

The Political Empowerment of Korean Protestantism since around 1990

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Abstract

The time around 1990 was an important turning point for the Korean Protestant Church. The church, which had undergone rapid growth in previous years, began declining at this time. In this period, while Korean society saw the system of growth-oriented statist mobilization cease and launched into the era of democratization and the difficult processes of overcoming remnants of the past, the Korean Protestant Church became ever more focused on growth. This paper refers to such a phenomenon as “anachronistic growth” to encompass the fact that the church came to be situated in conflict and tension with civil society. The growth crisis and civil society affect each other in a vicious cycle, which reinforces the negative relationship between the two. This paper examines this vicious cycle by looking at the trajectory of the destructive effect of the church on the notion of “social publicness,” with a focus on the political empowerment of the church. The political empowerment of the church interferes with the institutionalization of a social publicness that is being newly constructed in the post-democratization era. This paper also attempts to conceptualize a notion of “social spirituality” in order to discuss the theology that goes beyond the faith antagonistic to social publicness.

Keywords: Korean Protestantism, growth-oriented economics, decline in congregation membership, mega church, political power of the church, social spiritualization

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Korean Protestantism since around 1990

In Korea, public opinion about Protestantism is polarized. On one side stand devout and passionate believers who display a favor incomparable to believers of any other faith, and on the other, anti-Christians who openly criticize Protestantism. Further, the majority of those in the middle, more likely than not, comprise a *silent* anti-Christian viewpoint.

Such antagonism toward Protestantism is a phenomenon since 1990. Prior to this era, Protestantism was well received for the most part throughout Korean society. In contrast, a negative reputation first began to spread around the early 1990s and then it rapidly expanded and intensified in the 2000s.¹

In this sense, the time around 1990 can be considered a turning point for the history of Korean Protestantism. The growth rate of congregation membership, which had sharply ascended from 1960 to 1990, began to decrease rapidly around 1990. Church membership grew by 412.4 percent between 1961 and 1970, 56.7 percent between 1971 and 1977, 29.7 percent between 1978 and 1985, and 23.9 percent between 1986 and 1991, but between 1992 and 1995, the growth rate declined to 9.0 percent.² In addition, the 2005 census showed a 1.4 percent decrease in overall Protestant Church membership (from 19.7% of the population to 18.3%).³ The decrease over ten years was only of approximately 140,000 people (from 8,760,336 to 8,616,438), but the very fact that there was a decrease was alarming to the Korean Protestant community (S. Kim 2007, 148).

1. According to a telephone survey conducted in 2008 by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea, Protestantism was rated least favorable and credible among the three major religious orders in Korea (Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism). In contrast, in the 1970s and 1980s, Korean Protestantism was regarded highly favorable and credible. For a critical analysis of this phenomenon, see Kim Jin-ho (2012a, 91-109).

2. See W. Lee (1997, 150).

3. Chung Byung-Joon, "Haebang ihu hanguk gaesingyohoe seongjang mit gamso" (The Growth and Decline of the Korean Protestant Church after Independence), <http://bjjoon63.blog.me/30101953919> (accessed February 1, 2011).

Such a decline occurred despite the growth-oriented principles held by Korean Protestant churches. According to a 1997 study by Gallup Korea, entitled “The Third Study of the State of Religion and Religious Consciousness in Korea,” 79.6 percent of respondents stated that “religious organizations are prioritizing expansion more than the search for truth.”⁴ Although this question is phrased to refer to religion in general, it is of little doubt that this collective opinion strongly refers to the Protestant Church. Such a result was also found in a 2003 survey by the Hyundai Research Institute at the request of the Institute of Theological Studies in Academy of Hanshin University (ITSHAU). Across the religion, geography, and gender categorizations, 70 to 80 percent of the survey participants responded that Protestantism employs a more active form of proselytization than other religions; moreover, excluding Protestants, 70 to 80 percent of these respondents stated that such a form of proselytization was undesirable (ITSHAU 2003, 107-110). As shown, growth-oriented principles remain in place to this date, but congregation membership has declined.

The decline is significant for reasons other than the fact that believers of the Protestant religion are shocked at the rapid decline. It is, in fact, the most critical illustration of the past and present of Korean Protestantism. From this perspective, this study discusses the decline in congregation membership in connection with the Korean experiences around 1990, and then examines the effects of this decline on the trajectory of the Korean church as well as on the reputation of the Protestant Church in Korean society. In particular, this paper focuses on the notion of “social publicness.” Specifically, it argues that the Protestant Church in Korean society since 1990 is understood as a religion that deteriorates social publicness.

Successful growth by all means was probably the most important guiding principle in Korean society between the 1960s and 1990s. But around 1990, the starting point of the movement away from military

4. Jo Seong-gwan, “Hangugin-ui jonggyo saenghwal, 48%-ui hangugin-eun sin-ui jonjae-reul minneunda” (The Religious Life of Koreans: 48% of Koreans Believe in the Existence of God), *Wolgan joseon* (Monthly Chosun), January 2001.

authoritarianism and into democratization,⁵ the problem of social publicness arose. The ardent desire for social publicness intensified after the 1997 financial crisis, which led Korean society into the turbulent vortex of neoliberal global capitalism.

Within this context, we can understand the differences in the views of the church and those of the society with respect to the decline in congregation membership. While the church is ever more focused on growth and success, civil society views this priority as a force that encroaches on people's realm of social publicness and deteriorates the social meaning of religious spirituality. Put differently, the ways in which the church responds to the decline in church membership hinders the role of religion in social spiritualization, and this phenomenon acts as a social constructivist element that strengthens the negative relationship between the Korean Protestant Church and civil society today.

The activities of the Korean Protestant Church since around 1990 can be summarized into three types: (1) the vitalization of international mission work, (2) the subjectification of prosperity theology (the phenomenon of late capitalist religious formation), and (3) political empowerment. These three types of activities cannot be deemed direct and intentional responses to the decline in membership, but I believe that the Korean Protestant Church emphasized these activities as the unintended consequences of the membership decline and the corresponding sense of crisis. Therefore, these three types of activities are critical to the understanding of Korean Protestantism. And this paper aims to explore the current state of the Korean Protestant Church by focusing on the third topic.

Specifically, I focus on the relationship between the political empowerment of Christianity and the social publicness of religion. The issue of publicness is a key topic in the political-theological interpretation of mass theology. Originally, Ahn Byung-Mu interpreted the pri-

5. In Korean society, the starting point of the transition into a democratic regime is generally considered to be the period following the implementation of the direct election system in 1987.

vatization of the public as “natural sin,” or as the prototype of human sinfulness. Namely, he viewed the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden as “the public” and its privatization as the prototype of human sinfulness (Ahn 1986, 442-499). His work was later used by scholars as a theological basis for the critique of modern capitalist society (Choi Hyung Mook 2006a, 205-216, 217-230; Kim Jin-ho 2001, 161-184). By building on this line of thought, I will conclude this paper by interpreting the issues of the political empowerment of the Protestant Church and social publicness in connection with that of social spiritualization.

The Sociology of Religion in Decline around 1990

As discussed above, since the time around 1990 has a special significance to the membership decline in the Korean Protestant Church, it is necessary for us to gain an understanding of the period. Beyond the history of the Korean Protestant Church, the time around 1990 is a pivotal turning point in modern Korean history. I have previously studied the significance of this time period by examining democratization and the rise of consumer society as focal points (Kim Jin-ho 2007b).

The year 1987 was the point at which Korean society moved away from military authoritarianism and into a democratic regime. And 1998 was the point at which the transition into consumer society occurred as a result of the expansion of the durable consumer goods industry. I characterize this phase as the emergence of the citizenry. The citizen construes oneself as an agent of rights as well as that of desire, and becomes a subject within the basis of two types of liquidation. The first is the liquidation of the authoritarian regime that represses democracy, and the second is the liquidation of pre-consumer society, which represses individual desire.

On the other hand, the Korean church accomplished unprecedented growth between the 1960s and 1990s under the military authoritarian regime. In the process of such high-speed growth, the church has

been established into a growth-oriented system. Central to this growth was the structuring of the church as a tool for the total mobilization of available resources. The phenomenon bears a resemblance to the militaristic, total mobilization system that brought on unprecedented economic growth.⁶ The church and state, two growth-oriented systems are particularly similar in that they encompass myths of heroism and vest full authority in one charismatic leader.⁷

But since around 1990, democratization unfolded in Korea through a process of demythologizing heroism.⁸ The system of heroism, however, continued to operate within the church. One interesting study on this topic can be noted here. According to Park Jong-Hyun (2008, 10-14), the expansion of the Korean church is closely related to the long-term exercise of charismatic leadership of the minister in a particular church. Such ministers served in one church for over 30 to 40 years and monopolized all resources of faith, and the church structure was under such a system of concentrated authority. The success stories of most mega churches share this characteristic. While many of the “dictators” reached retirement ages in the 1990s, these “autocrats” continue their ultimate exercise of power by remaining in honorary positions, and in some churches, maintain or reproduce their authority by passing on their positions to their children. Needless to say, these methods are the most stable yet undemocratic means of succession.

The 1980s saw frequent conflicts over authority between the laity and the ministry. Protest posters were posted on church walls for the

6. Regarding the structural similarity between the growth-oriented Korean church and the growth-oriented national regime, see Kim Jin-ho (2012a, 61-70).

7. Hong Young Ki, the director of Yoido Full Gospel Church's Institute for Church Growth, understands the driving force of the growth of the Korean church to be the “charismatic leader” (Hong 2007). On the heroism that characterizes Korean capitalism and its messianic political character, see Kim Jin-ho (2012b).

8. As referred to by Kim Jin-ho (2012b), Korean democratization gave birth to different notions of heroism. This is a consequence of the failure of the democratization movement to dispense with authoritarianism completely and is a question explored by the debate over inner Fascism, which was a source of great controversy in the late 1990s.

first time in the history of Korean Protestantism, and even handouts containing a list of churches to be burnt down were circulated. This phase also coincided with the most acute period of conflict between the nation's dictator and its citizens. As the laity's sense of sovereignty intensified, respect for the minister rapidly deteriorated, and challenge to vertical and authoritarian power structures was a dominant tendency of the time period.

But this struggle concluded in a victory for the minister and his lineup of the church elite, and the discourse of church democratization was almost entirely eliminated around 1990. Instead, small churches claiming to be post-authoritarian and laity-oriented began to emerge in the periphery of the church system.⁹ In this process, mainstream churches became a symbol of the old era's remnants. Additionally, the emblematic image of the minister, who monopolizes all church resources, became that of an intolerable and negative figure. As such, the social credibility of the ministry rapidly declined and the church came to be viewed as a gathering place of the old and inconvenient.

Heroism continues within the church, but has collapsed outside of the church. Many scandals that had never been evident beyond church walls began to be exposed. These included ethical flaws of ministers, the church's oppressive attitude toward the local community, unconditional pro-Americanism, far-right conservatism, exclusivism toward other religions and philosophies, and other historically and socially negative images. Civil society withdrew its support for the church, beginning with those who were more avid supporters of democratization.

Ironically, those within the church who first perceived the contempt of civil society and deemed it a crisis were members who were relatively less exclusivist and more democratic. While those who were conservative and narrow-minded were less sensitive to societal criticism and thus less vulnerable, those who sought to share with the

9. *Minjung* churches, which promoted class-conscious progressivism, were active during the 1980s. The 1990s, on the other hand, gave life to small churches that attempted to combine everyday democracy and religion. On "small churches," see Kim Jin-ho (2012a, 209-200).

larger society the value of social publicness of faith were spiritually hurt. Consequently, a large number of reformist and critical Christians either left the church or became discouraged and relegated themselves to the periphery of the church. More than anything, this pattern signified the collapse of the progressive Christian social movement. Those who advocated progressive theology disappeared from the church, and the church rapidly moved toward conservatism.¹⁰

The subordinate, pro-American attitude of the Korean Protestant Church and its antagonistic attitude toward North Korea further widened the gap between the church and civil society.¹¹ As a consequence, Korean Protestantism, which had successfully expanded especially in the urban areas and among the youths, noticeably declined after the 1990s.¹²

During the 1960s and 1970s, when industrialization accelerated to a certain extent, the household economies prospered and a generation enjoying the new wealth emerged. These individuals, who were born after the Korean War (1950-1953) and became adolescents around the end of the 1960s, emerged as eager consumers of Western youth culture imported from the United States. Because of the strict censorship of the time, however, their culture was stripped of political ideology unlike the more radical 1968-era youth culture of the West. The church played a leading role in introducing Western youth culture to Korea, and it was during this period that young people, beginning with those living in urban areas, became part of the church on an extensive scale (Kim Jin-ho 2006a, 91-99).

Starting with the rapid development of consumer society around

10. Of course, this is not all. The late 1980s was the point at which “progressive evangelists” and the “progressive evangelical movement” emerged within the conservative Evangelist camp (generally referred to as the “Evangelical Group”) in comparison with the reformist Christian camp (generally referred to as the “Ecumenical Group”). On the view that the progressive evangelist movement was activated after 1987, see Chung (2012).

11. For a detailed discussion of the history of the pro-American and anticommunist basis of Korean Protestantism, which converges into the Christian Council of Korea (est. 1989), see Kang (2006).

12. See Choi Hyunjong (2011, 22-29).

1990, however, the leisure industry experienced an unprecedented growth. While the per capita income in 1971 was US\$235, it rose to US\$5,883 in 1990 and US\$10,037 in 1995. Furthermore, after the financial opening of 1993, money from foreign loans circulated widely at low interest rates.¹³ In turn, consumption experienced rapid growth: the number of domestic and international travelers grew sharply; all types of sports clubs, entertainment establishments, and accommodations grew in number; and the time spent watching television greatly increased. Such circumstances substantially affected church attendance, and the church's attractiveness for urbanites and youth weakened remarkably (W. Lee 2005, 166-168). The church was even considered anachronistic and old-fashioned.

In addition, consumer society formed a basis for the emergence of self-confident, independent women. As Giddens (2001) notes, capitalist consumer society transformed the quality of "sensibility" into a resource for high value-added industry. This created a social structure advantageous for women, who were thought to possess expertise in sensibility, and such a social context enhanced the self-esteem and independence of elite women. For them, however, the church signified a stale environment in which pre-democratic, patriarchal culture was at the center. Such increasingly pervasive opinion caused progressive women to break away from the church and also prevented a new influx of women into the church.¹⁴ The decline in female membership was more noticeable in progressive and reformist churches, where many female believers held progressive views, in comparison with the

13. This brought about a great "financial catastrophe" a few years later, leading the nation to the verge of bankruptcy.

14. There are hardly any studies of substance on the development of the female Protestant congregation. But Song Ki-Tae (1992) provides two interesting findings from a survey of female Protestants in the capital area, conducted in February 1992. The first is that the ratio of new female members has declined significantly, and the second is that female members share little consciousness about community service or participation in matters of regional and national significance. On the other hand, religious sociologist Lee Won-Gue proposes an inference about the congregation membership decline through the hypothesis that there is a meaningful connection between the increase in women who are competitive in their profession and the decrease in their attentiveness to the church (Song 1992; W. Lee 2002).

conservative churches, where many female members condoned gender discrimination or were assimilated with such cultural values. It is because of this reason that in spite of the decrease in female membership, the church in general did not attempt to reform its conservative views on sex and gender.

Anachronistic Growth-Orientation

We must note that despite the stagnation or decline in congregation membership since around 1990, the church never gave up or rejected the principle of growth. Rather, the discourse and system of the Korean Protestant Church remain focused on growth. I call this discrepancy the church's "anachronistic growth-orientation." And I argue that it is necessary for the church to move beyond its repetitive discussion of the significance and necessity of congregation growth and, instead, to critically self-examine its growth-oriented principles as well as consider the ways in which the value of the church can be evaluated based on its merits and not just its size. In the following paragraphs, I focus on the harmful consequences of anachronistic growth-orientation, which has become a structural element that drives the church into a vicious cycle. This paper briefly explains this vicious cycle in three dimensions: the seminary, church, and civil society.

First, theological education has become devastated. The schism between denominations was most severe between the 1960s and 1980s, a time of rapid growth for the church. During this period of denominational divide, each expanded its investment in its affiliated seminary, and the number of students of theology rapidly increased. Many denominations also created their own system of accreditation, beyond what was authorized by the national ministry of education, thus further increasing the size of the ministry. At the same time, each denomination's strategy of training more seminary students produced not only ministry candidates but also a new generation of young theologians, many of whom were hired as professors. The increase in younger professors became a basis for higher-quality theological edu-

cation. Accordingly, Korean seminaries grew rapidly in both size and quality at the end of the 1980s, the last few years of rapid growth for the Korean church.

The problem surfaced after the 1990s when the growth pattern of the congregation membership began to reverse itself. According to 1999 reports by the seven largest denominations of the Korean Protestant Church, church membership had declined by 9,857 people from the previous year, but the number of churches had expanded by 559. Moreover, congregation membership is likely to be inflated in denominational reports, largely due to repeat registrants, who switch churches and therefore are registered at multiple churches. Among the repeat registrants, the percentage of those who switched churches due to job transfers and moving was especially high, at 53.3 percent (31.6% and 21.7%, respectively). The rates are reflective of recent statistics on job transfers (35%) and moving (around 20%) in Korean society. In addition, Korean Protestant Church attendees switch churches also out of dissatisfaction with the minister (33.7%), excessive time commitment on volunteering (11.3%), dissatisfaction with worship service (8.5%), and conflict with fellow members (8.5%) (W. Lee 2005, 152). Overall, Korean Protestant Church attendees have switched churches more than twice on average (W. Lee 2005, 151). To be sure, not all individuals who switch churches register in a new roster each time, but it is assumed that a significant number do so. On the other hand, statistics on the number of their churches and size of the clergy are mostly accurate. Taking this into account, the actual number of decline in membership is probably much greater than as reported by the above denominations, whereas the number of increased churches is probably much closer to reality. This signifies that the overproduction of ministry candidates by theological seminaries is even greater than what statistics might indicate.

A consequence of this particular aspect of the congregational decline, more than anything, was the shortage of available jobs for seminary students.¹⁵ Such circumstances pushed them to concentrate heavily

15. According to the testimony of Reverend Son In-woong, only 13% of graduating

ly on topics that could be utilized for church growth. Therefore, while the infrastructure for studying theology had expanded dramatically, students were disproportionately focused on topics such as “church growth” and “ministry counseling”—topics for which scholarly frameworks were underdeveloped. This phenomenon was followed by a widespread disengagement of theology from issues of social, national, historical, and global importance, as well as a decline in the study of humanities devoted to self-examination.

The church also preferred to hire new clergy based on their practical skills, rather than on their knowledge of theology, humanities, and sociology; this preference, in turn, exerted great pressure on theological education. In particular, both concrete and intangible devices were constructed to strengthen the church’s control and regulation over theology. The 1992 expulsion of Pyun Sun-Hwan, dean of the Methodist Theological University, and Hong Jung-Su, professor of the university, was a shocking event that signaled the full-scale regulation of scholarship by the church.¹⁶ Subsequent silence among theologians was a key reason for the near collapse of the church’s potential for self-examination.

Second, it is necessary to take a look at the church crisis caused by the stagnation and decline in growth. It is well known that, even after the 1990s, the growth rate of mega churches did not diminish in any sense. The crisis was felt primarily by medium- or small-sized churches. The number of churches that closed between 2002 and 2008 is estimated at 1,300 or greater per year.¹⁷ Needless to say, many of

students from Seoul Jangsin University, a theological seminary of the Presbyterian Church of Korea—one of the largest denominations of Korea—were hired at churches. Jeong Hyo-Im, “Maeyeon mun danneun jageun gyohoe 3000 gae, hae-beop-eun?” (3000 Small Churches Close Each Year: The Solution?), *Christian No Cut News*, April 1, 2008.

16. On the incident of professors Pyun Sun-Hwan and Hong Jung-Su, see Kim Ju-Duk (2007).
17. Kim Jin-ho, “Gyohoe sayong seolmyeongseo 2: gyohoe-ui seongjang jisangjuui-ga naeun sasaenga ‘gyohoe maemae’” (Church Handbook 2: “The Church Trade,” An Illegitimate Child of the Church’s Growth Principle), *OhmyNews*, September 22, 2011.

these were medium- or small-sized churches. The proportion of non-independent churches is also significant, accounting for 40 to 50 percent of the total number of churches that have recently closed in South Korea.¹⁸ Such a phenomenon is related to the fact that recent ministry graduates founded new churches because they were unable to secure jobs. The decline in church membership has thus given rise to an environment in which unprepared and inexperienced ministry candidates were compelled to start up new churches on inadequate foundations.

Moreover, as discussed above, many of these individuals had not devoted much time to exploring the church and society from humanities-oriented and theological viewpoints, having focused almost exclusively on methods for church growth. This proved to be a factor that exacerbated the civil society's critical view of the church. It became a generalized notion that the church was adverse to public values and only concentrated on its own growth. Regarding this phenomenon, sociologist of religion Lee Won-Gue has commented that the religious nature of the Korean Protestant Church has become strengthened in recent years while societal trust in the institution has significantly declined.¹⁹

In addition, after the 1990s, many medium- or small-sized churches suffered budget deficits, with construction expenses as a leading debt contributor.²⁰ The conventional wisdom that a large worship space attracts more attendees did not hold true any longer, which

18. Lee Hyun-ju, "Gaecheok gyohoe-ui 70% jarip-e silpae, jageun gyohoe-neun him-gyeopda" (70% of the Newly Established Churches in Korea Remain Non-Independent, Troubles Facing Small Churches), *IGoodNews*, February 6, 2009, <http://www.igoodnews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=21737>. A non-independent church refers to a church whose current income falls below the lowest level as designated by each denomination. When compared to the standard of Korea's largest denomination, the budget of the non-independent church is 20% lower than the minimum cost of living designated by the government.

19. Lee Won-Gue, "Hanguk gaesingyo-ui choegeun donghyang" (Recent Trends in Korean Protestantism), *Christian Times*, June 23, 2009.

20. Forty percent of church budgets in 1998 was used to fund construction (Kang 2004, 56-57).

only meant quickly worsened church finances.²¹ This phenomenon was reflected in the Christian Liberal Democratic Party's political slogan for the 2012 election year, which proposed to "lower interest rates to 2.0 percent for churches taking out loans from banks." It is evident that the principal reason behind frequent church loans was related to construction costs.²²

When churches came under financial pressure, they cut expenditures for social assistance and welfare programs. In turn, this brought about a downsizing of the church's social outreach activities. At the same time, all churches began to imitate mega churches to a greater degree and adopted growth programs based on American prosperity theology. Consequently, their ability to self-examine themselves and their philosophies only deteriorated, and their lack of consciousness with respect to social publicness became particularly acute.

Third, the relationship between civil society and Christianity is an issue. In the past, Christianity played a significant role in Korean civil society. In particular, coalitions formed by member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC), various Christian social movement groups, as well as other civil activism organizations and critical research institutes led the Korean progressive social movement. They contributed significantly to cultivating critical social elites and played an important role in creating a positive reputation for Christianity in Korean society. Further, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) and other Christian social movement organizations connected progressive church leaders with each other, functioning as an influential hub of faith and theology within church politics.

But the role of these organizations in civil society quickly declined after 1990. The fact that such progressive organizations as the NCCK and related social movement organizations were so active in spite of

21. Jeong Taek-eun, "Ildan jitgo boja! gyohoe geonchuk seonggong bojang?" (Let's Build and See! The Guaranteed Success of Church Construction?), *Christian Times*, February 10, 2010.

22. An Seong-mo, "Bit naeseo mom kiuneun hanguk daehyeong gyohodeul" (Korean Mega Churches, Increasing Their Size with Debt), *Sisa Journal*, July 8, 2011.

the overarching conservatism that had pervaded churches in Korean society was strongly linked to their funding by progressive foreign agencies. These funds, however, came to an end as the Korean government became a member of the OECD (Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development) in 1991.

Meanwhile, the influence of mega churches on most of the denominations sharply rose during this period. In order to gather members of church leadership, mega churches began to regulate the theological seminary, hosting various seminars and workshops with researchers who suited their taste. Such events mostly comprised of interpretive studies and programs based on American prosperity theology.

Evidently, forms of progressive modern theology that had been at the forefront of Korean theological thought in spite of their minority status—including *minjung* theology, indigenization theology, and European neo-orthodox theology—had been replaced in their entirety by a fast-arising form of faith and theology based on the practices of mega churches. Churches came to replace a form of theology that was *illuminated* upon them with the one that they themselves *led*. Accordingly, they began a religious movement of regulating theologians and guiding neighbors. As the term “prosperity theology” indicates, this movement placed growth at the core of church philosophy.

At the same time, the NCKK and other progressive organizations that had been suffering from financial deficits began to receive aid from mega churches that encroached on denominational politics. This signified a new means of funding, but it simultaneously meant the diminishing role of the NCKK’s human rights board that had mobilized the organization’s progressive vision. As a consequence, Korean Protestantism no longer carried a meaningful status in civil society.

Furthermore, other organizations in which NCKK members played significant roles, such as the Christian Broadcasting System (CBS) and the Christian Literature Society of Korea, also began to lose their status as sources of progressive media and knowledge. As the NCKK’s progressive vision dissipated, the significance of civic organizations, which once elicited a positive view of Christianity from civil society and served the role of uniting progressive churches, grew to be nomi-

nal. This phenomenon became the catalyst for the growing systematic insensitivity of the church, in both its practice and theology, to the problem of social publicness.

A Coping Strategy: Political Empowerment

As discussed above, key activities of the Korean church since around 1990 can be summarized as the following: (1) the vitalization of international mission work, (2) subjectification of prosperity theology, and (3) political empowerment. Although these are not directly related to the decline in congregation membership, they nevertheless have bolstered the church's sense of identity and purpose, which had diminished in light of the membership decline. In this sense, the three activities can be studied for their discursive effects on the Korean church's sense of self. And among the three, this study focuses mainly on the issue of political empowerment.

In a 1901 five-part document, entitled "Conditions to be Exchanged between the Church and State," the Korean Presbyterian Council first articulated the principle of separation of church and state. This document, which declared the depoliticization of the church as well as the secularization of the state, has been accepted by most Korean Protestants as the fundamental principle underlying faith and theology (Yi 1973, 367-373). The separation of church and state was further established as a constitutional provision after the founding of the modern Korean state in 1948, and this principle became widely accepted both among the religious and non-religious as a general principle that defined the relationship between religion and state. Nonetheless, the Korean Protestant Church was one of the most important political actors during the formation of the modern state. It played a formative social role as it would in a Christian state, in spite of the fact that only 1 to 5 percent of the population comprised of Christians prior to the 1960s (Kang 1994, 23-31).

After Park Chung-hee's military regime came to power, however, the church retreated from explicit political participation and instead

became involved in politics by passively collaborating with the government in exchange for political capital.²³ From a formalistic perspective, the church's role was in accord with the separation of church and state principle, since such exchanges occurred behind closed doors.²⁴ But, entering the 1990s, the passivity of the church changed into assertiveness. In 1991, the last year of the Sixth Republic and the first direct presidential election, mainstream churches united under the banner of "Let's elect a presbyter²⁵ as the president" and began to withdraw from the passive and secretive political activities of the past.

Such a slogan articulated the church's envisagement of a Christian state and desire to participate in shaping the future of Korean society in the post-military authoritarian era, and led to the formulation of a Christian-led unification. A political front formed around the Christian Council of Korea, founded in 1989, and anticommunism and pro-American unification comprised the unifying discourse of this solidarity (Kang 2006, 502-506). The church became visibly engaged in politics, in contrast to its passive involvement of the past. During the period of rapid congregation membership decline, the so-called "subversive mission in North Korea" discourse helped the church overcome its crisis in mission work as well as imbue itself with a sense of pride and superiority.

The second important event was when Kim Han-shik of the Love Mission Church declared his candidacy for the 1997 presidential election. Minister Kim Han-shik viewed the crisis of the near-bankruptcy of the nation, which resulted in an IMF takeover, as the failure of "a presbyter president" (President Kim Young-sam) and in turn, the fail-

23. Kang In-chul interprets Christianity during the Park Chung-hee regime through the frameworks of the resistance of the minority and the collaboration of the majority (Kang 2007, 86-93).

24. S. Lee (2004) analyzes the trajectory of active resistance by the Protestant majority after the 1990s.

25. The Korean Church is divided into almost 100 denominations, but surprisingly, there are no significant differences in doctrine and organization. This is most evident in the system of the elder. Most Korean denominations adopt the elder system. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to state that Korean Protestantism is an "expanded version of Korean Presbyterianism."

ure of Christianity. Minister Kim founded a Christian party named Political Union for the Right Country and entered the presidential race at a time when the mainstream church could not play any important political role and congregation membership was declining. He also emphasized anticommunism and pro-Americanism. What set him apart, however, was that in contrast to the presbyter president, who was triumphalist in his approach to the gospel, Kim emphasized the Christian politics of love and benevolence. Although results were devastating (0.18% of the vote), his quixotic effort became an important turning point in that he created a political party and attempted to politicize religious discourse.

Of particular significance was that Kim Han-shik, representative of young Korean conservatives, first attempted to formulate a “Bible Belt”²⁶ in Korea, which was similar to that which played a leading role in the elections of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush in the United States. In the following years, he kept his vision of a Korean Bible Belt and remained a consistent intermediary who led influential Christian leaders into politics.

The church, however, did not succeed in political empowerment through party politics, and is unlikely to do so in the future. Although Christian political parties have been repetitively founded and merged for general elections in 2004 (Christian Democratic Welfare Party, 1.1% of the vote), in 2008 (Christian Love Action Party, 2.54% of the vote), and in 2012 (Christian Freedom Democratic Party, 1.2% of the vote), their accomplishments have been nominal. These results reflect the overall societal criticism of the Protestant Church as well as church members’ diminishing loyalty to and increasing distrust of ministers. Moreover, the political slogans advanced by the Christian parties were distinguishable as those of an interest group, rather than advancing any cause of social publicness, and have continued to fail to attract even church members as political supporters.

On the other hand, Kim Han-shik’s vision is materializing in dif-

26. This term refers to a region in the United States in which socially conservative evangelical Protestantism is a significant part of the culture.

ferent ways. The series of rallies that began with a 2003 mass prayer session at the City Hall Square of Seoul signaled political empowerment of a “great conservative alliance.” These rallies did not signify a “Bible Belt” but rather an “anticommunist, pro-American far right belt,” with Christianity as a key influence within this far-right coalition.

Even in the absence of mass rallies, the “new right,” as an extension of the “far right,” continues to wield their influence by organizing numerous micromobilization groups and by producing and maintaining the far right discourse. The central actors of these micromobilization groups play important roles as mesomobilization actors who communicate and cooperate with each other, and have become intermediaries who are capable of inducing macromobilization in a specific situation.

It is also necessary to examine the efforts by the “moderate right” to establish “new right” political empowerment in their quest for a Korean Bible Belt. Christian Social Responsibility, a highly politicized NGO established in 2005, has made clear the political vision of a great conservative alliance, and also seeks to realize such a political regime aligned with the vision.²⁷ Although the formative political role of Christian Social Responsibility has diminished significantly in recent years, this camp continues to subsist through numerous micromobilization organizations.

One interesting point is that organizations and activists of both the far right and the moderate new right were not limited to the Christian coalitions, but rather played active roles in fostering the solidarity and articulating discourses between different religions as well as between the religious and non-religious groups. In other words, by prioritizing ideological similarities, they collaborated more flexibly with those from other religions and the non-religious groups.

27. See Yoo Chang-seon, “‘Nyu raiteu’-neun joseon donga-eseoman tteunda?” (The “New Right” Only Appears in *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*?), *OhmyNews*, November 22, 2004. Meanwhile, as the bubble of its political orientation is slowly eliminated, this organization is becoming established as a civil society NGO that monitors the government from a conservative basis, rather than an institution of the political periphery.

Such Christian political empowerment, compared to other activities, inspired a much greater degree of goal-oriented behavior and vision. It unified Christians who shared a similar ideology and reanimated their sense of purpose in social, national, and global dimensions beyond the scope of the church. This also prompted them to formulate their own internal interpretive system.

During this time, Christians needed to confront the elements that dissolved their sense of self and actively interpret them so that they could establish a firm sense of religious identity within the political arena. The decline in congregation membership became the foundation for the sense of crisis felt by all Christians who experienced the changes since around 1990. Moreover, this sense of crisis was not to be resolved by internal enunciation in the church, but rather by political interpretation and sociological diagnosis. In other words, the sense of crisis caused by membership decline had to be interpreted not only in religious aspects but also in political and social dimensions.

The church began a full-scale analysis of the decade of democratic stabilization under the governments of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Mu-hyun (2003-2008) following the fall of the military regime and sought to identify the elements that needed to be either criticized or advocated in order to advance a Christian political system. It reached the conclusion that the crisis of Christianity was related to the external factor of democratization and that civic awareness, inspired by democratization, intervened with the church's attempts to socialize and nationalize Christian philosophy. At this time, the church regarded democratization in the same light as a political leftist movement and interpreted civic consciousness, which emphasized social publicness, as a manifestation of pro-North Korean ideology. In this way, the church once again utilized the traditional language of anticommunism, and additionally began to focus on political empowerment strategies used by American churches. As a result, the church defined their political objectives as promoting laws based on Christian ethics as well as gathering political forces that advocated anti-North Korean policies.

The political empowerment of the Christian church was now

understood to be directly related to the decline in congregation membership. The logic was that the decline was a consequence as well as a process of society's move to the left; people were leaving the church because they were leaning to the left. Atheists and communists were thought to have conspired to denigrate the contributions and significance of the church, and had defined the church by isolated incidents and accidents.²⁸ At the same time, the reason why robust capitalism had not developed was believed to be due to the evil effects of New Age culture, which included sexual depravity, drug abuse, and dissolution of the family.²⁹ Therefore, it was necessary for the church to eliminate such cultural abuses and reconstruct a society of strict ethical standards in order to foster a robust form of capitalism. This was the future society whose materialization was delegated to the Christian church. To accomplish this, Christianity had to take on the adventure of creating a political regime, which in Korea would be realized by the mass conservative coalition under the right-wing belt.

In the course of political empowerment, the Christian church came to invent an interpretive storyline that explained their sense of crisis caused by membership decline. The story is comprised of clear allies and enemies, divided along the lines of America and North Korea. The Christian church came to believe that it needed to become an agent of political coalition among allies in order to limit the maneuvers of enemies. Political empowerment was thus a motive for overcoming the church's sense of shame, which correlated with the membership decline, and charging itself with a renewed sense of purpose and calling.

28. "Seven Golden Candlesticks and Seven Stars," a sermon presented on January 14, 2001, by Reverend Kim Hong-do who heads the largest Methodist Church of the world, exhibits the generic form of such a conspiratorial understanding (http://www.sermon66.com/news_view.html?s=index&no=63203&l_page=5&find_how=&find_value=&s_id=3726&ss_id=&hd=).

29. Such responses by the Protestant Church toward the New Age movement were launched full-scale beginning in the early 1990s (Chun 2006).

Conclusion: Toward Social Spiritualization

The principal discourse of Christian political empowerment is founded on the Other, interpreted as the “enemy.” The Other exists as a subject of conversion, but not as that of co-existence and negotiation. Christian leaders are governed by a sense of victimization that is pervaded by the notion that the Other, if left unconverted, will deprive *our* existence. The church, which confronted the Roh Mu-hyun government’s attempts to reform the private education law, believed that democratization was no different from communism.³⁰ They believed that the democratic government was plundering mission schools, a territory of the church, just as the North Korean government in the mid-1940s extorted Christian resources for the purpose of land reform.

The objective of Christian political empowerment, therefore, is to transform society into a world of the church, rather than that of the Other. With such an objective in mind, no gray area exists. Everything is either ours or that of the enemy, and history is the collection of time that is interspersed with wars over territory between us and the enemy. To win this war, the Christian religion must defeat the enemy by mobilizing all of life’s resources. Previously, this notion of war had remained in the imaginary realm as long as it was confined within the church. With politicization, this abstract enemy came to be associated with a specific subject, the unconverted Other. In essence, the Christian political empowerment sought in Korea is a discourse of religious war.

But true evangelization, needless to say, is a movement that opposes war. In particular, in a world oppressed by tyrannical neoliberal capitalism, in which conflicting private desires transform the world into a battlefield for survival even in the everyday life, the gospel is associated with efforts to protect the public and to preserve what should not be privatized. Evangelization, then, is a historical movement that seeks to create a *demilitarized zone*, a *territory of deterritori-*

30. Reverend Kim Hong-do stated that the debate on private school legislative reform “contains communist Juche ideology” (*Dangdang News*, October 18, 2006).

alization, in which principles of capitalistic warfare are dissolved. Moreover, evangelization, as the *territory of deterritorialization*, is a territory that blurs the boundary between the territories that each of us has occupied. In other words, if boundary refers to the division between us and the enemy, the *territory of deterritorialization* becomes a zone of deterritorialization, or frontier zone, in which different *others* meet and communicate.³¹

But modern capitalism approaches people through technological and epistemological systems that mobilize even such a demilitarized, or frontier, zone into a war zone. In this sense, the phenomenon of capitalist globalization is perhaps the finality of the modern capitalist regime. The public sphere is gradually disappearing within this system of globalization, and everything is becoming a sphere for competition and self development. The current state of globalization is thus moving toward turning the daily life into war as well as incorporating such war into the daily life (Kim Jin-ho 2007a).

In this respect, prosperity theology is the church theology that best reflects the capitalistic system. The movement of the Korean Christian church, which arms itself with prosperity theology and engages in political empowerment to annihilate the Other, stands as an obstacle to the democratic struggle that seeks to preserve and expand the public sphere.

Politics is the thought and action that seek acceptance from the Other by presenting the private desires of actors as public ones. In this process, *we* and the Other come to negotiate and seek methods to coexist. But the church, in its pursuit of political empowerment, does not present its desires as public ones but only utilizes them to pressure the Other to surrender. And it regards those who do not surren-

31. Prescott employs the notion of “frontier zone” as a concept of the ancient society that responds to the “boundary” of the modern state. Whereas the “boundary” clearly partitions space among nations, the “frontier zone” refers to the space that existed between premodern nations, characterized by ambiguities and fluctuations in regulatory control. Thus, we can refer to the “frontier zone” as a “vacuum of regulation” (Prescott 1965, 40-49). Here, I am reapplying the term as a space for *minjung* theology.

der as the enemy. Such a form of political empowerment is a religion of war that alters all spheres of life into war zones. This transforms the neighbor into the enemy.

If the church seeks an alternative to such a structuralized crisis, I would emphasize that the church needs to make special efforts to rediscover and restore “social spirituality.” According to the Gospel of John, “God who became human” (Jesus), or God who was confined to the human body, left the world and, instead, the *spirit* came to the world. The spirit is shapeless; it is the dissolution of form. In addition, it is impossible to know where the spirit comes from and where it goes; it dissolves purpose. As such, the spirit is not swayed by the world’s rules, and freely coexists with the world (Kim Jin-ho 2009). If *spirituality* encapsulates these characteristic of the spirit, social spirituality refers to an element of society that does not become monopolized by the church, nation, or capital. Social spirituality is thus a sociological interpretation for the spirit that does not belong to anyone but is captured within everyone, or *public God*.

Politics becomes social spiritualization when it, rather than turning the neighbor into an enemy, turns the enemy into a neighbor, creating a zone of communion between neighbors, and functions as a social act and strategy that forges a frontier zone. In contrast, the transformation of the neighbor into an enemy is no different from a faith of social anti-spiritualization. Given this, today’s church, seeking political empowerment, must advocate for the *social spiritualization of the church* rather than the *sanctification of society*.

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