

# Christianity, Shamanism, and Modernization in South Korea

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There is no "official," nor one dominant, religion in South Korea. Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, as well as a whole spectrum of new religious movements, coexist peacefully in one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world. Nonetheless, there are also more than 160 Protestant denominations and nearly 60,000 churches, as well as 1,100 Catholic churches, which supposedly make South Korea "the most Christianized" non-Western country, excepting the Philippines, in the world.

Since its introduction in 1884, Protestant Christianity has proceeded to become the nation's largest religion with over nine million followers, representing more than one fifth of the total population. The rise of Roman Catholicism in South Korea has been equally remarkable. Introduced in 1784, it had been subjected to severe persecutions for nearly a century — more than eight thousand Catholics were martyred — but has steadily grown to be the country's third largest religion after Buddhism. With nearly four million followers, Roman Catholicism has been the fastest growing religion since the late 1980s. Together, Protestants and Catholics thus make up close to a third of the total population in the nation. The rapid growth of Christianity in South Korea is all the more astonishing given that the imported faiths successfully penetrated and took roots in a land dominated by traditional religions, including Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism. The country's Christian "success story" is also remarkable in light of the fact that only about 4 percent of the Asian population is Christian and that Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, has failed to strike roots in Japan and China — neighboring countries with strikingly similar social organization and shared cultural traditions — where less than 1 percent of the population has converted to Christianity.

This strong religious impulse has been sustained in a vastly modernized and urbanized society. Indeed, Christianity remains vital in a society that has been swept into much that are associated with modernization and Western materialism. Upon closer examination of this fascinating development, it becomes clear that such vitality of Christianity in South Korea has been due to the Church's role as a principal agent of the economic, political and social modernization. Also integral to the dynamism of Christianity has been its indigenization or "Koreanization," whereby the key aspects of indigenous religious beliefs and practices have been incorporated by the imported faith. These two factors have combined to ensure Christianity's preeminence in South Korea in spite of rapid modernization, manifesting the continuing relevance and importance of religion in the lives of people in a contemporary setting, while challenging the notion that modernization inevitably leads to the decline of religion.

## A Christian Worldview and the Spirit of Modernization

From early on, Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, provided the first and most continuous impetus to modernization in Korea (see Y. Park 1975; J. Kim 1984). In education, the missionaries were the first to establish a complete system of education, from kindergarten to college, and they were the first to implement modern curriculum, including modern science and medical science, in schools. Taking over from the missionaries, both the Protestant and Catholic Churches have been committed to enriching the educational life of South Koreans, operating dozens of schools at all levels, including some of the nation's top universities. Politically, Koreans first became acquainted with several key values that mark modernity, such as freedom, human rights, democracy and equality, largely through Christianity. The prominence of Christians in politics throughout the last hundred years, either in the independence movement or in the democratic movement, have added further impetus to such a connection. Economically, the postwar relief aid, much of which was channeled through missionary agencies, included not only modern goods that were distributed to the needy, but also modern technologies that were subsequently utilized in the government's major economic drives of the 1960s and 1970s. Socially, it was the missionaries who introduced institutional philanthropy by founding the nation's first orphanages and schools for the blind; the Korean churches have followed in their footsteps by maintaining an extensive network of social services, including those for the poor, the elderly, and the mentally or physically challenged, that were in line with the process of modernization.

Because the Church provided the basic tools of modernization and assumed a central role in the economic, political, and social modernization of South Korea, many 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. In this way, Christianity held out a vision of how things might or ought to be, and in due time, conversion to Christianity came to mean enlightenment, inspiring the proselytized to do away with many superstitious or backward aspects of their traditional worldview and behavior. The identification of Christianity as a gateway to modernity and success, both personal and national, acquired even more impetus during the period of rapid economic development from the early 1960s and the end of 1980s. Koreans' admiration of Western culture and its economic achievements played a decisive role in encouraging such identification.

The Christianity-modernization nexus has been further strengthened by the fact that a disproportionate number of Christians have held positions of power and influence following the country's liberation from Japan in 1945. From the leaders of the independence movement to the current political leadership, Christians have always been conspicuously salient in the nation's politics. For example, between 1952 and 1962 nearly one-third of political leadership consisted of Christians, an astonishing figure given the fact that only about 4 percent of the Korean population was Christian during the same period (Han and Kim 1963). The prominence of Christians at all levels of government, paralleled by the conspicuous presence of Christians in the academic, economic and social leadership, continued unabated for the next three decades. In particular, the election of Kim Youngsam, a Presbyterian elder, as the nation's president in 1993 is a compelling manifestation of the vitality of Christianity in South Korea. His immediate successor, President Kim Dae Jung, is also Christian, more specifically Catholic. His presidency means, among other things, that the country for the first time has a Roman Catholic president.

As impressive as the overrepresentation of Christians in Korean politics is the Christian influence on the democratization of the Korean polity. While not insisting that democracy is an essential element of modernization, in the South Korean context at least, the democratic movement has been intimately linked with the nation's modernization. Both the Catholic and Protestant Churches, especially the former, have championed the values of freedom and democracy, acting as the strongest supporters of the democratic movement against the unprecedented sociopolitical role of the military and its oppressive rule. Although many large, conservative Protestant churches had maintained neutrality, Korean churches as a whole represented, along with university student associations, the only other major organization to oppose the policies and decisions of the authoritarian regime. The churches collectively questioned the regime's commitment to human rights and democracy, confronting the government over labor relations, human rights abuses and political oppression. The prominence of Christians in the democratic movement is evident in the way a large proportion of those who were incarcerated for antigovernment activities were Christian, including priests, ministers, union leaders, students, and journalists. As a potent political force that championed for democracy, the Church thus came to be favorably viewed by the general populace, many of whom are believed to have converted as a result of such positive perception. It was during this period of oppressive political rule, moreover, that a Korean form of liberation theology called *minjung shinhak*, literally meaning the "theology of the people," became a towering symbol of the rally for democracy, equality, social justice, and human rights (see the Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia 1981).

#### The Indigenization of Christianity and This-worldliness

In addition to the role of the Church as a major force of modernization, it is Christianity's affinity or convergence with the central religious values of Koreans, particularly those of Shamanism, that has ensured the rise of the imported faith to social prominence in South Korea. In particular, Christianity has adopted shamanic emphasis on the fulfillment of material wishes through prayers to or communication with spirits as a belief of its own. Such "Shamanization" of Christianity was necessitated by the fact that Shamanism is the fundamental religious worldview underlying the mental landscape of Koreans and that it has traditionally exerted the most powerful religious influence upon the Korean people.

Central to Shamanism is the notion that spirits, including those of ancestors, nature, and prominent kings and generals in Korean history, wield power on the shifting fortunes of each individual and that these spirits must be appeased through shamanic rituals to implore their blessings (see Howard 1998; Kendall 1988; Moon 1982). Accordingly, the adherents of Shamanism try to appease the spirits through a shamanic ritual called *goot*, usually entailing an elaborate setting of food, shaman's dance and music, in hopes of realizing their material wishes, such as longevity, health, male births and wealth. The most striking characteristic of this folk religion is thus its preoccupation with and emphasis on the fulfillment of material wants, fostering this-worldly, materialistic, and even capitalist tendencies of Koreans (see Kendall 1996). As such, Shamanism has been the enduring core of Korean religious and cultural thought, exercising a profound influence on the development of Korean attitudes and behaviors as well as cultural practices. Its influence was so profound that newly introduced religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, had to compromise with and absorb elements of Shamanism in order to be accepted by the Korean populace.

Many features of Shamanism, particularly the pragmatic nature of belief, have been assimilated into Christianity, resulting in the birth of a unique form of Christianity in Korea. The adoption of the traditionally revered concept of *Hananim* ("god in heaven") as the Supreme God of Christianity was one significant way the early Christians ensured that the imported faiths converged with Korean religious tradition. It was no accident that they adopted *Hananim* as the Supreme God of Christianity, for they perceptively recognized that the term referred to the highest deity in the religious culture of Korea from primitive times, and that its use as the ultimate deity in Christianity would prepare Koreans to accept the imported faiths with ease. Similar to the Chris-

tian conception of God, Koreans long understood Hananim as the Almighty presiding over the affairs of heaven and earth, and controlling the fate of human beings. In times of weakness, Koreans prayed to Hananim for his mercy and charity as well as for his power to overcome adversities beyond the reach of human will. For Korean Christianity, therefore, the adoption of the term Hananim as the Supreme God was fundamentally significant in providing an important point of contact between Korean religious culture and the imported faiths, thereby facilitating the people's smooth transition from their attachment to the native concept of God to that of the Christian image.

The terminological or conceptual congruity afforded by the Christian adoption of Hananim has been further strengthened by Korean churches' insistence on the functional equivalence of the old and the new Hananim. This was particularly true for the Protestant Church, which more or less advanced the belief that Protestant Christianity, as a faith that believes in the omnipotence of Hananim, is a religion that would yield prosperity for the converts. The early missionaries also portrayed the supreme deity of Christianity as a merciful god who, like the old Hananim, attends to all kinds of human need. To that effect, God was most conspicuously characterized as the Savior, an image emphasized through references to biblical verses, especially the anecdotes of miracles, that asserted the omnipotence of God. Korean prayer books also largely depict God as a wish-granting entity to whom one turns to in times of need: one can be liberated from suffering, attain salvation, be healed or receive consolation through the power of God. Reiterated through biblical verses and prayer books, therefore, the image of God as the Savior, the messiah, the liberator has served as a "selling point" par excellence for Protestant Christianity. The masses, for whom the entreaties to Hananim have been traditionally linked with his supposed magical power, are found to be fascinated by the biblical accounts of miracles and the assumed possibility of their reenactment in contemporary circumstances (Gallup Korea 1985, 1990, 1998). For many Christians, in fact, this emphasis on the fulfillment of practical wishes through faith in Hananim in the guise of Christianity has represented the essence of their religion. An acceptance of the Gospel is simply viewed as a means of improving their social and financial standing, attaining advantages in an unfamiliar social context and sharing in the national prosperity.

The outstanding example of Korean Christianity catering to the shamanic tendencies of the traditional belief system is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, the world's largest church, with more than seven hundred thousand members today. 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, contained within the second verse of the third Epistle of John. Preaching the "theology of prosperity," Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho and his imitators have advanced the idea that the acceptance of the Holy Spirit can mean that one is, besides being blessed with salvation in the next life, graced with health and materialistic successes in this world. These pastors have also maintained that illness, poverty, business failure or any other misfortune is simply due to sin and spiritual impurity.

Accordingly, many Christians associate the purpose of offerings with secular blessings. There are various types of offering, but most, if not all, are intimately linked with wish-fulfillment. Sowonhongeum or the "offering of petition" with which Protestant Christians regularly dedicate, in an envelope, money and a list of wishes to be prayed for is one of the most utilized forms of offering. Gamsahongeum or the "offering of gratitude" also exemplifies this-worldly orientation of Christian life, for many Korean Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, contribute money to their churches whenever "good fortunes" occur—e.g., birth of sons, sons and daughters passing the university entrance examination, prosperous business or the return of health—all in an attempt to express their gratitude to God and to ensure the continuation of God's blessings.

### Conclusion

The Shamanization of Christianity reveals a virtually unexplored yet distinctly plausible affinity between Shamanism and the spirit of capitalism. While there is more to the spirit of capitalism than the acquisitive impulse and pursuit of wealth, Shamanism's singular emphasis on material successes as the supreme goal of its belief does seem to converge with certain aspects of capitalism. This is not to argue, however, that Shamanism played any significant part in the rise of capitalism in South Korea. One impact Shamanism seems to have had on the economic activity of Koreans is found in the way they generally work hard to realize their Shamanism-induced wish for material success. While seemingly inconsistent, working hard to achieve success is not antithetical to Shamanism. That is because neither passivity nor fatalism is inherent in Shamanism. For example, shamanic-minded entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs who actually patronize a shaman ritual do not passively wait for an economic windfall. Rather, they work as hard as they can, feeling emotionally secure from the knowledge that they have done everything, spiritual and practical, to ensure themselves a success. In this way, shamanic values seem to be as consistent with capitalism as Protestant ethic or individualism.

ANDREW EUNGI KIM is Research Professor of Korean Studies, Graduate School of International Studies, Korean University. He has published more than a dozen articles, some of which have appeared in *Social Compass* and *Sociology of Religion*.

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