

Preserving Ethnicity through Religion in America: Korean Protestants and Indian Hindus across Generations, by Pyong Gap Min. New York: New York University Press, 2010, 280 pp., US\$27.00, ISBN: 978-0814795866 (paperback)

Participation in ethnic religious community has long been considered an important mechanism for preserving ethnic identity and culture. The author, Professor Pyong Gap Min, the eminent sociologist at Queens College and the Graduate Center of City University of New York, however, takes issues with the fact that early scholarships have made overly sweeping generalization, overlooking the factor of religion in the home country. According to Min, immigrants are more apt to preserve their ethnic culture through religion if their religious rituals are strongly associated with their ethnic culture. Min refers to the relatively greater success of the Amish and the Jews in preserving their ethnic culture as good examples of such link.

With this theoretical background in mind, Min contrasts Korean Protestants and Indian Hindu immigrants in the United States as two distinct cases of using different religious mechanism for preserving their ethnic cultures. But before the specifics of the book can be discussed, what must be noted is a very different religious/cultural contexts of the two countries from which Koreans and Asian Indians came from. While Asian Indian immigrants and the religion they practice, Hinduism, is well-known, the fact that a majority of Korean Americans are affiliated with Protestant churches is a little known detail which is a remarkable fact in itself. Between 70-80 percent of Korean Americans reportedly identify themselves as Christian, either Catholic or Protestant, albeit a far larger proportion belongs to the latter. The overall figure includes some 40 percent of Christians who began attending churches only after they arrived in the United States. The fact that the proportion of Protestants in the total population of South Korea never exceeded 20 percent—according to the 2015 census, Protestants comprised nearly 20 percent of the total population, the highest ever figure for the religion—makes the Christian figure among Korean Americans that much more striking. In fact, when Koreans started to immigrate to the United States in earnest in 1965, the proportion of Protestants in the total population of South Korea amounted to only about five percent.

Min is well aware of the important differences which exist in the religious contexts of the two countries and devotes a full chapter to this comparison.

More importantly, Min is intent on examining whether Protestantism has played an important role in preserving Korean Americans' ethnic identity in the same way Judaism and Christianity did for European immigrants in the past. The reason why the Korean case is unique is that Protestantism is not an indigenous religion for Koreans. Judaism and Christianity, in contrast, are indigenous religions for Jews and for other Europeans, respectively. Asian Indians, whom Min has chosen for comparison with Korean Americans, also practice a religion that is indigenous to their culture. From this preliminary observation alone, an interesting comparison between Korean Americans and Indian Americans is "set" for closer analysis.

The book has two major objectives: 1) "examine the different ways that Indian Hindu and Korean Protestant immigrants....preserve their ethnicity through religion" (p. 5); and 2) "examine the theological differences between evangelical Protestantism and Hinduism that have affected the intergenerational transmissions of religion and ethnic traditions through religion" (p. 6). Min uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, complete with questionnaire surveys, interviews, participation observations, and site visits, to analyze the different ways that Korean Protestant immigrants and Indian Hindu, both the first and second generations, have preserved their ethnic culture through religion. For his comparative study, he has focused on Asian Indian and Korean immigrants living in the New York/New Jersey area, because the area has large numbers of both groups.

Among the main findings of the book, the most important one is that the ways Korean Protestantism and Indian Hinduism contribute to the preservation of Koreans' and Indians' ethnicity are very different. Min argues that the most significant difference between the two groups is found in their religious practices at home. Indian Hindu perform religious rituals at home which are largely identical to cultural traditions of India. That is because Hinduism is an indigenous religion of India, meaning that Hindu rituals and key elements of Indian folk culture, including the holidays, food, and music, are virtually one and the same. In contrast, Koreans' Protestantism is largely dissociated from Korean traditional culture. A conspicuous example of such "disconnection" between the two is how Korean Protestantism has banned its followers from practicing the ancestral rituals, which is one of the most important customs and cultural practices of Koreans. In Korean Protestantism, moreover, a greater stress is placed on the reading of the Bible, on listening to the pastor's sermons

and gospel songs, and on prayers rather than on practicing traditional rituals at home. This is not surprising given the fact that Protestantism is an imported religion from the West, introduced to Korea in the late nineteenth century. In a religiously plural country, complete with traditional religions such as shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, Protestantism is relatively a “new” religion in Korea, having little to do with Korean traditional culture.

The findings in the book thus “suggest that the relationship between religious and ethnic identities is close for Hindus but full of tension for Korean Protestants” (p. 199). This is amply demonstrated in the way Indian Hindu and Korean Protestant respondents answered several key questions. For example, to the question of primary identity, over one-third of the latter chose Christian identity as being more important than the Korean one. As for potential marital partners for their children, moreover, they favored non-Korean Christians over non-Christian Koreans. To these Christians, their Christian values seem to be more important and meaningful than their ethnic values. For Indian Hindus, on the other hand, there is no discord or tension between their religious and cultural identities because they are practically identical. Such difference allows Min to rightly claim that “Indian Hindu immigrants have a huge advantage over Korean Protestant immigrants in using their religion to enhance their ethnic identity” (p. 199).

Min also finds that a similar pattern is evident among second generation Korean Protestants and Indian Hindu. For example, although the former attend Korean churches avidly and congregate with coethnics more often than their Indian counterparts, Korean Protestants’ ethnic pride, as expressed in survey questions, is found to be “lower” than that of the latter.

In the last chapter, Min tops off his brilliant analysis by using the findings from the book to reflect on how well other immigrant groups in the United States might preserve their ethnicity through religion. The groups under consideration include Thai Buddhists, Pakistani Muslims, and Mexican Catholics. Among the three groups, Thai Buddhists are deemed to have the highest level of the association between religion and ethnicity, with the reason being that Buddhism has been a traditional religion in the country and that the religion has thoroughly permeated many aspects of Thai culture. In reading this part, however, the reviewer could not help but think how interesting it would have been to also include Japanese Americans and the role of their traditional religion, i.e., Buddhism/Shinto, on retention of their ethnicity.

Also, because his study focuses on Korean and Indian Americans living in large urban centers, where they are more exposed to coethnics, ethnic media, and religious organizations, it would be interesting to reflect on the applicability of his conclusions to their counterparts living in smaller urban areas and in places where there are relatively fewer coethnics.

Min's book is one of those rare books that one would be hard pressed to find flaws. The book is rich in details, complete with interviewees' comments which reveal intimate details about their personal stories, and is methodologically well conceived. The book has an excellent literature review, showing that the author has a good grasp of theoretical insights on the relationship between religion and ethnicity, and a brief but first-rate overview of religions in India and South Korea. Min's findings on two groups of Asian Americans make a very significant contribution to the literature in the sociology of religion, which hitherto has largely focused on the religious experience of European immigrants. All in all, it is an important book for studies of Asian-American immigrants and is an essential reading for courses in race and ethnicity, Asian-American Studies, and sociology of religion.

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