

# The Flourishing Roman Catholic Church in Korea: Why?

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## Abstract

South and North American countries, and other traditional Catholic states in Europe, have been seeing sharp declines in their ranks in the past few decades, especially the number of people entering the priesthood, and the falling attendance of members of the congregation at Mass. The Catholic Church in the world is in a state of radical transition and is experiencing profound and dramatic changes following the close of Vatican Council II, 40 years ago. In contrast, the Catholic Church in Korea is thriving. This study examines the possible causes connected to the increase in membership in the Catholic Church, focusing upon socio-cultural factors, and exploring the questions of how these aspects of unique development were historically and structurally related to the dynamics of Catholicism in Korea, and its disparity between external growth and internal maturity.

**Key Words:** Catholicism, Protestantism, Modernization, Industrialization, Secularization.

## I. Introduction

Catholic Churches in Latin America, Europe, and North America (e.g., USA and Canada) have seen sharp decline in their ranks in the past few decades, with a dwindling priesthood and falling attendance at Mass. Contributing to the decline were allegations of sexual abuse of young people and subsequent cover-ups (some well-founded, others not). Allegations of pedophilia by Catholic clergy severely tarnished the authority, and clerical image, of the Church. Subsequent to the close of the Vatican Council II (1962-1965), the Catholic Church has been in a state of radical transition and has experienced profound and dramatic changes, during the past 40 years. However, in mark contrast, the Catholic Church in Korea has thrived. Statistics Korea (2006) reported that the Catholic Church has increased its membership by 74.4% in the last ten years (1985-1995), while membership in Buddhism increased by only 3.9%, while the Korean Protestant Church, mired in various controversies of their own, has been struggling with a slow decline in the number of followers (-1.6%).

In Korea, the growth of Christianity coincided with modernization and industrialization which has led to economic prosperity. Classical theory of sociology of religion (Inglis 1963: 90) argues that "modernity" is accompanied by a general falling off of traditional religious belief and practice. Challenging this theory is the explosive growth of Christianity in Korea. Supporting the notion that social environment influencing social development is unique for each country. Many contemporary theorists have critiqued the secularization thesis, for example Scott M. Thomas (2005), asserting that the revival or resurgence of religion -- including evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians in the developed world -- is part of a more wide-ranging global phenomenon that represents a crisis of modernity itself.

Any explanation of the recent trend seen in Korea must take into account a number of

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interrelated factors without overemphasizing any single component. Religious conversion consists of changes in a multiple-faceted nature of “the individual’s meaning system and self, it has social, psychological, and ideational components” (McGuire 1992: 74). For example, critical factors contributing to this trend is the radical political, economical and social transition Korea has undergone in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This study examines the possible causes related to the recent increase in membership in the Korean Catholic Church, exploring how the aspects of growth were mutually and structurally related to the dynamics of Catholicism in Korea.

## II. Christianity and Social Changes

Classical social theorists, such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim, observed that modernization lead to increased secularization resulting in the attenuation of institutional religions (Martin 1978). The relationship between participation in religion and “secularization thesis” has been the focus of considerable academic interests in the West. Industrialization assumed that migration to urban areas involves the fracturing of traditional community ties, leading to an increase in anonymity and individualization, destroying stable human relationships. This leaves the individual vulnerable when exposed to a plurality of ideas and beliefs, attenuating an individual’s traditional religious belief and practice. Peter Berger (1979: 26) noted, “The impact of modernity on religion is commonly seen in terms of the process of secularization, which can be described as one in which religion loses its hold on the level both of institutions and human consciousness.”

Religion in the West, especially in Europe, has been peripheral in the modern world, and traditional beliefs were scorned by modern scientists and intellectuals. In contrast, modernization was introduced and driven by Christian missionaries in Korea. Koreans “viewed the acceptance of the Gospel not only as a means of entry into modern society but also as an access to what is believed to be a more advanced civilization.” (A. Kim 2000: 114) Modernization originating from the West was associated with freedom, democracy, and progress for Koreans. People quite naturally want to associate themselves with modernity, and insofar as they see Christianity as the source of prosperity, they will be more likely to accept it as an important influence in their lives.

Korea is one of most rapidly industrializing and urbanizing nations in the world, as such Christianity was profoundly influenced by the onrush of modernization, and at the same time, there was astonishing growth in the number of converts to Christianity. This is a rare case in the history of Christian mission in the world. The question arises then, of how these two trends—modernization and rapid growth of religion—worked together in Korea. What propelled the dramatic growth, especially the explosive growth of Protestantism during the 1970s, and massive migration into Catholicism recently?

Numerous theories have been put forward to explain the occurrence of such phenomena, the entire scope of which can not be reviewed here; however, several of the more popular explanations deserve mention. Any explanation of a complex social and political phenomenon always presents a dilemma between the presentation of generalizations and exceptions. In scholarly discussions, the variable historical meanings and social contents of religion as a phenomenon are the concerns of those favoring a socio-historical approach, and hence they should be understood in terms of the concrete society, theology and culture in which they were born, and in which they play an active role.

Modernization, industrialization, and urbanization are interrelated and linked, and social changes often seen as a corollary of secularization, itself one of the typical processes of modernization. However, the global resurgence of religion in secular domains has led prominent scholars such as Jürgen Habermas (1997) to pronounce that modernity is yet an

“unfinished project,” or “unfulfilled promises of modernity,” in speculating about a new “post secular” age. Religion is still a significant influencing factor in voting patterns, and in formulating ideology about public policy, and securing political careers in the United States, and other parts of the world. This suggests that “the secularistic certainty is losing ground that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of accelerated modernization.”<sup>1</sup> The global resurgence of religion coincides with the re-emergence of policies that advocates international security to be the top priority. Likewise, in *The Desecularization of the World*, Peter Berger (1999: 2) also admits the need for a reexamination of “mistakes of secularization theory” due to “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” including Korea.

The influence of religious fundamentalism has been shown not only in domestic politics but also on the agenda of international affairs. After 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, no one is in doubt anymore that religion is high on the agenda of political affairs. Roof (1979) offers explanations of church growth through statistical research, stating that the "contextual factors" (the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the communities surrounding a church) has a 56% influence, and "institutional factors" that a church might hope to control has a 44% influence, in determining church growth. Religion, like other institutional realms, is embedded in a broad process of socio-cultural, political, and economic changes, and in this process religion is not passive, as is so often depicted in secularization or modernization theory.

### III. Main Factors of Roman Catholic Church Growth in Korea

Since the introduction of Christianity into China by Nestorian missionaries in 635 C.E (Ching 1993), the population of Christians in China still remain about 3 percent of the population of China.<sup>2</sup> While in South Korea there has been an explosive growth of the Christian population in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is recognized as the most successful case of Evangelization in the world. In the era of pre-modern Korea, religious tradition had been dominated by Buddhism and then later by Confucianism until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In modern Korea, Christianity is now the foremost religion of choice (29.2% of population, of which 18.3% are Protestants and 10.9% Roman Catholics), displacing Buddhism with 22.8% of the population who have indicated their religious orientation<sup>3</sup> (South Korean National Statistics Office, 2006).

Reliable data pertaining to religious belief and the Korean population can be obtained from the Korean National Statistical Office. Data from the 2005 census is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Population and Religion in Korea

(Units: 1,000 and %)

	1995		2005		Growth	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Total Population	44,554	100.0	47,041	100.0	2,488	5.6
Religion Indicated	22,598	50.7	24,971	53.1	2,373	10.5

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas , “A ‘post-secular’ society – what does that mean?.” <http://www.resetdoc.org>. (Accessed 08/14/10).

<sup>2</sup> Amy Patterson Neubert, “Prof: Christians remain a small minority in China today.” <http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/research/2010/100726T-YangChina.html> (accessed 15/06/10).

<sup>3</sup> Figures compiled by the South Korean National Statistical Office 2006. *NSO online KOSIS database*.

Buddhism	10,321	23.2	10,726	22.8	405	3.9
Protestantism	8,760	19.7	8,616	18.3	-144	-1.6
Catholicism	2,951	6.6	5,146	10.9	2,195	74.4
Confucianism	211	0.5	105	0.2	-106	-50.4
Won Buddhism	87	0.2	130	0.3	43	49.6
Other	268	0.6	247	0.5	-21	-7.7
No Religion	21,953	49.3	22,070	46.9	117	0.5

Source: National Statistics Office, 2006.

The Protestant Church witnessed enthusiastic growth in the 1970s and 80s, while the Catholic Church remained relatively static. However, since the 1990's, there has been a reverse in this trend with the Catholic Church rapidly growing while the Protestant Church remained static. What factors came into play for this to have occurred?

The growth or decline of any organized religion cannot be explained adequately without reference to a large number of internal and external factors. Taxonomy of factors needs to be developed, and then applied in appraising South-Korea's third-largest denominational group, the Roman Catholic Church. It is thought that the interactional effects of internal (i.e., institutional) and external (i.e., social/cultural) factors has led to a rapid growth of the Catholic Church in Korea recently.

## 1. Contribution of Christians to Korean Modernization

We have witnessed a strong growth sustained in a vastly modernized, industrialized, urbanized and secularized Korean society. Christianity in Korea, even in its early stages of development, has taken on a vital role in introducing new modern ideas. Upon closer examination of this development, it is clear that the vitality of Christianity in Korea was primarily due to the Christian's role as a principal agent in promoting economic, political and social modernization.

Even though Protestantism (in 1884) was introduced a century later than Catholicism (in 1784), Protestantism flourished and experienced greater growth. Korean society at that time was decadent and plagued by political, social and economic chaos. In the late 1800's through the early 1900's was a period of culmination of political and social instability of the Joseon dynasty, eventually falling under the power of Japanese colonization in 1910. The traditional society was crumbling and many Koreans turned with hope to the *Gaehwa* (modernization) to defend their nation's independence. The Christian missionary movement in the third world, especially during the late nineteenth century, was criticized as a guider of Western imperialists. In fact, colonialism afflicting the Koreans was not stemming from a Western power but an Asiatic one, Japan. As Min Kyoungbae (2005: 311) observed, "the (Protestant) missionaries, however, contributed to a tremendous extent for the cause of the achievement of the ideals of the Independence Movement."

One century of persecution strengthened the faith of the Catholics, and saw the death of close to 10,000 martyrs. But at the same time it was a great obstruction to the normal development of the Catholic Church in Korea. As a result, at the end of 19th century, following greater religious freedom in Korea, Catholic missionaries, mostly of French origin, showed little interest in their own social promotion and hesitated to take leadership roles during the time of rapid modernization. French missionaries were very conservative,

theologically,<sup>4</sup> and maintained dualistic worldviews which demarcated the sacred from the secular. They experienced a great loss and secularization of its institutions by anti-religious movements in a rapid transition of modernization through the French Revolution during the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (G. Ro, 1988).

The Catholic Church was started by lay people, but once, missionaries entered Korea, clericalism was dominant over the church hierarchy, and led to the lay leadership being devalued. They established schools, but were limited to elementary schools and a few vocational schools, hospitals, orphanages and other organizations. They were very slow to establish secondary or university level schools, and to recruit young intellectuals. While the Catholic Church in 1910 had established 124 schools, none were universities or secondary schools, other than the occasional seminary. In contrast, the Protestants established five universities, including the first medical college, and one women's college.<sup>5</sup> Protestant churches were quickly adopted by the progressives and elites in the "social anomie," who were "attempting to solve social and political problems" (M. Yi 2004: 41). After young intellectuals were educated in Protestant mission schools, they continued to become respected national leaders, like Rhee Syngman,<sup>6</sup> Yi Sangjae, Jo Mansik, An Changho, etc. Moreover, Protestant missionaries sent the young elite to study abroad, mainly to the US. They later became pioneers for modernization and social reform in every aspects of Korea. Later, this disparity in establishing higher level of educational institutions proved to be a decisive difference between the Protestants and Catholics in influencing the growth and social prominence of the church.

In its inception, Christianity was appealing to the Korean intellectuals not only because it was new religion from the West, a developed world, but also because of its association with civilization, namely modernity. The identification of Christianity "as a gateway to modernity and success, both personal and national, acquired even more impetus during the period of rapid economic development from the early 1960s and the end of 1980s. Koreans' admiration of Western culture and its economic achievements played a decisive role in encouraging such identification" (A. Kim 2000: 113). Modernization, Westernization and Americanization are synonymous terms in Korea, and the explosive growth of Christianity is associated with these social changes. Christianity has played a significant role in the process of modernization, and parallel social changes in Korea during the last two centuries, an achievement that happened with the help of western missionaries, especially from America.

## 2. Industrialization and Social Justice Movement

The "Student Rebellions" on April 19, 1960, led to the resignation of the autocratic President Rhee Syngman. Then, Jang Myeon took the office during the Second Republic. The Jang administration experienced political and social instability, and was eventually overthrown by General Park Chunghee's in a military coup (the "*5-16 coup d'état*"), on May 16, 1961. General Park's regime drafted and implemented the Five Year Economic

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<sup>4</sup> Roman Catholic Church, especially Pope Pius X, condemned Modernism both its aims and ideas which was particularly prominent in France and Britain. Moreover, many French missionaries were deeply influenced spiritually by extremely rigorous Jansenism.

<sup>5</sup> *Hanguk Catholic Daesajeon* (Catholic Encyclopedia in Korea) (Seoul: Hanguk Gyohosa Yonguso, 1985), pp. 322-324.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article, Korean words, personal names, and place names have been transliterated according to the Revised Romanization system of Korean (RR, also called South Korean or Ministry of Culture (MC) 2000) except already recognized internationally certain names, i.e. Rhee Syngman or Park Chunghee and author's name already published in English Journals. In all cases when Korean authors are referenced, it has been done in the traditional Korean style, family name first followed by given names.

Development Plan. His policy of “Economy First” started Korea on a path of unprecedented economic growth and self-reliance, and is recognized as ushering the era of modernization in Korea.

Prior to the 1950s, Korea was primarily an agriculturally based economy. The push toward industrialization brought rapid growth and urbanization. Between 1945 and 1985, the urban regions of the country saw massive migration from the rural (countryside) regions to the urban regions. The urban population grew from 14.5 percent to 65.4 percent of the total population of Korea, and reached 75.4% in 1990.<sup>7</sup> Industrialization was born of capitalism and the economy grew rapidly. The implementation of the series of the economic plans was so successful that Korea was considered one of the world's fastest growing economies from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. At the same time, there was a dramatic growth of the number of Christians (Table 2.). Developmental motif associated with the philosophy of prosperity at any cost swept over society, even in religion.

Table 2. Growth of the Protestant Church in Korea

Year	1960	1970	1977	1985	1991	1995	2005
Population	623,072	3,192,621	5,001,491	6,489,282	8,037,464	8,760,336	8,616,438
% Yearly Growth	24.6%	412.4%	56.7%	29.7%	23.9%	8.9%	-1.6%

Source: Research Institute for Korean Religion and Society, Hanguk Jonggyo Yongam (Yearbook on Korean Religions, 1993); Ministry of Culture and Information, ROK Government, Authorized Religion and Religious Organizations (1977); National Statistics, Population and Housing Census (1991, 1995, 2005).

As shown in Table 2, the explosive growth of the Protestant population peaked in 1970 followed by a gradual decline of the growth until the 1990's. During the late 1990's, there was a sharp downward decline, and even a negative growth rate, for the first time for Protestants in Korea.

Rapid industrialization and concentration of population in urban areas accompanied many social changes. During this period of rapid urbanization, the Christian churches were established in urban areas. Industrialization led to people moving from farms into cities where jobs were more readily available, consequently resulting in the deterioration of traditional face-to-face social interactions and relations (loss of a sense of community), and a sense of belonging. Christian churches seem to have filled the void, as a substitute community, providing a strong sense of belonging that can ameliorate their feelings of anxiety and suffering.

The economy grew rapidly under a series of military dictatorships throughout the industrialization periods. Koreans were engaged in protests demanding democracy, restoring social justice and human rights. This struggle took the form of *Minjung* Theology or Indigenized Liberation Theology. *Minjung* (grassroots or people) Theology emerged in the 1970s among the progressive theologians in the struggle for social justice and human rights. The movement encouraged the development of the sociopolitical hermeneutics of the Christian Gospel and applied Christian ethics to social problems. It is a grassroots theology, based on the "image of God" concept in Genesis 1:26-27, but also incorporates the traditional Korean emotion of *Han*. Suh Namdong (1981: 55) noted “*Han* is an underlying feeling of Korean people. On the one hand, it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and

<sup>7</sup> Based on information from Korea Institute for Population and Health, *Journal of Population and Health Studies* [Seoul], 8, No. 2, December 1988, 19 & 22. [http://www.mongabay.com/history/south\\_korea/south\\_korea-urbanization.html](http://www.mongabay.com/history/south_korea/south_korea-urbanization.html) (accessed 15/08/10).

nothingness. On the other, it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings.”

Emerging social justice movement gave rise to several Christian social missions in the 1960s, such as the Catholic Farmers Movement and the Protestant Urban Industrial Mission, which sought better wages and working conditions for workers. Cooperating with *Jaebeol* (business conglomerate), the military government imprisoned many of their union leaders and activists, announcing the movement a threat to social stability. Conservative Protestant leaders, mostly pro-Americanism, organized National Prayer Breakfast Meetings for the president, and praised the notorious dictators and often acted as an ideological bulwark against Communism, largely ignored the call of social demands.

This oppressive social structure was radically challenged by the Catholic Church along with a few Progressive Protestants. Under the rule of missionary bishops in Catholic Church until 1950's, the missionaries had advocated a policy of separation of church and state. The Roman Catholic structure is hierarchical and dominated by the clerics and thereby, discourages lay participation in church governance. When Ito Hirobumi was assassinated by An Junggeun, a Korean independence activist and devout Catholic at the Harbin Railway Station on October 26, 1909, Archbishop of Seoul, French missionary Augustine Mutel, did not permit pastoral visits to An in prison, and moreover suspended Father Wilhelm, French priest, who defied the order and visited An Junggeun (G. Ro 1988). No Catholic was listed among the 33 leaders who signed the Korean Declaration of Independence in 1919.

The Second Vatican Council sought greater church openness to the modern world. Korean bishops and priests outnumbered the missionaries in the 1960s. Since then, Catholic Church became actively involved in social reform and justice, and the democratic movement. The first clash with government occurred, when Bishop Ji Haksun, the bishop of Wonju, was arrested by the KCIA (Korea Central Intelligence Agency) in 1974, charged with aiding dissident students and activists — while in custody in the Catholic hospital at Myeong-dong cathedral, he issued public statements denouncing the Yusin Constitution, which bestowed enormous powers to the president. The arrest of Bishop Ji outraged the Catholic Church, and progressive and younger priests formed the “Catholic Priests Association for Justice” (CPAJ) in the same year.

The progressive leader Cardinal Kim Souhwan stood at the forefront of the social justice movement and helped protect student activists from the police, and began to speak openly against the government and their use of secret police methods to silence critics and the opposition. The strong message of the Catholic Church opposing corruption and oppression of the military regime and accompanying social campaigns culminated in the nationwide street protests that lead to the epoch of Park Jongcheol incident, revealed by the Catholic Priest Association for Justice, and eventually lead to the end of the series of military rule in 1987. Over the next two decades, the Myeong-dong Cathedral became as sanctuary from the police arrest and was known as the “Sanctuary of Korean Democracy” and Catholic Church was known as a “Patron of Human Right and Social Justice” (Chu 2009: 285).

The Catholic Church had by this time commitment to championing social justice, human rights, the environment, ethical standards, and various other social issues. While the Protestant Church, with their numerous denominations, were unable to unite their voices, but rather remained pietistic and spiritually oriented, and tolerated government actions in the name of national or ideological security. The Catholic Church was also experiencing intense internal conflicts between the conservative (mainly senior priests and bishops) and progressive young priests. The conservatives established the “Catholic Priests Association for Save a Nation” in 1977, in opposition to the “Catholic Priests Association for Justice.” Since then, the two factions have been engaged in intense opposition regarding the level Catholic Church commitment to the social justice and democratization movement in Korea. The chair, Cardinal Kim, of the Leadership of Korean Bishops' Conference, was replaced by

conservative Bishop Kim Namsu and Archbishop Yi Munhi<sup>8</sup> in 1987 (the Conference has since been dominated by conservative chairs to date). This action, along with others, was seen to suppress the progressive factions of lay and priest activists, by the church hierarchy. Although there were internal fractions and disputes within the church, the message to the public society was united through the representative spokesperson of the Korean Bishops' Conference.

The Catholic Church, third among the three major religions after Buddhism and Protestant, had one central body, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea, along with worldwide international ties and the Vatican, maintained a strong united voice, often the loudest voice that opposed the dictatorship in Korea. During this period, Cardinal Kim arose as one of the most respected elders in Korea, even among other religious affiliations. The Catholic Church grew 3.9% 1976, and peaked at 9 % annual growth in the 1980s (G. Oh 2007). The Catholic Church became known for their social commitment to the poor and social justice, building social credibility, giving major impetus to the rapid growth of the Catholic Church.

### **3. Institutional and Religious Factors**

Religious conversion is “a holistic process by which a person becomes consciously aware of some specifically religious, fundamental truth as relevant to this own life.” The influence of any given factors also depends upon its relation to interplay with the other factors that happen to be present at the same time (G. Lee 1961: 10).

#### **1) Moral Authority**

Religion is a source of moral authority and provides moral guidelines for society to follow. The form and perception of moral authority is extremely complex in a multi-religious society like Korea. Koreans have experienced extreme “social anomie” (Durkheim 1897), derived from political and social instability partly from the Korean War. Koreans have been seeking authority to give direction to their lives and society. The Catholic Church fulfilled the need of the Korean society.

The clergy is the formal religious leadership within a given religion but their role and personal maturity as religious leader, guider and teacher is often decisive factors for growth or decline of religions. The Roman Catholic Church has a worldwide united body and universal formation system for clergy. Anywhere in the world, the selection criteria of candidates, academic course work, and spiritual formation are meticulously regulated. Thus, the Catholic Church in Korea has maintained strict and well organized formation system for clergy and religious persons (nuns and brothers). Catholic clergy and religious persons take a vow of celibacy, which is seen as total devotion or total self sacrifice to the people. Celibacy is a form of renunciation of personal marriage and family, and is thought as a consequence the Catholic priest or religious are relatively freer from the financial greed and other secular business. Traditionally, Koreans respect more celibate priest or monk than married ministers or monks. According to a survey conducted on this issue, an absolute majority of Catholics (90.4%) staunchly supported the celibacy of priest and religious purity

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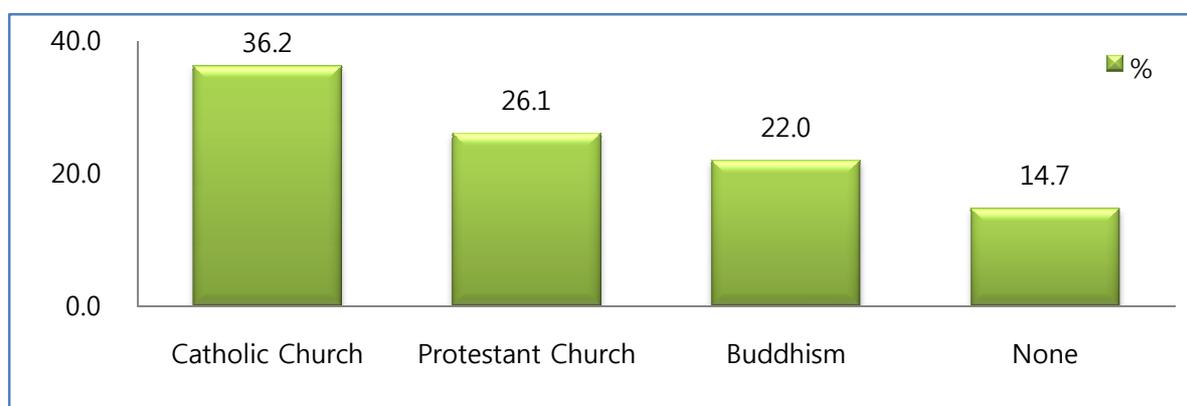
<sup>8</sup> Archbishop Yi Munhi at the Archdiocese of Daegu was a son of Yi Hyosang, former speaker of the National Assembly and closely allied with the Park regime. Archbishop Yi Munhi's diocese was a political stronghold for the Park regime, as well as for the President successors Chun and Ro. The region was known as the TK (Taegu and Kyungbuk Province) political power-house for conservative politics in Korea.

(I. Gang 2007). The habits of priest or nun often seem sacred and mystic in the eyes of the laymen.

Many public social welfare institutions transferred management of various works of social welfare to the Catholic Church. There were 56 institutions in 1976, and by 1999 there were 524, a near 10 fold increase in 30 years. This accounted for 11.3% of the total social welfare institutions in Korea (M. Bak 2006). The parishes are strictly controlled by the diocese, and the faithful must attend their local parish. Not more than one parish is established in any district. All pastors should be transferred to another parish every 5 years, except those involved in special ministry. The finance of the parish is open and reported in detail to the parishioners. And, the Catholic Church does not demand a tithe from their membership.

Clergy and the religious person, are relatively uninvolved in scandals of sex or money, and devotion themselves to social work, welfare and justice. There is openness to the financial management of the church, and church owned institutions. The Church has established a positive perception among Korean people, and has a great deal of social credibility, and moral authority in the society. Recently, the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) jointly conducted a survey with the Global Research Institute in 2008 to investigate the most reliable religion, The survey results showed that “35.2 percent chose Catholicism and 31.1 percent chose Buddhism. Protestantism was the choice of 18.0 percent, while 15.7 percent said ‘no religion’.”<sup>9</sup> The following year on September 28–29, 2009, the same institute (CEMK) surveyed 1,000 respondents aged over 19. Figure 1 shows the response rate of credibility rating among religions:

Figure 1. Credibility Rating According to Religion



Source: CEMK. 2009

The “Korean General Social Survey” (KGSS) is an annual personal interview survey of Korean households conducted by the Social Research Center at Sungkyunkwan University in Korea. The KGSS in 2008 asked the question about “the most reliable religion,” and found that 51.8 percent of respondents indicated Catholicism, 50.7 percent Buddhism, and 36.3 percent Protestantism.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A report on a survey conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) and the Global Research Institute — “Local Protestantism Suffers From Lack Of Credibility, Survey Indicates,” <http://archive.ucanews.com/2008/11/27/local-protestantism-suffers-from-lack-of-credibility-survey-indicates/?key=korea+protestant> (accessed 07/08/10).

<sup>10</sup> The survey adopts the latest GSS of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) as a model survey. Like the GSS, the KGSS integrates the replicating core questions and topical modules,

A survey investigating the perceived influence of religious leaders in Korea asked the question “Who Moves Korea?” and was conducted by Sisa Journal in 2010 (with 1,000 respondents including 845 males and 155 females, aged 20s & 30s (280), 40s (395), and 50 and over (325), administered by Media Research on July 22–30<sup>th</sup>, 2010). Table 3 shows the results of the survey:

Table 3. Perceived Influence of Religious Leaders: Who Moves Korea?

1. Cardinal Kim Souwhan	2. Cardinal Jeong Jinseok	3. Jasung Buddhist monk	4. Beobjeong Buddhist monk	5. Rev. Jo Yonggi, Protestant minister
29.4%	24.2%	13.2%	12.6%	11.0%

Source: *Sisa Journal*, 08/18/2010

Over 29% of the Koreans surveyed perceived Cardinal Kim as exerting significant influence in Korea, even though he passed away in 2009, and another 24.2% indicated that Cardinal Jeong exerts influence. Together the two cardinals totaled over 50% among all religious leaders, suggesting a strong Catholic Church influence upon Korea. The above sources shows the Catholic Church possessing the highest level of social credibility and moral authority, which indicates the Catholic Church’s powerful social influence upon Korea.

## 2) Multi-Religious Society and the Need for Dialogue

Christianity is exclusive in that its teachings indicate that the faith of other sects or religions does not allow for the rightful way to salvation. Catholicism traditionally has advocated that *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, which means "Outside the Church there is no salvation. But the turning point was the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra aetate*) that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, which although differing in many ways from our own teaching nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (*The Documents of Vatican II*). The Vatican Council II in 1965 and Catholic Church officially began to support ecumenical dialogue among Christian denominations, and inter-religious dialogue with other religions. Due to globalization and the tendency towards a multi-religious society in the world, such dialogue was a critical step toward better relations with other religions.

While some Protestants, mostly hard liners of Evangelicals, have aggressively opposed other religions, especially street missions that often resort to picketing, while shouting “Kingdom of Heaven with Jesus, hell with non believers”, that has angered and drew criticism among non-Christians and atheists. The Protestant’s aggressive evangelical goals are frustrated by the events of changing social and political environments in the context of a broader society. The Catholic Church has been engaged in active dialogues with other religions. For this reason, Catholics and Buddhists have invited each other to talk in their temples or churches, even displaying congratulation placard at Christmas or Buddha’s birthday. The openness attitude of the Catholic Church to other religions has given a

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including the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), into a single survey framework. The primary goal of the KGSS is (1) to collect nationwide sample survey data on Korean society and its people’s values, attitudes and behaviors in a regular and continuous manner; (2) to provide time-series data to researchers and university students in social science fields, enabling them to identify general social trends; (3) to provide survey data-sets that facilitate cross-national comparison studies. Kim Sangguk et al., 2008, *Hanguk Jonghabsahojjosa* (Korean General Social Survey). Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press.

favorable impression to the general public.

### 3) Cultural Adaptation and Ancestral Rite

Even though Confucianism is no longer a state religion or ideology after the end of the Joseon Dynasty, the Confucian influence is still deeply ingrained in Korean ethical thought, life philosophy, value system, social relations, and over all Korean traditions. For example, ancestral rite or worship is still practiced in many Korean families. Filial piety, a Confucian notion, is considered the greatest of among the virtues, and must be shown towards the living parents as well as the dead parents and ancestors. The veneration of deceased ancestors is still considered an important duty for children, especially that of the sons.

The great persecution against Catholics broke out because of the ancestral rite controversy. In the earlier period of Catholicism in China, Jesuit missionaries adopted ancestral rite as ceremonies in honor of ancestors, not religious in nature. But Pope Benedict XIV, who was advised by rival missionaries against the Jesuit, prohibited ancestral rites condemning them as superstition or idolatry in 1742. Such prohibition later provided China and Korea the motivation to persecute Catholics. But in 1939 Pope Pius XI allowed ancestral rite under limited conditions, and when all superstitious elements are removed from the ceremony. The ancestral rite controversy is still alive in Korea, especially between Protestant and non-Protestant family members. The Protestant Church condemned any ancestral rites as idolatry acts, and lead to heightened tense and arguments among family members, especially during memorial days of ancestors and other events such as New Year and Korean Thanksgiving (*Chuseok*).

The contemporary Catholic Church in Korea molded Christianity to adhere to Korean culture, and a broad berth of tolerance was allowed. The Catholic Church adapted traditional ancestor rite, displaying food and name tablet on the table, the bowing down in veneration of ancestors, and other acts, while adding Christian prayer for their ancestors. This cultural adaptation was greatly praised by the general public and funeral services were well organized in each parish, leading to great admirations when people were in agony from their loss during the funeral.

## IV. Reappraisal of Catholic Church Growth in Korea

Statistics on religious adherence have fallen prey often to statistical pitfalls and are difficult to gather accurate data; statistics for the change of religious adherence are even more so in a multi-religious society like Korea. Between 1995 and 2005 the number of Buddhist increased by 3.9%, and Protestants saw a decrease of 1.6%, while the Catholic Church alone has seen prodigious growth during the period, increasing its membership by 74.4% in the past ten years. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) reported that there were 4,667,283 (9.5% of population) Catholics in Korea, less than the National Statistics figure of 5,146,000 (10.9%), as of December 31, 2005. National statistics only reflect the official position of the government. The CBCK's report is the most accurate data because all parishes report their yearly baptismal numbers to the CBCK, and the count is performed twice a year. Confession ticket is an obligation for Catholics in Korea, if the faithful misses 3 years in a row of confession, then, they are considered as a non-practicing or tepid Catholic. Oh Gyeonghwan (2007: 159), priest and sociologist, interpreted this discrepancy as arising from "the national statistics number derived from self-identified people to questionnaire including preparing number for baptism and potential candidates who

thinks conversion in future,” and does not include a large number of non-practicing baptized Catholic, who identify themselves as Catholics, but do not attend church.

The Conversion Boom was a result of a very complex process of external and internal factors working altogether. Growth, in part, can be attributed to the Catholic Church's positive perception by the general public. The numerical growth, however, is not automatically translates to the spirituality and maturity of Catholics. The Catholic Church of Korea can be pleased with the growth in numbers, but the numerical growth alone may not necessarily be associated with success. After the end of World War II, Christianity in Korea, both the Protestant and Catholic Church, grew tremendously. Today, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in Korea face different circumstances with different challenges. Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are both considered Christian religions, but the two seem to be two entirely different religions in Korea: The word *Gidokgyo* (Christianity) is exclusively applied to Protestants, not Catholics. The Catholic Church is called as *Chujugyo*, literal meaning *Lord of Heaven Church* derived from China. They use different translations of the Bible and hymns, as well as numerous different usages derived from same Christian terminology, and even God's title is different. The Catholic and Protestant churches are archrival in contemporary Korean society, and do not like to be seen as being religions of the same origin. Recently, stagnation or decline of the Protestant Church can be seen as a reflection of a counter-effect to the growth of the Catholic Church.

A majority of Protestant leaders of mega-churches in Korea support a pro-American stance, and is seen as being out of step with, and staunchly against, the Communist and Social Leftist. Protestant Churches suffer from a lack of credibility and mired in various controversies and scandals (mostly sex or money scandals), involving church funds and family inheritance of church property from father to son, etc. Thus, current the Protestant Churches are struggling with a declining number of followers, provoking saying such as “*Gidokgyo* turns out *Gaedokgyo*” where the first letter Gi is replaced with *Gae* meaning dog, a very derogatory term. Anti-Christian sentiment, mostly aimed at Protestant Churches, is becoming stronger and rapidly spreading through the Internet. For the first time, in February 2010, an anti-Christian movement, called *Bangiryon* (established in 2003), posted anti-Christian signs on public transit vehicles (buses on the street), with slogans “I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures” cited from Albert Einstein. Another sign appeared in March 2010, “Human beings are still energetic and spiritual without God” citing Richard Dawkins (W. Lee 2010). Negative sentiment towards Protestantism could be directed towards the Catholic Church someday if the Catholic Church fails to meet the needs and expectations of society.

Unlike western and Islamic countries, Korea is a multi-religious society, and often seen is a changing of religious affiliation akin to a changing of mobiles phone carrier. According to the National Statistics in 2005, in response to a survey of personal religious belief, 46.9% of respondent indicated “no-religion.” Among them, many responded that they “switched” from Buddhism (23.2%), from Protestantism (74.5%), and Catholicism (10.0%).<sup>11</sup> Religious identity often coincided with family tradition in the west, but often multi-religious adherences within the same family unit can be easily seen in Korea. This compartmentalized religion creates a pluralistic “market situation” (Berger 1990) where religions were left to compete with each other in the family unit, and even in the choice of recreational activities like secularized “consumer preference.” Religious mobility does not seem to be purely religious but for business, political and social networking reasons. Koreans who left previous religions are not necessarily positive atheist, but rather can be seen as being disappointed with their former religion. Lifelong commitment to one religion is now challenged by the

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<sup>11</sup> “Religion and Consciousness of Religion in Korea,” 2<sup>nd</sup> Comparative Research. 1990. Hanguk Gallup Josayonguso (Research Institute for Korean Gallup).

readily available multiple religious or spiritual movements, such as the New Age movement, and thus, all religions including Catholic are facing endless competition in this religious “market situation.”

The Catholic Church in Korea, however, is also faced with many internal problems: the numbers of Catholics going to Mass on Sunday is less than 25%, and continues to decline. The number of non-practicing Catholics is increasing from an average of 23% in the 1980s to 36.4% in 2005, especially among the youth who are turning away from church life. Moreover, the vocation number of seminarians and religious (nuns and brothers) are declining, especially the number of nun candidates has sharply declining from 1,073 in 1995 down to 456 in 2005 (I. Gang 2007). In the west, declining numbers entering the nun’s vocation mirrors the decline seen for the priest’s vocation, and this is seen as presenting a serious problem for the future. At the same time, lay people who are highly educated want to be actively involved in the ministries, but such demands are still being ignored by clergies, especially the permanent diaconship<sup>12</sup> and woman priesthood. Clericalism, especially male dominant clericalism will be an ongoing problem in the modern Catholic Church.

Although the Catholic Church has greatly contributed to the restoration of democracy in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, their ecclesial operation is ironically authoritarian, hierarchical, and not democratic at all. Appointment of a bishop is solely depending on the Pope’s discretion, and once appointed holds the position until retirement at age 75. The authority of the clergy is considered absolute and is seldom challenged by lay people. The pastoral committee in the local parish is organized, but only at an advisory level, and final decisions made by the pastor alone. Two newspapers, *Pyungwha* and *Catholic News*, printed by the Catholic Church, are controlled by the church authority and do not print criticism of church leadership or internal scandals. The lay person educated in a contemporary democratic system may not adhere to this type of one-sided obedience, and may provoke internal conflicts against the autocratic leadership within the church. Tangible opposition to this authoritarian church leadership, can be seen in the form of the Catholic Internet News *Jiguem Yogi* (Here and Now) which was established by progressive lay people in 2009. The feminist movement is another challenge to the exclusively male dominated church hierarchy, and the ever increasing call for woman priesthood. Thus, the Catholic Church in Korea may face worldwide pressures on these issues in the near future.

The Catholic Church has assumed a vital role in re-establishing democracy in Korea, and championing social justice and actively participating in the human rights movement during the 1970s-1980s. However, its social role has been restricted since the 1990s as a result of the rapid democratization of Korea. Moreover, the leadership of the church has become more conservative, and has often been called a “Rome more than Rome”, and membership mostly from the upper and middle classes, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Religious Belief and Social Economic Class

(Unit :%)

	Protestant	Catholic	Buddhism	No-	Total
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<sup>12</sup> According to Canon law, Catholic clergies are exclusively bishop, priest, and deacon. While the permanent diaconate was maintained from earliest apostolic times, it gradually disappeared in the Roman Church. The transitional diaconate continued in a vestigial form, final step along the course to ordination to the priesthood. In the 20th Century, the permanent diaconate was restored in many Roman Catholic dioceses to salvage the shortage of priesthood. Lay candidates are usually trained in the seminary over the weekends basis for 3 years but Catholic Church in Korea does not accept yet permanent diaconship.

				Religion	
Upper Class	3.5	11.3	2.4	3.3	3.6
Middle Class	63.1	64.8	48.3	51.0	53.4
Lower Class	33.3	24.0	49.3	45.8	42.9
Total	99.9	100.1	100.0	100.1	99.9

Source: The Institute for Social Development and Policy Research at Seoul National University (1992)

As shown in Table 4, there is a proportionally larger membership in the middle and upper classes, seen to support conservative lines, opposing and protesting the progressive church's message in society, especially the "Catholic Priests Association for Justice." Such dominance of middle and upper middle classes, and heavily concentrated in urban area created alienation of poor and lower class in the church at the fringe of industrialized society. Ideological conflicts, right or left, are so tense in every corner of society, even within the Catholic Church. The Korean Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a public statement in 1987 announcing the Church as a non-political organization, and so should maintain neutrality, limiting the involvement of the Church in social movements and reaffirming the policy of separation of State and Religion (Chu 2009). The majority of bishops now hold a conservative line, including Cardinal Jeong who has had acrimonious disputes and conflicts with progressive priests and lays, especially during recent conflicts regarding the national project for the 4 Great Rivers.

Korean society is changing rapidly and diversifying, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are emerging, and their activities based on professional research. These NGOs present alternative ideas or visions, advocating progressive social and economical views, taking over the role of the Catholic Church in leading society on these issues. Moreover, dominant clericalism discourages the promotion of lay leadership, even with regard to secular issues, leading to frequent conflicts between the two groups. Although the Catholic Church is still highly revered and is perceived to possess high social credibility, the Church's social influence is waning (I. Gang 2001).

A new paradigm is needed to lead the Church in this rapidly changing society, particularly the role of religion and the alienated classes, politics, and attitudes toward social values. Modern Korea has achieved formal democratization, and has established social and economical stability. The Catholic Church faces new challenges in these times, both from outside and within the church. Christianity has yet to establish firm roots in Korean soil, and thus, is yet in process of enculturation into Korean society. The Catholic Church is yet a foreign or imported religion in the eyes of Koreans. The Catholic Church faces the challenge of stimulating new visions, and injecting a new energy into Korean society, and perhaps the prodigious growth witnessed at this time will become a transitional boom in the future.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Explanations of the recent growth of the Catholic Church in South Korea should recognize that the present "successful evangelization" is owed to a multiple of factors. The influence of religion upon society should be examined in the context of the multitude of changes in society. Christianity that developed in Western society evolved in a different context and a different period in history, whereas in Korea Christianity dates back to the early years of Christian mission in Korea. Christianity had developed with enlightenment, inspiring the proselytized to do away with much pre-modern entity. Thus, classical social theory regarding religion and modernity cannot be wholly applied to contemporary Korean

Christianity or religions. Otherwise, as Peter Berger (1999: 18) states, "those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril."

The growth of Christianity in Korea occurred in an anomic social condition up to the 1980's but patterns of religious practice are varied in Modern Korea. Due to secularization in and out of the churches, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in Korea face new challenges in dealing with the process of dehumanization, and widely spreading religious indifferentism, especially among the younger generations. And thus we are left with the question of how to steer onward as a salvific institution in this post industrial and secular society.

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