

## **Development of Protestantism in South Korea: Positive and Negative Elements**

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Protestantism was transplanted to Korea by American and other Western missionaries in the 1880s, about one hundred years after Catholicism had spontaneously started in Korea. However, due to Japanese colonial rule and conflicts between Protestant religious doctrines and Confucian ancestor worship, the two Christian religions did not grow much in Korea until the early 1960s. The Korean Census indicates that in 1962, only 2.8% and 2.2% of people in South Korea were Protestants and Catholics, respectively. Many people seem to assume that Buddhism had been popular in South Korea before Protestantism began to gain strength in the 1960s. However, despite the long history of Buddhism in Korea and its strong effect on Korean culture, this was not true. The Korean Census shows that Buddhists composed only 2.6% of the population in South Korea in 1962. There were many Buddhist temples in Korea at that time, but since many of them were located deep in remote mountain locations, they did not have much effect on people in general. According to the Census, less than 10% of the population in South Korea had a religion in 1962. However, the proportions of Koreans affiliated with the two Christian religions and Buddhism rose radically between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s. In 1985, the proportions of Buddhists and Protestants had increased to 20% and 16%, respectively. Their proportions grew slowly after 1985, to 23% and 18%, respectively, in 2005. Catholics comprised 11% of the population in Korea in 2005. How can we explain the radical increase in the religious population in Korea between 1962 and 1985? Researchers indicate that the mass migration of Koreans from rural areas to urban areas, especially to large cities, left many Koreans rootless during this period of radical urbanization and industrialization, and that urban migrants therefore turned to religious organizations for psychological comfort, fellowship, and social services. Another factor to the phenomenal expansion of the Protestant population in Korea was the heavy evangelical orientation of Korean churches, especially of Korean Presbyterian churches. Additionally, many Buddhist temples relocated to cities to accommodate urban migrants and even adopted some Christian-style social services.

The fact that Census data showed that only 10% of Koreans had a religion in 1962 does not necessarily mean that the other 90% of Koreans did not have a religion. The vast majority of Koreans at that time practiced religion in the form of shamanism and Confucian ancestor worship. As South Korea became a more rational and modern society with improvements in education and technology during the period, Koreans replaced their traditional folk beliefs with those of organized religions. However, even after making the shift to Protestantism, Catholicism, and Buddhism, these Korean followers of organized religion continued to incorporate important elements of shamanism into their religious practices, including praying for good luck and Confucian ancestor worship. Protestantism, along with American missionaries, came to have a positive effect on South Korea's modernization and industrialization. American Presbyterian and Methodist

missionaries established dozens of modern schools in Korea at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most importantly, these modern schools enabled Korean women to get formal education for the first time, thus making an important contribution to achieving gender equality in Korea. Ewha Womans University, originally established by Mary Scranton, an American Methodist missionary, has grown into one of the major women's universities in the world, and it has produced many women leaders in South Korea. Church Women United is a very influential ecumenical Christian women's organization (modeled after another U.S. organization with the same name), and almost all leaders of major women's organizations are associated with it. Additionally, medical schools that were established by American missionaries have become the foundation for Western medical schools in Korea. Moreover, YMCA, YWCA, and other Protestant educational and social-service organizations have played a central role in providing leadership, education, and services for young Koreans in large cities.

Despite the positive effects summarized above, the development of Protestant churches has also had some negative effects on South Korea. While the transplantation of Protestantism to South Korea moderated the patriarchal system in the beginning as described above, it has also contributed to maintaining and even strengthening gender hierarchy in Korea by eliminating women from church leadership. My review of the 2006 Directory of Korean Churches revealed that women comprised a tiny fraction (4.6%, even in Seoul) of head pastors and a small proportion of elders. Korean Protestantism incorporated the age and gender hierarchy of Confucianism in the process of its adaptation in Korea. Thus, almost all Protestant denominations, including Korean Methodist Church, adopted the elder system, which gives a small and exclusive group of elders (predominantly middle-aged and older men) high levels of status and power in each church. Many Korean Church leaders have justified the elimination of women from church leadership by referencing their theology, e.g., using Bible passages. However, they should know that Confucian ideologies emphasizing age and gender hierarchy has strongly influenced the organization of Korean Protestant churches. It is ironic that while many Korean Christian women are very active outside of the church as leaders of women's organizations, they are powerless within the church.

Another problem associated with contemporary Korean Protestantism is its heavily evangelical orientation, which focuses on missionary activities with seemingly little interest in social concerns. The aggressive and sometimes antagonistic evangelical activities of diehard Protestants against the other religious groups in Korea, such as destroying Buddha statues and stone pagodas, have alienated many Koreans from Protestantism. When Pope Francis visited Korea this past summer (2014), some Korean Protestants even demonstrated against his visit. South Korean churches have sent approximately 14,000 missionaries to foreign countries, the second-highest number next to the United States. The insensitivity to and disrespectful attitudes of many Korean overseas missionaries towards local cultures have sparked angry reactions in several countries, including Turkey and India. When large numbers of American and other Western (Canadian and Australian) missionaries came to Korea at the end of the nineteenth century with social-service and educational packages, they were received relatively well because few Koreans had an organized religion at that time. However, overseas Korean missionaries today are received far less enthusiastically in many foreign countries because a predominant majority of them have Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, or

Buddhism as their dominant religion. There was a news report that some Korean Protestant missionaries visited Buddhist temples in other Asian countries and read the Bible. This is neither morally nor legally acceptable.