

II. The Religious Situation of Korea and its Theological Trends

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Rather than offering a detailed investigation of Korean theology, this article hopes to serve as an introduction to the religious situation there. By "religious situation" the writer means to include both the Catholic and Protestant experience. As in other Asian countries, an indigenous theology for the Church in Korea is still in the formation stage. Following a path quite similar to that which the Chinese Church is presently taking, modern Korean theologians are also emphasizing the idea of "the people" as a basic starting point for theological reflection. However, the implications and connotations of the Korean word "minjung" differs from the Chinese "renmin." Both designate "the people", but each country brings to the concept its own historical, philosophical, and political meaning. China and Korea have much in common. Korea has borrowed heavily from Chinese culture. Both countries suffered from colonialism and similar forms of oppression. Nevertheless, the way in which the two

countries are developing their theologies is different. Because of their radically different socio-political situation, Korean theology and Chinese theology will each be unique. In this article we shall take a brief look at the religious situation of Korea and its theological development.

I. The Background of the Catholic Church in Korea

According to recent research carried out by South Korea's Sogang University,¹ previous to the 1970's South Korean Catholics numbered only about 800,000, only 2.5% of the total population. Throughout the whole country there are fourteen dioceses, with about 400 parishes. From its beginnings at the end of the 18th century, the Catholic Church has had a history of almost 200 years in Korea. For the first one hundred years of its existence, the development of the Catholic Church was very slow. However, in the 1950's and 60's the situation changed suddenly. Within

a short period of twenty years so many converts entered the Church that the Catholic population experienced a five-fold increase. This phenomenon is most likely related to the Korean War (1950-53). During the mid-60's, however, the numbers of converts leveled off to a fixed number each year. In the 1960's, the Korean Catholic Church underwent a period of adjustment, and it will continue to develop and change in the 1980's. The Korean Catholic Church today is more actively involved in Korean society, and is very concerned with questions of justice and human rights, with Korean bishops acting as leaders in these issues.

II. The Future of the South Korean Church

Although the Catholic Church in South Korea has a 200 year old history, when compared to the church in Europe, it is considered very young. A short period of 200 years is really not long enough for the complete integration of the Christian faith, nor long enough to create the ways and means of expressing itself fully within the context of the Korean culture. In other words, as is the case with churches in other Asian countries, the Korean church, and the indigenization of its theology, still have a long road to travel.

The Catholic religion came to Korea, at a time when the whole world was experiencing great and sudden change. Korea was no exception. Then, at the beginning of the 1950's, urbanization invaded

South Korea, followed by the rapid economic development of the 60's and 70's. Most of the people, accustomed to the quiet life of farming villages, were taken unawares and found it difficult to adapt. Faced with the great changes of those years, the first reaction of the Korean people to change was the same as that of Westerners. They instinctively struggled to resist it. Every effort was made to preserve the old familiar traditional values and patterns of life. They felt fear in the face of the difficulties and pain brought on by change. Only a few people were able to accept the new age and to look upon technological progress as similar to a stage play, a play in which a new "electronic" age suddenly comes stage-front, and the old agricultural age retires behind the curtain. Today, it seems to some that in many places the old agriculture society, like the Stone Age, has disappeared without a trace.

At first, the stance of the Korean Catholic Church was conservative, tending towards the denial of the need for change. It held onto a static view of the world and remained fixed in its traditional value system. There was no psychological nor pastoral preparation for confronting the change. When, in the end, it was impossible to resist the fact of change, the effect was felt to be even more traumatic for the Church than for the secular structures of Korean society.²

After Vatican II, the Korean Catholic Church was faced with two sets of problems. The first kind were problems around adaption to a new urban culture and a new industrial society. The old agricultural society along with its traditional cultural values, was quickly fading from the scene. The urbanization of society and the mechanization of the culture made many Korean Christians uneasy. The second set of problems concerned those difficulties brought about by changes in the Church herself between the two Vatican Councils. While in the past, it was almost as if there were a specific rule governing every aspect of Church life; now it seemed that everyone was following his or her own way of thinking. At the same time, most of the Korean Christians were recent converts (80% had been baptized within the previous 3 decades). Some did not have a very deep grasp of the complexities of Catholic doctrine, frequently mixing up primary and secondary elements of the faith. When faced with change, they sometimes abandoned things they should have held on to, and clung obstinately to the things they should have abandoned. Many Christians were, on the surface, apparently open to the new, while at the same time still maintaining a pre-Vatican II outlook deep inside. According to the Sogang University survey,³ the impression that Korean Christians of that time made on others was a comparatively con-

servative one.

Twentieth century man has entered into a dynamic age of rapid technological development. The instruments of mass communication have developed to the point where they play a major role in international cultural exchange, and, as a result, a new, technological culture has been taking form on a worldwide scale. The Church existing in this kind of a society cannot avoid change. But to face up to the challenge of drastic change is not the same as saying that all change is for the better. Therefore, the Church of the present and future must foster a true critical attitude, and prepare flexible principles for meeting the problems arising from a continually changing environment. It seems that the Korean Catholic Church of the 1970's was already aware of this necessity. In 1971 and 72, Korean bishops with a concern for social problems, demonstrated that the Korean Christians will continue to become actively involved in society, not only by accepting the fact of change, but by devoting themselves to bringing about changes in society.

The Korean Catholic Church was not very enthusiastic about the recent movement for indigenization. At that time, although Christians worked for the establishment of a local church, they concentrated their energy around self-government and self-support while not placing much emphasis on creating a dialogue between the Christian faith and local culture. At the same time

in some instances efforts towards indigenization by the Korean Church, as in other local churches, resulted in a narrow-minded nationalism. In fact, the process of indigenization, the integration of Christian religion and local culture, must also include the integration of the larger reality world culture or global culture.

Considering its yearly rate of increase and comparing this percentage to that of the population as a whole, the Korean Church of the 80's will still be considered "a little flock." She will continue to be a "leaven" in Korean society and have a positive effect on the Korean people. However, the increase in the number of vocations in Korea and the continued growth of Korean Catholics in social awareness makes the Korean Catholic Church a force to be reckoned with, as it works for the spread of the Gospel and for social improvement.

III. The Korean Protestant Churches

The Protestant Churches came to Korea about one hundred years after the Catholic Church. Although the Protestant Churches have a history of only about 80 years in Korea, its growth has been quite rapid. Protestantism came to Korea just at the time that the Japanese army occupied the country. When Korea was liberated in 1945, the country was still quite poor. The Protestant missionaries, when they arrived in Korea in 1884, considered that their most important work

was evangelization. They did not concern themselves with theological reflection. The first converts to Protestantism were, for the most part, workers, and women. Few were intellectuals. The first Protestant missionaries were conservative in their thinking, and were, for the most part, fundamentalists.

From the 1920's to the 1950's, Korea suffered under despotic and oppressive rulers. Korea came under the control of Japan in 1910, and was under Japanese rule for over thirty years. During the 30's the Japanese government put pressure on the Protestant Churches, and forced them to close some of their seminaries. During World War II, all foreign missionaries were expelled from the country. During the 1940's the local Korean Protestant Churches were mistreated and suffered much from the hands of Japanese authorities. Although Korea was liberated in August, 1945, five years later the Korean War broke out. The Korean Protestant Churches struggled to the best of their ability to survive and expand in this time of chaos.

In the 20's and 30's, although the Korean Protestant Churches did not formally engage in theological studies, theological discussion did begin to emerge due largely to the hard work of a handful of people, and a few theological works did reach publication. However, the real developmental stage of local theology in the Korean Protestant Churches took place in the 1950's.

Beginning in 1955, Korean scholars who had studied in England or America returned home, and assisted in the establishment of several theological schools. Protestant literature also developed rapidly during the 1950's. Besides translating foreign books, the Churches published many works by Korean Christians themselves. Some theological schools published magazines which reflected the situation, conditions and theological direction of the Korean Churches. At that time, theological reflection went along two main routes:⁴ the first followed Western theological thought, and the second worked for the establishment of a local theology.

From the 1950's to the 1970's basic Korean theology still did not completely lose its Western flavor. However, in recent years some progressive Korean theologians have felt that in order to form an authentic Korean theology, it was necessary to break through past tradition and make the present situation of Korea the starting point for the development of a "contextual theology."

IV. The Present Direction of Indigenous Korean Theology

As for the direction taken in the development of an indigenous theology, the experience of the Korean Protestant Churches is somewhat the same as that of other Asian Churches. On the one hand it is concerned about traditional

Korean culture, and how the seed of the Gospel can take root in Korean soil; on the other hand, it emphasizes the reconstruction of Korean society. Therefore, modernization, urbanization and technological advancement all fall within the boundaries of their theological investigation.

The development of a local Korean theology is clearly influenced by "secularization" and "liberation theology." Korean liberation theology is certainly not the liberation theology of Latin America. But, at least it can be said that its theological method feels the effects of the two above-mentioned movements. As we enter the 80's, it is thought that future Korean theology will have a strong pastoral accent, and that theology will be considered a tool for the revival of the Churches and for the reconstruction of society. The new Korean theologians feel that the creation of a new environment, the protection of human rights, the promotion of civil liberties and the pursuit of happiness are all the concerns of a responsible theology.

Korea's recently emerged "minjung" theology is full of political overtones. Some Korean theological researchers even call it "political theology". The "minjung" in this theology is not to be confused with "the masses" (qunzhong) or "the people" (renmin). The reason that the former term cannot denote the theological meaning of "minjung" is that in the

gospels "the masses" (qunzhong) were a crowd of people who lacked awareness. On the other hand, the latter term is politically a very sensitive word. As far as the citizens of both North and South Korea are concerned, "the people" (Renmin) is a term commonly linked with communist doctrine. The so-called "minjung" stands for all those people oppressed by political or societal forces, who awaken to the necessity of seeking justice and restoring human rights. "Minjung" theology is much concerned with the collective feeling of the nation. It feels that "han" (the Chinese character for "hatred" is used but not exactly with the same meaning) sums up the collective feeling of the Korean people in the face of oppression and injustice. The feeling of "han" finds expression in the people's dances, songs, poems and plays. "Minjung" theology tries to look at and deal with this collective feeling, and make it become a positive force for the reconstruction of the country and the Church. Some people think that "minjung" theology might better be called "Korean political theology" or "liberation theology;"⁵ others even hesitate to call it a "theology" at all. However, if it is possible to call it a theology, it is a theology which is still very rudimentary. When a theology is just at the initial stage of formation, to decide whether it is complete or not, is a premature judgment to say the least. If "minjung theology" is Korea's "contextual

theology", then Korean theologians have a lot of work ahead of them. In the process of developing and pushing forward this theology, there are still many serious problems to be dealt with.

In reading the book Minjung Theology,⁶ the writer discovered only a starting point for a theology. There is still not much of a system for understanding Christ and the Church in a theology which takes "people as the subjects of history."⁷ This theology still has a lot of reflection to do in the areas of Christology and Ecclesiology.

Nevertheless, we sincerely hope and pray that Korean Christians will continue to work toward the development and formation of a local theology. Not only will the experience serve as a point of reference for other Asian Churches, but also, the efforts of Korean theologians will encourage a bolder approach in theological circles from theologians of other Asian countries.

(For the footnotes, refer to the Chinese version of the article, p.8)