

## Korea: A Developing Nation Also Creates a Unique Christian Theology

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The Unification Church can be proud of its deep roots in Korean life and thought. However, few American members are in a position to understand how much Reverend Moon represents a dynamic response to the Christian experiences of his native land. Perhaps then it will be useful to survey the development of theology in Korea for the past century.

For 30 years after Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea, Korean Christianity was devoid of constructive theological activity. According to Dr. Tongshik Ryu of Seoul National University, the original missionaries were usually ultraconservatives who regarded dancing, smoking and card playing as major sins, feared biblical criticism and condemned liberal Christians as heretics. Hence the Christian faith was hardened into "legalistic fundamentalism." Naturally then the missionaries made converts from the uneducated masses and provided future Korean ministers with the absolute minimum of training.

From 1916 to 1927 Korean theology began to germinate. Young men studied abroad and returned home with fresh theological ideas. For example, Yang Ju-Sam (d. 1950) graduated from Vanderbilt and Yale, published an introduction to the Bible, introduced higher criticism of the Old Testament, wrote the first Protestant theological essay by a Korean, and edited a theological quarterly. This Methodist seminary journal began in 1916; a Presbyterian magazine started in 1918; and an important inter-church monthly entitled *New Life* was founded in 1923 by Koreans educated in Japan.

This period was characterized by a liberal theological awakening in Korean Methodism. Christians were encouraged to be more open minded in matters of doctrine and progressive socially. Scholarly study of scriptures was favored. Methodists felt free to criticize conservative theology from the perspective of contemporary social problems. However, Presbyterianism remained locked in the rise of rigid Calvinistic orthodoxy during these years.

When the Japanese occupied Korea in 1910, there had occurred a great upsurge of enthusiasm for the traditional Korean culture and spirit on the part of the oppressed people. This revival of interest in Korean culture has continued to the present and is a major topic of discussion in contemporary theology, as we shall see.

From 1928-1939, Korean theology flowered. In spite of the Japanese occupation, the churches matured academically. A crop of ably trained young theologians returned from studies in America and Japan.

However, this spread of modern religious ideas provoked stormy controversies in the Presbyterian church. In 1924 the General Assembly of that denomination condemned Rev. Kim Yong-Ju because he denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. It also denounced Rev. Kim Ch'un-Bae because he disagreed with St. Paul about women keeping silent in the churches. The next year the Presbyterian assembly attacked the Korean translation of the Abingdon Bible Commentary, a very reputable work published by the American Methodists.

Pak Hyong-Nyong, a graduate of Princeton seminary, wrote the first Korean systematic theology in which he championed extreme fundamentalism (1935). A far better systematic theology came out in 1939. Its author, Chong Kyong-Ok, a graduate of Garrett Theological Seminary, was appreciative of the many advances made in Christian theology and was himself a follower of Karl Barth. From this time on, most

Korean theologians belonged to the orthodox fundamentalist school of Pak or the moderately progressive neo-orthodox group.

From 1940:1956 Korean Christianity suffered a period of theological stagnation. In 1938 the Japanese government ordered all Christians to worship at Shinto shrines. Soon the seminaries were closed, theological journals ceased publication, and foreign missionaries were expelled.

When independence came in 1945 open bickering began between fundamentalists and liberals; denominations were rent with ugly schisms; and ecclesiastical power politics became notorious. Prior to the Korean War, Protestantism appeared disgraceful in the eyes of the world because of its extreme factionalism, says Tong-shik Ryu.

Dr. Kim Jae-Jun (b. 1901) has been called the leading Korean theologian of the pre-1960 period. He studied at Aoyama Gakuin in Japan as well as Princeton and Western Theological Seminary. When the Presbyterian seminary of Pyongyang closed its doors in 1938, Prof. Kim went south to open a new Chosen Theological Seminary in Seoul. As an Old Testament scholar specializing in the prophets of Israel, he opposed the otherworldliness of Protestant orthodoxy. Therefore he urged readers of his articles in *New Man* and *Soldiers of the Cross* (1945-56) to become involved in the rebuilding of the Korean nation.

From 1957 to the present Korea has experienced unprecedented social change. Many seminarians have studied in Europe and America. There are now 20 theological schools, while in 1938 only two existed. Christian literature is widely circulated. An interdenominational monthly magazine entitled *Christian Thought* has been published since 1957 and is of high quality. A valuable magazine in English is the *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*.

Most contemporary Korean theologians are still Western oriented. These can be ultraconservative, fundamentalistic, and anti-ecumenical. Or they can be men trained in European or American seminaries who become Korean exponents of neo-orthodoxy. Such followers of Barth, Bultmann, Tillich and Neibuhr more or less dominate the theological scene today.

More interesting are a third group who are attempting to develop an authentic Korean theology. These theologians try to understand the Gospel in terms of their own culture rather than merely accepting European thought forms. They are concerned about how the Gospel can grow in Asian soil. Prominent examples of this effort are Yun Song-Born's *Christianity and Christian Thought* (1964) and Tongshik Ryu, *Christianity and the Religions of Korea* (1965).

A fourth group of Korean theologians are disciples of the "secular" theologians like Harvey Cox, Pennenberg and Moltmann. *Honest to God* and *The Secular City* were best sellers when translated into Korean. These liberation theologians are usually radical social activists. Faced with the urgent task of modernization, the problem of technology and the fact of urbanization, they refuse to be bound by archaic traditions. According to Tongshik Ryu, the two most prominent radical Christians are Kang Won-Yong, director of the Korean Christian Academy, and So Nam-Dong, a professor of Yonsei University.

Tongshik Ryu calls the coming era in the Korean church "the era of the Holy Spirit". He says it should be a time of freedom, joy, new creativity and dynamic power. Hence, religion cannot remain enslaved to church tradition and literal interpretations of scripture.

When we meet Christ, he must be an indigenous Christ. Rather than proclaiming the unrelated, Western God, the churches in Korea should preach about the Lord of Korean culture and history. Besides honoring Calvin or Wesley, Koreans should praise God for ancient Buddhist priests like Won Hyo and renowned Confucian scholars like Toe' Gye and Yul Gok, says Tongshik Ryu. Secondly, the Seoul professor claims that Christians must give up their traditional otherworldliness and privatized concept of faith. It is meaningless to separate the realm of the sacred from the secular. Besides worshipping God in the church, modern man needs to meet God in the heart of the world.

Thirdly, Tongshik Ryu believes that Korean Christians should develop a theology which gives direction to men today and offers forward-looking leadership. To do so, Koreans must throw off theological traditions inherited from the past and engage in the process of creating anew.<sup>1</sup>

The New Year edition of the Presbyterian journal *Theological Instruction* for 1936 predicted that a Holy Spirit-centered religion would replace the church-centered and Bible-centered Christianities of the past. Who would combine the dynamic power of the West with the quiet, inner power of the East? Korea, the journal answered. Korea could show the fruits of a Spirit-centered religion because Koreans are manly, benevolent, intelligent and wise without being worldly. Korea would produce a Spirit-centered Christianity because from ancient times her people opened their hearts to God in worship and service. So more than 40 years ago there were definite signs for the birth of a dynamic Korea-based new religion of the Holy Spirit.

Prof. Tongshik Ryu is not a member of the Unification Church. Yet his perceptive analysis of Korean theology for the past century throws great light on the successes of Rev. Moon. Korea was prepared to be challenged by a dynamic new religious prophet.

Thoughtful and devout Christians awaited the proclamation of a Spirit-centered new age. The best Korean theologians were saying that individualistic pietism and otherworldliness are inadequate. A few at least recognized the distinctive contribution Korea could make in synthesizing Western activism and Oriental spirituality.

At the same time, anyone who championed such a new vision of Christianity would face opposition from scriptural literalists, bigoted fundamentalists, a faction-ridden Korean Protestantism and a noisy minority of political activists who were using the cloak of religion to hide their leftist sympathies. In the light of Korea's century old theological experience, Rev. Moon's difficulties and remarkable accomplishments become understandable.

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**Notes:**

1. Based on Tongshik Ryu, "Rough Road to Theological Maturity", in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, edited by G.H. Anderson, 1976.