

The Rise of Protestantism in Modern Korea

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The Rise of Protestantism in Modern Korea:

A Sociological Perspective

By

Andrew Eungi Kim

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By Andrew Eungi Kim

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In grateful memory of my parents
*for giving me the strength and courage to live and love,
although they passed away when I was a child*

and my aunt
for loving me like her own child, although she was a nun

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PREFACE

When foreigners visit Korea, one of the things which they find interesting is that red neon crosses dot the skyline of Seoul at night. There is a good reason for the ubiquity of neon crosses—found not only on the top of church buildings but also on the roofs of small shopping plazas in which small churches are located—in Seoul. Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, today comprise nearly one-third of the Korean population. More specifically, Protestant Christianity is the country's largest religion with nearly ten million adherents, comprising about 20 percent of the population. A large number of Catholics, whose total is now nearly 3.8 million or about 8 percent of the population, also adds to the Christian presence in Korea. The remarkable growth of Korean Protestantism in particular is attested to by the fact that Korea boasts some of the largest Protestant churches in the world, including Yoido Full Gospel Church, the world's largest church with nearly 500,000 members today. The vigour of Korean Protestantism is also demonstrated by the fact that Korea now sends the second largest number of overseas missionaries in the world, second only to the United States.

What is extraordinary about the “success” of Protestantism in Korea is that the new religion has established itself as the largest religion in the country in some 130 years since its introduction in 1884. Also striking is the fact that its growth has been achieved in a country with a rich religious tradition, replete with shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Korea also stands alone in international comparisons, for it is the only country in all of Asia where Protestantism has established itself as a major religion. The Korean case also contrasts sharply with its neighbouring countries, namely

China and Japan, where Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, largely failed to make a lasting impact.

The question is: What are the factors which account for the Christian “success story” in Korea? This study argues that there are both religious and non-religious factors which facilitated the rise of Protestantism as the largest religion in Korea today. More specifically, the study shows that the rise of Protestantism in the country has been made possible by the following historical, religious, cultural and social causes. First, one of the most important “religious” factors is that Protestantism was introduced to Korea when its traditional religions, except for Confucianism, had been severely weakened by centuries of government ban. In the absence of a powerful, organised religion in the host society, the new religion was able to grow. In the annals of Christianity, it is a well proven fact that the missionary religion largely failed to penetrate cultures where strong “religious opposition” existed, e.g., the Middle East (Islam) and India (Hinduism). Second, another religious factor for the success of Protestantism in Korea is that the imported faith and traditional religions of Korea share certain common grounds, albeit “artificially” underscored by Korean pastors. A third factor has to do with the timing of the introduction of Protestantism to Korea. At the time of its introduction in the late nineteenth century, the country was faced with a national crisis over its very existence, which prompted the Korean elite to become receptive to the new religion in wishing for Western help in preserving its sovereignty. This alone stands in stark contrast to the experience of Protestant missionaries in China and Japan, where they were generally met with suspicion and hostility. Fourth, from the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s, which is a period of the most rapid church growth in Korea, churches were able to achieve rapid growth, because they served as something akin to a “community centre”

(similar to “ethnic churches” in North America) which provided not only an outlet for spiritual or emotional comfort but also fellowship, information, and practical help to converts and potential converts. These “services” were greatly attractive for those suffering from alienation, social displacement and the perceived sense of relative deprivation caused by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Lastly, an increasing competition among churches and from Buddhism galvanised Korean churches to develop efficient evangelical strategies to target potential converts. Their efforts were guided and justified by the ideology of church growth that became popular in the United States in the 1970s.

This book thus demonstrates that a convergence of factors has facilitated the establishment of Protestantism as the largest religion in Korea. The study illustrates that both religious and non-religious factors have been equally important in making Koreans receptive to the new religion. As a way of closing, the applicability of James Grayson’s theory of “implantation” to the Korean context is assessed. The study affirms the validity of the theory’s arguments that Protestantism succeeded in Korea partly due to the resolution of not only potential contradictions between the new doctrine and the core values of the receiving society but also potential conflicts between the new doctrine and the existing religions of the host society.

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Korea University, Seoul

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea

South Korea (henceforth Korea) has no “official” religion—like the Anglican Church in England—nor is there one dominant religion. Shamanism, Buddhism, and Christianity as well as a whole spectrum of new religious movements co-exist peacefully in one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world. It is not hard to find expressions of shamanism in contemporary Korea: a shamanic ritual called *gut*,¹ in various forms and purposes, is still practiced and an estimated three million Koreans regularly consult shamans and fortune-tellers, whose numbers reportedly hover around 300,000 (Macilgyeongje 2018). Confucianism, albeit more revered and practiced as a set of moral precepts, still attracts a considerable number of devotees: about 76,000 Koreans still identify Confucianism as their religion. Buddhism, which had been the country’s largest religion in terms of membership ever since census on religious population has been taken since 1985, is, according to the nation’s latest census in 2015, the second largest religion with 7.6 million followers or about 15 percent of the total population (National Statistical Office 2016).

¹ Except for certain proper nouns and proper names, transliteration of Korean terms follows the Revised Romanisation of Korean adopted by the Korean government in 2000. What distinguishes the current Romanisation system from the previous versions is that it has eliminated pronunciation symbols and is more faithful to the actual Korean pronunciation.

More interestingly, it is the rise of Protestant Christianity as the largest religion which sets Korea apart from all other countries in Asia.² According to the latest census in 2015, Protestantism, which was introduced to Korea in 1884, is the country's largest religion with nearly ten million adherents, comprising about 20 percent of the country's 49 million population (see Table 1 and Figure 1).³ That is, about one in every five South Korean is Protestant. Adding to the Christian presence in Korea is a large number of Catholics whose total is now nearly 3.8 million or about 8 percent of the population. Together, Protestant and Catholic Christians comprise nearly a third of the Korean population.⁴

² Singapore is also known to have a sizable number of Protestants, with the latter accounting for about 10 percent of the total population, according to the 2020 census (CNA 2021).

³ A recent survey shows that the growth of Protestantism may be stagnating. For example, a 2021 survey by Gallup Korea (2021) finds that Protestant Christians comprised 17 percent of the Korean population, followed by Buddhists with 16 percent and Catholics with 6 percent. Another survey by Hankook Research in 2021, however, shows that the number of Protestants is not declining, as 20 percent of the Korean population identified themselves as adherents of the religion, followed by Buddhism with 17 percent and Catholics with 11 percent (Korea JoongAng Daily 2022). Notwithstanding the difference in these survey results, a decline in membership is predicted for Protestantism in the near future. Such projection will be either verified or refuted in the next census in 2025.

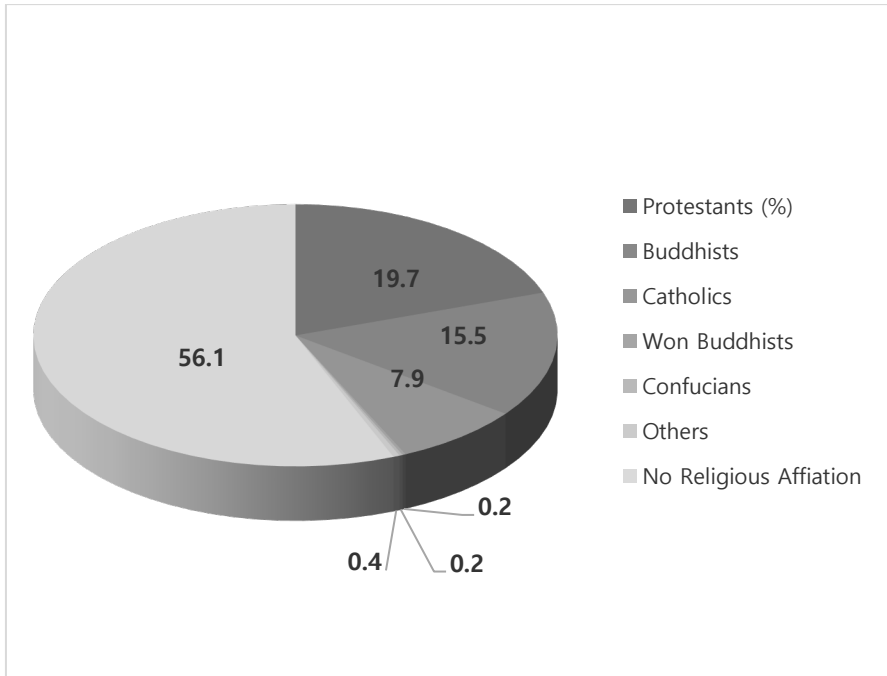
⁴ One noteworthy fact about the religious landscape in Korea is that more than a half of Koreans reportedly profess no religious affiliation. According to the 2015 census, for example, 56.1 percent of Koreans had no religious affiliation (see Table 1), while the 2021 Gallup Korea survey shows that 60 percent of its respondents were unaffiliated with any religion. Both figures are significantly higher than the world average, as only 16 percent of the world population was unaffiliated with any religion as of 2015 (Pew Research Center 2017).

Table 0.1: Religious Population in South Korea (in thousands; percentage of total population)⁵

	Religious Population in South Korea			
	1985	1995	2005	2015
Total Population	40,448	43,834	46,352	49,052
Protestants	6,489 (16.1%)	8,505 (19.4)	8,446 (18.2)	9,676 (19.7)
Buddhists	8,059 (19.9)	10,154 (23.2)	10,588 (22.8)	7,619 (15.5)
Catholics	1,865 (4.6)	2,885 (6.6)	5,015 (10.8)	3,890 (7.9)
Won Buddhists	92 (0.2)	86 (0.2)	129 (0.3)	84 (0.2)
Confucians	483 (1.2)	210 (0.5)	104 (0.2)	76 (0.2)
Others	212 (0.5)	260 (0.6)	245 (0.5)	208 (0.4)
No Religious Affiliation	23,216 (57.4)	21,735 (49.6)	21,826 (47.1)	27,499 (56.1)

Source: National Statistical Office (1987, 1997, 2006, 2016).

⁵ Data for the religious population in Korea have been compiled by asking the question “What is your religion?”

Figure 0.1: Religious Population in South Korea in 2015

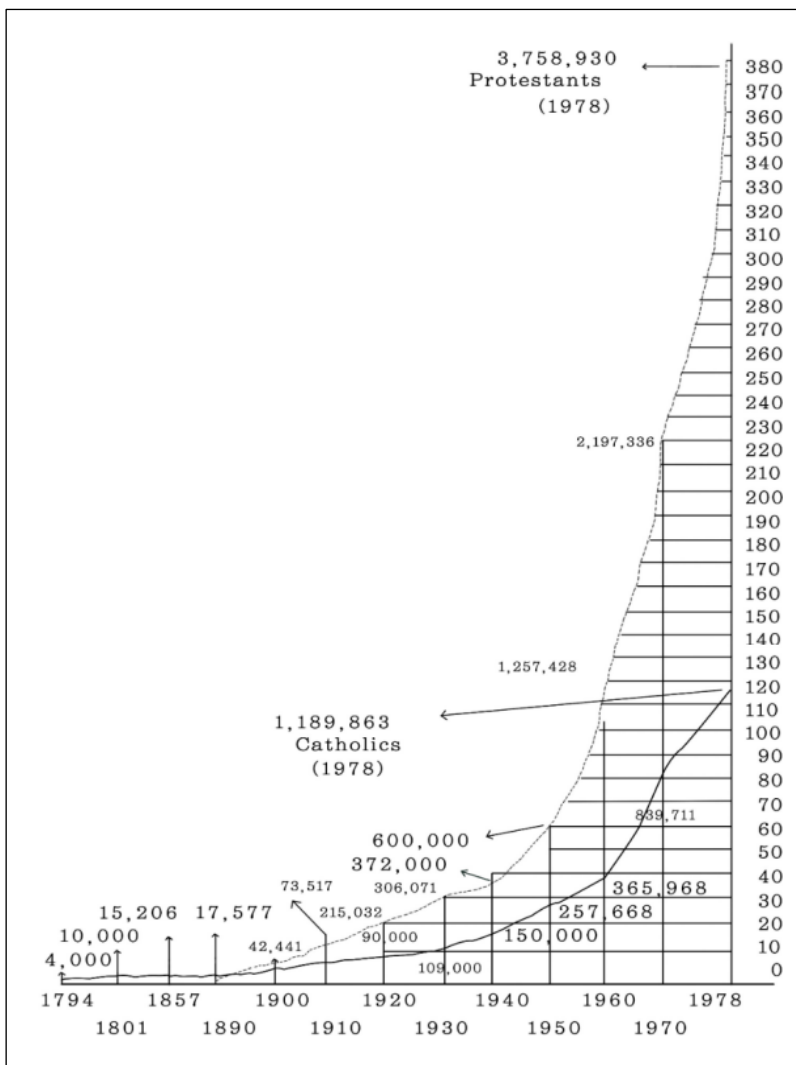
Source: National Statistical Office (2016).

The growth of Protestantism had been particularly pronounced from the early 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the period of the country's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Since the early 1960s, when Korea's Protestants scarcely topped the one million mark, the number of Protestant Christians increased faster than in any other country, nearly doubling every decade (see Table 2 and Figure 2). Industrialisation, which is usually believed to cause a decline in religion, seems to have helped spur the growth of the new religion in Korea. Protestantism in modern-era Korea is also an urban phenomenon, as a vast majority of Christians live in cities and urban centres.

Table 0.2: The Number of Protestant Christians, 1950–2005

Year	Number of Members	Growth Rate (%)	Total Population (in thousands)
1950	500,198	-	20,412
1960	623,072	24.6	24,989
1970	3,192,621	512.4	31,435
1980	5,001,491	56.7	37,406
1985	6,489,282	29.8	40,419
1991	8,037,464	23.9	44,452
1995	8,760,336	9.0	44,553
2005	8,616,438	-1.6	47,041

Sources: For the 1950, 1960, 1970 and 1980 data, see Korea Research Institute of Religion and Society (1993); for the 1985 datum, see National Statistical Office (1987); for the 1991, 1995 and 2005 data, see National Statistical Office (1991, 1997, 2006).

Figure 0.2: Expansion of Christian Population, 1794–1978⁶

Source: Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development (1982, 144).

⁶ While the numerical figures are not accurate, this figure gives you a “visual” image of the rapid growth of Christianity during the specified periods.

The phenomenal growth of Korean Protestantism is attested to by the fact that Korea boasts some of the largest Protestant churches in the world. Metropolitan Seoul is home to 23 of the 50 largest churches in the world, with many of these megachurches being characterised by Pentecostal theology and worship (Freston 2001, 62). In fact, five of the ten largest churches in the world are found in Seoul, a “city of churches” (Draper et al. 1994). Seoul is home to not only the world’s largest congregation—Yoido Full Gospel Church which currently boasts nearly 500,000 members—but also the world’s largest and second largest Presbyterian churches: Yeongnak Church (60,000 members in 2006) and Choonghyun Church (19,730 members in 2008). The world’s largest Methodist church—Geumnan Methodist Church (100,000 members in 2009)—and the largest Baptist church in the world—Seongnak Baptist Church (130,000 members in 2009)—are also found in the city (Shin 2015).⁷

Partly as both a cause and consequence of the establishment of the large number of megachurches, there were, as of 2018, 126 denominations (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2018), and over 78,000 churches.⁸ The largest denominations in terms of membership in Korea are Presbyterian (33 percent), Methodist (22 percent), Holiness (16 percent), Baptist (11 percent), and Full Gospel (8 percent). The rest, i.e., about ten percent of the total number of Protestant churches, comprises independent churches.

⁷ Korea also has a large number of megachurches, i.e., churches which have more than 2,000 people in average weekend attendance, estimated to total around 900 (Kim, J. 2020, 14). The United States reportedly boasts the largest number of megachurches in the world with more than 1,750. Given that the total number of churches in the latter is about five times larger than that of the former (350,000 vs 70,000), such large number of megachurches in Korea is noteworthy.

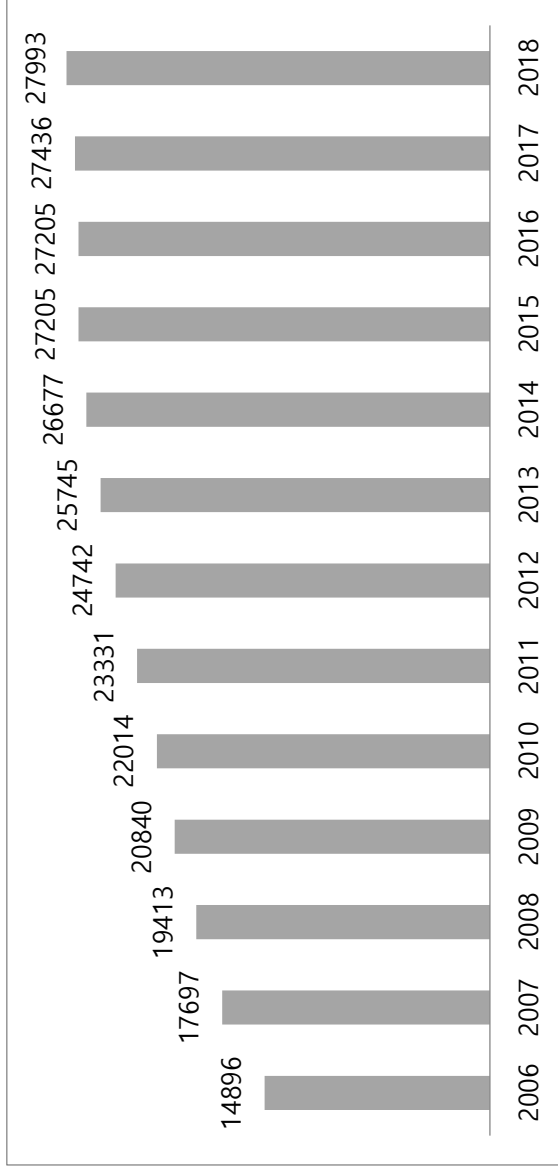
⁸ The reason for the existence of relatively many denominations in Korea is that the total includes many Presbyterian, Methodist, and Holiness sub-denominations.

The dynamism of Protestantism in Korea is also attested to by the fact that Korean churches collectively now send more missionaries abroad than most other countries (see Figure 3). According to the data compiled by the Korea World Missions Association, as of the end of 2018, Korean churches sent 27,993 missionaries to 171 countries (Gidokilbo 2019). The total, which is second only to the United States, set the record for the highest number of Korean missionaries sent abroad since the group began compiling the relevant data since 2006. Nearly 60 percent of Korean missionaries who are sent overseas are stationed in other Asian countries. Korean churches began sending missionaries abroad in earnest since the early 1980s, and by 1998 Korea already had nearly 8,000 missionaries (4,700 ordained ministers and 3,200 lay evangelists) stationed overseas, which was the third highest in the world after the United States and the United Kingdom (Kukminilbo 1998).⁹ One interesting aspect of missionary efforts from Korea, past and present, is that they are largely done by individual churches, with very little collective or joint effort from denominations.

A compelling manifestation of the phenomenal expansion of Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, is further demonstrated by the fact that a large proportion of the country's heads of state, past and present, were and are Christians, at least nominally. Rhee Syngman (1875–1965), who served as the first president of the Republic of Korea from 1948 to 1960, was Protestant, and his successor, Chang Myon (1899–1966), who served as the Prime Minister from 1960 to 1961, during which the country

⁹ Amazingly enough, Korea began sending missionaries overseas as early as 1912, less than three decades since the introduction of Protestantism into Korea. Three missionaries were sent to China in that year. In the post-war era, the first Korean missionary was sent overseas as early as 1956, when Youngnak Church sent a missionary to Taiwan.

Figure 0.3: Number of Korean Missionaries Sent Abroad, 2006–2018



Source: Gidokilbo (2019).

adopted a parliamentary system, was Roman Catholic.¹⁰ Chun Doo-hwan (1931–2021), who served as the president of South Korea from 1980 to 1988 was Catholic, although he became a Buddhist in later life, while his successor Kim Young-Sam (1927–2015), who was in office from 1993 to 1998, was a Presbyterian elder. Former president Kim Dae-jung (1924–2009), in office from 1998 to 2003, was Catholic, as was his immediate successor Roh Moo-hyun (1946–2009), in office from 2003–2008, known to have lapsed while practising some form of Buddhism in later years. Lee Myung-bak (b. 1941), who was in office from 2008 to 2013, is a Presbyterian elder. Moon Jae-in (b. 1953), who served as the country's 12th president between 2017 and 2022, is Catholic, as is the incumbent president Yun Suk-yeol. What all of this means is that nine out of thirteen heads of state the country has ever had were and are Christians, either Catholic or Protestant, practicing or non-practicing.

As for the characteristics of Korean Protestantism, its theological orientation in general has been “conservative” or “fundamental,” characterised by evangelical and charismatic Christianity, emphasising the belief in the will and power of God, the sinful estate of human being, salvation of individuals through the grace of God and redemption through Christ, and the need for personal conversion, i.e., being “born again.” Similar to its counterparts in other parts of the world, theological fundamentalism in Korea emphasises the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, stresses the importance of evangelism, and accentuates the ultimate authority and infallibility of the Bible, which is usually understood “literally” and is believed to be “inerrable.” While there are several reasons why Korean churches are theologically conservative, the most important

¹⁰ Yun Posun (1897–1990), who served as the president of the country from 1960 to 1962, was Protestant Christian.

factor is the overwhelming influence of the early missionaries, most of whom came from the United States, a country well-known for its Christian fundamentalism. According to Allen D. Clark (1987), a total of 1,952 foreign missionaries had worked in Korea from 1893 to 1983, out of which 1,710 were Americans, representing about 88 percent of the total. In other words, nearly nine out of every ten missionaries in Korea had been Americans, manifesting a very close relationship that existed between American Christianity and its counterpart in Korea. It is also worth noting that a large majority of the missionaries to Korea were sent by the conservative Presbyterian and Methodist mission bodies in the United States, particularly the former.

Accordingly, American missionaries were largely informed by “theologically conservative Presbyterianism, especially that of Calvinistic theology, which held as its central tenets the belief in Christ’s atonement, premillennialist eschatology, and the inerrancy and supernatural authority of the Bible” (Chong 2008, 25). The early missionaries also disseminated only “simplified” theology to Koreans and insisted on strict adherence to the doctrine. As Deokju Lee (1997) argues, the theology of early missionaries from the United States and Canada was largely conservative and their faith was strongly rooted in Puritanism, pietism—with its emphasis on individual piety and a fervent Christian life—and evangelicalism. Other factors for the conservative nature of Korean theological orientation include a thorough permeation of the conservative Confucian tradition in Korean culture and society, the anxiety created by the presence of belligerent North Korea, the existence of a sizable number of North Korean refugees among the leadership of the Protestant community, a large number of Korean pastors who have been educated in conservative theological schools in the United States, and “the evolution of the church relatively isolated from Western

theological developments, especially liberal Christianity” (Chong 2008, 25).

Many Korean churches, irrespective of denominational affiliation, embrace faith healing and speaking in tongues, both of which are, strictly speaking, Pentecostal. In fact, theological distinctiveness among Korean denominations is rather blurred, as a large number of Korean churches, regardless of denominational ties, are Pentecostal in beliefs and practices as well as in theological outlook (Kim, A. 2013). As Cox (1995, 221) perceptively observes in *Fire from Heaven*, “the traditional western denominational labels mean very little” in discussing Korean Protestantism. The “Pentecostalisation” of Korean churches is clearly evident in their style of worship and preaching, as they largely believe in faith healing, pray for the sick, pray for supernatural miracles and encourage the congregation to speak in tongues.

Most denominations and churches in Korea are socially and politically conservative as well. And anti-communism has played an important role. The communist regime’s brutality against Christians during the Korean War (1950–1953)—Christians in areas captured by invading communist forces were often killed or captured and marched to the north—hardened the enmity of Christians toward communism in general and the northern regime in particular. The influx of a large number of North Korean Christian refugees into the south prior to and during the Korean War further reinforced the conservatism of Korean Protestantism (Kang, I. 2004). This is why many Protestant Christians in South Korea have viewed communism as a mortal enemy, and this helps explain why most Korean Protestant churches had been loyal to the succession of anti-communist, authoritarian regimes from the 1950s to the 1980s, often ignoring anti-democratic nature of their rule.

Another noteworthy fact about Korean Protestantism is its adherents' devotional fervour and enthusiasm. In terms of the frequency of prayers and Bible reading, participation in Bible study, observance of the Sabbath, tithing, and participation in revival meetings, Korean Christians are said to be second to none, as indicated by many international surveys. The frequency of worship services is also notable. Most churches hold worship services several times on weekdays, with Wednesday and Friday worship services being the most common. Practically every Korean church also holds predawn prayer meetings between 4 and 6 in the morning every day. Fasting prayers and healing prayers, both of which are often held also at *gidowon* or prayer centres, are very popular among Korean Christians. The practice of fasting prayers in particular is seen as a demonstration of the depth of one's faith. Another characteristic of Korean Protestantism is that, unlike North America and Europe where there is a wide gap between the number of people who identify themselves as Christians and church attendance, there is relatively much smaller gap between Christian identification and actual church attendance in Korea.

As for the question of why it was Protestant Christianity rather than Catholic Christianity which was more successful in Korea, there are multiple causal factors. What gave Protestantism a particular advantage over Catholicism was that a much larger number of Protestant missionaries, pastors and churches in comparison to their Catholic counterparts allowed the former to outpace the latter in attracting people into its churches (Baker 2016). Other factors for the greater success of Protestantism in Korea include the following: Protestant identification with modern schools and hospitals and with anti-Japanese nationalism (because of its resistance to Shinto rituals), both of which will be discussed in greater detail below, the participatory nature of Protestant rituals (the Catholic mass was in Latin

until the early 1960s), and the granting of important roles (and titles) to lay men and women in Protestant congregations.

Research Question and Aim of the Book

What is remarkable about the “success story” of Protestantism in Korea is that the imported faith established itself as the largest religion in the country in some 130 years since its introduction in 1884. The fact that the new religion has successfully taken roots in a country which has a rich religious tradition, replete with time-honoured religions such as shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism, is also noteworthy. Another significant fact is that Korea is the only country in all of Asia where Protestant Christianity has established itself as a major religion, as nearly one-fifths of the population has converted to the new religion. The Christian success in Korea also contrasts sharply with the failure of Christianity, either Catholicism or Protestantism, to make a lasting impact in China and Japan, the neighbouring countries with strikingly similar social organisational arrangements and shared cultural traditions and practices, especially those pertaining to Confucian and Buddhist influences. Similar missionary efforts were made in these countries, but Christianity largely failed to “penetrate” the religious landscape of these countries. For example, the absolute number of Christians in China may be higher than that of Korea now, but the proportion of Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, in the total population of the former is believed to be less than four percent today.¹¹ The presence of Christianity in Japan is even more negligible, as the number of Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, is less than a million or about .8

¹¹ In Taiwan, the proportion of Christians in the total population reportedly comprises about five percent.