *Pentecostalism can function as a positive resource for modern economic development*. From

this, I think that we should reexamine the connection between Pentecostalism and economic culture in South Korea.

Miraculous economic development has unfolded in tandem with tremendous growth of Pentecostalism in South Korea back in the 1970s, and 1980s. This reflects a “selective affinity” between Pentecostalism filled with the values of ascetic Protestantism and the new economy generated by globalization (COX 2006). As of 2000, nine out of fifteen of the largest mega-churches in the country are, in fact, charismatic or neo-Pentecostal (HONG 2000, 101–4). However, I would contend that in this era of “globalization,” we should factor in something other than asceticism to explain the interconnection between Pentecostalism and economic culture. BERGER (2008, 74) has maintained that inner-worldly asceticism is functional in the early phases of modern economic development, but that it becomes dispensable, even dysfunctional, in later phases. He calls for constructing a “new” Protestant ethic in this highly modernized world.

Thus, I think that we should seek to update Max Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis and create a “Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (MILLER and YAMAMORI 2007, 164–5). I suggest that Pentecostalism differs from the former Protestant ethic by its stress on mystical and expressive elements. Pentecostalism cultivates a direct and individual relationship with God. In addition, this promotes the individualism that the market also requires. The religious experience people have in the worship can strengthen their “self” (MILLER and YAMAMORI 2007, 62). This strengthening of the self through mystical religious experience can help “empower” people to persevere through harsh neoliberal economic situations (KIM, S., 2012, 59; PREMAWARDHANA 2012, 91–96).

YFGC’s founder David Yonggi Cho’s “Threefold Blessing” (3 John 1: 2) includes salvation for the soul, material prosperity, and physical health. *Minjung* theology’s dismissal of Cho’s Gospel of Prosperity as false consciousness or right wing conspiracy misses the following point. For many ordinary Koreans, the Gospel of Prosperity provides a framework for responding to the pressures of modernization and facing painful social and economic transitions. I presume that the Prosperity Gospel would even expand in the new economic climate, in a form of compensation and potential empowerment (KIM, S., 2012). As South Korea is under a strong legacy of Asian prosperity, and religious traditions such as shamanism and Taoism (KIM, S., 2002), the Prosperity Gospel still holds a significant place in the country.

Concluding Remarks

There are two interrelated pivotal agendas for future research of Korean Pentecostal Christianity. First, we should delve into rediscovering the “positive” function of shamanism for Pentecostal growth in Korea. Scholars and, specifically,

Christian intellectuals often exhibit prejudice toward “anomalous experiences” which are an inherent feature within shamanism. If sociologists of religion (including myself) wish to understand why people (such as Korean Pentecostals) believe as they do, they must be willing to listen to people’s stories (McCLENNON, 2002, 155). The sense of “empowerment” that accompanies neo-Pentecostal practices may be illusory, but it is not merely so. Researchers on Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity should be concerned with observing the effects rather than speculating about the causes of transformative religious experiences. We should not explain them away through secular modes of rationality and intelligibility (PREMAWARDHANA 2012, 87).

Second, we should assess the bright and dark side of the Prosperity Gospel, in tandem with shamanic fortune belief (*kibok shinang*), regarding its influence in the believers’ thought, attitude, and behavior toward a market economy and even political activism. My work (KIM, S., 2012) and that of PREMAWARDHANA (2012) are relevant for the project examining the controversy surrounding the Gospel of Prosperity associated with neo-Pentecostalism.

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