

# Profiles of Contemporary Korean Religions: *The Emergence of Neo-Ethnicity*

Chin Hong CHUNG

## Abstract

*This paper describes the religious culture of contemporary Korea. It rejects both the causal-normative debate of a standard historical approach and the hegemonic-normative debate of a cultural approach, attempting instead to synthesize facts that are made apparent by the present state. Based on the premise that Korea's religious culture is in a multireligious state, I conceptualize the types of extant religions into central religions, which are deeply rooted in tradition, and peak religions, which exercise direct influence on contemporary society, to examine these religions' intersecting teachings on peak-oriented and center-oriented attitudes. Then, I examine how relationships with political authority are formed based on understandings of contemporariness. A religion's perception of its relations with politics can change depending on whether it considers contemporariness as a monoreligious, multireligious, or multicultural condition. Presently, however, the strata of each religion's situational perception have been significantly and chaotically convoluted. Finally, I point out that religions are showing qualities of new ethnicity. I highlight the resulting inevitable inabilities of religions to communicate and the exclusion they derive, as well as the dynamism of exclusion, upon which religions build their trade value through mega growth, extremity, and convenience in the current state of multicultural markets.*

**Keywords:** consciousness of contemporariness, central and peak religions, trend of mega growth, trend of extremity, principle of convenience, neo-ethnicity

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## **Introduction: The Consciousness of Contemporariness**

The objective of this article is to narrate and understand contemporary Korean religion. It is a necessary task for those living in this contemporary age to describe contemporary problems and to adduce the meaning it carries. The fact that the contemporariness is recognized as a question suggests that a certain distance is inherently structuralized within the contemporary person's experience of the contemporariness. In this regard, I will critically examine two conventional approaches for the consciousness of contemporariness and consider a possible new method.

The first approach to the consciousness of contemporariness is a historical one. Within this approach, we conceptualize only a chosen fact, establish it as a cause, and narrate the contemporariness as a reality that corresponds with this cause. The past or present that appears at this point is, in fact, only an interpreted reality or conceptual reality that we have prescribed in order to perceive the contemporariness. As a result, attempting to perceive the contemporariness through a historical approach is no different from planting a conceptualized past or present into the contemporariness and considering only the notions that emerge from such an approach to comprise the contemporariness. The effort to attain the consciousness of contemporariness in this manner, however, is tantamount to projecting either a conceptualized past or conceptualized future onto the contemporary age and accepting the perceived content corresponding to the concept as the reality of the age. As a result, the historical approach fails to provide a sufficient foundation for the consciousness of contemporariness since it becomes a criticism of what is wrong with the contemporariness and a demand for its rectification, rather than the construction of knowledge of the contemporariness.

Another approach toward the consciousness of contemporariness employs culture. The notion of "culture" is ambiguous and unstable. Yet still, this very ambiguity allows culture to become the most holistic category that narrates life on the basis of its generality. Accordingly, the contemporary person becomes capable of perceiving the con-

temporariness through intercultural narrative. But the cultural approach also has its own dilemma. The different culture, the Other, inevitably causes the subject to narrate difference and resemblance. If resemblance becomes the foundation for consciousness, however, difference ultimately loses its meaning, and if difference becomes the premise, resemblance is excluded from the sphere of consciousness. Thus, we aim for an alternative situation through the paradox that we are alike but different and different but alike. But this is mere rhetoric and fails to provide a practical pathway toward the consciousness of contemporariness. Therefore, any approach, whether it be historical or cultural, demands an ideological stance over the consciousness, and after the establishment of the consciousness, the reinforcement of such an ideological stance is naturally sought. Therefore, we cannot avoid questioning the appropriateness of a historical cause-and-effect principle based on an epistemological premise or of a consciousness of contemporariness attained through a cultural theory reduced to the logic of power.

The consciousness of contemporariness would be enabled only by the elimination of the consciousness that is based on historical causal relations or cultural comparison. This is because the impulse for the consciousness of contemporariness is derived from a certain limit where the narratives or interpretations resulting from existing historical or cultural consciousness cannot be fully accepted. Therefore, we must attempt to narrate the contemporariness through a logic that differs from the comparative logic of historical and intercultural approaches.

The consciousness of contemporariness, in sum, should aim for a consciousness-after-consciousness using consciousness-before-consciousness as a foundation. This is akin to questioning subject's orchestration of the wide array of sounds that he perceives as a question, using his own imaginative power. Put differently, this is the process by which a questioning subject accepts and embraces the phenomenon of the contemporariness as a performance. If we accept that the sound of the contemporariness exists as a concrete entity before consciousness within our contemporary experience, such a process will not only become possible but will also enable us to capture a dif-

ferent contemporariness, as opposed to the contemporariness that is provided by the artificial construction of historical-cultural models.

With such an objective and methodology in mind, this article aims to narrate an echo of religious culture that we can conceptualize as an extant sound of the Korean contemporary age in the next section.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Contemporary Consciousness of Korean Religion**

According to statistics, the religious population of Korea slightly exceeds half of the total population. This number has remained unchanged for a significant period of time, a fact that shows that the discussion of contemporary religion in Korea cannot look solely at religious phenomena. Religious incidents that have occurred in the contemporary times are all linked to situations that affect all Koreans. Of importance is the task of inquiring into and narrating the general structure demonstrated by the repetition and progression of such phenomena. This article attempts this task in the context of Korean religion.

### *The Gap between the Core and the Peak*

First, we can point to the multireligious situation as a prominent fact of contemporary Korean culture. In Korea, however, there is neither a dominant religion nor one that is oppressed. At the same time, not all religions are simultaneously present in an equal manner. Each religion consists of evaluative superiority based on the weight of historical victory and adequacy within the relevant society. We can narrate this through a conical structure that consists of a base and a summit. Each religion exhibits a different level of superiority—for instance, with

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1. For the purpose of concentrating on the objectives of this paper, an examination of the notion of religion itself is reserved for future discussion. We must not overlook the fact that the notion's historical-cultural origin and adequacy are under debate. But it is also necessary to consider the fact that we share the term as a common-sense idea that is capable of being communicated. In this context, we may accept and embrace the nominal separation that surfaces in demographic studies.

Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism as the base of our culture, and with Catholicism and Protestantism at the peak of social influence. The former takes hold of the center of actual life at the base of the community, and the latter captures the peak of the power that directly influences the community within society. But the central religions pursue the peak, and the religions at the peak aim for centrality. Each strives to overcome its own social and cultural marginality. As a result, the many religions of Korea are situating themselves upon a place wherein the center-oriented horizontal structure and peak-oriented vertical structure overlap.

The problem is the friction and conflict between the horizontal and vertical orientations. The central religions cannot tolerate the fact that the peripheral religions occupy the summit. They view it as the setback of traditional values and thus conceptualize the center's peak orientation as restoration. Peak religions, on the other hand, cannot tolerate that the base religions occupy a central position. They view it anachronistic and thus conceptualize the peak's center orientation as the emergence of a new standard. Recent conflicts among Korean religions within the multireligious situation emerge from such a structure, which in turn is reinforced by the religious conflicts.

Confucianism is a typical base religion, maintaining only stationary continuation. It is situated at the center but is unable to secure its share. It could not resist in any way against the abolition of the household head (*hoju* 戶主) system, or the family registry system, which ultimately intended to end patriarchy. Even as the Catholic Church allowed its devotees to engage in ancestor rituals (*jesa* 祭祀) on the basis that these rituals are not directed toward an absolute God, Confucianism did not raise any opposing view with regard to the relative undervaluation of the idea of ancestry that could result from such a stance. Confucian marriage ceremonies are valued only for rareness, cremation is encouraged over burial, and weddings are reduced to wedding hall ceremonies without any embodiment of traditional archetype model, but there is no sound heard from the Confucian circle about aforesaid circumstances. The Confucian circle is similarly silent about the emergence of the new types of households replacing

the traditional family.

Still, the teachings of Confucianism remain Korean society's ethical virtues and philosophical foundation. Confucianism comprises the framework of Korean society in the form of custom, but this has not been translated into daily life with relevance to reality. Given that even the maintenance of a center position is difficult for Confucianism in reality, peak orientation cannot help but be an extinguished goal. Confucianism does not appear to perceive the fact that the center and the peak could finally coincide or be replaced with each other.

Buddhism prides itself on the fact that its doctrine operates as a clear symbolic regime of solutions within Korean life and consciousness. Buddhism is thus used to equating Korean culture with Buddhist culture. It understands the entirety of Buddhism as a cultural heritage of Korea, and demands its preservation and transmission as an obligation of the nation. Simultaneously, however, Buddhism recognizes that it does not exist as a source of power that corresponds with such significance and devotes itself to efforts toward peak orientation. Examples of its efforts include the alignment and reinforcement of the organization in a modern sense, including the education of the four-fold Buddhist community (monks, nuns, and male and female lay believers), the translation of Buddhist scriptures, the expansion of temples and modernization of facilities, the attentiveness towards society, the promotion of daily Buddhism, and the missionary efforts targeted at overseas Koreans.

It is in this context that we can understand the Buddhist efforts to institutionalize self-confirmation in spite of the fact that lay believers relatively lack self-confirmation. We can infer that the increase of Buddhist believers indicated in statistical studies is also a result of aforementioned reforms. But the conflict between nirvana and deviation that is created by the strong tradition of the Zen sect also raises a serious question about the relevance of Buddhist norms to reality. Whether or not Buddhism will be able to occupy the peak in addition to its central position will be determined by whether it can shift its consciousness from submerging into memory to facing the reality.

Catholicism is representative of the peak orientation and exercises

an influence relatively significant in relation to the size of its congregation. The Catholic Church gains substantial trust from the general public as a result of its timely remarks on and participation in political and social matters, and its congregation is consistently expanding. It also continues to engage in efforts for self-reflection. One example is the establishment of the regional synod. In addition, it continues its movement toward the center. This intent is materialized in its decisions to allow Confucian ancestor rituals and to conduct mass in the Korean language. It also appears to have determined that the enhancement of the status of Korean Catholicism in a global setting is likely to enable it to maintain the peak and enter into the center within Korea. One such example is the continued proposals for canonization in spite of the fact that 103 Korean martyrs have already been canonized.

But it is unrealistic for Catholicism to occupy the center with a negative sentiment toward the center, whose premise is that the period before the spread of Catholicism is a time of darkness in Korean history, as evidenced by its bicentennial slogan “Light onto this land!” Coexistence with other religions cannot be properly achieved with the belittling attitude, such as the one that Confucian ancestor rituals can be permitted because it is incomparable to the belief in the one and only Creator. Furthermore, Catholicism belongs to the Universal Church and thus is restricted in its ability to develop its theology within Korean history and culture. However, it appears that Catholicism considers the defense and reinforcement of the peak to be the pathway toward the center.

Protestantism has occupied the religious summit of Korean society after modernization. Protestantism was the embodiment of newness in all aspects of modernization, including language, education, medicine, politics, and equality. Consequently, Protestantism expanded rapidly. However, as society modernized at large, Protestantism was no longer capable of monopolizing the modernity of Korean society. It thus began to focus on orienting itself toward the center. The search for indigenous theology is one such example. But what had really enabled Protestantism to grow and succeed continuously was the aid from the United States with the Protestant churches as bases

for its outreach, the expansion of influence through the series of worship services characterized by an indigenous shamanist sentiment and behavior, as well as an uplifting atmosphere consisting of healing and relief. Frequent revival meetings, mass rallies, nationwide gospel events, and the emergence of mega churches are typical patterns of the presence of this influence. Protestantism also reinforced the effort to remain at the peak by paying greater attention to social reality. Its interest and participation in the democratization of politics and social justice contributed to gaining trust from the general public, as is the case with Catholicism.

While center-oriented, Protestantism maintains an exclusive stance toward the existing center. It attempts to occupy the center even by invading the sphere of other religions through the exercise of power. This is seen in its demolishing the sacred icons of other religions, forbidding ancestor rituals within the family, and carrying out exclusive religious education at private religious schools. The wave of foreign missionary work can also be read as an indirect expression of the center orientation, given that it is claimed not only as the expansion of one religion but also as the enhancement of national prestige at large.

Protestantism appears to have reached a limit in its capacity to occupy the peak. This is evident in view of its own capacity, the diminishing preference of the general public, and the gradual decline in congregation membership. Protestantism is exhibiting a conflicted sense of identity with respect to the structure of the peak and the center.

#### *Levels of Situational Consciousness and Aspects of Political Behavior*

We have shifted from a monoreligious society, which is defined by a single religion within a single culture, to a multireligious culture, in which various kinds of religions coexist within one culture, and then again to a multicultural society, in which multiple cultures encounter multiple religions. Consequently, we are exposed to a range of previously unanticipated questions.<sup>2</sup>

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2. On the related issue of singularism and pluralism, see Chung (2010, 46-47).

Our religions exhibit different levels of consciousness with respect to the shift from a monoreligious society to a multireligious culture and multicultural society. The spectrum is diverse even within each religion. For instance, some individuals believe that religion must be singular and exclusive, and such a religion is the one to which they are devoted. For those individuals, the phenomenon of multireligions is a wrong that must be eliminated. The majority of Protestants exhibit this tendency.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, while a spectrum exists within each religion, Catholicism and Buddhism tend to be more flexible with respect to other religions and are relatively active in the search for dialogues with other religions.<sup>4</sup> Liberal believers within each religion are engaged in a movement that searches and argues for open relationships between religions. But the reality in Korea is already transcending the multireligious situation within a singular culture and becoming the multireligious situation within a multicultural society. We are not merely encountering other religions, but rather confronting a reality that we cohabit with religions embraced by other cultures, irrespective of the question of difference in religious faith. This form of encounter prompts an unprepared-for tension, which was demonstrated by the Protestant resistance against and Buddhist and Catholic silence toward the proposed adoption of *sukuk*.<sup>5</sup>

Of note here is the relationship between religion and political power that emerges from such a circumstance. The existence of religion is in itself the existence of power and there is no religion that is not politically charged.<sup>6</sup> Religion inevitably becomes political. The determining factor behind the form of encounter between religion and

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3. On fundamentalism, see Antes et al. (2008, 437-447).

4. On the multireligious phenomenon and the issue of dialogue among religions, see Chung (2010, 78-101).

5. The South Korean government attempted to adopt an Islamic financial law in 2009 and 2011 through amendments to the Tax Reduction and Exemption Control Act. However, this attempt was met with resistance from Protestants on grounds of granting special privileges to certain religions, and consequently the adoption of the law was withheld due to aggressive opposition.

6. For a range of discussions in relation to the issue of religion and power, see ter Borg and van Henten (2010).

political power is the level of the religion's consciousness of the contemporariness. Religions that possess a monoreligious culture at the level of its consciousness argue that the existence and actions of political power can be justified only when supported by religions. Accordingly, religion considers itself a judge or supporter of political power. But these religions aim for the religious occupation of politics, in whichever way such an orientation is manifested. They are intending the self-subjugation of political power. Generally speaking, our contemporary religions are situated within such a layer of consciousness.

Nevertheless, politics already exceeds the monoreligious cultural situation and exercises its governance on the premise of multireligious situation. Thus, religion's perception of reality not only contradicts that of politics but is also at odds with that of the general public. To be sure, not all of today's religions overlook the multireligious situation. To different degrees, all religions recognize that it is impractical to deny other religions. Accordingly, religions search for varied forms of coexistence. However, these efforts face certain limitations due to the gap between ideological leadership and daily practice. Consequently, the relationships between Korean religions are expressed as a competition that is fundamentally based upon the absolute and develops into conflicts among the religions.

Within the multireligious condition, it is impossible for one specific religion to retain exclusive political power. Thus, each religion seeks to utilize political power as a tool for itself. It promotes its own political empowerment through occupation of political issues and political criticism. This becomes a source of power that strengthens each religion for competition. We must not overlook the reality in which Catholicism, Protestantism, and Buddhism compete to lead issues like human rights, social justice, the environment, Korean unification, and peace, and the edge in the competition has become a yardstick for evaluating their social trustworthiness. Contemporary Korean religions generally encounter politics through such a level of consciousness. They encounter politics by engaging in political behavior of their own. However, none of the religions narrate their own behavior as political behavior. Rather, they argue that it is a religious

behavior regarding politics. Such an argument, however, makes absolute each religion's own political behavior. This political conduct of religions plays an important role in the construction of a new reality along with other societal forces. We have experienced such a role of religion during the process of the democratization movement. In the process, it turned out that religion is the subject of political behavior that produces political results. The encounter between religion and politics is not unlike an encounter between political influences. Conflict between the two powers is inevitable.

At this juncture, we encounter the principle of separation of church and state. The Constitution of the Republic of Korea states the separation of church and state. Pursuant to the principle, religious education within public education is strictly limited, and religious education within private religious schools is also managed through strict guidelines. Where religious rituals are needed in public events, multiple religions are supposed to equally participate in order to repress the potential for religious bias among the political authority. Legally, religion cannot be a source of any type of discrimination. But this principle of the separation of church and state can also become the basis of a religion's argument for self-defense, as well as a tool for holding back other religions. For instance, the Buddhists relied on the argument that the separation of church and state was being damaged by political power and responded negatively to the Protestant-led National Prayer Breakfast. Protestants have done the same in arguing that the government is providing preferential support for Buddhism under the guise that Buddhism is part of traditional culture. Both religions are indeed engaging in political behavior to control each other in the guise of advocating the separation of church and state. In view of our reality, the separation of church and state is not feasible. Considering the relationship each religion forms with political power within the multireligious situation, the principle of separation only becomes a strategic basis of self-justification that the religions employ in order to gain a competitive advantage.<sup>7</sup>

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7. The European debate over the *hijab* exemplifies an ideological convolution of

It is necessary to note that, unlike in the monoreligious or multireligious situation, we do not encounter each religion individually in the multicultural situation. In a monoreligious or multireligious society, we face different cultures as encompassed by religions. However, in a multicultural society, we face religions that are parts of different cultures. Therefore, religion is a variable dependent on culture rather than an independent variable. It is faulty logic for religions to use uniqueness or exceptionality as a reason to assert that they cannot exist within the realm of quotidian life. It is undeniable that religions are culturally complex phenomena that cannot be conceptualized in simplistic ways. Therefore, unlike as in the past, conflicts among religions are manifested as conflicts among cultures. Whether it be the nation-state or society, the whole unit of any community encompassing a religion becomes a principal agent in conflict.

It is more difficult for religions to dominate politics in multicultural societies. Furthermore, political acts by religious bodies become increasingly limited. Politics cannot subjugate religion nor intervene in religion. Interactions such as participation and oppression or resistance and alliance are unsuitable to describe the relationship between religion and politics in a multicultural situation. What we find here is a transformation of the power exercised by political authorities within a composite cultural structure. The ability to control the whole turns into the ability to mediate between components. The attributes of religion are transformed as well. In order to survive, the ability to politically support or resist political authorities becomes the ability to depend on politics by requesting the mediatory action. Therefore, the relationship between religion and politics can be described as mediation and dependence.

Let us consider an example. The political support for the protection and maintenance of Buddhist cultural heritage as national cultural assets is an instance of politics simultaneously protecting and managing the Buddhist religion. However, it is also an instance of the Bud-

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monoreligion, multireligion, and multiculturalism. For an examination of the surrounding debates, see Scott (2007).

dhist religion taking advantage of political authority for its own expansion. The structure of mediation and dependence is evident in this case. But it can also lead to conflict. The kidnappings and murders of Protestant missionaries that occurred during a religious mission abroad is one example. In these instances, political authorities restrict the autonomy of overseas mission work by mandating the return of missionaries or limiting their departures. However, if the government's ability to protect its citizens did not exist, religions would not be able to partake in activities overseas. In this sense, religion's dependence on government is inevitable, and, considering the fact that unrestricted mission work abroad can cause danger to the nation, political management of religion is inevitable. The structure of mediation and dependence does not change. This mediation and dependence within the relationship between religion and politics is the typical relationship between church and state that we face in the contemporary era. It is not a phenomenon that applies to religions universally, but in the multicultural situation, relations between church and state are being sought in such dimensions.

### *The Multicultural Situation and Opportunism*

Though prevalent assumptions dictate that monoreligious culture, multireligious culture, and multicultural situation developed sequentially, we cannot definitively trace this development. This is because each religion reacts differently to situations according to the problem at hand, the various spectra of recognition within each religion, and the attributes of political authority. Consequently, we are experiencing concurrent, simultaneous discursive responses to these various situations.

However, this situation gives rise to significant chaos. For instance, in the multicultural condition, reacting to a problem within the realms of monoreligious cultural thought turns out to be an act unsuitable to reality. This is currently exemplified by Protestant reactions to Islam. Protestant attitudes toward foreign students from the Middle East are exclusive to the point of being Islamophobic. In a multicultural soci-

ety, Korean Protestantism exhibits a monoreligious attitude, one that is not appropriate even in the multireligious condition. As aforementioned, Protestants criticize the government's proposal of the Sukuk Bill as a misguided policy that contradicts the separation of church and state by unilaterally accommodating and enforcing other religions' standards. These reactions are expressions of consciousness that are only acceptable in the monoreligious context. However, while Buddhists are aware that government policies related to temple stays, intended for the development of the tourism industry, are derived from the government's intentions to use religion to boost national interest, they are actively cooperating with the government with expectations that political authority will help the religion to grow.

It should be noted that the contemporary era already finds itself in a multicultural situation and that religions continue to respond with overlapping consciousness about the contemporary era even though there is no reason that they should not be able to recognize such situation. If so, the problem is to define the self-consciousness of the religion that causes it to show composite reactions to multicultural situation, in which their different consciousnesses of various situations are overlapped. It can be considered whether there is another criterion that eliminates or limits religious reactions that are in line with the multicultural situation. In posing this question, we must shift our attention from the framework of a relationship between politics and religion to a consideration of the place where religion and politics coexist.

Here, we are reminded that our lives currently operate in a market-like situation. On the whole, markets are places where all forces participate in trade for their own benefit and, therefore, are composed of dualistic forces such as domination and exploitation, and subjugation and exclusion, for the sake of profit that comes from trade. However, the market in a multicultural society is complex beyond duality. As mentioned above, politics and religion also do not exist in a dualistic structure. While all the forces recognize conflict, they also realize that no singular entity can survive unless all entities coexist. These interdependent relationships that take place are mediated by need. Therefore, all things become tools for each other. We can call this the

market situation.

Today's religions, while perceiving the conceptualization of the multicultural context as a market, are self-aware that they cannot sustain their existence without assigning themselves a trade value. In other words, all religions are aware that they must be consigned to a trade value, or presented as a consumable good, in order to grow and be passed on to the next generation. Politics must also become a consumable good that satisfies the needs of religions. Religions are always prepared to purchase and possess political power if necessary for their survival. From the viewpoint of politics, religion is also a consumable good for political authority. However, not all agents within the market situation are alike, as there are differences in purchasing power and exchange value between them. For instance, while political authority can control a significant portion of the market, religion cannot do so to the same degree. This is primarily because there are many different religions. In a market structure, religion is in a more disadvantageous position than politics. Beyond questioning how their self-produced consumable goods can satisfy consumers, religions must also be concerned with whether they can offer convenience, which is the maximized efficiency of need.

Then, in this situation, how are contemporary religions displaying their self-awareness of the market? This can be described by two prominent trends. One is the trend of mega growth. The pursuit to increase followers, the construction of complex communities composed of countless units, the digitalization of organization management, the construction of colossal buildings, the continuous accumulation of wealth, the extension of a religion's history to obtain more influence within Korean history, and the transformation of accumulated tradition into public goods are all actions belonging to the category of mega growth, but the targeting and pursuit of such acts are unusually active. Most of contemporary religions are not exceptions to this trend. Exceptions to this trend include some ethnic religions—which has lost dynamism by adhering to outdated worldviews and methods of survival as well as failing to adjust to reality and acquire followers—and Confucianism, which has abandoned attempts to adjust to reali-

ty and has instead concentrated on securing its existence by instating its ideological traditions as Korean philosophy.

This trend of mega growth can also be considered a natural development. It can evoke overwhelming emotion, function as a demonstration of power, secure the sustainability of religions through competitive superiority, and serve as a foundation for the complex practice of various functions. The factors that consequently support the trend of mega growth of religions are: the operation of institutes for religious education; the competitive establishment of social service organizations; the rapid increase of prayer houses, cultivation centers, Zen halls, sanatoria, and meditation centers; the translation of holy scriptures; the operation of mass media such as newspapers and broadcasts; and the formation of self-directed groups and societies that take critical note of and act against sociopolitical problems. This trend is also apparent in individual religions' plans to be globalized. Protestantism argues that globalization through overseas mission works fulfills its *raison d'être*. Buddhism takes pride in the fact that the globalization of Buddhism is the realization of the true meaning of the renewed Buddhism. Catholicism's self-awareness as the internationally unparalleled nation of the holy saints claims internationality as its criteria, epitomizing the trend of mega growth.<sup>8</sup> Confucianism follows this trend as well. It claims that the excellence of Korean Confucianism is well appreciated on an international scale.

However, religions' pursuit of mega growth in the market situation that aims at providing convenience comes with great costs. Business principles that increase the influence of religions take precedence over ideological religious principles. For religious authorities, the scope of their roles shifts from divine leadership to executive leadership. To the extent that ideological indicators have become market commodities, this phenomenon can be called the value distribution of ideological indicators. No matter the divinity of a commodity, if it does not have trade value, it will not be distributed.

The same can be said for the criticism against the trend of mega

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8. On religious nationalism, see Juergensmeyer (2009).

growth. Resistance against mega growth increases continuously. However, unless the criticism itself does not undergo significant growth, the trend of mega growth of religions cannot be sublated. Accordingly, the noticeable growth of the forces critical of religion's mega growth is, ironically, in line with the overall mega growth trend. Even these small forces of criticism, through increased voice and aggressive arguments, attempt to increase their influence.

In this vein, we can designate "extremity" as the second market trend. When we have nothing else but strong emotion to accentuate ourselves, we present ourselves in the most extreme manner. Regardless of denomination, all religions, especially contemporary religions' sociopolitical movements, have presented the most extreme versions of themselves. Individual practice of devout faith is no different from this. Since it is impossible to survive without trade value, religions must be different from others, be conspicuous, and stand out in order to attract attention from people.

Extremity is usually realized by way of a dramatic structure. Processes of logical reasoning are eliminated. Extremity is thorough simplification. There exists only right or wrong, and there is no process of discerning possibilities between the limiting extremes. Judgment has the upper hand over facts, and action over judgment. Methodological discussions are meaningless and, in reality, are not practiced. But the trend of extremity identifies the autonomously judged wrongs of reality and elucidates the agents who are responsible. This does not mean that ways to solve the problems of reality are being sought. Only reform and elimination are requested. In these ways, extremity has become a marked trend of the existence of today's religions.

Despite simplification and elucidation, extremity causes confusion and dilemma. This is because ambivalent reactions emerge both within and outside of religions. Such a phenomenon causes religions to experience sympathy and antipathy regarding one issue. For instance, regarding such issues as human rights, the environment, and peace, the progressive movements of Protestants, Buddhists, and Catholics face numerous sympathetic and antipathetic forces. Conservative religious movements have similar experiences in debates about abortion,

death with dignity, creationism, anticommunist ideology, and more. Other examples include Buddhists' movements against high-speed railroads for the environmental protection of salamanders and their temple closings, which meant to indict the government's religiously biased policies, Catholics' dramatic anti-abortion movements that do not consider the situational predicaments of pregnancy, and Protestants' "Disbelief is Hell" campaign. People are moved by such extremity and motivated to participate. However, since extremity causes and/or strengthens polarization, it cannot obtain universality.

This does not equate extremity with absolutization. Absolutization refers to individual religions asserting their beliefs in the mono-religious or multireligious situation. In contrast, extremity is a phenomenon that occurs in the conceptualization of the multicultural condition into the market condition. Thus, in absolutization it is impossible to acknowledge the Other, while in the trend of extremity it is impossible to eliminate the Other even though it is possible to exclusively assert one's legitimacy. This situation is of course complex. However, religions autonomously reject the self-examination of their realities' complexity. This is because their arguments are already clear when they are following the trend of extremity. Extremity is a mode of existence in today's multicultural situation, as well as its content. While the consumer experiences perplexity in the face of such polarization, this is why they consume elucidated extremity. Therefore, even if something carries great meaning, it cannot exist without being extreme in the multicultural, or market, situation.

In our contemporary reality, the trends of mega growth and extremity are methods of survival under the multicultural condition. Their implication of convenience is the principle that sustains today's religions. Mega growth, by producing and selling all kinds of solutions, is the most suitable convenience for the market condition, while extremity, which silences all questions stemming from the total complexity, is the most efficient convenience in the multicultural condition. In a reality that turns convenience into a virtue, the trends of mega growth and extremity serve as the rationale for Korean religions of today.

### *Neo-Ethnicity and the Dynamism of Excluded Cultures*

As noted above, the multicultural situation does not refer to a reality in which multiple agents are integrated. Rather, it is a concept that implies the impossibility of integrating multiple agents, or a concept built upon the premise of rift and dissolution. We can confirm that indications of market exclusion are coming to the front of religions' mega growth and extremity in the multicultural situation. Let us elaborate on this matter.

The multicultural situation produces countless unit communities comparable to ethnic groups or tribal communities. The coexistence of these communities actualizes differences. Consequently, it is inevitable that those belonging to a unit community must realize that they belong to an excluded community. The fact that one belongs to a single community makes one feel that exclusion is inevitable. Unless such communities aim for exclusion, they could lose their identities. In that sense, the excluded communities that we are witnessing today are not merely *excluded* communities but communities that consider *exclusion as a credo* for survival.<sup>9</sup>

It is the phenomenon of language differentiation that causes the advent of excluded bodies. The inability to communicate across generations is also derived from language differentiation. Ignorance regarding jargon and unfamiliarity with language in vogue also constitute factors of a rift. We can also include in this category severance from different conceptual understandings of the same language. For example, the ineffective cross-generational communication is apparent when discussing concepts such as life, the environment, community, justice, equality, human rights, peace, and national unification. The respective generations of the Japanese occupation, the post-liberation, the Korean War, the era of the military dictatorships followed by the resistance against them, and the post-democratization period all fill their languages with concepts based upon the traumatic experiences of their own. Conceptual severance is apparent in bodies that are reg-

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9. On religion as an excluded community, see Asad (2003, 159-180).

ulated by the nominal terms of “liberal” and “conservative” as well as in the different memories of individuals. This way of life in which different generations and different viewpoints constitute different parties each of whom speaks different languages is the multicultural situation. Linguistic miscommunication is inevitable. Today, we consequently argue *different things* using *the same language* to make judgments about who is right or wrong. As a result, chaos has become, of course, part of quotidian life. However, in one’s own community where one’s arguments resonate with others’, one does not experience the miscommunication of one’s own arguments. Excluded communities continue to strengthen their inner bonding in this way.

What we should note here is not the diversity that comes from differentiation but the emergence of scattered communities that are divided by differentiation. A particular language takes its communicative potential as its standard and uses this standard as the power to sever one community unit from another. However, since such communities are not functional units, they are not complementary with other communities. Of course, the solidarity between these communities is limited. Nor can one community attempt to eliminate others through competition. This is not possible in the contemporary multicultural situation. Thus, the foremost and only conceptual goal for communities in the multicultural situation is how to maintain themselves without being exclusive. This does not mean that these excluded communities occupy a fixed amount of space. In this way, these communities are fundamentally different from existing diaspora communities.<sup>10</sup> The proof of isolation is unclear, and the threats from surrounding powers are intangible. Moreover, excluded communities are not fixed but fluid. Incoming and outgoing of members are transient. Even so, they share their own language as long as they are part of the same community, and this language causes them to feel limitations in communication with non-members and plants into them self-awareness about their community as an excluded community. They there-

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10. Especially, in relation to diaspora religion, see McLoughlin (2005, 526-546) and Antes et al. (2008, 275-297).

fore feel, through their self-awareness, that they have secured space even though they do not occupy any in fact. They also believe that there is a boundary dividing them from non-members even though there is no proof of one and that they have been divided even though their memories remain undispersed. In addition, they feel a besieged sense of crisis even though threatening powers do not exist in reality. One lives with a diasporic self-awareness, or a self-awareness that one is a member of an excluded community.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, excluded communities are imagined communities rather than ones in actual existence. Thus, people living in the multicultural situation have a self-community based on the imagination that they are part of a specific community that uses a differentiated language. In other words, today's people construct their own communities by following languages with which they can communicate within a structure wherein actual communities and imagined communities do not correspond. Our contemporary religions exist as such excluded communities. This is why, in a multicultural situation, religions make self-absolutizing statements, which are only appropriate in a monoreligious situation, and also tolerant statements, a reaction appropriate in a multireligious condition. In addition, they make statements about the principle of separation between church and state, which has no practicality in the multicultural situation. All these are because they believe that these statements are appropriate in the multicultural situation.

However, religions know that they are being confronted with problems of communication while they also know that giving up their own language is no different from losing their own identity. For instance, the Korean Protestant church claims that overseas missions are its own calling. The Catholic Church constantly seeks to monumentalize the sites of martyrdom to prove the miracle of evangelization in Korea. Korean Buddhism believes that its globalization is a dream that will be realized soon. Korean Confucianism is proud that it has inherited the Confucian rituals in their entirety and perfected authentic Confucianism. However, these claims are not communica-

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11. On an in-depth discussion of "mobile religion," see Vásquez (2011, 291-319).

tive. In reality, claims also exist that overseas missions tarnish national prestige, that the monumentalization of martyrdom sites damages the traditions of national history, that the specific pursuit of globalizing Korean Buddhism rather than Buddhism as a whole is a nationalistic idea, and that looking back on one's past as whole and complete is no different than self-justification against losses. Because of these different claims, each party making these claims experiences mutual exclusion. Even though they speak the same language in one large community, they cannot communicate with each other. It is in this structure, where one cannot assert one's own claims without forming smaller, differentiated communities within the larger community, that the Korean contemporary religious culture finds itself.

A community in which each party can communicate freely in a multicultural condition, sharing each other's languages, memories, customs, and value systems as if belonging to one cultural area that is excluded from the whole, is comparable to a small ethnic minority community. In this vein, the aforementioned peak religions can be said to be excluded communities in reality because not only do they occupy the summit while speaking a different language, unable to communicate with others, and imagining that they will occupy the central position, but they also judge themselves as already being at the summit and in control of the central position. Such is the self-awareness of the Protestant and Catholic churches. Central religions are no different. Buddhism and Confucianism are excluded communities that occupy the central position. Not only do they imagine that they will occupy the peak and expect that their different language will be communicative in any situation because they are occupying the central position, but they also believe that they are already in the central position that has taken possession of the summit. However, these peak-oriented goals pursued by the central religions or center-oriented goals sought by the summit religions produce the dynamism of excluded communities, which is an aspect of the multicultural situation. We can call such a circumstance the emergence of *neo-ethnicity*. This is the reality in which Korean contemporary religions are situated. If so, we can then say that the trends of religions to pursue mega

growth, extremity, and convenience, as we have examined thus far are all expressions of the dynamism of excluded cultures. This is how the ways to live in exclusion become apparent. The recent trends of religions to pursue minimization or quotidian values in reaction to mega growth and extremity are also different representations of excluded cultures.

Then how does self-identification occur in excluded communities? Self-expansion has no validity, because excluded communities are derived from the multicultural condition in which methods of self-identification are structurally limited. If there were a way, it would be to continuously modify oneself using one's own differentiated heterogeneous language that brought about one's exclusion. This is actualized into giving up all attempts of communication only to strengthen oneself through infinite repetition of one's own language. This standardization then distinguishes oneself from others in external relationships. However, this modification is at once one's own choice and something assigned by external parties. Therefore, the reality of today's religions is no different from a raucous forest of countless differentiated languages. In excluded communities, thus, the frequency or intensity of this unfamiliar, heterogeneous language leads to the self-identity of neo-ethnicities.

Of course, modifications will evolve as they are endlessly produced and consumed, and, in this process, will be amassed and then conglomerated with other differentiated languages. This is because ethnicity, in the multicultural condition, breathes *dynamism born from exclusion* rather than *reclusiveness caused by exclusion*. It is difficult to know whether this will finally amass and conglomerate to the extent that new designations and descriptions of religion will be achieved. It is unclear whether contemporary Korean religions are equipped with this kind of labyrinth, but the indication is clear that the *enculturation of labyrinth* is forthcoming.<sup>12</sup>

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12. On problems related to indefinite religion, see Hervieu-Léger (2008).

## Conclusion: The Phenomenology of Exclusion

I have thus attempted to sketch contemporary Korean religions. Thus far, we have become accustomed to describing contemporary Korean religions in terms of the laws of historical cause and effect as well as the theory of cultural hegemony. However, even recent statements of consciousness regarding religions all carry tones of sorrowful indignation. The resulting emotional sympathy, therefore, rather than making consciousness more transparent, turns the contemporary person's attempts to perceive the contemporariness into one belief and fortifies it. Even our academic attempts to understand today's religions are part of contemporary religious phenomena. It is impossible to eliminate concerns that such orderly depictions are overlooking depictions of reality and creating hasty ethical standards. For this reason, I attempted a deliberate methodological detour. This attempt includes concepts of the center and peak, levels of situational consciousness and aspects of political behaviors, the multicultural situation and the principle of convenience, and the dynamism of excluded cultures. According to this context, I have described contemporary Korean religious culture as the emergence of neo-ethnicity. In other words, by combining the sounds of phenomena, I have trimmed the resulting overall sounds.

Korean religious culture is moving toward constructing a *multicultural excluded society* and demanding the *phenomenology of exclusion*. This is because Korean religious culture is organizing itself through the dynamism of exclusion. It is too early to discuss what will come of the tentative diagnosis of designating the contemporary situation as one of neo-ethnicities. It is impossible to know whether, by facing the changes following the multicultural situation, which might be a phenomenon of cultural fusion, the dynamism of exclusion of neo-ethnicities will become the dynamism of solidarity, or will turn into an unexpected phenomenon that can be described as a harmonious new world, after undergoing dissolution withdrawn from exclusion. This is why the phenomenology of exclusion is required.

Religion does not exist of its own accord. Religion is part of the

ecosystem that constitutes human lives. Religion reveals its presence when it is defined as an event that is interspersed with occasions such as connection with and severance from, flexibility and sudden growth of, and emergence and extinction of all the things that exist. As such, religions may suddenly lose or give up their very names. It remains to be seen how the argument of this article, which describes today's Korean religions as implications of the self-awareness of neo-ethnicities, can be applied to the politics of power that will affect Korean religions.

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