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What Does Seoul Have to do with Bangkok? Church Growth in Korea & Thailand

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Introduction

For over a century, Protestantism in Korea has widely been considered the greatest evangelistic success story in Asia with Protestants today numbering roughly 25% of the total Korean population. In his study of the Korean church, Palmer contrasts its rapid numerical growth to Asian Protestantism generally, and he specifically compares it to the "worst case" scenario in Thailand (Palmer, v). The Protestant churches of these two countries, Thailand and Korea, thus share one thing in common: they are both well known for their church growth record, Korea for its almost miraculous "success" and Thailand for its dismal "failure."

The successes of Protestant church growth in South Korea since World War II loom large over the Thai church, standing in the eyes of many as a continuing judgment against it for its failure to achieve what the Korean churches have achieved. The widespread presence of Korean missionaries in Thailand, the large amounts of Korean funding for evangelism, the numerous conferences and seminars featuring Korean speakers, and free trips to Korea for Thai church leaders reinforce the impression that "the Korean success" offers a model for the churches of Thailand. Some Korean missionaries still come to Thailand today consciously intending to import that model, offering it to the Thai churches as an Asian alternative to Western models for evangelization and church life. Understanding the nature of the Korean Protestant experience is thus important in the Thai context.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on some of the important similarities and differences between the Protestant churches of Korea and of Thailand. Although the reasons for the Korean Protestant success story in church growth are numerous, there appears to be a consensus among the students of Korean Protestant church growth regarding the key components of that success. They have to do with the state of religion in the late nineteenth century when Protestantism first appeared in Korea, with the strategies of the first generations of missionaries involved in the evangelization of Korea, with the Japanese colonization of Korea, and with the nature of traditional Korean religious consciousness itself. The result of this mix of historical events and forces has been what some now call "the Korean miracle," the explosive growth of Protestantism in Korea in the years after World War II.

The rapid growth of Christianity is not a recent phenomenon nor is it limited to Protestantism. As Kim points out, early Catholicism grew very quickly, and even after World War II Catholicism has grown relatively rapidly, although not at the pace of some of the larger Protestant denominations and groups (Kim [1], 35-38, 47-48). Accounting for the Korean success in evangelism, therefore, requires that we look at a number of factors, and in general there are two sets of factors involved in the growth of Christianity in Korea widely held by scholars as being the keys to explaining Korean Protestant church growth. The first set includes those that have been beyond the control of the

churches, external factors that the old-time missionaries often called "providences." These include the geo-political setting of Korea, its historical experience within that setting, and the ways in which the first generation of Protestant missionaries initiated their work. The second set of factors has to do with the ways in which the Korean churches have accommodated their Protestantism with Korean culture and Korean nationalism.

These two general factors, then, provide us with a framework for comparing the Thai experience with that in Korea. The situation in Thailand, as we will see in what follows, was and is very different from that of Korea. It is in those differences that we find the explanation for the "success" of Protestantism in Korea and its "failure" in Thailand. We need to emphasize from the beginning that there is no one factor that is the explanation for a high rate of church growth in Korea and the low rate in Thailand. We have to look at the combination of factors in each nation in order to understand the causes of their higher or lower rates of growth.

Internal Factors

Protestants, historically, have lived under particular conditions in Korea and in Thailand, conditions that they have had to contend with but could not control. These conditions include not only the political and diplomatic settings of their nations, but also the strategies used by foreign missionaries in introducing the Christian faith to their peoples. They also include the nature of indigenous religious consciousness and the condition of competing religious institutions, especially Buddhism in Thailand and Confucianism in Korea . Taken together, these factors significantly shaped the formation and historical development of the churches of Korea and Thailand.

The Geo-Political Context

One of the most consistent themes in the literature on Korean church growth before World War II is that Protestantism entered Korea at an auspicious time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both externally and internally, the ruling elite was facing near chaotic political conditions engendered by debilitating internal factionalism and external colonial pressure from China, Russia, and especially Japan. Modernization had become a further destabilizing issue in the face of widespread Westernization throughout Asia. The increase of Japanese power in the early twentieth century, which eventually led to Korea becoming a colony of Japan in 1910, only served to increase the sense of political and social crisis in the country. The common people of Korea suffered greatly throughout the era when Protestantism first appeared in the country both at the hands of their own political leadership and under Japanese rule.

The importance of the suffering of the Korean peoples for church growth is that the work of the first generation of Protestant missionaries benefited from that suffering. Many Korean intellectuals and the general populace were deeply interested in Westernization. They saw the benefits that Japan derived from modernization, they wanted those same benefits for Korea, and for many years the Protestant missionaries were the only representatives of the West who could help Korea acquire what they wanted from the West. Rather than resisting missionary influence, thus, the people generally welcomed it. (Clark, 256-257; Ro, 159-163). Which is to say, Protestant Christianity was initially viewed, at least in part, in a positive light and seen as a source of possible assistance to

the Korean people and nation.

In Thailand (Siam), the Protestant missionaries established themselves permanently in the 1830s when Western colonialism, particularly in the form of British imperialism, was emerging as an increasingly worrisome problem. Unlike Korea, however, Siam met the colonial threat as a relatively well-governed and politically unified state (see Englehart, esp. 107ff); and while it had to give up both large tracts of territory and substantial control over its own economy especially to the British, Siam was able to maintain its political integrity with the support, albeit somewhat passive, of the British (see Tuck, esp. 239ff). Equally as important for our purposes here, the Siamese government itself became the primary promoter of Westernizing modernization and was able to co-opt the missionaries and other Western agencies, casting them in a secondary, supporting role.

At the same time, the Protestant missionaries, although they were Americans and thus not representatives of a colonial power that threatened Siam, looked like other Westerners and, to an extent, were identified with the British and French colonialists. There is some evidence in the correspondence of the American State Department with its consulate in Bangkok that the American Presbyterian missionaries for many years generally sided with the British in political and diplomatic matters. (see Partridge to Fish, 10 October 1871, v. 3-4, United States Government). Thus, where Japanese colonial aggression in Northeast Asia created favorable circumstances for Protestant missions in Korea, Protestant missions in Siam benefited little from their role in modernization.

There was some tendency in Korea, evidently, to identify Protestantism with modernization as a total package. According to this premise accepting the Christian faith was an important step towards acquiring the benefits of the West (Chung [2], 24). Thai intellectuals, beginning with King Mongkut, rejected any correlation between Western religion and Western technologies, and Mongkut himself pressed for the reformation and modernization of Buddhism. He was clearly unimpressed with missionary Christianity as a religious system (Lord, 177-178). The Presbyterian missionaries in the nineteenth century repeatedly predicted that the Thai people, who were also interested in things Western, would surely come to see that the Christian religion was the foundation of Western civilization and, thus, accept it in place of Buddhism as the national faith. That sequence of events, obviously, never took place.

Korea, thus, faced an aggressive Asian colonial power in Japan and did not have the wherewithal to thwart a colonial takeover, while it also failed to assert political control of modernization. The first generations of missionaries and converts were able to capitalize on these conditions in introducing Protestant Christianity to Koreans. Siam, by way of contrast, was able to withstand the European colonial threat to its independence by a combination of generally wise leadership and the largely passive support of the British, who did not have any political intentions towards Siam and did not want to see it fall into the hands of the French either. Protestant missionaries, in sum, had less room to maneuver in the geo-political situation of Southeast Asia compared to their colleagues in Northeast Asia.

The Religious Context

An important factor contributing to the general sense of crisis in Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the fact that its traditional religious

structures were in serious decline, even before Protestant missionaries first entered the country in the mid-1880s. Buddhism and Taoism had long been discredited, and by the end of the nineteenth century the Korean people generally had lost faith in Confucianism as well. It seemed to be a religion for the upper classes that was irrelevant to the lives of common people. Koreans were increasingly returning to reliance on traditional "shamanism" as well as a number of new religious movements that had close affinities with shamanism. Most commentators understand shamanism to be an ancient Korean religious system involving supernaturalism, the manipulation of spiritual powers by ritual, prayer, and exorcism. It includes the use of magic and the interpretation of dreams and was the ancient indigenous religion of the common people, especially women, by which they sought security and prosperity. Shamanism disappeared long ago as an independent religious system, but scholars argue that it has survived in various guises from ancient times down to the present. Its growing strength in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one sign of the religious and national distress of the Korean people.

This unstable, deteriorating religious and spiritual situation facilitated the introduction of Protestant Christianity into Korea in at least two ways. First, it meant that the Korean people were receptive to new religious options, ones that would provide them with the meaning and religious vitality that was missing in the country's traditional faiths (Chai-Sik Chung [1], 526; and Chai-Sik Chung [2], 22). Second, Koreans did not identify "Korean-ness" with any one religion (Kang, 124). In sum, Korea 's unstable religious condition, in conjunction with its political and social situation, offered a wide open door to Protestantism. Just as importantly, the situation in Korea also offered Protestant missionaries with a "level playing field" religiously, one where they could compete well with Korea 's older religions and its other new religious movements.

Again, the situation in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Siam was quite different. Siam had just one dominant religious faith, a combination of Buddhism and animism, which was strongly rooted in the political and cultural life of the people. Down to the present, it has widely been understood that to "be Thai" means to be a Buddhist; and there has been not a little prejudice against Christianity as being an alien religion that is inappropriate to the Thai people. There are some indications in the late 1860s in Chiang Mai and the early 1880s in Phet Buri that both northern and central Thais were receptive to Christianity. Taking advantage of that receptivity, however, required unusual circumstances and a unique evangelistic approach, and such peculiar combinations of circumstances and approach have seldom occurred in Thai church history. In general, Buddhism was and remains the dominant religious force in Thai society and is a key indicator of Thai-ness. The missionaries in Siam, thus, played on a playing field where all of the competitive advantages were heavily weighted towards Buddhism.

Aiding and abetting the introduction of Protestant Christianity into Korea was the traditional Korean belief in a supreme, personal religious being called Hananim. Commentators on Korean church growth repeatedly contrast the situation in China, where there was no indigenous term for the Western Christian concept of God, with that in Korea where the people already believed in a ultimate power similar to that concept. According to Palmer, Koreans traditionally believed that Hananim is a "personal deity" with something of an "anthropomorphic character" linked with traditional stories of

creation. The term's most general meaning is "Heavenly One" (Palmer, 7-8). He also notes that there are a number of parallels between the mythic Korean and biblical creation stories and concludes that there is "some reasonable basis for drawing analogies between old Korean concepts and biblical ideas of God." (Palmer, 15) He goes on to argue that,

Hananim was a point of contact with Korean culture the like of which missionaries in China did not have. As a personal transcendent God, clearly the supreme deity of the Korean people, Hananim was uniquely suited to prepare the Korean people for belief in the Christian God. (Palmer, 18)

Kim fully agrees with Palmer's assessment, arguing that the importance "of this terminological consistency cannot be under-estimated." Where in most of Asia Western and indigenous Asian religious conceptions regarding the ultimate have been in conflict, he notes, in Korea there has been no such conflict. He argues that this congruity between Christian and local religious concepts is part of the explanation for the rapid growth of the Korean churches because "Koreans found a mirror image of their own supreme God in the imported faith." (Kim [2], 123-124)

As an aside, it should be noted that the Korean situation is not unique in Asia, particularly among the upland tribal peoples of South and Southeast Asia. Many of these people have a treasury of creation stories that include some form of a personal creator deity, which have provided Christian missionaries with an important point of entry for evangelism. In Burma and Thailand, the outstanding example is found among the Karen people and their traditional belief in Yua, the Creator. (See Esther Danpongpee, "Karen Stories of Creation" in HeRB 1). It is clear that Karen evangelists have a considerable advantage over Thai ones, as Karen converts can see their new faith is augmenting their belief in Yua . Christianity seems less alien, more familiar as a result.

Thailand, again, presents us with a quite different situation. Protestant missionaries carried over the term *phrachao*, first used by the Catholics, as the translation for the English word "God," but the term carries no clear associations to a personal Deity. The literal meaning of *phrachao* is "holy lord," and the Royal Thai Institute dictionary (1999 edition) defines *phrachao* as meaning, first, the Buddha, second, Buddha images, and, third, "an important deity" (thep phubenyai). Even this last term does not carry any clear connotations of a personal God in the Western Christian sense; admittedly, one could translate it as "Supreme God," but to do so inserts English concepts of deity that are not inherent in the Thai. While modern-day Thais with some education or exposure to Islam or Christianity will probably understand that *phrachao* can mean "God," that certainly was not the case in the nineteenth century. Thailand is one of those nations where Christian religious conceptions have been in conflict with indigenous ones, and the missionaries had to struggle to communicate Protestant meanings across the wide theo-linguistic gulf between English and Thai.

In sum, the chaotic religious situation in Korea in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries plus important conceptual parallels between Korean and Protestant religious concepts meant that Koreans were receptive to the Protestant message as being one that seemed congruent to their situation. In Thailand, just the opposite was the case. There was a strong indigenous religion in place, religious conditions were relatively stable rather than chaotic, and the potential parallels between Western Protestantism and Thai

Buddhism were far less obvious. On the face of it, there was little overt congruence between Christianity and Thai religious consciousness. What the people heard and saw was an alien religion.

The Missionary Context

In order to understand the Protestant experience in any Asian culture or society, it is important to understand how Protestantism was first introduced into that culture or society. A people's first experience with Protestantism generally sets the course for succeeding developments, and while changes can obviously take place in later years there is a general tendency for the history of the later church to flow more or less in the channels first dug for it in its initial years. Three factors related to the missionaries themselves have been particularly important in the history of the founding of Protestantism in Korea from the 1870s and 1880s, and these factors help us to understand the situation in Siam as well as Korea.

First, when the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea in 1884 there were already small groups of converts who had heard the Christian message from missionaries working in Manchuria in the 1870s. The New Testament was already translated and in the hands of the converts in Korea, and there was active evangelism being conducted in several parts of country as well. Grayson concludes that when the first foreign missionaries arrived in Korea, "The Church was already established; it only needed further cultivation to begin to flourish." (Grayson, 303). Korean Protestantism, that is, had begun to take shape and voice some years before missionaries arrived. The situation in Siam was yet again entirely different. There were no Protestant communities waiting for the first missionaries, and, in fact, most of the initial missionary effort in Siam was directed towards Chinese immigrants. It took decades before the missionaries could establish any significant number of churches or even to complete the translation of the New Testament, by which time Protestantism was thoroughly identified with the West as a foreign religion.

Second, in 1890 the Presbyterian missionaries in Korea invited the Rev. John L. Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary working in China, to present to them his innovative program for church planting and development. Nevius argued that the foreign missionaries should limit their role in the churches as much as possible. They should promote local leadership and provide no more than an absolute minimum of financial support, either for building churches or paid evangelists. The churches should be encouraged to be the chief engines for evangelism and, to that end, Bible study groups should be pushed strongly so that the churches would gain their own knowledge of Scripture as quickly as possible. The Presbyterian missions in China rejected Nevius' plan as being unworkable there, but some of the fledgling Protestant missions in Korea, notably the Presbyterians, quickly implemented it—particularly in terms of financial self-support. Clark argues that while the Presbyterians, at first, failed to give the Korean converts a full roll in the work of the churches, they eventually realized their mistake and took concrete steps to empower Korean church leadership. He states that, when given that opportunity, the Koreans were able to quickly take a hand in the management of Christian schools, hospitals, and other work because they were already generally self-supporting and self-governing within their own churches (Clark, 235-238, cf. Palmer, 27-28). Clark, writing in the 1930s, goes so far as to claim that, "the Nevius Methods have been the final determining factor in the

results attained in Korea." (Clark, 270). As we will see, below, Korean pastors have long played a key role in accommodating faith and culture to each other in Korea and in responding to the national aspirations of the Korean people. It is hard to believe that a church fully dominated by missionary leadership could have successfully engaged in either of these activities.

One of the most striking and important consequences of the use of the Nevius Plan had to do with the missionaries themselves. Palmer points out that the missionaries saw many parallels between the Korean situation and experience and that in the Bible, and that,

The missionaries held favorable attitudes towards the native people and their traditional way of life. They not only had confidence that Protestant Christianity was relevant to native culture, but they insisted that Koreans could be trusted to take it under hand without having it suffer serious distortion thereby. (Palmer, 33)

Thus, while the missionaries still tended to dominate certain aspects of the work and to display certain negative attitudes towards Korean culture generally, they trusted the churches they founded to be true, faithful churches that could carry the responsibility for evangelizing Korea themselves.

Yet again, the situation in Thailand was fundamentally different. When the predominant American Presbyterian mission began its work in the 1840s, missionary leadership in every phase of the work was taken for granted. In the 1890s, the Presbyterian mission in northern Siam, the Laos Mission, did flirt briefly with the idea of employing the Nevius Plan, but it went no further than a narrow emphasis on financial self-support most clearly embodied in a policy of not employing "native" evangelists. After a few years, the mission retreated from even that policy and, while some missionaries claimed that the Laos Mission had tried the Nevius Plan and found it wanting, such was not the case at all (See *Khrischak Muang Nua*, Chapter 6, 103ff). The Presbyterian Siam Mission never seriously considered the Nevius Plan. In both missions, the missionaries retained full control of virtually all aspects of church and mission work well into the twentieth century.

The question of trust is crucial here. Unlike what Palmer describes happening in Korea, in Thailand Protestant missionaries generally took a highly negative view not only of Thai culture but also of the ability of Thai converts to divorce themselves from their culture. They had what can only be called a strong prejudice against the ability of Thais to lead their own churches (see Khrischak Muang Nua, Chapter 4 and following; see also HeRB 5, "The Poor Lost Sheep at Phrae Revisited"). A few missionaries, notably the Rev. E. P. Dunlap of the Siam Mission and the Rev. Robert Irwin of the Laos Mission, disagreed with the highly negative attitudes of their colleagues and worked to empower local church leadership, with some success (for Dunlap, see Swanson, Towards a Clean Church; for Irwin, see Khrischak Muang Nua, Chapter 6, passim). My own research suggests that the Presbyterian missionary failure to trust and empower their converts has been a crucial factor in preserving the inherently alien nature of Protestant Christianity in Thailand.

The difference between Thailand and Korea is striking, and Clark argues forcefully, as we saw above, that the one reason the Korean churches have grown at a rate unprecedented in Asian history is that the first generations of missionaries in Korea were

the only Protestant missionaries in Asia to employ the Nevius Plan seriously. He somewhat overstates the case for the importance of the Nevius Plan, but his point is well taken if other chief factors are given more consideration than he gives them. Based on the cases of Korea and Thailand, it is fair to say that churches founded by missionaries are far more likely to act in a responsible and trustworthy manner if they are given responsibility and treated as trustworthy. We should add that it is clear that the missionaries working in Thailand and Korea, otherwise, shared precisely the same general set of ideologies and attitudes. They conducted much of their work along lines exactly like those carried out by Protestant missionaries throughout the world, especially in emphasizing the use of education and medicine as tools for evangelization. The missionaries believed in the superiority of Western civilization no less in Korea than in Siam. Indeed, Dunlap and Irwin, although innovative in their trust of Thai church leadership, were otherwise among the most theologically conservative Presbyterian missionaries to serve in Siam. The one difference between them and their colleagues—and between the missionaries in Korea and Thailand generally—is in the matter of trust and empowerment.

The third factor concerning the missionary context of the Korean and Thai churches is one that is actually similar in both countries, but worked out differently in each. The missionaries in both Thailand and Korea sought to respond to human suffering with a patently Christian form of humanitarianism. They established clinics, hospitals, and dispensaries in both nations; they initiated the use of Western medical treatments in both. They attacked certain social institutions or conventions that they considered inhumane, and they especially sought to improve the lot of women in society. They established schools, industrial projects, and other work aimed at social and moral improvement.

The consequences of missionary attempts to heal human suffering, however, played out differently in the two countries. In Korea, human suffering appears to have been more intense, particularly after the full Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910, and the missionaries and churches became one of the leading agencies addressing that suffering. They were agencies that were not identified with the Japanese, but were, as we have already seen, positively linked to the people's national aspiration for modernization and independence (see Chung [1], 530; Clark, 260-261). In Thailand, the humanitarian efforts of the missionaries were widely appreciated, and the missionary record contains numerous references to the praise and thanks of government officials from the King on down for those efforts. That thanks did not translate into an identification of Christianity with the struggles and aspirations of the Thai people, either in central or northern Thailand. In the absence of immediate colonial domination and persecution such as experience by the Koreans, indeed, there was not even much of a Thai national consciousness until the opening decades of the twentieth century. Streckfuss argues that Siam only developed a concept of "Thainess" in reaction to French intentions on Siamese territory, which were based on the argument that most of the various peoples ruled by Bangkok are not "really Thai." (Streckfuss, esp. 143-144)

Conclusion

Differences in geo-political, religious, and missiological conditions between Korea and Thailand, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries up to World War II, go a long way towards explaining the differences in church growth between the

Protestant churches in these two countries. The virtually chaotic political internal situation in Korea, Japanese colonialism, Korea's unsettled religious situation, missionary strategies, and the ways in which Protestantism identified with the plight of the people—all of these factors established a solid foundation upon which to build the Korean Protestant church. In Thailand, meanwhile, the nation's political institutions were relatively stable, colonialism was a less pressing (although still potentially dangerous) threat to national independence, missionary strategy was markedly untrusting of church leadership, and missionary humanitarian activities were not identified with national suffering and aspirations. There was not a foundation for church growth.

We must, however, be wary of concluding that the Korean church has grown rapidly and the Thai church slowly because of these external factors alone, especially in the case of the Korean churches. In Thailand, it seems that the church has not, until recently, had the opportunity to take responsibility for its own life to the degree that it can effectively respond to the sociocultural and religious context within which it works. Even today, the anti-culture ideology of the majority of Protestant missionaries in the past and of many even today continues to saddle the churches with a crippling ghetto mentality that frustrates rather than facilitates conversions to the Christian faith. In Korea, meanwhile, it was not a foregone conclusion that the church would necessarily grow as rapidly as it has because of the factors discussed in this section. We turn now to the ways in which Korean Protestants have capitalized on these factors.

Internal Factors

The "external factors" of Korean church growth discussed above created a set of favorable conditions for the rapid spread of Protestantism, but the Korean churches themselves have played a central role in Protestant demographic expansion. Here, the contrast between Korea and Thailand becomes, if anything, even sharper. Where the churches of Korea had options in their response to the Korean context, the situation in Thailand largely deprived the Thai Protestant churches of viable options in their way to response to their political and social context. The Korean church, thus, was able to lodge itself firmly within Korean life and identify itself with "Korean-ness," whereas the Thai church retained an alien identity if simply could not shake.

Identification with National Suffering and Aspirations

The first generations of Protestants, during the era of Japanese domination (1910-1945), charted a response to the Korean colonial situation that combined ministering to the suffering of the people with a generally passive attitude towards Japanese rule itself. It was left to the Korean churches and their leaders to transform the missionaries' caring but passive approach into an active identification with the suffering and national aspirations of the Korean people. Christian leaders played a prominent role in various attempts to resist the Japanese occupation, and the Japanese colonial government soon initiated a policy of repression aimed at Christians that including imprisoning thousands of church members and the burning of many church buildings. Christians were hardly the only Koreans subjected to colonial brutalities, but they both played a leadership role and suffered reprisals totally out of proportion with their small numbers. In the process, they also were able to identify Protestantism with Korean nationalism, and while Clark is probably correct that few people before World War II converted to Christianity as a result

(Clark, 262-263), the larger point is, once again, that Protestantism was able to lodge itself in the mainstream of Korean life. Given the nationalistic commitment of Korean Christians and their willingness to suffer for that commitment, the general public could hardly deny their genuine "Korean-ness." Chung contends that because of Protestant struggles against and under the Japanese occupation Koreans came to accept Christianity, "as a tremendously positive force in the nation's struggle for independence and development." (Chung [2], 28; see also, Ro, 167-69; and Kim [1], 42-45)

The small Protestant community in Siam also suffered persecution from the later 1930s through the end of World War II, but the circumstances were entirely different. That persecution was carried out largely by Thai government officials as part of an undeclared policy to force Christians to return to Buddhism under the premise that all loyal Thais must be Buddhists. Christians, that is, were persecuted in the name of Thai nationalism and were seen as traitors to the nation rather than its defenders, as was the case in Korea. It is true that the dominant Presbyterian mission had supported the emergence of Thai patriotism beginning especially in the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) on the premise that good Christians make good patriots. In the indigenous totalitarian climate of Thailand in the later 1930s, however, there was no way in which the churches could have benefited from the missionaries' attempts to present Thai Christians as good patriots.

Accommodation with Korean Religious Consciousness

Still another factor contributing to Korean church growth is the fact that Korean Protestantism has been able to identify with and draw upon a wide range of indigenous religious themes to the extent that it may itself be considered an indigenous religion. This is true in spite of the fact that most Protestants continue to reject Confucian-based ancestor worship. Kim's article in Sociology of Religion (Kim [2]) presents with particular clarity the case that the churches have been able to identify with indigenous religious consciousness, and his article provides a useful starting point for our arguments here.

Kim argues that the Protestant churches of South Korea have been successful evangelistically because the message they preach is largely congruent with Korean culture. He states that there is a strong affinity between the Protestant message and practices, on the one hand, and traditional Korean shamanism, on the other. Koreans found Protestant doctrines and values thus, "to be compatible with the values that they were familiar with." Korean pastors, he also claims, consciously sought to shape Korean Protestantism, "in accordance with the tradition-bound religious inclinations of Koreans." (Kim [2], 129) Kim concludes, "…the remarkable growth of Christianity in South Korea rested heavily on minimizing the contradiction between the new doctrine and Korean values and on reducing the conflict between the new faith and Korean traditional religions." (Kim [2], 130)

Specifically, Korean Protestantism is strongly this worldly and parallels the thought-ways of traditional Korean shamanism in their mutual emphasis on the practical needs for living of average people including health, material prosperity, and social as well as religious salvation. Materialism, he contends, is an important element in both Korean shamanism and Protestantism, and he holds that Protestants have actually incorporated shamanistic-like rites into their faith. The Korean church's "gospel of success," in sum,

neatly parallels shamanism. (Kim [2], 119-122). Youngsook Harvey agrees with Kim and notes that shamanistic-style thinking and rites have a particular hold on Christian women. She links, for example, Christian women's prayer groups with shamanism as both being similar in ideology and activities, and she describes various activities carried out in those prayer groups that show similarities to shamanism. She argues that Shamanism, like Christianity, has been a place where women could find solace, emotional release, and exercise some control over their own lives (Harvey, esp. 165-167).

Korean Christians, Kim suggests, particularly draw on traditional conceptions of God (Hananim) to reinforce their materialistic, shamanistic approach to religious consciousness and practice. They emphasize God's role as Saviour, the one who answers their prayers and is the source of their happiness (Kim [2], 124-125). He writes, "The masses, for whom the entreaties to Hanamin or spirits had been traditionally lined with their material wishes, identified the Christian God as the supreme deity who can liberate them from their miseries, grant them material wishes, and bring them happiness." (Kim [2], 125) Young-ho Kim argues that the Christian appropriation of materialistic shamanism has nationalistic implications as well, namely Christians fully agree with the belief shared by those Koreans who belong to various new religious movements that Korea is the axis mundi, the center of the world, and the Korean people are a specially chosen people. Kim traces this belief back to traditional shamanism and observes that one of the ways it manifests itself among Korean Christians is in their belief that the Korean church will be the vehicle for the renewal of Christianity in many other nations (Young-ho Kim, esp. 123-124; see also Kim [1], 110).

In their book *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*, Brouer, Gifford, and Rose, contend that conservative Korean Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, relies on a set of practices that also parallel traditional shamanistic ones. These include, most notably, exorcisms, faith healing, and charismatic revivalism with its emphasis on the indwelling of spiritual powers, namely the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. They note that the Korea 's other new religious movements also rely on similar vehicles for evangelism. Referring to the powerful role of traditional shamans in exorcisms and rites of "self-effacing ecstasy," they state.

The Korean Pentecostal pastor is just such a powerful officiant. Through the processes of speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other gifts of the Sprit, he allows his body, given up to ecstatic experience, to be the conduit of the Holy Ghost's overwhelming power. Such shamanistic power, added to the other considerable attributes of the Christian faith, allows the Pentecostals to emulate and possibly outperform the spirit power evoked in the other new religions. (Brouer, Gifford, & Rose, 113)

Kim agrees that Korean pastors function much like the traditional shamans, arguing that pastors especially emphasize those passages in the Bible regarding the "healing potential" of God and of Christian belief (Kim [2], 126).

There is, in sum, a widespread agreement among scholars that contemporary Korean Protestantism has incorporated, knowingly and unknowingly, many of the practices and though-ways of traditional Korean shamanistic spirituality. Kang makes the point that Korea has a long tradition of drawing from many different sources—notably shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—for its religious life, to the extent that it could be said that

Koreans were not one or the other but were all three of these religions, mixed together (Kang, 98-104). Chung simply states that syncretism is one of the basic characteristics of Korean religiosity, which religiosity stresses "this worldly" values (Chang [2], 33). It is hardly surprising that Korean Protestantism shares, to one degree or another, in that syncretism.

Although relatively little work has been done as yet on the relationship of Thai Christian religious thought to its culture compared to the impressive amounts done on that of Korea, it seems apparent that Thai Christians do draw heavily on their Buddhist parent culture for their own expressions of the Christian faith. Hughes, more than twenty years' ago, made the point that northern Thai Protestant attitudes towards soteriology (doctrine of salvation) are far closer to those of Thai Buddhists than they are to Western missionaries (Hughes). Research that I have done recently suggests that northern Thai Protestants have accommodated their Christian faith and Asian culture in numerous ways, to the point that one can argue that northern Thai Protestantism is an indigenous, albeit distinctive religious faith (see "Dancing to the Temple, Dancing in the Church," in HeRB 3 and, "Northern Thai Attitudes towards People of Other Faiths."). It does seem likely that the Thai church has drawn on the syncretistic religious resources of Thai society and culture just as much as have the Korean churches. To the extent that is true, however, the accommodation of church and culture in Thailand has not translated into the type of positive relationship with Thai culture that is so evident in Korea. As we have indicated already, there is still a tendency to see Thai Protestantism as being an essentially alien religion. Korean Protestants, thus, are able to radically reject traditional Korean Confucian ancestor worship and still maintain a widely accepted indigenous identity. In Thailand, in the other hand, Christians are held in low esteem largely because they reject the rites and rituals of Thai Buddhism and spirit worship. As we have already seen, the conditions that have allowed Korean Protestantism to be accepted widely as an indigenous Korean faith simply do not exist in Thailand. However Thai Protestants, that is, frame their relationship to their mother culture, they have had great difficulty convincing other Thais in any numbers that Protestant Christianity is a viable, indigenous religious alternative.

Conclusion

While it is not unanimous, there does seem to be some scholarly consensus concerning the central cause of Korean church growth. When taken together, the three external and two internal factors we have discussed here allowed Korean Protestantism to identify itself, in large degree, with Korean culture and society. It has taken on the aspect of an home-grown "new religious movement" that shares certain core traits with other NRMs and, indeed, outdoes them in many ways as an indigenous Korean faith. As Grayson states, "The growth of the seed which was planted, however, can be explained in large measure by the association of Christianity with a sense of Korean nationalism and culture." (Grayson, 128)

However we look at the matter, Protestantism's situation in Thailand is fundamentally dissimilar to that in Korea because the mix of factors discussed here has worked out quite differently. Siam faced Western rather than Japanese colonialism. Siam had a relatively strong central government that was able to co-opt the process of Westernization-modernization. The nineteenth-century missionaries initially employed strategies that

limited rather than fostered strong local church leadership. Where the Korean churches were able to function as widely accepted representatives of the people's desire for freedom and development, Thai Christians were at various times considered traitors to their country. The Korean churches have been able to accommodate faith and culture in syncretistic ways that facilitate church growth, while such accommodation in Thailand does not seem to correct society's general disinterest in what is seen to be an essentially alien religion.

We began with the question, "What Does Seoul Have to do with Bangkok?" Viewed from within the Thai context, the comparative study of the Protestant church experience in Thailand and Korea sheds important light on the Thai church's experience in at least two ways. First, it serves to underscore the importance of missionary policies in fostering or impeding church growth by taking advantage or failing to take advantage of geo-political factors beyond their immediate control. The Korean experience, most importantly, reminds us that the Protestant churches of Thailand have operated in a more restricted arena because of the way factors external to it have played out since the 1830s. In that sense, the Protestant experience in Thailand is historically more typical of what has happened in many other Asian nations, most notably China.

Second, studying the different situations in the two nations should serve as a warning that Korean answers are not immediately relevant to the Thai churches. Those answers were shaped in response to a set of conditions peculiar to the Korean situation in Northeast Asia. They are not any more applicable to that of Southeast Asia than are the answers other missionaries import from Europe, America, and even other parts of Asia. While Korean successes in evangelism, moreover, are impressive, they also raise a number of difficult theological concerns, partly because that success seems to incorporate materialistic and self-serving cultural values that seem almost a denial of the Gospel. One can well wonder if many Korean churches, like many in the United States, have not in more recent decades "sold out" to culture to such an extent that they have lost the ability to transform broken human culture. This is not to say that the churches of Thailand have nothing to learn from Korea; it is to say that the Protestant churches of both nations have things to teach each other. In order to learn from each other, however, requires a clear-headed understanding of the churches' situations in each nation—and sensitivity to the great differences in those situations.

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