The Rise of Protestantism in Contemporary South Korea: Non-religious Factors in Conversion

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This paper analyzes non-religious factors which facilitated the rise of Protestantism as one of the three largest religions in South Korea today. The paper argues that certain key historical and social circumstances in Korea - and the resulting sentiments - have galvanized a large number of Koreans to embrace the imported faith as a means to make sense of their experience in the rapidly changing world. Indeed, such political, economic, and social strains as the traumatic experience of the Korean War (1950-1953), the fear of further North Korean attacks, the anomie arising from rapid industrialization and urbanization, the abject poverty for a substantial segment of the populace, and the deeply-rooted sense of deprivation arising from a widening income gap all have encouraged a large number of Koreans, particularly the underprivileged classes, to embrace a new value system offering them hope and a way out of misery.

Keywords: Protestantism, Korea, industrialization, deprivation-compensation

1. Introduction

One of the most outstanding features of religion in South Korea is that the proportion of those professing religious affiliation has steadily increased following the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953. From 1964 to 1994, the "religious population" jumped more than six-fold, while the total population increased by only about one and a half times. The growth has been particularly pronounced for Protestant

Christianity, which appealed greatly to urban-bound and modernity-inclined South Koreans (see Lee, W. 1992, 1994; Kim, B. 1985, 1995; Ro and Nelson 1995).[1] Since the early 1960s, when Korean Protestants barely topped the one million mark, the number of Protestant Christians in South Korea increased faster than in any other country, more than doubling every decade. As of 1995, there were nearly nine million Protestants in the country (National Statistical Office 1995). Moreover, by 1997, there were approximately 100,000 pastors attending to nearly 60,000 churches, making the Protestant Church in South Korea one of the most vital and dynamic in the world. Its dynamism is also attested to by the fact that the nation now sends more missionaries abroad than most other countries. As of 1998, South Korea had sent nearly 8,000 missionaries (4,700 ordained ministers and 3,200 lay evangelists) abroad, which was the third highest in the world (*Kungminilbo* 1998). The remarkable growth of Protestant Christianity is further demonstrated by the fact that five of the ten largest churches in the world, including the world's largest Yŏŭido Full Gospel Church, are reportedly found in Seoul, a "city of churches" (Draper et al. 1994).

Of all the key factors that account for the dramatic rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea, the changing socio-historical context is fundamental, for it has served as the fertile ground in which the imported faith flourished and from which it continues to draw its support. Indeed, certain key historical and social circumstances of Korean history seem to have encouraged Koreans to seek a refuge or an answer in the new religion. These include traumatic experiences of the Korean War (1950-1953), profound fear of further North Korean attacks, the succession of authoritarian regimes, the anomie arising from rapid industrialization and urbanization, continuing poverty for a considerable segment of the population, and the profound sense of deprivation arising from a widening income gap (see Noh 1989; Kim, J. et al. 1982; Lee, W. 1997).

In a typical social reaction to national disasters and protracted "hard

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1. David Martin (1990) argues that Korean Protestants largely consisted of two groups during the "conversion boom," i.e., 1960-1980: middle-class individuals who found points of contact between modernity and Protestantism; and lower middle-class individuals who found affinity between Shamanism and the imported faith.

times," large numbers of Koreans, particularly the underprivileged classes, embraced a new value system offering them hope and a way out of misery. The imported Christian "alternative," with its promise of eternal life and worldly success thus became the salvation ethos for personal and national empowerment for growing numbers of Koreans burdened by a troubled past and uncertainty in a world of rapid change. Studies (Glock 1964; Barkun 1974, 1986; Lanternari 1963) have shown that chronic social problems or sudden changes in social conditions in terms of poverty, economic insecurity, political instability and oppression, or the social marginality of certain groups often inspire people's greater receptivity to religious or political ideas and action. In particular, the prevalence of religious faith and the concomitant compensatory role of religious ideas among the underprivileged social or ethnic groups has been well documented within the sociology of religion (see Niebuhr 1957; Lanternari 1963; Weber 1946, 1963). The most cogent theory that explains this phenomenon is the deprivation-compensation theory of religious activity, which is supported by Marx (1963) and Freud (1928) who saw religious beliefs as reactions to both personal and social deprivations. Weber (1963:106) also anticipated the deprivation-compensation model by arguing that, for the underprivileged classes, personal suffering, economic or social, often leads to the faith in compensation, the belief that "rests on some concealed promise for the future which implies the assignment of some function, mission, or vocation for them." In this "theodicy of compensation," moreover, suffering takes on the "quality of the religiously meritorious, in view of the belief that it brings in its wake great hopes of future compensation" (Weber 1963:110). The deprivation-compensation theory of religious commitment is further articulated by Kingsley Davis (1948:532):

> The greater his [human being's] disappointment in this life, the greater his [one's] faith in the next. Thus the existence of goals

2. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1979:121) advance the deprivation-compensatory model a step further by defining religion as "a system of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions." Compensators here mean intangible promises that substitute for this-worldly rewards that people covet, such as success, prosperity, and health.

> beyond this world serves to compensate people for frustrations they inevitably experience in striving to reach socially acquired and socially valuable ends.[2]

In view of this reasoning, Charles Glock (1964) distinguished five forms of deprivation which may inspire religious reactions: 1) economic; 2) social (i.e., status); 3) organismic (i.e., physical); 4) ethical (i.e., value conflicts); and 5) psychic (i.e., the lack of a meaningful value system). Like Marx, Glock argued that religious responses to deprivations are very likely to emerge when the causes of frustration are beyond the control of those deprived. The notion of relative deprivation is also pertinent, for the people's subjective evaluation of their situations, rather than their objective conditions, is one of the main reasons for the individual's involvement in religious activities.[3]

Consistent with this deprivation-compensation model of religious commitment is the most widely used sociological theory of collective behavior developed by Neil Smelser (1962). Smelser's model attributes the emergence of religious or social movements to, among other conditions, social or structural "strain." Accordingly, any situation or factor that places a strain on society, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, uncertainty about the future, or a gap between expectations and reality, usually leads to a form of collective behavior. Indeed, the feelings of discontent and insecurity engendered by social strains need to be released, and the psychological force emanating from this tension is usually channeled into various spheres of social behavior, including religious observance.

These compensatory and strain theories are strikingly germane to the rise of Christianity in the Korean context. It was indeed the political, economic, and social strains, as well as the accompanying feelings of deprivation and discontent, that inspired a nation-wide Christian movement in Korea. Since the introduction of Protestantism in 1884, social circumstances of the country made the lives of Koreans, particu-

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3. This does not mean, of course, that the existence of relative deprivation automatically causes a religious movement; it means rather that the phenomenon of relative deprivation engenders a pool of dissatisfied individuals who, if and when mobilized, would express dissension or a new value system through a political or religious movement. It suffices to say that the deprivation model is useful in examining the relationship between sources of discontentment and a movement's social base.

larly those of underprivileged classes, miserable to the extreme, thereby making Korea ever more conducive to the rise of a new religious movement. As many testimonials reveal (see Ko 1982, 1988), a considerable number of Korean Christians seemed to have acquired their faith as a means of psychological relief from deep-seated discontent and despair over personal tragedies and social crises. Moreover, the relationship between the Korean people and the Christian gospel had been increasingly strengthened by the conditions of hardship and deprivation. The key reason why large numbers of Koreans turned to Christianity was the perceived irrelevance of their traditional religions. Unable to make sense of their harsh realities within the traditional worldview and value system, large numbers of Koreans enthusiastically embraced the imported faith, which provided new norms and values as well as a sense of purpose in a rapidly changing, troubled world.[4] Furthermore, in their yearning for spiritual comfort and security, many Koreans seem to have found in Christianity a vehicle for democracy, equality, and justice as well as salvation.

2. Economic, Political, and Social Strains of Post-war Korea

Until 1945, the impact of Christianity in Korea had been seriously constrained by Japanese authorities, who imposed heavy sanctions against Western influences, including religion. Political chaos that ensued following the country's liberation further hampered any missionary effort. The event that served as a turning point for the active involvement of church organizations and missionaries from the West was the Korean War. The three-year long war left over three million people dead and about ten million people separated from members of their families. The devastation from the war was such that it would

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4. This brings to mind the notion that new faiths prosper only from the weakness of old faiths. As Stark and Bainbridge (1985) pointed out, new religions appear constantly in all societies, but their successes are contingent upon *opportunity*, and this opportunity usually involves social crises. What this means is that new religions make their way against long-established counterparts only when the latter fail to serve the needs of a significant number of people. People, Stark and Bainbridge argue, typically do not surrender a faith that gratifies them to espouse a new faith.

take at least a generation to recover economically, and much longer to recover emotionally and psychologically from the horror of violence. Such great human loss and massive destruction, combined with accompanying feelings of trauma and despair, engendered a condition ripe for a religious movement.

It was during this period of profound shock that the appeal of Protestant Christianity became immense to many Koreans, irrespective of social status. The allure of the imported faith was especially amplified by its active relief efforts. More than any other religious organization, the Protestant Church provided the greatest humanitarian aid to the country. In fact, the Church happened to be the only national relief agency that operated effectively. Due to the media attention given to the Korean War, many new foreign missionary bodies, some of which had hopes of starting new denominations, became interested in Korea and began sending new missionaries and relief aid. Various war relief services, operating through the network of local churches and church agencies, reached out to virtually every rural town and distributed food and other goods to those in need. This relief effort undoubtedly allowed the Church to attract local attention that was far beyond what it would have received under normal circumstances. For people in great stress after having lost everything, the dedicated relief efforts of Christian agencies must have been overwhelming. Many of those who first became aware of Christianity through the charitable work of the Church later took great interest in its doctrine and became converted. As Roy Shearer (1966:211), a noted historian of missionary work in Korea, observed:

> ... [F]ollowing the war, American Churches sent massive relief supplies to war-stricken South Korea, and many persons joined the Church in thankfulness for this material help....The material help American Christians gave to the people in their time of need did serve as an example of Christ' s love, and many recipients of this aid responded to that love and became Christians.

One noteworthy achievement of the missionaries' relief work, besides providing assistance to the war orphans, widows and the wounded as well as refugees from the north, was their evangelistic

work among prisoners of war. Due to their sympathetic counseling and dedicated preaching, more than 60,000 prisoners of war (out of about 160,000) taken by the UN forces became Christians (Clark 1971:256). Moreover, during this period of heightened emotion, it was not uncommon for a whole village or a whole clan to pledge their devotion to Christ. With such stories of massive conversion to fire Christian enthusiasm, the relief and charity work continued into the 1960s. In 1960, for example, Catholic and Protestant mission-related agencies brought into Korea over thirteen million dollars worth of relief supplies, ranging from food and clothing to medicine, which were distributed to needy families (Moffett 1962:134). They also set up hundreds of feeding stations where daily hot meals were provided. Other relief work included the operation of widows' homes, amputee rehabilitation, tuberculosis control, and a post-polio project (Clark 1971:266-295). For people in dire need of food and shelter, therefore, the sympathetic help from the Church and its agencies seem to have left a deep impression on them, setting the stage for the unprecedented growth of Christianity in the next three decades. As Bong-rin Ro (1995:25) argued:

> In the midst of intense suffering and toil, the Korean church was able to give hope to the hopeless, food to the hungry, and shelter to the homeless. Christians looked forward to their heavenly home as a relief from the painful earthly conditions that surrounded them. They learned to trust God in times of trouble. Churches were filled with people who needed hope and peace of mind.

3. The Rise of Christianity Amidst Rapid Social Change: Industrialization and Urbanization

The period of greatest growth for the Protestant Church in South Korea was from the early 1960s through to the end of the 1980s, during which the nation underwent rapid urbanization and achieved remarkable economic growth. During this period of the "conversion boom," the number of Protestants doubled every decade, making Protestants nearly 20 percent of the nation's entire population of 42 million in

1989. This rapid growth of Christianity made South Korea one of the most dynamic "Christian success" stories in the world.

In grappling with the potential factors that account for such dramatic growth of Christianity, it is evident that the troubled conditions and concomitant socio-psychological predispositions of the Korean people played a key role in preparing large numbers of Koreans to accept the new faith. Social and social-psychological conditions characteristic of the modern development period, such as the breakdown of traditional values owing to modernization, the widespread anxiety due to the rapidity of social changes, and the profound sense of deprivation over continuing poverty and economic disparity, simply served as culminating factors in the extraordinary surge of Protestant Christianity in South Korea.

1) The Social-Psychological Condition of Anomie and the Church's Response

As many scholars observed, the rapid growth of the Church during this period may be "psychologically related to the anomic situation of Korean society" (Kim, B. 1985:64; see also Han 1981; Lee, W. 1992; Kim, Y. 1988). Industrialization, modernization and rapid urbanization have engendered social chaos and produced a social-psychological condition of *anomie*, depriving people of a feeling of community and burdening them with urban anxiety and stress, such as unemployment, competition, avarice, residential congestion, and moral disorder (Park, K. 1985:55). Modernity had not only torn people from their village and traditional roots, but also mobilized them into armies of industrial workers. In particular, industrialization attracted a massive internal migration from the impoverished agrarian countryside, and subsequent massive rural-urban migration[5] not only produced a class of people who were removed from their birthplace, but also greatly undermined the traditional values and extended family structure that were the basis of rural stability and communal life.

Neither can we underestimate the psychological impact of the divi-

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5. Urban population in South Korea has steadily increased, jumping from 24.5 per cent in 1955 to 33.6 per cent in 1966, 48.4 per cent in 1975, 65.4 per cent in 1985, 74.4 per cent in 1990 and 90.5 percent in 1995 (Kim, I. 1997:53).

sion of the Korean people. The war, which left about ten million people, including over four and a half million refugees from the north, separated from members of their families, initially engendered profound feelings of shock and numbness. From the mid-1950s to the end of the 1980s, during which time the adult population was still coping with the psychological scars of war, the incessant threats of invasion from the North, real or imagined, further fostered profound psychological insecurity and stress. In fact, such threats sustained the psychology of wartime crisis. Until the early 1990s, there had been a full-scale air raid rehearsal on the 15th of every month, and in all the years it had been exercised, it had never gained any of the ritualistic or formalistic overtones that would dull its edge. In addition to the threat of invasion, political tensions engendered by the authoritarian regimes' oppressive measures against leaders of the democratic movement, labour unions, and student demonstrators also contributed to the overall sense of insecurity during the period between the 1960s and the 1980s.

Such feeling of insecurity coupled with urban anxiety provided the psychological stimulus for many South Koreans to seek spiritual security and fellowship in Christianity. They turned to Christianity not only because it had the most sympathetic and resourceful organization, but also because it offered a network of communal support. Church attendance and involvement with church activities, such as the Sunday School program, Bible study, various intra-church groups, and "area or home service," provided communal or associational ties that furnished social solidarity and created a sense of community among the new believers. Indeed, churches provided a supportive environment for social relationships, whereby fellowships and friendships were nurtured and feelings of reassurance and encouragement were enhanced. In this way, churches became "havens for the masses," and grouping into small units (i.e., cell groups) became a very useful means of retaining personal relationships and staving off the impersonality of the wider society. The Church's provision of communal networks was significant particularly in light of the traditional proclivity of Koreans to seek "personal community" in social interactions and everyday matters. Found within the congregation, such personal networks, through which members "exchanged" help, material resources, affection and loyalty, ensured the continuation of mutual help and socio-psychologi-

cal security. As Han Wan-sang (1981:185) argues, the appeal of the Church derived largely from its role as a community, particularly its provision of communal feelings, including *we-feeling* (sense of belonging), *role-feeling* (sense of role-playing), *dependency-feeling* (sense of security), and *hope-feeling*. Echoing Emile Durkheim, the support function of religion is also noted by Lee Wŏn-gyu (1992:237-238), the noted sociologist of religion:

> The Church, which was most successful in providing emotional support and consolation to those who were alienated in urban settings, grew at an astounding rate as a result of its consolation role. The Church provided not only the feeling of community but also a much-needed identity. There is no doubt that the churches that were more sympathetically attentive to interpersonal relations and social-psychological needs of belonging grew faster.

As intimated above, Koreans' endeavor to regain a sense of identity also galvanized large numbers to accept Christianity. As they searched for personal and group self-definition, Christianity proffered a means of and outlet for self-expression and release. As Han (1981:169) put it:

> There were two social-psychological attributes that acted as push factors in the growth of Christianity in South Korea.... First, when people lost their sense of identity due to the breakdown of traditional norms and values, they reacted positively to a Christianity that facilitated their wish to recover their identity. The greater the number of such identity seekers, the greater the growth of the church. Second, when people lost their sense of community [due to modernization and urbanization], they naturally sought a new kind of community. The greater the number of such community seekers, the greater the growth of the church.

In this sense, we can conceptualize the rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea as people's reaction to the complexity and the rapidity of social change in the last four decades as well as their endeavor to regain a sense of identity and community.[6]

The so-called industrial mission or evangelism is a good example of how the Church responded to the identity and fellowship needs of workers, most of whom left their rural hometowns to work in urban centers. From initiating fellowship meetings and Bible study groups to setting up a program of medical insurance and establishing the workers' credit unions, the industrial mission was at the forefront of championing the welfare of laborers. The industrial mission also provided labor education to labor leaders and workers, and offered undivided moral support for their cause. Not surprisingly, such efforts by the industrial mission had excellent results for church growth. Byung-man Kang's case study (1989) of an industrial mission attests to this. Kang examined the Daenong Church on the premises of Daenong Industry, located in Ch'ungju, about 150 km south of Seoul. The church had a modest beginning, with only 100 members in 1980, but the industrial missioners' tireless efforts and their pragmatic programs attracted a large number of new converts. The workers' receptivity was phenomenal: the church membership, made up entirely of the workers and their families, reached 2,700 by 1987, which represented nearly half of the total number of workers at the time (Kang 1989:69). Moreover, between 1980 and 1987, the church attendance increased by 290 percent for the day services and by an astonishing 2,200 percent for the evening services. A 1978 national survey of factory workers also demonstrated the effectiveness of the industrial mission. The survey found that 30 percent of the respondents (N = 350) began going to church after their contacts with industrial missioners (Cho, 1981:190).[7]

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6. James Grayson (1995:85-86) goes as far as to conclude that "without the spiritual support of Christianity....the Korean nation would have lacked the moral and social coherence to survive the massive pressures imposed upon it by the social and economic changes which have occurred over the past three decades."

7. It is also true that not all industrial missions were welcomed by management and non-Protestant workers alike. Management was worried that religious activities in the workplace would distract workers from performing to the best of their abilities, while non-participating fellow workers felt alienated.

2) Economic Deprivation and the Compensatory Role of Christianity

Another psychological impetus that was perhaps even more signifi-cant than the condition of anomie in the surge of Protestantism was the perceived deprivation by the underprivileged, including women, factory workers, and manual laborers. Since the early 1960s, the con-suming concern of the succession of authoritarian regimes in South Korea was state-sponsored industrialization, steered by export-oriented economic policies and labor-intensive manufacturing. Because South Korea's economic success depended on keeping wages low, the state has sustained extremely austere anti-labor laws, effectively maintaining the downward pressure on wages. While it is undoubtedly true that the objective economic conditions of the lower classes in South Korea have improved in the past thirty years, these improvements had been far greater for the rich and the privileged. Even with a noticeable increase in income, those at the bottom of the class structure witnessed increas-ing gaps between themselves and their rich counterparts. For example, the richest fifth of the Korean population had their wealth increased from 41.6 per cent of the total in 1971 to 46.7 per cent in 1980, while the poorest fifth experienced a decrease from 19.6 to 15.4 per cent dur-ing the same period (Lee, W. 1992:71). The income gap also reflected the same tendency. In 1989, the richest fifth earned 43.7 per cent of the total income, while the poorest two-fifths earned only 17.7 per cent (Lee, W. 1992:96). The situation was even more overwhelming in regard to assets: the richest fifth possessed over 60 per cent of the total assets in the same year, while the poorest two-fifths owned only 6.4 per cent of the total.

Next to the economic deprivation, it was housing, a consuming con-cern of Koreans, that engendered much resentment among Koreans. The urban housing crisis, brought on by a massive migration to cities in the last four decades, was exacerbated by unchecked land specula-tion during the same period. In 1989, for example, the richest 5 per cent owned 65.2 per cent of all private land, while the poorest three-fourths of the population owned only 9.2 per cent (Lee, W. 1992:96).[8]

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8. Big conglomerates invested heavily in land too. With vast capital resources, they played a major role in land speculation.

Land speculation was so rampant that the income from land investment amounted to a startling 36 per cent of GNP in 1987 alone. Furthermore, while the average income increased only 2.8 times between 1974 and 1988, the price of land increased more than ten-fold (Lee, W. 1992:96). The figure is even more astounding for the six largest cities in South Korea where the average price of real estate increased 20.8 times. As a consequence, the rate of housing supply in South Korea was reduced from 78.2 per cent in 1966 to 53.5 percent in 1980 (Lee, W. 1992:71). Because the residential congestion and land speculation drastically inflated the price of all urban land, particularly in Seoul, owning one's own house or condominium was out of reach for the vast majority of the members of the lower class. The cost of rent, in the form of *chŏnse* (a one or two-year contract to rent a house or room for a large deposit that is repaid on leaving), soared too, denying many people from having access to acceptable housing. For the lower class, and even a considerable proportion of the middle class, their inability to own a house, long prized as a symbol of financial and social status, or to live, at least, in *chŏnse* housing, caused much grievance and agony. It is no coincidence that Yŏuido Full Gospel Church, the world's largest church with more than 700,000 members, had its auspicious beginning in an area where residents lived in shacks and shanties. It is also noteworthy that a considerable number of "successful" churches had their beginning in poor areas under similar residential conditions.[9]

In addition to such income disparity and economic inequality, what made life in South Korea harsh for the underprivileged was that there had been practically no welfare system until the early 1990s. From cradle to grave, each citizen was fully responsible for his or her own life and immediate family members. Medical care was only available to those who could afford it. Poor families burdened with a family member who was gravely ill or in need of long-term medical care had no other recourse but to attend to him or her on their own. The welfare of

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9. It is true that several of the largest and best known churches in Korea, such as Somang, Gwanglim, Younglak, Choonghyun and Myungsung, did not have their beginnings in poor residential areas. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, the development of Korean Protestantism as increasingly a middle class phenomenon deserves more scholarly attention.

the elderly, no matter how poor, was fully in the hands of their children. Nor did the government provide adequate relief for the poor in education. With the exception of elementary education, tuition fees, which amounted to a considerable sum of money for the lower class, were required for every other level of education. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was not uncommon for teenagers of poor families to start working because they could not afford even high school tuition. In addition, the absence of a student-loan program made it difficult for young men and women from poor families to obtain a college education, the surest way of achieving success in Korea's education-frenzied society.

All of this induced a strong sense of insecurity and anxiety as well as discontent, particularly among the lower class. Such disjunction between the goals or values of society and the institutional means of achieving them seem to have galvanized many members of the lower class to accept Christianity as compensation.[10] Indeed, poverty and concomitant hardships are two of the most salient themes of any collection of testimonials by Korean Christians (see Ko, 1982, 1988; Kim, J. 1993). Many testimonials of Korean Christians reveal that their poverty and hopelessness, often combined with their personal traumatic experience over the "problem of meaning," such as the death or illness of close kin, inspired them to seek a satisfying response in Christian doctrines. In this sense, their conversion to Christianity was a reaction to their exclusion from the prosperity of certain segments of society. The fact that Christianity was reshaped in the image of Korean Shamanism, especially its emphasis on prosperity and material blessings, made the imported faith even more appealing to the economically deprived (Kim, A. 2000).

Christianity's appeal also came from the contemporary relevance of the Biblical accounts of the suffering of the powerless and of the poor. For example, many Koreans believed that their own "years of bondage" under Japanese colonialism and later under various homegrown military dictators paralleled Biblical depictions of the ordeals of the

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10. This does not mean, however, Christianity drew its converts exclusively from the lower classes. A considerable proportion of Christians was drawn from academics, intellectuals, politicians and the middle to upper-middle classes.

Israelites under Egyptian tyranny. Engrossed in feelings of frustration, sadness, anger, shame and *han*,[11] the underprivileged masses were in desperate need of dogma which could supply them with the security of unassailable truths as well as with hope that they could soon escape their sense of humiliation and hopelessness. Slowly but assuredly, they found that dogma and new hope in Christianity, embracing it not only as a new spiritual means to shed their sense of stagnation and defeat, but also as a dynamic and energetic spiritual foundation of life which could inspire a new beginning. And this "new hope," born out of the conditions of adversity and misery, and the very real human expectation that hopes could be attained through the strength of the new religious movement have given powerful impetus to the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Korea.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion thus highlights the significance of non-religious factors in conversion. The phenomenal growth of Christianity in South Korea in the last forty years is partly due to the convergence of structural and socio-psychological factors. Structurally, key events in Korean history and particular social circumstances, such as the Korean War and division of the country, rapid social changes borne by industrialization and modernization, and the widening income gap, paved the way for the rise of Korean Christianity in two ways. First, these national traumas and social ills seriously undermined the influence of traditional belief systems, engendering a religious vacuum that was readily filled by Protestant Christianity, and second, these disturbances

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11. One of the most interesting and important factors in explaining the disposition and behavior of Koreans, including their receptivity to Christianity, is *han*, a feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness, and a sense of regret, grief, remorse, revenge, grievance or grudge (see Lee, J. 1994). These feelings arise from an accumulated sense of discontent and frustration, and from repeated deprivation of basic human rights and needs. In fact, *han* is widely recognized as one of the very distinctive psychic states of the Korean people (it is not implied here that the sentiment of *han* is limited to Koreans). As Suh Nam-dong (1981) maintains, the real voice of Koreans is "a sound of *han*" and the real biography of the people is "a story of *han*," being filled with the mourning sound of *han* of those who suffered from foreign invasion, war, oppression, disease, poverty and starvation.

made it possible for the new religion to demonstrate its sympathetic role, both humanitarian and material, thereby leaving an exceptionally favorable imprint in the minds of Koreans. Socio-psychologically, the masses' overwhelming sense of deprivation and discontent over national tragedies and various social problems, particularly those of poverty, political oppression, inequality, and urban anxiety, inspired a large number of Koreans to accept Christianity, through which they sought psychological relief from all the mundane ills.

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