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The Evangelization of Korea, c.1895–1910: Translation of the Gospel or Reinvention of the Church?

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Several studies of the history of Protestant Christianity in South Korea have argued that the religion's rapid growth was chiefly because of the successful translation of the gospel into Korean language and thought. While agreeing that the foundation laid in this respect by early Western missionaries and Korean Christians was a necessary prerequisite for evangelization, this essay challenges the use of a translation theory, such as has been developed by Lamin Sanneh, to describe the way that Christianity took root in Korea, both on the basis of conceptual discussions in the field of mission studies and also on historical grounds. It draws on research for A History of Korean Christianity (2014) to examine the years of initial rapid growth in Protestant churches in Korea – 1894 to 1910. Its findings suggest that rather than 'translation of the gospel' a more historically accurate description of what took place is 'reinvention of the Church'.

It was not until the late 1870s that the first Korean Protestants were baptized, yet by the early twentieth century Protestant Christianity in Korea was noted among mission fields for its rapid growth, the believers' religious fervour, and the social transformation it was producing.¹ By 1910 Protestant numbers stood at only about 1 per cent of the population but this proportion was significantly larger than in China or Japan in the same period and about the same as in India, which had a much longer Christian history.² John R. Mott, Secretary of the

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¹ 'Protestant' in this period of Korean history refers to Presbyterian and Methodist denominations.

² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols (New York, 1937–45), 6: 428–30.

World's Student Christian Federation and later chairman of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, visited Korea in 1907.³ He was impressed with Koreans' commitment to Bible study, prayer, giving and evangelism, and he reckoned that the midweek prayer meeting in P'yŏngyang (Pyongyang)⁴ was 'possibly the largest meeting for united intercession which assembles anywhere in the world'.⁵ At the Edinburgh conference, it was reported that '[a]lmost the whole population of Korea is now ready to listen to the Gospel'.⁶ Korea was said to represent 'the most striking example of a whole nation being moved by the Holy Spirit'.⁷ And it was thought that Korea – 'perhaps the most attractive and responsive field in heathenism today' – might actually achieve the 'complete evangelisation' 'within this present generation' that was the aspiration of the conference.⁸

Several studies of the history of Protestant Christianity in Korea have argued that the religion's rapid growth was chiefly because of the successful translation of the gospel into Korean language and thought in the early encounter in the 1870s and 1880s.⁹ Whilst agreeing that the foundation laid in this respect by early Western missionaries and Korean Christians was a necessary prerequisite for evangelization, this essay challenges the use of a translation

³ For the conference, see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Mission (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009).

⁴ Note on transliteration: This essay uses the McCune-Reischauer system of Romanization for Korean words. Korean names will appear in East Asian order (family name first). Alternative spellings will be given in brackets.

⁵ John R. Mott, *The Decisive Hour of Christian Missions* (Edinburgh, 1910), 88.

⁶ World Missionary Conference, *Report of Commission I* (Edinburgh, 1910), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.* 36.

⁸ *Ibid.* 80.

⁹ Notably David Chung, *Syncretism: The Religious Context of Christian Beginnings in Korea* (Albany, NY, 2001); Sung-Deuk Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religions, 1876–1915* (Waco, TX, 2013).

theory, such as that developed by Lamin Sanneh,¹⁰ to describe the way that Christianity took root in Korea, both on the basis of conceptual discussions in the field of mission studies and on historical grounds. It draws on research for *A History of Korean Christianity* (2014)¹¹ to examine the years of most rapid growth, roughly 1895 to 1910.¹² Its findings suggest that rather than ‘translation of the gospel’, a more historically accurate description of what took place in these decades is ‘reinvention of the Church’.¹³

THE TRANSLATION MODEL IN MISSION STUDIES

In the study of global Christian expansion and church growth, scholars of mission history have made use of the concept of translation as a model for the process of transmission of the faith. The most prominent contemporary purveyor of this approach is Lamin Sanneh. In *Translating the Message* (1989), he argued that ‘translatability’ has been an inherent feature of early Christianity from Pentecost onwards.¹⁴ In his work, translatability is a matter not only

¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 1989).

¹¹ Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity* (Cambridge, 2014), which offers greater detail and further indications of primary sources and secondary literature than can be given in this essay.

¹² Although Protestant translation activities had been going on since the 1870s, it was not until about 1895 that Protestant Church growth began to accelerate rapidly; after 1910 the rate of growth slowed. For figures, see Dae Young Ryu, ‘The Origin and Characteristics of Evangelical Protestantism in Korea at the Turn of the Twentieth Century’, *ChH* 77 (2008), 371–98, at 397; Chung-Shin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle, WA, 2003), 16. Cf. the outlines of Lak-geon George Paik, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea 1832–1910*, 2nd edn (Seoul, 1970); Allen D. Clark, *A History of the Church in Korea* (Seoul, 1971).

¹³ Use of the word ‘reinvention’ is inspired by John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1995).

¹⁴ Sanneh, *Translating*, 214–16.

of the use of different languages to express the gospel being characteristic of Christian mission but also of translation of the Christian faith from one cultural context into another. The paradigmatic example of translation is the transmission of Christianity from a Jewish to a Hellenistic milieu.¹⁵ Sanneh extends this pattern through Church history.¹⁶ His main primary research is on Protestant mission in the Niger Delta, in which Bible translation featured not only as an important foundation for missionary work but also as signalling the affirmation of local cultures as vehicles of Christian truth. Sanneh finds that the West African case confirms Christianity's translatability and therefore its inherent plurality.¹⁷ In Sanneh's view, Christianity became an indigenous faith in West Africa by its translation into local languages and cultures through processes that characterize evangelization throughout Christian history. Its potential for re-expression in local idioms is the most important factor in its impact on culture.

Although Sanneh applied it historically, the extension of textual translation as a model for the process of evangelization had already been used by mission anthropologists in the inculturation debate of the 1970s. Louis Luzbetak drew on Eugene Nida's 'functional' or 'dynamic' equivalence model of Bible translation to analyse the relationship of church and cultures.¹⁸ Luzbetak's early work was later developed for Protestant Evangelicals by Charles Kraft.¹⁹ However, in discussion about the construction of 'local' or 'contextual' theologies, Stephen Bevans identified several weaknesses in the translation model. First, it presupposes that there is an essential gospel for which a dynamic equivalence must be found, and such an understanding of the gospel tends to be propositional. Second, it takes a positivist approach to culture, assuming that there are parallels between one culture and another. As a consequence,

¹⁵ Ibid. 9–49.

¹⁶ Ibid. 50–129.

¹⁷ Ibid. 130–56.

¹⁸ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY, 1988; first publ. 1963).

¹⁹ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 1979).

a translation approach may not treat the receptor culture on its own terms but rather subordinate it to the presumed gospel message.²⁰ In other words, the translation model emphasizes the message and role of the missionary who mediates it rather than the receptors' appropriation of what they see and hear.

Sanneh's historical model of translation is open to the same criticisms. He also draws on Nida's linguistic work to develop his translation model for mission, which, he believes, despite errors of translation and vernacularization, leads to indigenous expression of faith. Sanneh points out that translation is most successful when it is done by the local people, emphasizes (with Nida) the importance of reception and goes on to suggest that once the message is translated, it may challenge and subvert the mission.²¹ However, despite Sanneh's emphasis on the receiving end of the translation process, his interest is in the translation of a predetermined gospel and the subtitle of the book ('The Missionary Impact on Culture') makes clear that it is focused on the missionary process.

There are additional problems with Sanneh's approach. There are philosophical issues with the empiricist view that essential meaning can be separated from the words of a particular language and transferred from one language to another, and this problem is compounded when the more complex concept of culture is used. Furthermore, the translation model relies on a semiotic understanding of cultures as discrete wholes or sign systems, like languages, which condition the perceptions and behaviours of those within them. Such an approach has been challenged by postcolonial criticism that understands cultures as shaped by those within them and draws attention to cultural hybridity.²² The assumption that the Christian gospel is in some sense new and foreign to a culture in which there is no contemporary Christian presence is also questionable, not only on the theological grounds of

²⁰ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 2nd edn (Maryknoll, NY, 2002), 40–4.

²¹ Sanneh, *Translating*, 192–209.

²² E.g. Stuart Hall, *Representation* (London, 1997).

the *imago Dei*, the cosmic Christ or the creative presence of the Holy Spirit, but also in view of historical findings of the spread of Christianity before the modern period.²³

There are two further concerns about Sanneh's particular use of translation as a historical model for evangelization. First, it is far from obvious from a historical perspective that translatability is an inherent feature of Christianity. Where Sanneh sees a sharp divide between the Judaic world of Jesus and the Hellenistic world of the Gentiles that necessitated translation, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the extent to which many Jews were Hellenized and the continuity between the cultures.²⁴ Moreover, although Catholic missionaries used vernacular languages and practised forms of what would now be called inculturation,²⁵ the Roman Catholic Church resisted the translation of the Bible and the liturgy in the name of orthodoxy and unity for the better part of fifteen hundred years.²⁶ Furthermore, Sanneh's approach is heavily influenced by two factors that are more theological than historical: by a particular reading of the New Testament that sees diversity where others have seen unity, and by the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation, which he regards as liberating the gospel from cultural accretions. Furthermore, his historical conclusions are drawn from particular West African experience of Protestant missions, whereas he concedes that Protestant mission as a whole, including in Africa, did not always use translation as its

²³ Such as the recovery of the early history of Christianity in Asia: Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY, 1988).

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London, 1992), 341–5. I am indebted to Morwenna Ludlow for alerting me to this point.

²⁵ See, for example, William R. Burrows, 'A Seventh Paradigm? Catholics and Radical Inculturation', in Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzing, eds, *Mission in Bold Humility* (Maryknoll, NY, 1996), 121–38.

²⁶ Aylward Shorter, *Evangelization and Culture* (London, 1994), 30. Sanneh is aware of this difficulty (*Translating*, 50–87), and argues for a vernacularizing effect of Catholic missions even before the Second Vatican Council encouraged translation of the liturgy and reading of the Bible by lay people: *ibid.* 88–129.

primary method and was susceptible to colonial attitudes that resisted it.²⁷ The second concern about Sanneh's model is the subtext that the 'translatability' of Christianity (even in its Catholic and colonial forms) results in accommodation of plurality, whereas Islam, the competing world religion in Africa, is said not to accommodate plurality, or at least not in religious matters. The Qur'ān is not translated and use of Arabic is required in worship, law and devotion.²⁸ Sanneh articulates a sharp division between the two faiths in this matter, which he sees as impinging closely on the theme of his book.²⁹ He has subsequently done further research on Islam in secular societies in Africa,³⁰ but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the stress on the 'translatability' of Christianity may be driven by an agenda beyond the historical evidence.

Given the theoretical drawbacks of translation as a model and the questions about the historical foundation of Sanneh's focus on translatability, we will examine the Korean case as another particular historical example of change resulting from the introduction of Christianity that has been described as 'translation', in order to consider whether this is the best way of representing the processes involved.

BEYOND TRANSLATION AS A MODEL FOR KOREAN EVANGELIZATION

As seen above, Korea presents a notable example of the rapid and socially significant acceptance of Christianity by a particular ethnic group in modern times. Protestant mission to Korea began with Bible translation into Korean in the 1870s while the peninsula itself was closed to mission work.³¹ John Ross, missionary of the (Scottish) United Presbyterian Church

²⁷ Sanneh, *Translating*, 88–129.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 211–38.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 212.

³⁰ E.g. Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban* (Boulder, CO, 1997).

³¹ Catholicism had been practised in Korea for almost a century by this date but had been largely suppressed by persecution.

in Manchuria, noting that the Korean travellers and exiles he met loved books, concluded that the most effective way to reach Korea was to translate the gospels and smuggle them into the country.³² The effectiveness of the translation work he initiated with Koreans in Shenyang (Mukden), which was continued later by missionaries and Korean Christians inside Korea, was enhanced by the decision to use the medium of *han'gŭl*.³³ The use of this simple script enabled the dissemination of the Christian message beyond elite males, allowing the previously illiterate and uneducated, including women, to know their culture, history and script and contributing to the growing sense of nationhood.³⁴ The translation work went beyond purely linguistic considerations and involved theological decisions about formulating a Christian vocabulary and identifying other affinities between the Protestant gospel and Korean religions.³⁵ The decision to which most attention was given was the choice of the term *Hananim* for God: this is a pure Korean word, not one of Chinese derivation. Ross claimed that this was an almost universal Korean name for God and used it in his New Testament.³⁶ The origins of the term are disputed by historians of Korean religions, but *Hananim* was certainly associated with the indigenous *Tonghak* teaching of Ch'oe Che-u (Choe Je-u; also known as Su-un).³⁷ The adoption of this indigenous term for God encouraged the

³² John Ross, *Mission Methods in Manchuria* (Edinburgh and London, 1903). On Ross, see, in this volume, James H. Grayson, 'John Ross and Cultural Encounter: Translating Christianity in an East Asian Context', 000–00.

³³ This was a script designed by King Sejong's scholars several hundred years before, specifically for the Korean language, but which was despised by the literati who preferred to use Chinese characters.

³⁴ Martha Huntley, *Caring, Growing, Changing: A History of the Protestant Mission in Korea* (Cincinnati, OH, 1984), 28.

³⁵ E.g. that ancient Koreans were monotheistic: Oak, *Making*, 63–83.

³⁶ John Ross, *History of Corea, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1891 edn), 355.

³⁷ Don Baker, 'Hananim, Hanūnim, Hanullim, and Hanöllim', *Review of Korean Studies* 5 (2002), 105–31; Paul Bierne, *Su-un and His World of Symbols* (Farnham, 2009).

inculturation of Protestantism and distinguished it from Catholicism.³⁸ In the P'yŏngyang Revival of 1907, which Mott observed, there was a religious outpouring similar to the holiness revivals in the Western nations in which people confessed their sins, reconciled themselves with one another, and sought to enter more deeply into their faith by reading the Bible and attending church. This event not only proved to the satisfaction of Western missionaries that Koreans had indeed become Christians,³⁹ but, through this 'Korean Pentecost', 'the religious experience of the people gave to the Christian [Protestant] Church in Korea a character which is its own'.⁴⁰

Early studies of the growth of Korean Protestantism gave most attention to the character and activities of the missionaries.⁴¹ While this historiographical tendency continued after the liberation of Korea in 1945,⁴² the development of Korean language history since then has focused attention more on Korean reception of Christianity.⁴³ In a study originally completed in 1959, David Chung saw the way Korean society had long accommodated and assimilated religions of foreign origin through equation or identification with indigenous

³⁸ Korean Catholics referred to God as 'Chŏnju', the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese term preferred by Matteo Ricci.

³⁹ Huntley, *Caring*, 132–8.

⁴⁰ Paik, *History*, 374.

⁴¹ The earliest history of Protestantism in Korea is Paik, *History*, which is a history of missions written in English and citing only English-language and missionary sources; cf. Charles Allen Clark, *The Korean Church and the Nevius Methods* (New York, 1930).

⁴² Notably Clark, *History*.

⁴³ The leading church historians writing in Korean are Min Kyŏng-bae (Kyoung-bae Min) and Yi Man-yŏl (Mahn-yŏl Yi): see, for example, Min Kyŏng-bae, *Han'guk kidokkyo hoesa [A History of the Korean Church]* (Seoul, 1982); *Han'guk minjok kyohoe hyŏngsŏngsa-ron [The Establishment of an Indigenous Korean Church]* (Seoul, 2008); Yi Man-yŏl, *Han'guk kidok'kyo suyongsa yŏn'gu [Study on the Korean Reception of Christianity]* (Seoul, 1998); *Han'guk kidok'kyo-wa minjok t'ongil undong [Korean Christianity and the National Unification Movement]* (Seoul, 2001).

beliefs as the key to explaining the Korean case.⁴⁴ Chung's focus on 'syncretization' to explain the processes by which Christianity became established in Korea goes beyond the missionary initiative and attends to the indigenization of the faith by Koreans, although his analysis is mainly focused on the linguistic-cultural aspects of what happened, in keeping with the translation model. In the most recent (2013) example in English of this approach, Sung Deuk Oak gives an in-depth exposition of Korean-led inculturation of Protestantism and its indigenous identity as the chief way of understanding Christian growth in Korea.⁴⁵

A few examples will indicate that once the missionaries had initiated translation and church formation, Koreans played the more significant role in spreading and defining Protestantism. First, the translation of the Bible was coupled, not only by Ross but also by later missionaries in Korea, with the use of the 'three-self' approach to mission, also known in Korea as the Nevius method.⁴⁶ Following this, Koreans studied and taught the Bible themselves and created 'self-supporting', 'self-governing' and self-propagating' churches.⁴⁷ Ross himself did not enter Korea until a short visit in 1887, but most of the first Christians, although they were baptized by the American Protestant missionaries working inside Korea from 1885, were Ross's disciples and their converts. Second, Korea did not become a Western colony and was not of great strategic interest to Western missions. The initial entry of missionaries to this closed country was made possible because of invitations by progressive Koreans, one of whom – Yun Ch'i-ho (Yun Chi-Ho) – even helped to finance the mission.⁴⁸ Compared to other mission fields, missionary numbers were low and many missionaries did not become fluent in the Korean language. The spread of Christianity owed most to the

⁴⁴ Chung, *Syncretism*.

⁴⁵ Oak, *Making*. Oak also noted translation from Christian literature in China.

⁴⁶ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (Shanghai, 1899).

⁴⁷ Charles Allen Clark, *The Nevius Plan for Mission Work in Korea* (Seoul, 1937).

⁴⁸ Clark, *History*, 147–8; on Yun Chi-ho, see Shin Ahn, 'The International Religious Network of Yun Chi-ho (1865–1965): Mission or Dialogue?' in Jeremy Gregory and Hugh McLeod, eds, *International Religious Networks*, SCH S 14 (Woodbridge, 2012), 228–35.

Korean missionary ‘helpers’ and the labours of Korean colporteurs and bible women.⁴⁹ Third, due to lack of funds, missionaries in Korea founded relatively few institutions; it was local believers who multiplied churches, schools and hospitals around the country.⁵⁰ These examples all suggest that Koreans themselves established the Korean Church.

In view of the extent to which Koreans wanted the gospel and the effort they put into spreading it, in the final analysis the growth of the Korean Church cannot be explained without looking at it from the receptors’ point of view.⁵¹ But in order to do this we must move beyond Sanneh’s translation model, which we noted above focused on the perspective of the foreign missionaries and the way in which they propagated a given Christian message in the vernacular. Taking this step may also help us to explain why many aspects of Western Christianity received in Korea were not translated into indigenous forms. When Mott held up Korea at the Edinburgh 1910 conference as an example of the transforming power of Christianity, he pointed not only to its spiritual effects but also to its social ones: in particular its contribution to modernization.⁵² Korea was said to be ‘vibrating with the spirit of the modern world’.⁵³ The rapid Christianization of Korea in terms of both church growth and modern development was described as ‘one of the marvels of modern history’.⁵⁴ The delegates did not see Christianity primarily as translated into the Korean idiom but as a source and agent of the modernization that was transforming Korean society .

Moving beyond the translation model is also a shift away from an emphasis on language and culture in the study of evangelization. When in 1967 Spencer Palmer tested the hypothesis that Christianity’s resonances with the religious and cultural context of Korea

⁴⁹ Paik, *History*, 295–8; Hyaewol Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 65–72.

⁵⁰ Paik, *History*, 419–28.

⁵¹ Ryu, ‘Origin’, 398.

⁵² Mott, *Decisive Hour*, 5–7.

⁵³ World Missionary Conference, *Report I*, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 71.

offered the most persuasive explanation for the early success of Protestant Christianity in Korea, he concluded that they were not the ultimate cause, which he found instead in the socio-political conditions around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Attention to socio-political issues in Christian history also became prominent in South Korea during the labour and democratization movements of the 1970s and 1980s encouraged by the *minjung* (masses or peoples') movement.⁵⁶ In his 1985 study of the 'implantation' of religion in Korea, the historian of Korean religions, James Grayson, emphasized the solving of conceptual and linguistic issues and the nature of Christian relations with other faiths, but in his later study, he put greater emphasis on the social instability of the period and the way Christianity was appropriated as a resource for modernization and nation-building.⁵⁷ These examples suggest that in order better to represent what happened in Korea, we should look further at both the agency and motives of Korean Christians and also the role of the Protestant churches in the socio-political context of the time.

THE REINVENTION OF THE CHURCH IN KOREA

It was progressives frustrated by the gradual pace of modernization under the guidance of China who in the early 1880s encouraged the mission boards of American churches to send missionaries to Korea.⁵⁸ The first generation of missionaries generally shared the progressives' view that the dependence of Korea on China was the main reason for its 'backwardness', and

⁵⁵ Spencer J. Palmer, *Korea and Christianity* (Seoul, 1967). Palmer identifies 1895–1910 as the years of most rapid growth and connects this phenomenon with the social trauma of the period: *ibid.* 80–1, 91–4.

⁵⁶ In Protestant historiography this was led especially by Mahn-yŏl Yi.

⁵⁷ James H. Grayson, *Early Buddhism and Christianity in Korea* (Leiden, 1985); *idem*, *Korea: A Religious History*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2002).

⁵⁸ Mahn-yŏl Yi, 'The Birth of the National Spirit of the Christians in the Late Chosŏn Period', in Chai-shin Yu, ed., *Korea and Christianity* (Seoul, 2004), 39–72, at 40–3; Kim and Kim, *History*, 62–3.

aimed to liberate Korea from this subservient relationship.⁵⁹ Their combined attempt to promote a separate identity for Korea was one of the motives for attention to religio-cultural continuity with Korean religions. In addition, the translated gospel provided the example of a nation – Israel – with a distinct religio-cultural identity over and against threatening empires, and a nation which God promised to bless and make great.⁶⁰ This theological parallel between Korea and Israel accompanied the development of Korean self-awareness and ethnic nationalism.⁶¹ Evidence suggesting that nationalism was the most immediate reason for the attraction of Protestantism includes the fact that the rapid growth for which the Korean Protestant churches are famed began only from about the time of Korea's Peasant Revolution (1894–5). The Revolution was inspired by *Tonghak* ('Eastern Learning') teaching, including belief in *Hananim* and the Korean people.⁶² In this context, the fact that Protestants were also worshipping *Hananim* and preaching a new kingdom made their movement appear to be a nationalist one that revived traditional Korean religion.

However, Protestantism differed from *Tonghak* in that it promoted modernization. Since the *Tonghak* armies could be defeated by the government only with the help of Japan's modern forces, modernization of Korea seemed to the elite all the more necessary. The Protestant churches served the cause of modernization in several respects. The first was by the formation of the churches as modern communities. Protestant emphasis on conversion and individual conscience encouraged personal responsibility and Presbyterian polity laid foundations for Korean democracy.⁶³ The churches implemented social changes such as the participation of women as well as men in services, and the inclusion of butchers and other

⁵⁹ Everett N. Hunt Jr, *Protestant Pioneers in Korea* (Maryknoll, NY, 1980), 90–2.

⁶⁰ Wi Jo Kang, *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea* (New York, 1997).

⁶¹ Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* (Stanford, CA, 2006), 21–57.

⁶² Carter J. Eckert et al., *Korea Old and New: A History* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 214–22.

⁶³ Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea, 1896–1937* (Honolulu, HI, 1990), 85–6.

hitherto despised groups in the Christian community,⁶⁴ and they campaigned for corresponding social reforms,⁶⁵ many of which were among the modernizing reforms that were imposed on Korea by the Japanese who intervened to suppress the Revolution. These included ending the Confucian school and examination system for public office in favour of modern education using Hangeul, outlawing some traditional punishments, abolishing the social class system, allowing the remarriage of widows and deregulating clothing and hairstyles.⁶⁶ The defeat of China encouraged King Kojong (Gojong) to declare himself emperor in 1896, claiming Korean self-reliance and the parity of Korea with China and Japan.

A second way in which the churches promoted modernization was in their educational work. The victory of modernized Japan over Confucian society and over *Tonghak* produced a nationwide rush for Western education.⁶⁷ However, although it had dismantled the Confucian education system, the Korean government was slow to implement a replacement, so local churches and (to a lesser extent) missions largely took over the educational role which had been the foundation of Confucian power. The Bible became the new classical text; Christian theology and Western thinking, which Koreans did not yet distinguish, provided the new philosophy; and the Church was the new moral institution.⁶⁸ Korean Christians responded enthusiastically to the need for schools; each village church established and funded an elementary school and these became feeder schools for the few secondary and tertiary institutions that had been founded by the missionaries. In addition, the wider education provided by church activities, Christian institutions and newspapers imparted Western

⁶⁴ The category of 'unclean' included butchers, undertakers and shamans.

⁶⁵ Huntley, *Caring*, 66–80.

⁶⁶ Andrew C. Nahm, *Korea: Tradition and Transformation* (Elizabeth, NJ, 1988), 179–81.

⁶⁷ Paik, *History*, 234.

⁶⁸ Wells, *New God*, 30–2.

scientific and technical knowledge and encouraged the questioning of traditional religions and the development of ideas of human freedom and social justice.⁶⁹

At a grass-roots level, the ‘three-self’ method promoted initiative, self-reliance, growth and progress for national development. Following the disempowering of Confucianism, Protestantism now appeared as a contender for its place in public life. As well as practical help, protection, education and new values, Christian churches offered access to power: religious power in the form of strength to cope with what were proving to be troublesome times, the power of knowledge, legal power because of the extra-territorial powers held by the missionaries in this period, and the possibility of political power.⁷⁰ From the beginning of the Peasant Rebellion in 1894 Korean men converted in significant numbers, leading to the conversion of whole households and villages.⁷¹ Just as church communities emphasized ‘three-self’, progressive Christians tackled Korea’s general dependence on foreign powers by espousing ‘independence’, in the sense of self-reliance, as their main aim. In 1896 the Protestants Sŏ Chae-p’il (Seo Jae-pil; Philip Jaisohn), Yun Ch’i-ho and others formed the Independence Club, the first modern nationalist organization in Korea.⁷² Its branches were closely connected with Protestant churches⁷³ and its mouthpiece, *The Independent*, the first newspaper to be published entirely in Hangul, was distinctly Christian in tone.⁷⁴ They promoted a ‘self-reconstruction nationalism’ which would bring about a modern nation state without recourse to violence by ‘awakening’ the people through free speech and education about Western values and social responsibility. This was largely the

⁶⁹ David Kwang-Sun Suh, ‘American Missionaries and a Hundred Years of Korean Protestantism’, *IRM* 74 (1986), 5–18, at 6–9.

⁷⁰ Cf. Paik, *History*, 260–2, 356–8.

⁷¹ Huntley, *Caring*, 125.

⁷² Vipam Chandra, *Imperialism, Resistance, and Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea* (Berkeley, CA, 1988).

⁷³ Park, *Protestantism*, 127.

⁷⁴ Wells, *New God*, 57.

vision of Yun, who had become convinced, like the Hebrew prophets, that the problems Korea was facing lay primarily with the internal weakness of Korea itself and that Christianity offered a transcendent power to overcome evil and inculcate an innate morality and civic responsibility. He also promoted capitalism as an extension of the Christian public spirit by investment in industry and public enterprise, and other nationalist Christians like Yi Sŭng-hun (Yi Seung-hun) and Cho Man-sik (Jo Man-sik) began commercial companies to strengthen the nation.⁷⁵ Rather than Protestantism affirming – by translation – Korean culture as a vehicle of Christian truth, as Sanneh described it as doing in West Africa, Protestantism in Korea was being used by Koreans to transform Korean culture and modernize the nation. As events gradually revealed Japan to be the chief enemy of Korea, the religion of the Americans became not only less objectionable but even politically attractive. The churches came to be seen by nationalists as allies and as a means of saving the nation by raising awareness and organizing against the Japanese. Despite their avowed neutrality in politics, Protestant churches and schools became vehicles of nationalism because they used the Korean vernacular and encouraged self-reliance and because they symbolized in their buildings, music and artefacts an alternative modernization.⁷⁶ The churches were motivated toward nationalism and mobilized to serve the nation.⁷⁷ Protestant churches, schools and Bible classes also offered leadership skills for activists and trained a ‘new intellectual class’.⁷⁸ Despite the disciplinary measures of missionaries and Korean church leaders fearful for the future of the Church if it became a means of political insurrection, nationalist Christians made use of Christian churches and networks both in Korea and also in exile in Hawaii, on the US mainland and in Manchuria and Siberia. For example, Ahn Chang-ho moved to San Francisco in 1902 and founded, in addition to a church, the Sinmin-hoe (New People’s Association), a

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Heekuk Lim, ed., *Christianity in Korea* (Seoul, 2013), 73–84.

⁷⁷ Yi, ‘Birth’.

⁷⁸ Park, *Protestantism*, 123–6.

secret revolutionary body that linked patriotic leaders in Korea, mostly Christians, with those in the USA.⁷⁹ Educational institutions founded by Ahn, Yun and other nationalists were accused of training resistance fighters. Not only were the churches agents of modernization, they were themselves being reinvented – contrary to missionary intentions – to serve nationalist purposes.

These socio-political arguments, which see the numerical growth and vitality of the Protestant movement resulting from its reinvention of the Church to serve Korean independence and modernization, are bolstered by the contrast with the Catholic Church in Korea, which by about 1907 was overtaken numerically by Protestant growth. Although it had been founded by Koreans as a lay community a century before the first Korean Protestant Christians were baptized, the Church was led from 1891 by Bishop Gustave-Charles-Marie Mutel and a French-dominated clergy. Furthermore, in reaction to its persecution in France by revolutionary forces, the French Catholic Church was in retreat from modernism and many aspects of the modern world. Catholic missionaries were therefore slower than Protestants to encourage modern education and Bishop Mutel rejected the idea of founding a Catholic university. Its anti-modernism is held to have hindered the growth of the Catholic Church in this period.⁸⁰

When tensions between Japan and Russia escalated into full-scale war in 1904–5, the Japanese won and ousted the Russians from Korea. In November 1905, Korea was declared a ‘protectorate’ of Japan, which then occupied Korea and imposed its authority by force. When it was clear that Korea was humiliated, the institutional churches in Korea held prayer meetings for the nation. Following the example of biblical Israel, missionaries and Korean leaders such as Gil Seon-ju called for repentance for personal sin as the first step toward

⁷⁹ Jacqueline Pak, ‘Cradle of the Covenant’, in Robert E. Buswell Jr and Timothy S. Lee, eds, *Christianity in Korea* (Honolulu, HI, 2006), 116–48.

⁸⁰ Don Baker, ‘Sibling Rivalry in Twentieth-Century Korea’, *ibid.* 283–308, at 289–96.

national recovery.⁸¹ In the light of these socio-political developments, the P'yŏngyang revival of 1907 appears not so much as a religious response to a translated gospel, as we saw above, but much more as a cathartic opportunity to pour out the distress and panic at what had befallen the nation.⁸² As well as being symbols of ethnic pride, means of modernization, mouthpieces of independence and vehicles of nationalism, the Protestant churches had become places of consolation and hope for the restoration of the nation in the context of the coming of the kingdom of God.

Whereas Chung, Oak and others, like Lamin Sanneh, have seen the translation of Christianity into the local language and culture as the chief means of its impact, in the Korean case in the period from about 1895 to 1910 it was Protestantism's discontinuity with Korean tradition that was the decisive factor in its growth and influence. Christianity was adopted because it was different from the tradition and offered salvation for the nation in a period of oppression and transition. The churches, which, due to the 'three-self' method, were organized by Koreans, could be reinvented to meet the challenges of the time. As such they became attractive to modernizers and nationalists.

CONCLUSION

This essay has questioned the use of translation model, as presented chiefly by Lamin Sanneh, to explain the rapid growth of an indigenous Protestant Church in Korea in the period 1895–1910. It has done so both on the basis of conceptual discussions in the field of mission studies and also on historical grounds. From the point of view of mission studies, the chief weaknesses of the translation theory are that it tends to detract from the agency of the local

⁸¹ Young Keun Choi, 'The Great Revival in Korea, 1903–1907', *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 72 (2010), 129–49.

⁸² Ryu, 'Origin', 394.

people in spreading the faith, to suggest that the gospel itself is a fixed deposit, and to focus unduly on the linguistic-cultural features of evangelization and the affirmation of local culture.

From the perspective of Korean Christian history, although the actual work of Bible translation and relating the gospel to Korean tradition had laid an important foundation, in the dire political situation of the final decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, when church growth was particularly rapid, the missionary legacy of a translated gospel and its indigenization in the religio-cultural traditions of Korea were not the most important reasons for the attraction of Protestantism in Korea. On the contrary, the more modern Christianity appeared, the greater the hope it offered Koreans in their darkest hour. It could be said that Korean Christians were rather reinventing Christianity and the Church to transform their communities and country and to fulfil nationalist ends. A few months after the revival in 1907, the Presbyterian Church of Korea was formed. After Korea was finally annexed by Japan in 1910 and the state was lost, Protestant Christians saw the independent Church as continuing the nation.⁸³ In predominantly rural Korea, Protestant villages formed, in which the church was the social as well as the religious centre. These were self-help communities with high levels of solidarity and mutual care. They would move together into exile and they saw themselves as modelling the kingdom of God.⁸⁴ The Protestant network bound diaspora Christians with those in the peninsula and, through missionary connections, both could gain international support for the cause of Korean independence.⁸⁵

In conclusion, the establishment of Protestantism in the years between 1895 and 1910 does not appear to be primarily as a process of the translation of a persuasive Western religious tradition into Korean language and culture through missionary work. Although missionaries were involved and biblical translation did take place, a more compelling view is

⁸³ Wells, *New God*.

⁸⁴ Park, *Protestantism*, 30–6.

⁸⁵ E.g. in the independence movement of 1 March 1919: see In Soo Kim, *Protestants and the Formation of Modern Korean Nationalism, 1885–1920* (New York, 1996), 155–86.

that what happened was that Christian forms were imported directly from the West and reconfigured to suit Korean purposes and transform Korean society. In particular, Koreans reimagined Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church, informed by Western examples, to address the dire socio-political situation in which they found themselves in the decades immediately before and after 1900. The success of Christianity in Korea was less due to its translatability that affirmed the local culture and more due to its novelty and capacity for social transformation. Christianity was not so much translated into the Korean vernacular as it was reinvented to serve the need for the independence and modernization of the nation in its darkest hour.