

Commentaries

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Greetings—

I have known both presenters, Professors Don Baker and Chai-sik Chung at least for a few years now. The last time I saw them was three years ago at a conference on Christianity in Korea in New York, sponsored by the Korea Society, Theological Union, and the Luce Foundation. Both are well known as experts on the subjects they will discuss today. Both papers present a challenge to the commentator.

On Professor Baker's Paper

Professor Baker's paper is the more historical of the two. It appears that the author, in his wish to see something positive in the most bloody history of the Roman Catholic church in Korea, calls it civil society. Prof. Baker advances the rather novel proposition that the authoritarian Catholic Church begat the beginnings of a civil society in Korea and that the birth of the Korean Catholic church over 200 years ago as the first move toward democracy, laying the conceptual bricks out of which the edifice of democracy has been erected.

Prof. Baker contends that, when it first appeared, the Catholic church in Korea *demand*ed the right of sanctuary from government interference. After a long bloody struggle, the demand was granted, creating a zone of autonomy in which a Korean civil society could eventually sprout. He grants that the first Catholics did not know the concept of civil society. They inadvertently laid the foundation for its *later* emergence.

But he recognizes that: (1) The Catholic Church is seldom mentioned in relation to the rise of civil societies; (2) the concept of civil society is a rather recent phenomenon; (3) there exist many theories regarding the origins of civil society in Korea; and (4) there are varied hypotheses on the origin, nature and function of civil society.

These interpretation of civil society depend very much on how strictly you define the term. Don Baker defines it as 'A society in which limits to the authority of the state vacate space for citizens to fill with voluntary organizations operating independently of, and sometimes against the government.' Here the key words are "vacate space," implying a voluntary move on the part of the government to retreat and allow room. This definition is not compatible with the views of those who see the forerunner of Korea's civil society in the private academies of Confucian literati and in the early Catholic church in Korea. The presence of such seeds in the soil of the Chosŏn Dynasty accounts for the growth of a civil society in contemporary South Korea.

But, in Baker's mind, it is the first Catholics who fought harder than the literati; it was the Catholics, more than the literati, who insisted that the power of the state was not absolute and limited to how much the state could interfere. They asked that the government recognize their right to practice their faith without interference or harassment, although they did not win such religious freedom right away. Korean Catholics suffered large-scale persecutions in 1801, 1839, 1846, and 1866-69. By simply stating publicly and repeatedly that the state does not have absolute authority over every aspect of its subjects' lives, they introduced a defining characteristic of a civil society. When finally, in 1899, they were granted freedom of worship owing to a treaty with France, the cornerstone of a civil society gained new respectability.

I must respectfully disagree with Prof. Baker. These are overstatements of facts as I know

the history of the Catholic church in Korea. The fact is that the Korean Catholics could not simply declare, let alone publicly and repeatedly, that the state did not have absolute authority over them. Even after they won the freedom to practice their religion at the turn of the last century, the church remained so timid that it participated little in the nationalist protests against Japanese encroachment or colonial rule. It did even less than the Protestant church, whose lack of activism Prof. Chung decries. But unlike Korean Protestantism, the Korean Catholic church came out of a long hibernation and began to assert the rights not only of Catholics but of other individuals, starting in the 1960s. And it placed its prestige behind the shift from a negative to a positive concept of a civil society; only then was the state forced to retreat farther and faster than it might otherwise have (p. 6). How did this come about?

Further, I would appreciate Prof. Baker clarifying the following passage on p. 7:

The Catholic church was able to play such an important role in fostering the growth of a civil society on Korean soil because, when Catholics first came to Korea, they brought with them an understanding of the nature of religion, and of the relationship between church and state, which challenged the traditional range of state authority.

Points that remain unclear to me are the time and route of the Catholics' arrival. My questions are: *Who* were these Catholics and *whence* had they come? As I understand it—and I know that Prof. Baker knows this all too well—what is unique about the Korean Catholic church was that it literally arose from among Koreans without proselytization by foreign missionaries. It was established by Korean Confucian scholars who were interested in *shihak* and in reforming what they thought was a Korea in decline. So, there were no such “Catholics” who *came* to Korea. Next, it is said that they *brought* with them an understanding of the nature of religion. When Korean Confucianists first became interested in Catholicism, they were not even able to distinguish *shihak*, Western studies,

from *sokyo*, Western religion. It took a while for them to see the difference between the two. Finally, Prof. Baker says, these Catholics also had an understanding of the relationship between church and state. Once again, referring to the early Korean Catholic Confucian scholars, it appears that they endeavored to find compatibility between Confucian teaching and Christianity rather than to seek a wall of separation between their new religion and the state. They did so because they wished not to be accused of studying and belief in heterodox teaching.

It is true that they had to form “an unauthorized organization, gave unauthorized titles such as ‘sinbu’ (priest) and ‘kyoju’ (bishop), refused to perform *chesa* (ancestral worship ceremony).” The government did not give permission for the Catholics to organize, but they did so by stealth and in secrecy. I wonder if that really constitutes deliberate and conscious creation and refusal.

As an example of civil society, Prof. Baker cites a *kyouch'on* (‘village of fellow believers’) (p.15). Allow me to talk about how such a village was formed. There is only one such village of which any record exists. The story of a man named Shin T’ae-ho illustrates it well. After the dust settled from the anti-Catholic persecution of 1801, he was determined to reestablish the lost Catholic communities. By traveling over 40 li in one night and entirely on foot, he found four families of women and children at Yong-in, all related by blood. They were living in extreme poverty and immobilized by fear of further persecution. He found that women had hidden sacred books and other religious relics. With about 40 believers who began to gather, he conducted religious services every seven or eight days. But they felt unsafe because they were surrounded by hostile non-Catholics. It was too dangerous for the newly gathered congregation to continue in the same place. Shin led the congregation of women and children deep into the mountains of Kangwon province. He compared the move to Moses’ Exodus from Egypt. Other Catholic villages were established in similar ways but they could not remain in one locale very long and had to move

constantly. How can a village created to escape persecution to a location far removed from other human beings be called civil society? Is it any different from bandit villages and *hwa-jŏn* (slash-and-burn) villages?

The next point I would like to make is that too long an interval passed between the coming of Catholicism to Korea and the rise of civil society in Korea to render much credit to the Catholic church—much as I would like to do so. If my math is correct, more than a century passed between the last great persecution of Catholics in Korea in 1866 and the rise of civil society in the country. Prof. Baker says the early Korean Catholic Church paved the way for contemporary civil society. But he also says that the Church did not fully exercise its hard-earned freedom of religion and remained passive throughout the last years of the Chosŏn Dynasty and the Japanese colonial period. Korean Catholics were even less involved in social and political matters than the Protestants, literally interpreting the injunction of “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

After the 1866 persecution, the Korean Catholic church was driven underground. By the time Protestantism arrived in Korea in 1884, few Catholics remained visible. This is why, despite its primacy of origin, the Korean Catholic flock numbers less than half of the Protestant and the church itself is less influential in Korea until recently.

If we are serious about the Church’s contribution to the rise of civil society in Korea, we must pay our attention to the its struggle in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, rather than returning to the time of its birth.

On Prof. Chung's Paper

I became acquainted also with Dr. Chai-sik Chung at the conference, "Christianity in Korea: An Exploration of Its Unique Development." At that time I felt that Dr. Chung's paper alone almost entirely covered Korean Christianity's unique development, particularly the Protestant growth in Korea. Non-Christians in Korea and non-Protestant Christians such as Catholics and Latter-Day Saints have long felt that Korean Protestantism is different from those in Western countries but many could not quite articulate as succinctly as Dr. Chung has done, and why and how it had developed that way.

Looking at the phenomenal growth of Protestantism in South Korea, you would think a Korean Christian would be pleased. But here is one Korean-born social ethics scholar, an endowed professor in a school of theology of a major university, who is not all that jubilant just because the church has grown phenomenally. He is concerned about a lack of moral direction in South Korea and uneasy over the failure of such growth of Christianity to help steer the Korean morality in the right direction.

This is an amazingly candid, creatively critical, and intellectually challenging critique of the Korean Protestant churches. I found myself agreeing with the author on so many points that I am concerned about maintaining objectivity in my commentary.

After reading Prof. Chung's paper, I am somewhat closer to understanding why and how the Korean Protestant church developed into what it is now. In the next few minutes, I will briefly summarize the paper as I understand it, make comments along the way, and end with a wish list.

I would like to start out by quoting a few passages from a book by Spencer J. Palmer that helped me understand why Christianity flourished in Korea while it met with less success in the

neighboring China and Japan, the two countries with a similar philosophical background.

Palmer said in his 1986 book, *Korea and Christianity: Problem of Identification with Tradition*, that “the success of Christian missions in Asia is primarily dependent upon the forging of links between native culture and Christian ideology” (p. viii). He goes on to say that “acceptance of Christianity in Asia is contingent on its capacity to establish parallel and connections with the indigenous traditions ...” (p. 3). And then he says, “The primitive ethos of the Korean people derives from Shamanism, a polytheistic and polydemonistic religion based on nature worship” (p. 5). In Korea’s Shamanistic pantheon, there developed a concept of a hierarchy of the gods. Above all the spirits stood one supreme ruler named, *hananim*, who was acknowledged by all ...”(p. 6). Korean faith in *hananim* was an integral part of Korean thought from primitive times. Conviction of belief in him was strengthened, not reduced, by the introduction of the amorphous Confucian concept of *ch’ŏn* (heaven, hanul). From *hanul* came *hanulnim*, which in time came to be called, *hananim*. (p. 7). It appears that Prof. Chung thinks that the Korean Protestant church succeeded in Korea, in indigenization, contextualization, and inculturation (acculturation in Palmer), which are important.

But despite its success in indigenization, etc., and its massive growth, it failed to transform Korea and fulfill the dream of pioneer Korean Christian leaders. Unlike in Western countries, Christianity missed playing a crucial role in the historical evolution and fostering. Dr. Chung, I am sure, in pointing out missed opportunities, will acknowledge the vital role Christianity played in transformation and modernization. The author appears to imply that such changes have not occurred in proportion to the numerical and external growth of the church in South Korea. Protestant Christianity became indigenized and inculturated to a considerable degree — perhaps a little too much, too early in Korea. In other words, Korean Protestantism became localized and

focused on private and personal interest even before the fledgling early church became viable and had an opportunity to send a message of its transcendental characteristics of reform, transformation, development and improvement of the resources found in local culture.

Prof. Chung is asking an important question: whether Korean Christianity has not developed along the line of manifesting the authentic principle of Christian transcendence, by looking at the character of Christianity as a force for cultural transformation and integration and looking at it from a long-range and holistic point of view. He notes the rapid expansion of Christianity in the second half of the 20th century is nothing short of remarkable. He reviews its development from its introduction in 1884 through the faith of the pioneer Christian leaders, such as So Chae-p'il, Yun Ch'i-ho, and Syngman Rhee. He points out that these pioneers were drawn to Christianity because of its character (here I wish the author had elaborated a little what he means by the *nature* of Christianity), its prophetic, transforming force, which was not fulfilled. The reason is the tenacious power of the indigenous belief system. Although Korea had no dominant religion by the late 19th century, it is the force of inherited cultural and social characteristics that impeded Protestant Christianity from becoming the catalyst for change. After the initial period, majority of converts came from peasant stock and women. The Korean Protestant churches in time became a hotbed of perpetuating the religious-cultural habits of the people in a Christian disguise. People continued to live according to their traditional cultural code and held onto the idea that religion is good so long as it brings happiness. The majority of people were common folks, not socially aware and political conscious. The church catered to private needs of people, parochially self-absorbed and socially uninterested. Early Korean Protestant Christians had the will but lacked the means to disseminate their ideas, for they remained a small minority, set apart from the majority of Koreans and their voice drowned out.

Then, the Korean Protestantism became a revivalist, millennialistic faith, with a literal

interpretation of scripture. It began with the 1907 Bible Study Conference in Pyongyang, which appealed to those who had been seeking a way out of helplessness on the eve of the loss of national independence and spread throughout the country and extended into the following year. This movement was geared to an eschatological hope, setting the tone for the whole subsequent development of mainline conservative Protestantism. In time, instead of the church generating a mission of national regeneration, it became characterized by an increased tendency toward flight into the irrationality of apolitical emotionalism, self-absorption, other-worldly withdrawal from ethical concern for public affairs—dichotomizing the spiritual from the sociopolitical, sending a message of passive and apolitical endurance of Japanese colonial rule. Although there were a few courageous exceptions, for the most part, Korean Christians, Protestants and Catholics alike, remained private, emotionally and ritualistically devoted, concentrating on personal experiences of their relation to God.

Disturbed by these tendencies, intellectual and reform-minded Christians countered the external ritualistic emphasis of Korean Protestantism, with the Non-Church Christian movement of 1927. This movement emphasized Bible study. One of the most noted among them is Ham, who coined the term *ssial* (seed) people, which in time led to the idea of *minjung* theology, which in turn became the crucible for human rights struggle later—in the 1960s and 1970s. Basic forces that shaped the Protestant development in the latter half of the 20th century emerged in the last years of World War II (1941–45): the eschatological millennialistic hope or mystic spirituality focusing upon salvation of individual soul and personal piety.

After Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, Korean Protestantism became divided into liberal and fundamentalist wings. Despite liberal efforts, conservative evangelical and extremely fundamentalist orientations are still typical of the Korean Protestant churches. The latter tend to argue rigidly and self-righteously, just as Korean neo-Confucians had in traditional Korea.

What happened is that Korean Protestantism has drawn on the various resources from the *deep* recesses of indigenous religious tradition. The result is that the Korean Protestant church forsook its prophetic function, public good, and its earlier dreams of creatively transforming Korean society and culture. This led to a Korean preoccupation with the capitalist market mentality. We must rediscover the dreams of pioneering Christian leaders by making a radical rupture with inherited, sinful realities.

Dr. Chung asks many important questions and wrestles with the time-honored dilemma of balance between the values of the inherited past and of today, and the question of cultural continuity and liberation from it. But, I have the following wish list as well. First, I wish he had spent some time on what he meant by Christian transcendence. Second, I wish he had dwelt on a little more on why such Confucian literati as So, Yun, and Rhee, converted to Christianity. Such conversions were rare elsewhere in Asia. I wish Dr. Chung had been clearer about whether it the catastrophe of imminent loss of the nation would have justified it; and, if so, what can Korean Christians do today? Finally I wish he had speculated on whether the very success of indigenization had inhibited Christianity in Korea from contributing to the transformation and development of resources found in local culture, which is also very important.