

Abstract:

In this paper, I will be discussing the growth of the Korean church, the history of the Korean church, and the embedded cultures of a Korean church. I will also analyze how the traditional Korean culture has created a discrimination against women, especially Korean women. Also, I will compare how different religions have had an effect in building and shaping what Korean Christianity is today. I will then give connection to Biblical examples to show how the church can improve one's discriminatory beliefs and acts.

Outline:

- A. Introduction
- B. About Yoido Gospel Church
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- C. Religions that affected Christianity
 - a. How and why Shamanism has the biggest influence in Christianity in Korea
- D. Gender Inequality within a Korean church
 - a. Gender inequality in Korean society
- E. Underrepresentation of Korean American women in North America
 - a. Racism and sexism Korean American women face in the US
- F. Biblical examples of women and their roles
- G. My Personal Experience
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As a Korean, I grew up in a very traditional Korean family and environment. Our culture in Korea is completely different from that of the US and Western traditions or societal expectations. Therefore, it was quite difficult finding a sense of identity due to living in America but growing up in a traditional Korean family and environment. One of my main struggles as an independent individual is being a Korean Christian. I grew up attending the church with my family, always have but never will again. It is within these Korean churches that I have realized are the cause of my insecurities and criticism towards the traditional cultures that are embedded in the Korea church. In this paper, I will explain about the growth of the Korean church, the history of the Korean church, and the embedded cultures of a Korean church. I will then give connection to Biblical examples to show how the church can improve one's discriminatory beliefs and acts.

One of the most famous Korean churches that is known all over the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church. This church is a church that has seen a lot more success compared to other Korean churches due to the speaker and sermons. It has definitely caught the attention of many people to analyze this church and why it is so successful. However, this does not come without scrutiny and a deep dive on David Yonggi Cho's style of sermon and method of preaching. Allan Anderson discusses in *The Contribution of David Yonggi Cho...* that

the famous Korean Pentecostal pastor Paul Yonggi Cho...could be considered a Pentecostal Shaman par excellence. He suggests that Korean Pentecostalism should be interpreted 'with the categories of a Shamanistic culture' rather than historical and theological categories imposed from outside¹.

This was interesting to read about because I always felt that Korean churches built based on traditional Korean culture and traditions show signs of "shamanistic practice(s) into a Christian

¹Anderson, 92

ritual”². It is interesting to learn more about Cho and his background in cultural and religious environments. He said himself that after coming out of a Buddhist religion, he was appreciative of evangelical Korean Christians because he felt it was important that he felt Christian without being any less Korean than he is³. His beliefs and practices are seen as “godly” to many Christians in Korea. However, as someone who has experienced this culture and setting, it makes me question his true intentions and his faith. What really stood out to me about David Yonggi Cho was his demonization of the cultural and religious past of the country Korea. Although there were difficulties in our history and culture, it should be celebrated and seen in a positive light instead of creating a negative connotation surrounding our historical past and background as Koreans. I truly believe that the Yoido Full Gospel Church has some sort of influence on other Korean churches and other ministers or leaders to act or treat ministry in a specific way.

Now, it is not only the Yoido Full Gospel Church that is considered a mega church in Korea. There are so many megachurches in Korea that hold a significant influence over Korean Christians and have a large number of people attend on a weekly basis. Although none of the churches populations can be compared to the Yoido Full Gospel Church (est. of 230,000 adults), some of these mega churches still have thousands of members⁴. In this section of the paper, I will discuss the backgrounds of these mega churches and the historical significance behind them.

The oldest and largest church is the Yoido Full Gospel Church which was founded in 1958⁵. The development of Korean Pentecostalism was definitely founded and emerged thanks to the Yoido Full Gospel Church and its founder. Due to a major transformation in terms of the agricultural economy in Korea in the 1960s, Korean society has changed and therefore

²Anderson, 92

³Anderson, 92

⁴Young-Gi, 101

⁵Young-Gi, 104

industrialization has rapidly increased and helped modernize Korea⁶. During the rapid industrialization of Korea, religion was a sense of belonging and unity, a way for people to meet one another and experience fellowship activities⁷.

Within the mega-churches, there are definitely unrelated similarities between Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism. “Buddhism had an indirect influence on Korean Christianity with the idea of heaven and hell for people to receive the Christian gospel”⁸.

A way that Confucianism has impacted Christianity in Korea is that

Confucianism emphasized the patriarchal system, and the emphasis on the patriarchal authority of Confucianism made it easier for Korean people to accept and follow pastoral authority in the Korean church, especially in the charismatic Korean mega-churches⁹.

Finally, Shamanism has similar characteristics with Christianity as followed and worshiped in Korea. For example, some of the similarities include but are not limited to: supernatural experience including chanting, female leadership endorsed by the senior pastor, and psychological or physical healing¹⁰.

Due to all of these similarities, Christianity in Korea is the reason it is today. Because there were many historical significance and similarities between Christianity and other highly followed religions/beliefs, there is a large traditional culture that is followed within a Korean church. Although this sense of tradition and culture may not be as present in Korean churches that are in America (compared to Korean churches in Korea), it is still definitely there due to the natural tendencies for older generational men being influenced by the traditional cultures of

⁶Young-Gi, 106

⁷Young-Gi, 106

⁸Young-Gi, 107

⁹Young-Gi, 107

¹⁰Young-Gi, 108

Korea. Due to the tendency for people to be more concerned about the size of a church and the status of the church, it is common for Koreans to focus on more superficial characteristics.

To discuss and analyze more in depth of the correlation between Christianity and other religions in Korea, I analyzed Andrew E. Kim's academic research regarding this. To compare in depth about the influence that other religions have on Christianity in Korea, we must analyze each belief in detail. The first and biggest influence may be Shamanism. "Shamanism has traditionally exerted the most powerful religious influence upon the Korean people"¹¹. Shamanism is common and well-believed due to wanting to fulfill materialistic goals and practical needs in life.

Shamanism has thus catered to this-worldly, materialist, fatalistic, magical, and even utilitarian tendencies of Koreans. As such, Shamanism has been the enduring core of Korean religious and cultural thought, exercising a profound influence on the development of Korean attitudes and behaviors as well as cultural practices¹².

In order to gain an impression on South Koreans, it was necessary for Korean churches to make Christianity as relatable and accommodating to new believers. Therefore, many Korean churches emphasized the worldly "aspect of the Kingdom of God, projecting a society in which the will of God is done and in which a bounteous life would be a privilege for all"¹³. This was especially needed because of the historical development and hardships that South Korea experienced during the time period when the rise of Christianity was accelerating. It was also well known that this topic was quite common to be talked about and preached about in sermons during Sunday worship. This allowed church goers to feel that they would be blessed with materialistic success in this world. Due to this belief and increase in sermons with this nuance, it was believed that

¹¹Kim, 119

¹²Kim, 119

¹³Kim, 120

this idea of materialistic success was a guarantee for Christians because they believe in God. “They also maintained that illness, poverty, business failure, or any other misfortune is simply due to sin and spiritual impurity”¹⁴. Although we know that this is simply untrue, it was highly believed and still is relevant today.

Another greatly misunderstood ideology of God amongst Korean churches and Korean Christians is the belief and idea that God is the magical ruler among all.

In the history of Korean Protestantism, God, besides being portrayed as the creator and the sustainer of the universe, was most conspicuously characterized as the magical ruler, dispensing graces at his will¹⁵.

This idea that God will be a miraculous savior of all things evil and bad has created a specific image of God in Korean churches and societies that is not realistic and unreal to what the Bible says about the Lord. This idea and belief that God will be a miracle worker for those who believe in Him is something that is preached heavily within Korean churches that follow or are influenced by traditional Korean cultural practices, especially from the ideologies of Shamanism.

Along with the misunderstood idea that God will be a miraculous rescuer of all difficult situations for Christians, Korean churches enforce a strong belief in the miracles of Jesus, specifically disease curing and ridding of evil spirits.

Many Koreans, brought up in a culture that exalted the exorcism and healing powers of shamans, found the supernatural elements of the Scripture, i.e., faith-healing and casting out demonic spirits, neither difficult nor surprising¹⁶.

Although it is in the Bible of all of the miraculous deeds that Jesus has done, it is something that is highlighted by Korean pastors. It would make sense for a church to celebrate these miracles

¹⁴Kim, 121

¹⁵Kim, 125

¹⁶Kim, 125

but it is a different story when church pastors think they are the ones able to perform these miracles. Many Korean churches use these miracle performances to attract new converts and prove that they hold the same powers as God Himself. For example, Kim highlights that Korean churches “used hypnotism, chanted incomprehensible words (comparable to the phenomenon of speaking in tongues in Christianity), and spoke to the evil supposedly residing in the afflicted person”¹⁷. These characteristics that Korean churches and pastors portray are very similar to Korean shamanic rituals and beliefs.

One of the biggest reasons why I feel that Korean churches are not as popular within Korean American communities is due to these traditions and cultures that Korean churches tend to follow. When I learn about a Korean church or try to attend a Korean church for the experience, the population and community is always a bit more older and more old fashioned than what I would want it to be. The main reasons why I always feel like Korean churches are old fashioned is their belief and opinions regarding women in leadership. Not only Koreans but Asians in general have a heritage and cultural context that they follow. These usually include some sort of sexist views of women and the way they should or should not work in our society.

However, gender inequality has many factors that we must consider. “Women’s life experiences are formed not only by their sex but also by class, ethnicity, and other conditions”¹⁸. I feel like the inequality that women experience in Korea is much greater than the inequality women experience in North America. Not only within the church, but women in society in general have a far more disadvantage than men. For example, Korea is extremely different from 1970 versus the 2000’s. The sudden growth in Korea’s economy and the quick industrialization of the country created prosperity for some but has caused more income gaps, rural versus urban

¹⁷Kim, 126

¹⁸Sun, 126

areas increased, labor unrest, and the “export-oriented Korean economy has depended on cheap labor in surviving international competition”¹⁹. With this sudden growth and change in Korea’s economy, one would expect that people of all genders are free to work and live the way they want. However, this is not the case.

In fact, the work environment has become more difficult for a woman to make major contributions. Women have to deal with exploitation, lack of work opportunities, lack of paternal leave, sexist commentators, and many more unjust experiences. The main reason why this is a toxic trait of Korean society is because this is also reflected in a Korean church. Whether it is a Korean church in Korea or a Korean church in America, it is common for Korean churches to have this mindset that women should be on the backburner and be caretakers rather than those with leadership roles and positions. This ideology that women are not as important nor capable as men is an ideology that I will personally never understand and will forever work to make a change in my environment.

It seems quite unfair to see that a nation that has experienced such hardships and difficulties throughout history would continue to discriminate against gender and allow for gender inequality to be such a heavy topic in today’s debate in feminist conversations. Not only is this happening within Korean society itself but also within the churches. Women are usually perceived as someone who takes care of the children or takes care of the community members. I definitely feel that there needs to be more women leaders that represent the community rather than leaving women to do the behind the scenes work.

Due to the fact that this sexism is heavily embedded in Korean culture and traditions in general, Koreans who do decide to move to North America or plant a church in the United States continue to build the church with a sexist mindset. Therefore, women continue to be

underrepresented and continue to be taken for granted. “Korean American women are the foundation of the Korean American church. We are devoted, contributing members in the church, but we are seldom given positions of leadership or power”²⁰. Many Korean women immigrated to the United States to find freedom and release themselves from the stereotypes in Korea. However, many of those women ended up in similar if not much worse conditions in the United States. Even if the women were doing the same amount of work in harsh working conditions founded on inhumane circumstances, they were still paid less than men²¹. They were expected to work like men, care for men, and look after men. Some of these women had to work such laborious acts with little to no pay while bearing or taking care of children. A woman’s day never ended. Starting the day in the early mornings and taking care of meals for men and families, to then go out into the fields to work the same amount of labor as men, then to come home and do more housework and chores. It was a never ending cycle that Korean American women had to experience and struggle through.

However, the struggles never stopped there. Korean women had to face racism. They had to experience all of the difficulties of being foreigners in a new country on top of the sexism.

“Besides the physical hardship for Korean American women, there was also psychological difficulty for Korean American women, as they were viewed with racial categorizations such as ‘perpetual foreigners,’ ‘non-assimilable,’ ‘model minority,’ and ‘honorific whites’”²².

Adding onto the difficulties they experience due to sexism in the work field, they have to feel belittled and unappreciated in society in general. With all of this inequality being quite blatantly shown throughout our society, it would only make sense that these Korean American women

²⁰Kim, 18

²¹Kim, 19

²²Kim, 23

would turn to the church for comfort. Although some churches are more accepting than other churches, it is quite common for Korean churches to continue to put women into a box and define them based on stereotypical ideologies.

Due to the overly patriarchal culture and practice within a Korean church, many “Korean American women struggle to find their own identity in the” church²³. To help Korean American women feel a sense of belonging, there are a few teachings that churches can do to challenge the whiteness and maleness of our religion and God. Kim suggested that “Korean American women can begin to participate in such actions by dialoguing from a perspective of feminist theology that reimagines God in feminine terms”²⁴. Grace mentions that in Proverbs 4:6-7, it states, “Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight”²⁵. This helps us to see God in a more feminine aspect and provide a more empowering experience for women.

“As Korean American women fight against racial and gender injustice, their reimagining of historical Christian teachings about God must occur”²⁶. Korean American women, by seeking a deeper connection with our Lord, will be able to find a more wholesome God. We have to remember that God is someone who loves and “embraces all people regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or socio-economic status”²⁷. Therefore, it is important that we continue to practice training ourselves to see and know that God is not judging us like the rest of the world is. Although this is something that is rarely taught in a Korean church nor in Korean society, I definitely feel that this should be a priority.

²³Kim, 30

²⁴Kim, 32

²⁵Proverbs 4:6-7

²⁶Kim, 32

²⁷Kim, 32

In-Cheol Shin's theological study of the role of women in the Korean church also stood out to me. Shin states that

Over the past thousands of years, repression of women has been a social phenomenon; and while being aware of gender discrimination, women were afraid to address or approach the issue because they were apprehensive of the backlash from men²⁸.

As someone who is studying at ATS, it dawned on me that even if I did study my best and wanted to be ordained as a female pastor, I would not be able to within the C&MA denomination. Therefore, I felt compelled to reevaluate my options as a female who once thought that the road to being a pastor and founding my own church was the "correct" path for me. I think as females, it is discouraging to see that "female pastors are still not given the authority of a pastor in charge or a leader who can exercise leadership"²⁹. It has become quite obvious that although female members within the church serve out of love and obedience to the Lord, women are still overlooked.

One of the main reasons that Korean churches continue to see women as non worthy of being ordained and give the same pastoral role as male pastors is due to the "idea of a male-dominated society, rooted in the gender stereotypes of pre-modern pastors and Christians"³⁰. This results in women still being treated a certain way due to the gender stereotypes that the Korean culture has established in Korean societies. Due to these stereotypes, "the role and status of women in the church are struggling to escape from the limits of meal preparation, cleaning, worship guidance, and supporting the needs of male ministers"³¹. Even though our times have

28Shin, 1

29Shin, 1

30Shin, 3

31Shin, 3

modernized and women's rights are a prevalent issue in our society, the stereotypes against women are so deeply ingrained that it seems it is impossible to remove them completely.

What really opened my eyes was the social status that women had in the Book of Matthew. Matthew kind of clarifies what type of role women have in the ministry. Although women were not considered to be as respected nor important as males in the communities at that time, they were definitely still loved and supported by Jesus. For example, Shin highlights that “many women appear in the Gospel of Matthew, and their roles are valuable and prominent (Mt 1:1-17; 9:20-22; 15:21-28; 26:6-13; 27:55-56; 27:61; 28:1-10)”³². No matter where Jesus was and what situation He was in, women were always there to support Him and follow Him. Although the women were not given the same honored roles as the male disciples, the women followers of Christ were the most invested and supportive of Jesus.

Overall, I think it is discouraging to see that an issue that was relevant in history many years ago is still a problem that we struggle with. Although times have changed and modernized greatly compared to the past, it is interesting to see that the discrimination and gender inequality is still so prevalent in today's society. I believe it is the church's responsibility to diminish these discriminatory cultures and traditions and uplift all people of God. However, seeing that Korean churches in Korea and in North America continue to discriminate against gender is quite discouraging as a woman studying to become a woman of God herself. As a Korean Christian who is also a woman, I think it is my duty to continue to spread and bring awareness of these situations and traditions that still have an effect in our culture and society.

Throughout my life, I was always told that women have to act a certain way and are treated a specific way for a reason. However, after moving away to college, I learned that there is more to a female in a church than just being a pretty face. I grew up in a very conservative and

culturally strict Korean environment. Therefore, I understand that my upbringing was the reason for such a narrow minded viewpoint of Christianity and Korean culture in general. However, even after living away from my culturally narrow minded family for college, the discrimination against women continued to be a problem in many aspects of my life.

After graduating from University, I decided that I wanted to try to live in Korea to fully experience what it is like to live in the origins of my family's cultural beliefs. Living in Korea, I was able to experience the discrimination and sexism not only within the workplace but also the church. Attending Sunday service in Korea became unbearable and it made me begin to wonder how this continuation of historical discriminatory beliefs is relevant to this day. I then decided that in order to learn more about this phenomenon, I would need to study more about the Bible and God's commandments.

After coming back to America from Korea, I decided to spend my time at ATS to study more about the Lord. However, my findings continued to disappoint me to a certain degree. I appreciate that the times are definitely changing and that we are all trying to move towards the right step towards gender equality. However, learning more about the C&MA denomination and hearing about female pastoral leaders' experience within the C&MA has definitely made me want to focus on female leaders in church settings and to make our voices heard so that there are more opportunities and possibilities for female leaders to become ordained pastors within a church.

In conclusion, I feel that the historical context of the country of Korea has created a specific culture surrounding women in the workplace and at church. The discrimination that women experience on a day to day basis in Korea is something that is still relevant to this day, even within the church. This discrimination is something that I feel passionate about as a female

who is studying and working towards becoming a more influential leader within a Korean church and society. Overall, I feel that the traditional cultures that are embedded in Koreans is something that needs to be changed in order for us to see a more equal women's role and rights within not only our community but also our church.

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