

# **THE “CHRISTIANIZATION” OF SOUTH KOREA**

- LECTURE OUTLINE

- 1. The Rise of Christianity
- 2. Religious factors in conversion
- 3. Non-religious factors in conversion

# I. RISE OF CHRISTIANITY: AN INTRODUCTION

- According to 2005 census, Buddhism is the largest religion with nearly 11 million adherents, followed by Protestant Christianity with about 8.7 million and Catholicism with 5.1 million.

## ◆ Protestantism

- ◆ Since its introduction in 1884, **Protestantism** has proceeded to become the second largest religion in Korea.
- ◆ Nearly nine million Koreans or about 20 percent of the country's 49 million people are Protestant.
- ◆ The growth of Korean Protestantism had been particularly pronounced from the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the period of the country's remarkable modernization.

- Since the early 1960s, when Korean Protestants barely topped the one million mark, the number of Protestants in Korea increased faster than in any other country, more than doubling every decade until the end of the 1980s.

- Five of the 10 largest churches in the world, including the world's largest Youido Full Gospel Church, are found in Seoul, a "city of churches."
- Korea now sends more missionaries abroad than most other countries.
- As of 2003, Korea had 12,000 missionaries in more than 160 countries, second only to the U.S., which had 46,000 missionaries worldwide.
- Britain was third with 6,000 missionaries.

## ◆ Catholicism

- ◆ Although Catholicism was severely persecuted in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which nearly 10,000 Catholics were martyred, there are now 5.1 million Catholics in Korea, which amounts to about 11 percent of the population.
- ◆ In fact, Catholicism has enjoyed the largest increase in membership of all the religions in the last decade, soaring from 2.9 million in 1995 to over 5 million in 2005.

- In May of 1984 during the bicentennial commemoration of Korean Catholicism, Pope John Paul II canonized 103 of the martyrs, making Korea fourth in the world in the total number of saints.
- Together, Protestant and Catholic Christians comprise roughly 30% of the population, and Christianity as a whole is the largest religion in Korea.
- Comparisons with China and Japan.



- The question is: What are the factors that facilitated this tremendous growth of Christianity in Korea, particularly that of Protestantism?
- There are both religious and non-religious factors.

- James Grayson's theory of emplantation, which asserts that the growth and development of a missionary religion in a host society is contingent upon five sets of related factors:
  - 1. the resolution of contradictions between the new doctrine and the core values of the receiving society;
  - 2. tolerance or acceptance of the imported faith by the ruling elite of the host society;

- 3. the overcoming of linguistic and conceptual obstacles;
- 4. the resolution of conflict between the new doctrine and the existing religions of the host society; and
- 5. the missionary's comprehension of political circumstances conditioning members of the host culture toward the doctrine of the new religion.

## II. RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN CONVERSION

1. Religious Void: Declining Influences of Traditional Religions in Late Nineteenth Century Korea
  - When the first Protestant missionaries arrived in 1884, the country did not have strong religious presence of any kind.

- Although Shamanism represented the most pervasive belief system among the masses, it lacked unifying institutional expression, i.e., no priesthood and no organization.
- The state-sponsored Confucianism was more prominent as a set of social ethics, rather than as a conventional religious practice.
- Ancestor worship was more of a custom rather than an activity of an organized religion.

- Buddhism, which had been out of the court's favor since the beginning of the Joseon dynasty in 1392, posed even less of a threat to Christianity.
- Its organization was divested of any structural and financial means; its priesthood was weak; and its temples were only found in remote areas.

- These circumstances prompted the early missionaries and visitors to remark that Korea was without an organized religion.
- Henry Appenzeller observed on his arrival in August of 1885 that “people within the walls of this city [Seoul] are practically without a religion” and that “there is not a temple of any kind and Buddhist.... priests go about like thieves in the night.”

- William Elliot Griffis in 1888 also noted that the "Koreans offer the spectacle of a nation without a religion and waiting for one."
- Isabella Bird said in 1897 that "when Buddhist priests and temples were prohibited in the walled towns...anything like a national faith disappeared from Korea...."



- The situation in Japan was much different.
- Shinto, as the quasi state religion, and Buddhism prevailed as a national ideology and a national religion, respectively.
- So strong was the Japanese attachment to these belief systems that Christianity was not able to penetrate their religious sensibility.

- The religious circumstance in China was equally hostile to Christianity.
- As the stronghold of traditional religions of East Asia—i.e., Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism—China proved to be a “tough” or an inhospitable mission field.
- Later, communism erased any chance for Christianity to make a lasting impression in China.

## 2. The Affinity Between Korean Traditional Religious Culture and Protestantism

- To make Protestantism more acceptable to potential converts, Korean pastors accentuated specific Christian messages and practices, particularly those pertaining to shamanistic worldview:
  - A. the promise of this-worldly wish fulfilment;
  - B. the depiction of God as guarantor of wish-fulfilment;

- C. Adoption of the traditionally revered concept of *Hananim* as Christian God; and
- D. Practice of faith-healing.
  
- Similarities between Christian and Confucian teachings on the matter of practical morality and ethics were also emphasized.
- Example: even for thoroughly Confucianized Koreans, the Ten Commandments were acceptable.
- The fifth commandment—"Honour your father and your mother".

- In the process, filial piety of Confucianism was shown to have its counterpart in Jesus' command to honour one's parents.
- The lesson on obedience to one's parents has been a salient theme of sermons and Sunday school programs in South Korea.

- The Confucian ideal of the subordination of wife to husband was also emphasized as being consistent with the Christian exaltation of wife's submission to husband, as in "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church"

- What all of these points of contact demonstrate is that Christianity did not contradict or deny much that the populace had embraced in its old beliefs.
- As Samuel Moffett wrote:
- “Like Confucianism, it [Christianity] taught righteousness and revered learning; like Buddhism, it sought purity and promised a future life; like the shamanists, Christians believed in answered prayer and miracles.”

- The most outstanding example is Yoido Full Gospel Church.
- The church's evangelical slogan that has attracted large audiences—and inspired other churches to emulate—is the threefold blessings of Christ, i.e., health, prosperity and salvation.
- The “theology of prosperity” advances the idea that accepting Jesus Christ as Savior will bless him/her with salvation in the next life, health and materialistic successes in this world.



# III. NON-RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN CONVERSION

1. The Court's Favorable Disposition Toward Western Powers and Things Western in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century
  - The Joseon Dynasty, which had carried out atrocious persecutions against Catholicism for nearly a century until the late 1870s, could no longer afford to continue its anti-Western ways.

- Sensing the hostile manoeuvres of its neighboring countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the government signed a series of treaty with Western powers, starting with the United States in 1882.
- At the time, China, Japan, and Russia each manoeuvred to play a decisive role in Korea's emergence onto the international scene, since Korea's foreign relations would affect the balance of power in East Asia.

- The nation's sovereignty was in jeopardy and the gov't thought that the national salvation lay in courting the favor of strong Western powers, such as the U.S. and Britain, from which most of the missionaries came.
- In order to build a stronger relationship with the powerful U.S., therefore, it was thus desirable to welcome the missionaries and their religion.

- People's attitudes toward the missionaries and their religion were also favorable.
- Many Koreans came to "believe that everything of the West was superior and best."
- Moreover, Koreans hoped that the Church, as an agent of tremendously powerful Western countries, could save the nation against looming external threats.

## 2. The Missionaries' Involvement with Social Services

- By offering concrete and practical benefits, the missionaries were able to win the approval and confidence of suspicious Koreans. The missionaries
- - founded Korea's first modern school for girls and for boys, and established the country's first complete system of education from kindergarten to college;
- - started the first school for the blind;

- - established orphanages for abandoned children;
- - offered medical treatments and vaccinations for free to the poor who had no other recourse;
- - founded the first modern hospital; and
- - made modern medicine available to the poor.
- The missionaries first introduced the idea of institutional philanthropy to the Korean people.

- ### 3. The Rise of Christianity Amidst a Rapid Social Change: Industrialization and Urbanization
- The rapid growth of Christianity in Korea from the 1960s to the 1980s coincides with the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization, which uprooted millions of Koreans from their hometowns.

- All of these social changes also burdened them with urban anxiety and stress, such as poor working conditions, long work hours, low wages, competition, and housing shortage.
- Rapid urbanization caused the collapse of collective consciousness and loss of identity.
- In cities, people with different regional backgrounds lived in a dry and harsh urban environment.



- Furthermore, they moved around without a permanent settlement, because they didn't have enough money to buy a house.
- Such urban anxiety provided the psychological stimulus for many Koreans to seek spiritual security and fellowship in Christianity.

- The appeal of the church derived largely from its role as a community.
- Weekly services and other regular activities, like Bible studies, cell group and other group activities, provided communal or associational ties that furnished:
  1. "we-feeling" (sense of belonging);
  2. "role-feeling" (sense of role-playing);
  3. "I-feeling" (sense of identity); and
  4. "dependency-feeling" (sense of security).