

Commentaries

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Let me begin by recalling two experiences. The first occurred when I was asked to review a manuscript for possible publication dealing with developments in Protestant Christianity in Korea. I recall few details of the manuscript, but remember commenting that I felt under informed regarding specifically Korean dimensions in this development. It read remarkably like the denominational history of a religious group in the United States might have read. The point of recalling this here is to suggest that Americans may overestimate the ease with which they can comprehend Korean Christianity because of the earlier involvement of missionaries from the United States, the presence of familiar denominational names, and undeniable parallels in the history of Christianity in both countries.

The other experience concerns my participation in hosting a group of Korean clergy some years ago. One of our programs consisted in visiting some local churches. At one of those churches, often regarded as one of the city's more prestigious churches, we were given a guided tour by an affable member of the congregation who offered to answer any questions. One set of questions concerned the ministries of the congregation. He was asked why the tour had featured remembrance of visits of U.S. Presidents rather than their service to the community, why we heard so much about the duties of the staff and so little about the witness of the members by way of organized activities. Our tour guide was ill equipped to respond to these questions, which he correctly perceived as rather critical. But another question really baffled him. He was asked what percentage of Americans worshipped Greek and Roman gods? When he responded that few, if any Americans that he knew indulged in such worship, he was asked why there were so many statues of these gods throughout the city. For this he had no answer. The point of recalling this here is to remind us that however similar the practices of various forms of Christianity may be in the two countries, the context is in important ways dramatically different.

At least numerically, Christianity is more strongly represented in Korea than in any other East Asian nation other than the Philippines. A 1997 Gallup poll in South Korea reported 20.3% as Protestant Christian, 7.4% as Roman Catholic; 18.3% reported themselves as Buddhist. Thus, Christianity is powerfully present in South Korea, whatever the situation may be in North Korea.

Let me turn now to Prof. Baker's paper, from which I learned so much. The "Unexpected Fruit" that he finds in the development of Korean Catholicism rests on his portrayal of Roman Catholicism as "an authoritarian institution itself, [which] has been a supporter of monarchies and other authoritarian forms of government." Thus we are invited to be surprised at the way in which Catholicism in Korea contributes to Korea's "first step toward democracy" or "the rise of civil society in Korea." A number of later 20th century exceptions are noted including the Asian example of Cardinal Sin during the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines.

It is easy enough to find examples from many centuries and places that seem to justify the original characterization of Roman Catholicism. But that is not the whole story, either in theory or in practice.

On the one hand, prior to Vatican II, Catholic teaching about the relation between the Church and various governments was discussed in the language of thesis and hypothesis. The thesis represented the ideal. This would be fulfilled where a Catholic monarch ruled over a predominantly Catholic population. This was held to include the right to curtail the freedom of other religious groups to express themselves fully in those societies. A short hand way of justifying this arrangement was to maintain that error has no rights. Other situations were classified as hypothesis. This described situations in which Catholics were in the minority. Here they were urged to work out arrangements that would maximize the expression of Catholicism, and thereby to progress towards the thesis. That called for situational wisdom in working out the best possible hypothesis. Korean Catholics seem up to the present to be in the situation of the hypothesis rather than the thesis. Thus support of "monarchies and other authoritarian forms of government" is hardly inevitable, though possible.

On the other hand, there is the empirical experience of Catholics in non-thesis countries. Most closely studied, so far as I know, is the political participation in England and in ex-English colonies. There monarchy and more authoritarian forms of government have typically been associated with right wing political parties; Catholic political support has more frequently gone to parties considered to be to the left. This has been the pattern in the United States for much of our history. To be sure, there are many reasons for this including Catholics as a later immigrant population, participation in and leadership of the American labor movement, &c. But it is simply not the case that Catholic participation in political life has always and everywhere been of the sort that Prof. Baker's thesis presupposes as the norm. In short, the pattern of Catholic politics in earlier Korean history seems better described as "hypothesis" than "thesis." And the changes portrayed in more recent decades fit well with changes in Catholic teaching introduced at Vatican II. (The actions of Cardinal Sin in the Philippines represent a similar response to the new social teaching of Vatican II, though in a situation that previously would be described by many as "thesis" rather than "hypothesis.") Thus, both before and after Vatican II, Korean Catholic participation in politics seems to fit the teaching of the World Church, and to have been influenced by it.

I very much appreciate Prof. Baker's grasp of the centrality of civil society in the development of what we call democracy, and I applaud his understanding that civil society requires "voluntary private organizations" fully to flower. But I find myself unconvinced by his application of these insights to Korean Roman Catholicism.

On the one hand, it does not seem to me that the Catholicism he describes qualifies as a "voluntary private organization." Each congregation is subject to the hierarchy in Korea, and through that ultimately to the hierarchy that culminates in the Pope in Rome. At various times, the presence of Catholicism has been associated with French colonialism. I assume that in Korea as elsewhere, one is born into the Church; not all members are voluntary converts.

On the other hand, the relation of Catholic communities to "civil society" seems more ambiguous to me than to Prof. Baker. Is a group really a constituent of "civil society" when it is persecuted, or is it for that time period beyond the boundaries of civil society? Are there really no other candidates for early expressions of civil societies? Dr. Baker mentions, but dismisses the "literate-run private academies" as possible candidates. But they did not seem obviously "not truly autonomous" to a degree beyond what we might assert regarding the Catholic communities. And while my limited knowledge of Korean history forbids my naming other possible candidates, Prof.

Chung's paper mentions a substantial number of nationalist and modernizing groups who were in tension with the traditional unified Confucian state. It was, I suspect, a wide variety of groups that slowly and haltingly contributed to the development of a civil society relatively free of the control of the central government.

There is another way to perceive the Catholic contribution to democracy in Korea. Rather than talking about civil society, one might instead look for the development of human rights. When viewed on the screen of world history, the first human right successfully asserted was the right to freedom of religion. All other human rights claims come after this one, at least chronologically. While it was in part due to exterior coercion from the French, the 1899 treaty that guaranteed Korean Catholics freedom of religion is a major milestone in this regard. The persecution suffered by the Catholic community was the occasion for facing and addressing this problem. To the extent that freedom of religion is not merely the earliest, but in some sense a basic human right, this is a major Catholic contribution to moving toward democratic ways in Korea. Now the surprise becomes making so major a step within the framework of the "hypothesis" instead of the "thesis," a step that contributed to what might be called the "new thesis" proclaimed at Vatican II.

Prof. Chung's paper is very different from Prof. Baker's. He is much more overtly involved in theological evaluation of Christian witness in Korea. I very much appreciate this frame of reference since it is often omitted at scholarly gatherings where strong worldviews are often concealed under descriptive analyses. And his theological approach seemed to me to be in the tradition of the person for whom his chair is named, Walter Muelder. I have learned a great deal from his paper; the following comments are intended only to broaden the discussion.

His theological preferences are abundantly evident. His version of the Gospel calls followers to be a "force for cultural transformation and integration." He sees "Christianity as a reality situated in real history and society." Believers are called to perform "the authentic service of the living God of justice and peace." Prophetic criticism is a standard for theological work. And Korean Christianity, especially in its Protestant version, is regularly found wanting. In earlier years, it was coopted by various modernist and nationalist movements; in more recent years, it has been captured by "the cultural code of the capitalistic market place."

While I feel at home with many of these assertions, I feel obliged to point out that if this paper had been written by a Professor from, e.g. Gordon Seminary, there would probably have been a different assessment of the same data. He would share in Prof. Chung's critique of the huge congregations, probably also in the critique of widespread Pentecostal charismatic practices. But he would surely have evaluated more positively such things as: 1) the growth in bible study and biblical literacy; 2) the more fundamental, evangelical versions of theology; 3) continued approval of the idea that modern civilization rests on a Christian culture - albeit with a different list of the goods and ills of modern civilization; 4) great suspicion of Christian participation in certain political actions; 5) vigorous evangelization activities; and 6) higher regard for social service as compared to social action. Healing the injured was very consequential in earlier Korean perceptions of Christianity, especially in connection with the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919. My point is not to suggest that this theological assessment would be more correct than that of Prof. Chung, but only to remind us that other assessments are possible.

Prof. Chung suggests that the defects he discerns may relate to the survival of 2 religious histories

that continue their lives in Christian garb. This theme is introduced in several places, and summarized near the end.

What fuels this marked tendency in modern society toward privatism and entrepreneurial mentality is the indigenous cultural wellspring of this-worldly shamanistic folk religious mentality, a distorted notion of Confucian family values that forsakes public good for family egotism, and a global capitalist culture

To me, these assertions call for more: 1) description of "shamanistic folk religion" -- said in Korea to give special prominence to female shamans - and 2) distorted Confucian values. One also wonders who and where they penetrate Protestant Christianity in Korea, and why one finds similar traits elsewhere with no past links to these two religious traditions.

I am further puzzled that there is such scant reference to another religious tradition that is strong in Korean history, Buddhism. Many versions of Buddhism are strongly individualistic in ways that fit with some of the patterns he discerns in Protestant Christianity in Korea more comfortably than is the case with either shamanism or Confucianism. Social reform advocated by many Buddhist groups, including some based in Korea, is seen as possible only by transforming individuals.

Finally, I would have appreciated some mention of the ways in which Korean Christianity offers new understandings of Christianity that have been produced by the encounter with other religions. An example of what I mean is the intriguing book by Sung Bum Yun, *ETHICS EAST AND WEST*, in which he develops a correction to western ways of doing ethics, including Christian ethics, by introducing Confucian insights into his Christian perspective.

Let me close by again expressing my appreciation to both authors. I learned a great deal from both papers.