

A New Challenge to Korean American Religious Identity

: Cultural Crisis in Korean American Christianity

Ro, Young-Chan

(USA, George Mason Univ.)

《 Abstract 》

This paper explores the relationship between Korean immigrants to the United States and their religious identity from the cultural point of view. Most scholarly studies on Korean immigrants in the United States have been dominated by sociological approach and ethnic studies in examining the social dimension of the Korean immigrant communities while neglecting issues concerning their religious identity and cultural heritage.

Most Korean immigrants to America attend Korean churches regardless their religious affiliation before they came to America. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is the fact that Korean church has provided a necessary social service for the newly arrived immigrants. Korean churches have been able to play a key role in the life of Korean immigrants. Korean immigrants, however, have shown a unique aspect regarding their religious identity compared to other immigrants communities in the United States.

America is a nation of immigrants, coming from different parts of the world. Each immigrant community has brought their unique cultural heritage and religious persuasion. Asian immigrants, for example, brought their own traditional religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism. People from the Middle Eastern countries brought Islamic faith while European Jews brought the Jewish tradition. In these immigrant communities, religious identity and cultural heritage were homogeneously harmonized. Jewish people built synagogue and taught Hebrew, Jewish history, culture, and faith. In this case, synagogue was not only the house of worship for Jews but also the center for learning Jewish history, culture, faith, and language. In short, Jewish cultural history was intimately related to Jewish religious history; for Jewish immigrants, learning their social and political history was indeed identical with learning of their religious history. The same can be said about the relationship between Indian community and Hinduism. Hindu temples

serve as the center of Indian immigrants in providing the social, cultural, and spiritual functions. Buddhist temples, for that matter, serve the same function to the people from the Asian countries. Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Tibetans, and Thais have brought their respective Buddhist traditions to America and practice and maintain both their religious faith and cultural heritage. Middle Eastern people, for example, have brought Islamic faith to the United States, and Mosques have become the center for learning their language, practicing their faith, and maintaining their cultural heritage.

Korean immigrants, unlike any other immigrant group, have brought Christianity, which is not a Korean traditional religion but a Western religion they received in 18th and 19th centuries from the West and America, back to the United States, and church has become the center of their lives in America. In this context, Koreans and Korean-Americans have a unique situation in which they practice Christianity as their religion but try to maintain their non-Christian cultural heritage. For the Korean immigrants, their religious identity and cultural identity are not the same. Although Korean church so far has provided the social and religious functions to fill the need of Korean immigrants, but it may not be able to become the most effective institution to provide and maintain Korean cultural heritage. In this respect, Korean churches must be able to open to traditional Korean religions or the religions of Korean origin to cultivate and nurture Korean cultural heritage.

***Key words:** Korean American community, Korean cultural identity; Korean religion, Korean Christianity, immigration theology, marginality, Korean culture, Korean church, ethnic religious community, cultural heritage, The second generation Korean American.

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I . A Methodological Reflection: Culture Matters

Most scholarly studies on Korean Americans in North America have focused primarily either on the historical aspect or the social phenomenon of Korean immigrants in the United States. While the historical and social approaches have helped in understanding the Korean immigrant community in general and the Korean immigrant church in particular, the study of cultural dimensions related to the Korean immigrant community and church has been

largely neglected. Even theological reflection or interpretation of the Korean immigration to the U.S., such as “immigration theology,”¹⁾ has a “sociological orientation,” focusing on the social and political predicaments that Korean immigrants have been facing.

In this respect, “immigration theology” by and large is a theological interpretation of the predicaments of immigrants experiencing as racial and ethnic minority. It is an important and significant attempt in terms of immigrants’ self-understanding as minority within the larger and mainline society. Immigration theology has provided an interesting and meaningful framework of reference, from the Christian point of view, for such self-understanding. Immigration theology tries to make a meaningful statement about the life-situation of immigrant, especially the Korean immigrants from the Christian perspective. The paradigm of immigration of theology goes back to the very beginning of this nation. The first immigrants namely the Puritans set the basic pattern. The puritans just like the Israelites in the Old Testament or Hebrew scripture crossed the Atlantic Ocean, which is comparable to the Red Sea for Jews. The metaphor of crossing the sea has an important social, cultural, and religious significance, from social and political liberation to religious salvation. The Judeo-Christian tradition has long history of interpreting this event as a social and political liberation. For Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, the metaphor of crossing the river has more soteriological and spiritual significance for the ultimate liberation than social and political one. There are “symbolic differences” in understanding a root metaphor such as “crossing” or “crossing the ocean” depending on cultures and religions. Christians have made “secular,” this worldly, political and social meaning of the metaphor of “crossing” as found in liberation theology and minjung theology while Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists have maintained the “sacred,” other worldly, and the religious and spiritual sense of liberation by “crossing.” For Buddhists and Hindus, the meaning of “liberation” is more fundamental than Christian understanding of “liberation.” For Christians, “liberation” as expounded by

1) Sang Hyun Lee is a chief proponent of this theology in interpreting theological and biblical significance of the Korean immigration experience. See his article, “*Called to Be Pilgrims: Toward an Asian-american Theology from the Korean Immigrant Perspective,*” *Korean American Ministry: A Resource Book*, ed. S. H. Lee, Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary. 1987, pp. 90-120.

liberation theology or minjung theology has a profound social and political implication. Although they did not deny the spiritual significance of liberation, political theology, liberation theology, and minjung theology have politicized and socialized the concept “liberation” to stress the liberation of the oppressed from the oppressor in a concrete social and political context of this world. For Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus, “liberation” does not mean political and social liberation or liberation of the oppressed from the oppressor but the ultimate liberation from the vicious cycle of “birth”, “death”, “re-birth” and “re-death”. In this sense, the Buddhist or Hindu understanding of “liberation” is profoundly soteriological in nature.

Christians have interpreted the Exodus event primarily from the social and political point of view. Although the exodus event was a divine act or God’s intervention, the Exodus experience signifies political and social liberation from the Egyptians or the oppressors and acquiring a new and the “promised land”, the land of Canaan. This metaphor worked very well for the European immigrants including Jews and Christians from all parts of Europe. This metaphor of the Promised Land and the land of “milk” and “honey” had a powerful appeal not only to Jews and Christians in Europe but also to Hindus and Buddhists in Asia.

The symbolic difference was that the Asians including the Koreans crossed the Pacific Ocean, instead of the Atlantic Ocean, to reach the land of opportunities. The “original story” of Exodus has gone through the process of symbolic transformation, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, and now to the Pacific Ocean. For many Asians, crossing of the Pacific Ocean connotes a powerful symbolic significance in implying reaching the other side of the world. As mentioned above, the linguistic metaphor of the narrative of reaching the “other shore” has a powerful spiritual and religious meaning. In recent history, however, this powerful religious metaphor has gained literal significance for even Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains who are not familiar with the biblical narrative.

The Exodus narrative entails not only the joy of liberation but also the pain and suffering, the long journey to the Promised Land. Immigration theology picked up this narrative theme in the Bible as a paradigm to signify the Korean immigrants’ experience in America. The exodus narrative theme has been a useful hermeneutical tool for the Korean immigrants’ self-understanding.

The biblical narrative works particularly well for the Korean immigrants who are Christians and familiar with the stories in the Bible. Since Christianity is stronger in Korea than in any other East Asian countries and most rapidly grown religion in Korea, most Koreans who immigrated to this country have had some form of contact with Christianity. The biblical narratives were effective and powerful in exploring a meaningful way of understanding the Korean immigrants' dreams for the land of milk and honey and the long and arduous journey to the "promised land." While most popular Korean preachers delivered their sermons stressing the land of "milk" and "honey" and God's promise for Korean immigrants, immigration theology took the metaphor of the "journey of the wilderness." The task of theology as a meaningful way to explicate human predicaments must provide a way to comprehend the significance of the hardship the Korean immigrants experienced as a social and ethnic minority. Immigration theology was a proper response to this theological need. One of the most crucial and essential elements in theologizing human experience is the explanation and expounding of pain and suffering. This is because Christianity takes the cross as its center and theology must take the cross the central theme. In this regard, immigration theology had to take the unique form of Korean immigrants' hardship and suffering experienced as a marginal people.

II. Immigration Theology and Minjung Theology

: Social and Anthropological Concept of "Marginality"

Immigration theology expounded by Sang Hyun Lee, concentrated on the hardship of the wilderness. This hardship can be translated and characterized in terms of "marginality." Here, we see yet another transformation of "marginality." The social concept of "margin" now gained a theological significance. The social implication of the "center" and the "margin" is significant in terms of understanding and classifying people in terms of the "mainline" and "marginality," or "minority" of the society. The social notion of "marginality" has a negative image. But theological interpretation of "marginality," however, has provided a positive self-understanding of "marginality." Jesus took marginal

people seriously as found in the Gospels. Not Jerusalem, the center, but Galilee, the periphery or the margin, became the “center” stage for Jesus’ ministry. This kind of theological motive has been a dominant theme found in Korean minjung theology. Although minjung theology and immigration theology are different in terms of geographical location, historical context, and social circumstance, they have taken a similar theological approach. As minjung theology took “minjung” as “marginal” people, immigration theology found the Korean immigrants were “marginal” people in the U.S. Both minjung theology and immigration theology developed their theological interpretations based on the social concept of “marginality.” Minjung in Korean society and immigrants in the U.S. belonged to the same kind social status characterized as marginal people. From the methodological point of view, both minjung theology and immigration theology have taken the same approach. There are of course some fundamental differences between minjung and immigrants in terms of defining the constitutive members of these two groups. Both groups are disadvantaged social entities compared to the mainline society or the mainstream of culture. In this sense, they represent the marginality in language, culture, race, economic status, political participation, etc. In other words, minjung and immigrants regardless whether they live in homeland or foreign land, their social and cultural experiences have made them feel they are “marginal” people. For this reason, the theological attentions given to these two groups were due to their social status as minority or marginal people. In case of minjung, one may argue that minjung is not a social minority but in fact a majority of the general population. It is true that minjung may be a majority in terms quantity or number. But the social concept of minority or marginality may not necessarily be based on the quantity concept alone. The social concept of marginality, unlike a sheer spatial or quantitative concept of marginality, it takes factors such as social alienation, political limitation, economic disadvantage, etc. They are not the mainstream of the society. The social concept of marginality not only takes number and quantity, but more importantly, it takes the social status and political power in defining “marginality.” South Africa, for example, consists of the black majority and the white minority, but was ruled by the white minority until the recent history. In this sense, the sheer number does not necessarily define “marginality.” Rather marginality is found in the social,

political, and cultural context of the society. It is a qualitative notion.

The social transformation of the geometric notion of “margin” or “minority” entails the source for religious and theological explication of “pain,” “suffering,” and “alienation.” This approach intends to explore the theological significance of the pain and suffering experienced by Korean immigrants or Korean Americans as “marginal” or “liminal” people. Immigration theology took the “social” and “political” elements of the Korean immigrants as a theme for constructing theology. In this respect, the key element of Korean American experience defined as “marginality” or “liminality” is profoundly a social and anthropological definition. The social and political sense of “marginality,” however, is not limited to Korean immigrants alone but extends to all other immigrant communities. Furthermore, all social and racial minority groups in the U.S. including Afro-Americans and Hispanics share this sense of “marginality.” In this respect, the Korean immigrants are no different from any other racial and ethnic group in the U.S. and they are treated as just one of minority groups. From the political and social point of view, the Korean immigrants are the same as other immigrants as “minority” or “marginal” people. In short, social concept of “marginality” defines the Korean immigrants as a mere social minority. In other words, the social concept of marginality has a tendency to reduce all different minority groups into one basket ignoring the difference in cultural dimensions of each group.

III. Conceptual Transformation of “Marginality”

As we have noticed, the term “marginality” has gone through some form of transformation. The original notion of this mathematical or geometrical concept of “minority” or “margin” has been transformed into a social and political concept to denote racial and ethnic groups in society.²⁾ Most scholarly studies on ethnic and social groups, thus, use this social notion of “minority” and “marginality.”

2) I have explored the conceptual transformation of the word “margin” somewhere else. For more details, see my article, “Centrality and Plurality: A Making of Marginal Theology” *The Journal of Religious Studies*. Vol XXVII, Nos. 1&2. pp.107-114.

The geometrical sense of margin does not have a “value” concept. It simply denotes that there are the “main body” and the “margin” in the text or in any other designated space, and margin is an empty space surrounding the main body. This spatial notion was the most rudimentary meaning of the “margin.” This spatial notion of “margin” assumes “center”. The open space has no sense of “center” and “periphery” or “main body” and “margin.” The moment when we declare a certain position as “center” the idea of “periphery” emerges. Thus a sheer geometric sense of “center” or “margin” does not have its own intrinsic value. This value free notion of “center” and “margin” gains values when applied to human affairs. We, human beings, designated “center” and “margin,” and have given anthropological, social, and cultural values to the concepts such as “center” and “margin.” Once the geometric concepts such as “margin” and “center” gained anthropological and social significance, the concepts “margin” and “center” became powerful social and political categories that classify the people according to color, ethnic origin, language, income, etc. The social transformation of the geometric concept “margin” has created a new metaphor for the people socially isolated, politically alienated, and economically disadvantaged. The concept “marginality” thus has become a powerful political and social symbol.

The social, political, and economic sense of “marginality” have an obvious negative connotation implying that “margin” is something less desirable but soon to be eliminated, and it is considered a “temporary” status. Indeed, most immigrants including the Korean immigrants despise for being “marginal” or “minority” but aspire for joining the “mainline” Americans. The first generation immigrants to the U.S. encourage the second or third generations to become the mainline Americans as soon as possible and to get rid of the “stigma” of “marginal” people. This idea has worked well for most European immigrants to the U.S. and we see the success of the descendants of the European immigrants in every field of the U.S. society. The Korean immigrants have tried to follow the footsteps of these European American faithfully and succeeded to a certain extent. Asian Americans, unlike the European immigrants, are facing different obstacles in joining the mainstream of American society. The most obvious hurdle is the race and the color. The mainline Americans are supposed to be white. This is something we Asians, if we want to maintain the ethnic uniqueness, cannot change. The Korean

Americans are well aware of this reality and try to compensate this disadvantage by over-achieving, over-accomplishing in whatever they do in their own fields of their expertise. Most Asian Americans believe that they can still make themselves a part of the mainline American society by achieving the economic status, academic excellence, and professional success. Most Asians including Koreans believe that they may not change their color of skin or even the accent in their English but they can change their social status. After all, American is the land of opportunities. For Asian Americans, "American dream" is a powerful driving force for them to assimilate to the mainline American society. To be sure, Asian Americans, especially Korean Americans have accomplished remarkable degree of "success" in education, professional achievement, entrepreneurship, and so on.

Even the mainline Americans and the mainline news media applaud the success of the Korean Americans as a "model" case. The acceptance from the part of the mainline Americans has encouraged the Korean immigrants to believe that they too can be the mainline Americans in spite of their race and color. For this reason, immigration theology based on the interpretation of the theological significance of the social "marginality" may not be so "exciting" or the music to the ears of the Korean Americans. Immigration theology, a theological explication on the social concept of marginality, makes a lot of sense for Christian self-understanding of theology but not much exciting news for the aspiring Korean immigrants to motivate them.

Korean Christianity today in general loves to hear about the story of "success" not "suffering." The Korean immigrant Christians who are familiar with the Christian "success" story, Christianity will make you "successful", would not listen to the grim news of being "marginal" people. For most Koreans, the idea of social margin has a negative connotation and preaching positive values on the social sense of "marginality" has not been successful. For the Koreans and Korean Americans, "marginality" is a temporary status that they have to overcome. There are no positive and intrinsic values for being "marginal" for Koreans. This is the limitation of the social concept of "marginality." If we consider ourselves "social margin," it makes ourselves feel miserable. The reason for the Korean immigrants came to the U.S. was not to become a social "margin" of this society but to be successful in the land of opportunity. To be sure, there are stories of failure but the

opportunities for the children's education and their success have made Koreans willingly to give up their status of the mainline Korean society and gladly to take the marginality of the American mainstream. After all, the marginality that they experience in this county was the outcome of their choice not something they are born with it. Marginality for them is a necessary temporal process, not a permanent stigma for Korean Americans, to the mainline Americans. Whether this sort of Korean Americans' concept of self-understanding is "right" or "wrong" is not an issue. The issue here is how the Korean Americans understand themselves in terms of their motivation to come to the States, their being here and their aspirations.

IV. Cultural Concept of "Marginality"

The social concept of "marginality," thus, may not serve the Korean immigrants' self-understanding adequately. For this reason, there is a fundamental difference, in terms of understanding the concept of marginality, between the Afro-American perspective and the Korean American point of view, although they both are marginal in the social sense. We have to look at the cultural dimension of the Korean immigrants seriously. We can still speak of "margin" vs "mainstream" even from the cultural point of view. The cultural concept of "marginality," unlike the social concept of "marginality," does not reduce people into sheer numbers and quantities. Culture poses a unique and irreducible entity in itself. Yes, a certain culture may be considered "marginal" by the mainline society but this does not mean that particular culture is inferior or the object of elimination. Even if the people who feel that they are marginal people but they may not feel that their cultures are "marginal." Indians from India, for example, may consider themselves social and ethnic minority in the U.S. but they would not consider their cultural tradition is minor or "marginal."

The cultural concept of "margin" or "marginality" has a different sense of values compared to the social concept of "marginality." Cultural margin is not to be considered the space outside of the main body but a space linking next page. This space is a meeting ground of two different cultures, values, and

religion. Cultural margin is a creative margin, the margin not only link or connect from one culture to another but a front line of encounter, the encounter of religions, cultures, values. The margin in this sense is crucial and even more important than the main body of the text. The margin provides a space for dialogue, interaction, and reaction. You can make a mark, a point, and an interjection in the margin. You can produce something here. This margin is the space for crossing from one text to another text. It creates inter-textual foundation. The cultural sense of “marginality” can become a fertile ground for cross-cultural understanding and inter-cultural dialogue. In order to meet other culture, you have to come out of your main body, the mainline, the main body, the mainstream, and stand in the margin to face other’s main body, mainline, mainstream. Two pages of main body text are conjoined in the space of margin. The margin is a new front. When the dominant culture is decaying and dying, it needs a new blood and a new front. In order to find a new front, it has to step outside of its main stream or mainline and step into the margin for the next page and the next chapter. The dominant culture refuses to step out of its main text and stand in the margin is doomed to die. The margin is a channel for new blood, new breath for its own renewal. Cultural minority, unlike social minority, is a creative minority. Cultural margin, unlike social margin, is a breeding ground for a new culture. Culture can meet other culture in the margin. Culture transforms itself through interacting with other culture. The late Jung Young Lee has taken the issue of “marginality” from the cultural point of view. This approach provides a useful hermeneutical tool to appreciate a positive side of the concept “margin.” Unlike Sang Hyun Lee, Jung Young Lee explored the cultural dimension, rather than social aspect, of Korean American from the cross-cultural and inter-textual perspectives.

The Korean immigrants stand in margin to join the American mainstream. The Korean American culture is a marginal culture in both senses: it is marginal of the mainstream of American culture and, at the same time, it is also marginal in relation to the mainline Korean culture in its homeland. From the cultural point of view, marginality has double aspects as it relates two respective mainstream cultures. The Korean immigrants consciously or unconsciously have produced and created “Korean American culture” that is neither Korean culture nor American culture. For over a century of Korean

immigration to the U.S. and especially for the last 30 or 40 years of the history of Korean immigration to the U.S., Korean Americans have developed Korean American culture in the U.S. Culture has its own life.

One of the most noticeable examples is found in the culinary culture. The Korean immigrants in the U.S. developed different kind of Korean dishes and eating habit. The L.A kalbi, for example, is the case in point. This kalbi is a unique cut of the Korean favorite short rib that requires much less cooking time and easy to cook compared to the traditional way to prepare the kalbi dish. This form of kalbi fits American life style. Now this form of kalbi has made its way back to Korea. In the area of language, Korean Americans have also created a different usage of Korean language in combination of English words.

These observations, however, are not to be taken as a norm. In fact, there are many examples contrary to the above observations. Culture is complex and difficult to be characterized. Korean American culture, for example, has been in the process of transformation but Korean culture in homeland also has been engaged in the process of change. The speed of change is much more rapid in Korea than in the Korean American community in the U.S. Immigrant community in general has a conservative tendency to preserve its native tradition in spite of the pressure to adjust itself to a new environment. In this sense, immigrant community has double pressures: a pressure to preserve their native culture and tradition and a pressure to transform themselves in order to adjust and assimilate to the new country they have immigrated.

The Korean immigrant community or Korean American community has experienced a similar kind of pressure from both sides. In spite of the pressure to transform or change in order to assimilate to the country they immigrated, immigrant community has done an exceptional job in terms of preserving their native cultural traditions. The external pressure to accept the new culture and to assimilate with it may have caused the immigrant community a strong reaction to preserve its own native culture. In addition to this reaction, many immigrant communities have shown a tendency to create an exclusive community in which the immigrants can use their own languages and create a commercial district for their own convenience. The Korean immigrants have created this sort of ghetto: Korea Town. This kind

of exclusive community has helped Korean American community to preserve their own culture and language. For this reason, even in culinary culture, Koreans love for kalbi has helped the Korean immigrants to invent L.A kalbi. Nonetheless, Korean Americans in general have maintained the traditional Korean culinary culture in a more traditional manner while the Koreans in Korea has pushed their imagination in creating new forms of Korean dishes. Like wise, Korean language too has gone through the process of transformation. While the Korean immigrants tend to use English in their Korean sentences, their Korean vocabularies are old fashioned. I will discuss about a conservative character of Korean Americans and Korean American Christianity a little later, it is however worthy to note that the Korean immigrants in general have shown a conservative attitude in preserving their own tradition. One of the reasons for this attitude is that most first generation Korean Americans would like to maintain the culture and language they brought with them when they came to this country. Since the Korean immigrants would feel familiar with the form of Korean culture they grew up with, they want to maintain the same form of Korean culture while their homeland may have gone through a significant cultural transformation. For this reason many Korean Americans feel a reverse culture shock when they go back to Korea for a visit. The Korea they left was no longer there! It has been transformed drastically physically and culturally.

Someday, a linguist who wants to study older and “purer” Korean language will have to come to the Korean immigrant community in the U.S. or go other Korean diaspora communities outside Korea to conduct his/her research. It is difficult to define “purity” and “impurity” of culture because culture is in the process of change. Nonetheless, it is a noticeable that the immigrant communities in the face of the threat from the dominant culture have reacted strongly to this challenge in order to preserve their native culture. These are very simple examples, but the point is that culture is always in the process of transforming itself in encounter with other culture. In this respect, the concept of margin in culture plays a critical role not only in the cross-cultural interaction with other cultures but also in understanding one’s own culture and its self transformation.

V. Korean American Christianity : Success and Failure

What I would like to do in this part of the paper, however, is to elucidate the cultural significance of “marginality” by exploring the religious aspect especially Korean immigrant churches in the U.S. These churches are now facing new challenges as we begin a new century and millennium. We have been boasting not only of the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Korea, but also the most rapid growth of Christianity in the Korean-American community in North America. In fact, about 75%³⁾ of Korean Americans are attending church surpassing American Christian church attendance (about 55%). This is an unprecedented phenomenon. Historically, European and American missionaries introduced Christianity to Korea, Catholics in the 18th and Protestants in the 19th centuries respectively. Now, the percentage of Christians among the Korean immigrants or Korean Americans in America is higher than the percentage of Christians among Americans. It has never been the case that an immigrant ethnic community has more Christians per capita than Americans in the U.S. since the founding of this country. Korean American Christians have done something unique.

Of course, we can speculate the reasons for this phenomenal “success.”⁴⁾ But, just like any other success, there is a hidden failure in this “success.” Although this hidden “failure” is found both in Korean Christianity in Korea and Korean American Christianity, I will limit my discussion primarily to

3) It is difficult to estimate an exact figure, however, 70%-75% would be an acceptable figure that have been used by some scholars in the field. See, for example, R. Stephen Warner, “The Korean Immigrant Church as Case and Model,” *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* by Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner. The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2001. p.30.

4) For concise summary of the explanation of the growth of Korean American Christians, see *ibid.* p.30. For more details See Sang Hyun Lee, “Korean American Presbyterians: A need for Ethnic Particularity and the Challenge of Christian Pilgrimage,” *The Diversity of Discipleship: The Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Christian Witness*, edited by Milton J. Coalter, Mohn M. Muler, and Louis B. Weeks. Westminster/John Knox. 1991, 312-30, 400-402. See also Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles. 1965-1982*. University of California Press. 1998.

Korean American Christianity. In spite of this phenomenal growth of Christianity among Korean Americans, I wonder if this growth has a short life. By and large, most Korean-American Christians are first generation Korean Americans. In fact, the Korean-American church is characterized by the fact that it is “for the first generation, and by the first generation, of the first generation.” In my view, it is quite possible that the number of Korean American Christians will be reduced dramatically to one-tenth within the next 30 years. The vast majority of the 1.5 generation and 2nd generation Korean Americans is now leaving the church. There is a dramatic gap between the first and second generations in their church attendance. In this respect, the growth or the “success” of Korean American church has been largely due to the first generation of Koreans. Here the term “first” generation of Koreans has a unique meaning compared to other ethnic groups such as Japanese immigrant. Korean immigration to America is characterized as a steady flow of immigration from Korea. Although some noticeable chronological distinctions can be drawn in terms of the waves of Korean immigration to America, Korean immigration to the United States have been somewhat steady since 1965. For this reason, the “first generation” of Korean immigrants has been a continuous phenomenon due to the fact that the flow of Koreans immigration to the U.S. has been uninterrupted.⁵⁾ This steady flow of Korean immigrants has been a significant beneficial factor in the growth and maintenance of Korean churches in the United States. This continuous or perpetual existence of the first generation in the Korean church has somewhat lessened the possible impact from the lack of the second generation on the Korean congregations. It has also helped shape the pattern and style of the Korean Christian ministry. In fact, for a century, Korean American church has not significantly been changed in terms of language (Korean), style of worship (similar to the church in Korea), and theological stand (conservative evangelical). Furthermore, Korean American churches have increased the use of the traditional Korean style of worship services. The continuation or the perpetuation of this first generation phenomenon was one of the reasons for the Korean American churches becoming even more conservative than churches in Korea.⁶⁾ A critical question is how long the

5) In spite of the ups and downs of the number of Korean immigration to the U.S., the figures show that Korean immigrant has been steady. See *Korean Americans* p.12.

immigrants from Korea will continue and how large the number of the immigrants will be. As the standard of living in Korea continued improves and Korean economy grows steadily, the number of Korean immigrants to this country will certainly decrease. Although may not expect a total discontinuation of the Korean immigrants to country, we may not see the kind of the waves of immigration that we have seen for the last three decades. In my view, the growth or decline of Korean American churches will depend on the number of new immigrants from Korea. Once the first generation Korean immigrants to the U.S. starts to decline, Korean American churches will decline too. This phenomenon has happened to the Jewish community in this country. The first generation Jews from Europe eagerly built Jewish temples of synagogues but now many the first generation built synagogues are empty or sold out to other ethnic groups including Koran Americans. Korean Americans have built many churches in this country. The Korean American churches that uses American church facilities have plans to build their own buildings. Unless the flows of the fresh new immigrants from Korea continue, these church buildings will have hard time to fill the seats.

First generation Koreans are the largest the Korean component that performs the most vital functions of the congregation and they are also the most generous financial contributors to the church. For this reason, the nature and style of Korean immigrant church ministry and its governance are designed to appease this group. For the last four decades or even for a century for that matter, most ministers of Korean immigrant churches were born, grew up in Korea and trained at Korean theological seminaries. The most prominent Korean ministers serving the largest Korean congregations in the U.S. were all educated in Korea. Many of them have some form of theological education in the U.S. and most Korean ministers have Doctor of Ministry degree awarded by various theological seminaries in this country. These pastors in most case started their theological education while they were in Korea and had basic theological training in Korean. This first generation of pastor of Korean immigrant congregations are now being replaced with younger pastors who are 1.5 generation Koreans who came to this country as teenagers and have their theological education at American

6) Most mega churches in Korea are generally conservative and large Korean churches in the major cities in the U.S. are all conservative.

seminaries or divinity schools. These younger generation Korean pastors are now gradually assuming the awesome burden of the legendary success of the first generation pastors.

Most first generation of Korean pastors and ministers, like their parishioners, read Korean Newspapers, listen to Korean radio stations, and watch Korean T.V. programs. Ironically, the majority of the first generation of Korean Americans learns about what is going on in the U.S. through the Korean news media programmed either locally or even in Korea. Major Korean newspapers have branch offices in large cities in the U.S. and publish daily newspapers.

Most ministers of Korean American congregation read biblical commentaries written by Koreans or translated into Korean for their sermons. Korean bookstores in the major cities in the U.S. conveniently provide this service by importing theological books and church related materials that are used in Korea to Korean American ministers. An irony in this process is that Korean community in general and Korean American churches in particular “learn” about American intellectual traditions and theological and biblical interpretation filtered through Korean translation and interpretation. This is one of the reasons for why the Korean American congregations tend to be more conservative or a bit slower in catching up with America than churches in Korea.

Most Korean American Christians indeed practice Christianity as they did while they were in Korea. The language, the content and the style of sermon, the form of worship, and over all church life are familiar to them. They want to maintain that familiarity. One can hardly find any difference between Korean churches in Korea and in America. The Korean immigrant churches are modeled after the “successful” Korean church in Korea. Often, they invite preachers from Korea for revival meetings. Although they live in America, they have no direct experience of American life culturally or intellectually. In a word, Korean American churches have become a ghetto in American society. Some Korean American churches now establish their own governance, separating from American churches even within the same denomination. In general there is an exclusive tendency among Koreans, especially in Korean American church. Most Korean American churches that rent American church facilities for their worship service on Sundays, show their church sign

displaying the names of their churches in Korean that are larger, bigger and more visible than their host churches' signs.

By and large, as mentioned above, immigrant communities have a tendency to preserve and maintain their native cultural tradition better than their counterparts in the homeland. It is not unusual to find the most authentic Korean culinary culture in the immigrant communities outside of Korea. Korean language, for example, used by the Korean immigrants in the U.S. is an older fashioned and somewhat out dated version compared the one used in Korea. In spite of the continuous influx of Korean immigrants to the U.S., the Korean community in the U.S. has preserved the older form of *han'gul* and Korean vocabularies. This tendency may in turn discourage the second generation from becoming part of the congregation. Some of Korean American Church leaders are aware of this problem and try to concentrate on the 2nd generation ministry and English worship services because they believe the language is the main reason for 2nd generations leaving the church. Language may be helpful but language alone cannot solve the problem. The gap is not only in language but also in values, culture and generation. Most second generation Koreans feel that the first generation Korean American Christians are not flexible enough to embrace their second generations and run church with bureaucratic authority. The first generation Koreans feel that the second generations are too Americanized. Is this a cultural gap? Many of us would agree that it is. The issue, however, is more deep and complicate than to define just as a "cultural gap."

Contrary to the common misconception of "Korean culture," what we see in the Korean church in Korea and the Korean American church is not "Korean culture" in the genuine sense of the word. Instead of "Korean culture," what's really going on is authoritarianism, exclusivism, conservatism, formalism, and male chauvinism. Superficially these aspects, has been associated with Confucianism. This is a very unfortunate misunderstanding of Confucianism. What we see in Korean churches both in Korean and in the U.S. is not "Korean culture" but it is "Korean Christian culture." In this sense, Korean Christianity has already developed its own unique kind of culture for good or for ill. Korean Christian Culture, if we may say so, does not have much of Korean culture.

In reality, Korean Christianity has long been hostile to Korean cultural

traditions including ancestor worship (or ritual). Since the beginning of Christian missions in Korea, the Korean church advocated that Korean Christians sever their relationship with Korean cultural traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, shamanism, and ancestor worship. The introduction of Christianity to Korea coincided with the opening of Korea to the Western world, and Christianity was considered Western religion or even “Western Learning.” To become a Christian in Korea was to be a Westernized or modernized person. Furthermore, early Korean Christianity viewed Korean cultural traditions including religions as either superstition or idol worship. As a result, the Korean church is largely ignorant about Korean culture, history and still considers that learning about Korean culture or religions, except the language *han’gul*, is dangerous. Korean Christianity has made a considerable contribution to *han’gul* in its rediscovering by printing the Bible in *han’gul*, and maintaining and spreading it. The translation of the Bible into Korean *han’gul* revolutionized in spreading *han’gul*. Korean Christian patriots, under the Japanese occupation, maintained and thought *han’gul* in church as a form of a nationalistic movement.

Other than *han’gul*, Korean Christianity in Korea has either ignored or opposed against Korean culture. Korean American Christianity follows the same pattern: almost every Korean church has a *han’gul* school but no interest in knowing or learning the Korean cultural heritage.

VI. A New Challenge

Korean American churches, as an ethnic religious community in the United States, are facing a unique challenge. Most ethnic religious communities in this country have brought their own native religions along with their cultures and languages. In this sense, the places of their religious worship whether synagogue or mosque were at the same time their cultural centers where they could learn native languages, cultures, values, and religions. There is no conflict between the practice their own religions and observing, maintaining, and transmitting their own cultural tradition. For example, Jewish synagogue is the center of both their religion and their culture for Jews. People from

Thailand in this country go their temple for both their religious practice and cultural experience. People from the Middle Eastern countries go their mosques for their religious and cultural learning. Their religions were their cultures. In this way, religious centers, such as synagogues, mosques, and temples have become cultural centers transmitting cultural heritage to the next generation.

Korean American Christians, however, are in a unique situation: our religious practice does not coincide with our own cultural traditions. Korea has a long history with distinctive culture, language, and religions. Christianity is a very young religion with a short history in Korea. Korean American Christians are Christians in their faith but they are Korean in their culture. While other ethnic religious communities in North America boast of their religious faith and cultural pride, Korean American Christians feel a conflict between their religious confession and their cultural traditions. For this reason, most Korean American Christians really do not address this issue, by accepting Christianity not only as their religious practice but also as their cultural tradition. Korean American churches have built their church buildings as any other American church in terms of architecture and aesthetic. Some Korean American churches have built beautiful churches but there is no trace of any Korean cultural element in their church buildings. In fact, Korean American Churches have lost their Korean cultural heritage except for culinary culture. Korean American Churches have lost (or they never assumed) their role as the guardians of Korean culture, the role many other ethnic religious groups are playing prominently in North America. Furthermore, many Korean American church leaders do not believe that teaching and maintaining Korean culture is the Korean American church's responsibility. On the contrary, they feel that Korean cultural heritage may pose a danger of undermining Christian faith. Most Korean Christians and Korean American Christians believe that Korean cultural traditions and the Christian tradition are incompatible. They thus chose Christian faith over Korean culture. The vital issue here is whether Christian faith and Korean culture are to be put in a dialectical dichotomy in terms of the either/or choice. This question entails serious theological issues and cultural implications.

From the cultural point of view, Korean American churches may not be

able to provide Korean cultural heritage or to transmit the traditional values to the next generation. What they have shown to the 2nd generation was a bad side of Korean values and traditions as I indicated above. Most 2nd generation of Korean Americans thus have lost their interest in either learning Korean culture or appreciating Korean values. Nonetheless, there are some new positive signs among the second generation Korean Americans. The second and the third generations of Korean Americans begin to awake to their cultural identity. This new awareness of their collective self-consciousness is now growing among Korean American young adults. They are eager to learn about their cultural heritage and gaining a sense of self-confidence or even sense of pride for being descendants of Korean. I am confident that as we move into the 21st century and the new millennium, not only Korean Americans but many other ethnic communities will re-discover, re-appreciate their cultural origins or heritage. The “melting-pot” image of America has melted down and pluralism is now arising.

It is no longer tenable to maintain the universality of the American way of life. Cultural and religious diversity has become a dominant issue for this century. If America is serious about her future, she has to take pluralism seriously. History shows that no empire with single culture, single religion, single ideology, single language has lasted more than 500 years. America will not be an exception unless she changes her mentality and attitude drastically toward other cultural and religious traditions, an experience of a radical *metanoia*.

In this respect, Korean Americans are forced to reflect and re-examine our own cultural traditions, world views, and value system. If we don't take our cultural heritage seriously, we lose not only our own self-respect but also respect from others. The second generation Korean Americans who have a keen sense of their cultural identity and self-respect, this new wave will seek diligently their own cultural roots and learn the unique characteristics of the Korean world view, values, and spirituality. As I see it, Korean American churches, however, have no sense of urgency concerning this issue and they are totally unprepared to deal with this issue. This new wave of younger generation Korean American Christians will be disappointed at the lack of concern and the lack of knowledge of Korean culture among first generation Korean American Christians. The Korean American church is not equipped to

deal with this vital concern. Even the second generation ministry with its emphasis on English worship is not fully aware of this vital issue.

This lack of concern about Korean culture in Korean American churches is another important reason why the new wave generation of Koreans will not attend church. This generation of Korean Americans who are highly educated, successful in their careers, creative in their thinking, critically aware of their cultural heritage, an elite group of Korean American second generation will be disappointed in Korean American churches or Korean American Christianity as a whole. They will not be able to find much of the unique attraction from Korean American church. Most of them will either go to Anglo-American churches or drop out of the church all together. Some of them will seek Korean Buddhist temples for rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

From the theological point of view, one of the dominant theological issues is religious pluralism. Religious pluralism, whether we like it or not, is a pressing issue for the new millennium. Christianity in general and Korean Christianity or Korean American Christianity in particular will not be able to escape from this issue. Christian theology must re-think, re-construct, re-formulate the fundamental framework of Christianity in light of cultural and religious pluralism. Some frontiers of Christian theology have already taken this issue seriously.

On the other hand, however, most Korean Christians believe that Christianity is the universal religion and it goes beyond the boundary of race, culture, race, and nationality. Most Korean American Christians consider America is Christian country and they think to accept Christianity as their religion even if they were non-Christians while they were in Korea is the most logical thing to do. For this reason, the number of Korean American Christians is far greater than Korean Christians in Korea. Many non-Christians have come to the church for social acceptance, sense of belonging, friendship, and orientation to American way of life. Furthermore, Korean Christians in Korea and in the U.S. consider that they are the true successor of Christianity by taking over the field of the world mission from the Americans and the Europeans. They even declare they are the chosen people to heir Christianity itself. Most Korean American churches are sending missionaries to all parts of the world. Many Korean American churches organizes short term mission trips to the under developing countries. Some of

young Korean American Christians involved in this kind of aggressive mission activities may help other people with a sense of Christian mission and dedication. But these Korean American youth Christian may also believe that Christianity is the only one true religion and may fail to understand the indigenous culture and spirituality.

We have to ask some serious questions about the future of Korean American Christians. As we observed above, these young Christians are highly motivated, deeply dedicated, and powerfully inspired by the evangelical zeal. These Christian youth are well trained in an evangelical theology in believing that they are new age “crusaders” to recapture the sanctity of Christianity from the secular world, convert the pagans into Christianity. They are well equipped with mission strategy and sponsored by large Korean American churches. These young Christians are growing up in thinking that the world is their mission field and their task is to propagate the Gospels to all non-Christians and convert them into Christianity.

A danger in this kind of thinking is that they are growing up with a fixed mind about religion and culture, the dichotomy of true and false, right and wrong, and black and white, etc. They believe in dualistic world view. Christian youth with a high sense of God’s calling with an ideological understanding of Christian doctrine conceive of the world as an object to conquer and convert it into the Christian world. These young people are growing up with a very narrow sense of reality and values. They are strongly ideologically oriented and extremely intolerant to other culture or religion. In my personal experience, most “good” young Korean American Christians who attend church regularly and active in the church affairs are dogmatic, ideologically oriented, self-righteousness, intolerant, exclusive, and self-centered. On the other hand, the “nominal” Christian youths are more tolerant, inclusive, less dogmatic, less judgmental, and open minded. How do we picture about the future of these young people as they play a crucial role for the community, the country, and the world? What kind of leadership will they play? Quite often we hear about “leadership training” for young Korean American Christians in churches. But I wonder what kind of leadership we will have in the future with these narrow minded, exclusive, self-centered young Christians. These young people believe that traditional Korean religions are unacceptable to their Christian life and they have a certain sense of

Christian superiority over their ancestor's spirituality and culture. This false sense of superiority and the exclusive monotheistic belief in Christianity made these bright our next generation Korean Americans to become zealous Christian warrior to change the world.

These enthusiastic Korean American second generation Christians may have a strong sense of pride for being the descendants of Koreans but they may not consider Buddhism and Confucianism as a part of their proud heritage. Rather, for even most "open minded" Korean Christians, Korean religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism, and Confucianism are things of the past relics that can be displayed in museum. Most Korean Christians feel that these religions are somewhat "superstition" but not "true religion" like Christianity. Some Korean Christians with a liberal mind still think that Christianity is the peak of the religious evolution of humankind and other so called "religions" less developed form of human religiosity: a form of "religious Darwinism."

In this kind of religious environment of Korean American Christianity, we may not expect our next generation to be genuinely appreciative about our cultural heritage. Some Korean Christians view that our religious heritage such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism as part of culture not as religion. They conveniently separate culture from religion and appreciate these traditions for their artistic and technological excellence but not for their spiritual and religious values. For them, Korean Buddhism, for example, is an object of their cultural entertainment but not a source for spiritual inspiration. This is a form of reductionism, reducing religious and spiritual traditions into a cultural form. In short, we have to be reminded by what Tillich so aptly summarized when he described the relationship between religion and culture: "culture is the expression of religion and religion is the essence of culture." How can we appreciate Korean culture without understanding the essence of it?

Korean American churches must prepare for hard questions we expect from our next generation. We have to train our next generation how to appreciate, not just amuse, our cultural heritage without reducing it as a mere piece of art, an architectural structure, or a mere technological invention. What we need from our heritage is a new source of spirituality and inspiration.

A few years ago, I came across a story in Time magazine. Some of you

may know this story. Dr. David Ho, a prominent medical researcher who helped invents so called “cocktail” medication to suppress HIV virus that causes AIDS. He is one the most respected researcher in the field. Dr. David Ho is a second generation of Chinese Americans who was born and grew up in California. A Time magazine reporter asked a question as he interviewed him, “What is the most influential book in your life.” He answered him with a sense of pride, “Tao Te Ching,” and then he recited one of his favorite chapters in the Tao Te Ching by heart. He then revealed that he has been a Christian since his boyhood following his parents in southern California. My closing question is whether we will be able to see this kind of Korean American among our second generation.

I wonder if we can find our next generation Korean Americans will be able to appreciate and inspired by our Korean traditional religious and spiritual tradition so deeply that our next generations too will read and recite a portion from their favorite Korean religious texts, not the Bible, with a sense of pride.

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