

The Diffusion of Christianity in South Korea

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2019

Abstract

Missiologists have long lauded the church in South Korea as an example of explosive church growth. In less than 100 years, Christianity in South Korea grew from a nearly non-existent religion into one with a strong presence. The growth of Christianity can be viewed as a unique cultural change event. This article uses Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory and Hunter's theory of culture change to explain the growth of Christianity in Korea. The authors posit that Christianity grew in response to various historical events in which the introduction, persecution, and reemergence of the faith emerged.

Key Words: Culture, Diffusion, History, Innovation, Korea

Introduction

Missiologists have long lauded the church in South Korea as an example of explosive church growth (Kim 2000; Moon 2008). In less than 100 years, Christianity in South Korea grew from a nearly non-existent religion with very few adherents into a religion with a strong presence throughout the peninsula (Kim 1985). In fact, from 1960 to 1990 the number of Protestant Christians in South Korea grew faster than in any other country (Kim 2000). As such, the growth of Christianity can be viewed as a rare cultural change event, which has prompted missiologists to address the various factors that facilitated such rapid growth. For example, Park has suggested that the growth of the Christian church in South Korea can be attributed to historical, geopolitical, sociological, cultural, and religious factors (Park 2012).

In this article, we look to two cultural change theories through which we discuss the catalyzing factors that facilitated the rapid spread of Christianity in South Korea. We frame our discussion through Rogers' classic diffusion of innovations theory and Hunter's theory of cultural change. (Rogers 2003; Hunter 2010). Additionally, we briefly survey geopolitical factors including the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and urbanization (1960's-1990's) which were catalyzing factors that led to the adoption of Christianity throughout South Korea.

Theoretical Framework

In this section of the article, we give a brief overview of both Rogers' theory which he outlined in *Diffusion of Innovation* and Hunter's (2010) theory of cultural change from his work *To Change the World*. These two theories are the framework through which we discuss the rapid spread of Christianity in South Korea.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Rogers' (2003) seminal text, *Diffusion of Innovation*, continues to impact various academic fields including missiology. Put simply, Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory attempts to explain how, and at what pace, new innovations are spread throughout a society over a period of time. In addition to innovation characteristics, Rogers (2003) categorizes innovation adopters

into five categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority adopters, late majority adopters and laggards. Innovates are the first to adopt an innovation, whereas early adopters both adopt the new innovation and are “opinion leaders” of the innovation (Rogers 2013). Next, “early majority” adopters may deliberate before adopting an innovation whereas the “late majority” category is comprised of skeptics who finally choose to adopt an innovation due to increasing peer and economic pressure (Rogers 2013). Laggards are the last group to adopt an innovation because they tend to be suspicious of anything new and prefer the stability of the past rather than the uncertainty of the future (Rogers 2013). These terms will be used in the discussion section below.

Diffusion of innovation theory posits that change agents are those that “influences clients’ innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency.” (Rogers 2003:27) Change agents introduce the initial innovation to a society and opinion leaders influence the attitudes of behavior others in their shared social networks which then spreads the innovation throughout the social network. Rogers (2003) asserts that innovations can be perceived as new ideas, practices, or objects.

Following this assertion, we posit that religious beliefs can be then viewed as a type of innovation. This perspective frames our analysis of the diffusion of Christianity throughout South Korea which will be further extrapolated below.

Hunter’s Theory of Cultural Change

The other cultural change theory important to our discussion of Christianity in South Korea is Hunter’s theory of culture change (Hunter 2010). Hunter posits that cultures do not change from the bottom strata of society to the upper echelons. Instead, Hunter argues that cultural change is initiated from the top of society suggesting that societal elites who are outside the center of power can lead overlapping networks of institutional power (Hunter 2010). In other words, culture changes if and when enough elite members of society can coordinate their efforts to affect the culture change.

Throughout the article, we will refer to these two theories in our explanation of how Christianity spread throughout South Korea. Next, we will briefly explain the historical context in which the spread of Christianity took place.

Historical Context

While there exists evidence of pre-historical settlements on the peninsula, the Korean kingdoms and states first encountered the ancient Chinese kingdoms around the fourth century (Eckert and Yi 1990). Sandwiched between the mighty ancient powers of China and Japan, people throughout the Korean peninsula experienced regular pressures and wars between China and Japan (Eckert and Yi 1990). As a result, there was a fear of outsiders which, in turn, developed an isolated community marked by a homogenous identity and culture. By the 1800’s, Korea had been dubbed the “Hermit Kingdom” by Western nations who were busy engaging in trade throughout Asia (Eckert and Yi 1990).

It was around 1600 when Korean diplomats serving in China were first exposed to Catholic Christians. In turn, the diplomats became the first to bring the knowledge of Christianity to the Korean peninsula (Adams 2004). Following the introduction of the religion to the peninsula, records indicate that it was not until the 1700’s, after the arrival of Catholic missionaries, that

there was an establishment of Christian churches (Adams 2004). These churches were established throughout the Northern part of the Korean peninsula (Adams 2004).

Despite the initial success of the Catholic missionaries, contact with Christians was not to last very long. In 1791, persecution broke out against the Catholic community which lasted for almost 100 years. This period of persecution effectively dissolved Christianity throughout the Korean peninsula (Kim and Kim 2014). In fact, in 1866 alone, a government-operated anti-Catholic campaign ordered the deaths of over 8,000 Christians, including 9 of the 12 Catholic priests that were working in the Korean peninsula at that time (Eckert and Yi 1990). Although the severe persecution did not eliminate the growth of Christianity in South Korea, it delayed it for at least a few more decades.

By the late 1800's it was clear that international trade was advantageous for increasing the wealth and defense of Korea (Eckert and Yi 1990). The Western nations were intent on forcing open the Eastern nations for trade, and possessed naval and military strength. Thus, South Korea was being forcefully brought out from its "Hermit Kingdom" patterns and engaging with other global nations. By 1886, Korea signed treaties with the Western nations which then opened the doors for foreigners to enter and live in Korea. The shift is key. As Hunter claims, the top echelon of Korean society, in this case the government, had to initiate changes in order for society to follow. Thus, with a new attitude towards foreign powers cascading down from the government, Korean society as a whole was more open to engaging with foreigners now living in Korea. This meant that Protestant missionaries would find themselves welcome into a newly opened Korea.

Protestant Church Planting (1884-1910)

The first Protestant churches were predominantly planted by Presbyterians and Methodists beginning in the late nineteenth century (Neill 1990). Missionaries arrived on the Korean peninsula by traversing over land from China. This means that the Christian population and growth was concentrated in the northern regions of Korea. These early Protestant missionaries were change agents, to use Rogers' term, that brought in the innovation of Christianity to the Korean peninsula. Their proselytization resulted in many converts throughout the northern parts of the Korean peninsula. These new converts would become the innovators of Christianity throughout Korea. In fact, by 1907, there was a great Christian revival in Pyongyang. So much so that it was dubbed the 'Jerusalem of the East' due to its large number of churches and Christians (Kim and Kim 2014).

Most Protestant missionaries at that time followed the "Nevius Method" of church governance in which churches aimed to be self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting (Neill 1990). This "three self" church governance model aimed to establish churches that were not dependent on foreign missionaries either for leadership, direction, or financial aid. This proved especially important later during the Japanese occupation of Korea which is discussed further below.

In addition to the Nevius Method, Protestant missionaries took advantage of the royal court and government's desire for modernization. As a result, missionaries built the first modern hospitals, schools and seminaries in Korea (Kim and Kim 2014). This gave Christians access to the upper echelon of Korean society. As a result, the intellectuals and cultural elites became the innovators of the second wave of Christianity in Korea. Further, to use Hunter's position that

change takes place from the top of society to the bottom, it was these elites of Korean society that had the power needed to enact culture change. Indeed, several of the elites of Korean society who became Christians due to the Protestant missionaries' activities became leaders of the nationalist movements, and later, leaders of South Korea (Eckert and Yi 1990).

The independence of the newly planted churches also came into play during the Japanese occupation. Next, we will demonstrate how Japanese religion and national thought met resistance amongst Christians in Korea.

Japanese Occupation (1910-1945)

In 1910, Japan formally annexed the entirety of Korea. The monarchy was disbanded and Korea was ruled by a Japanese military government under a Governor-General (Kim and Kim 1990). It would be difficult to overstate the impact that the Japanese occupation had on the Korean peninsula. During this period of time, rapid modernization came to Korea, coupled with a concerted effort to erase the Korean culture and language (Kim and Kim 1990). Korea was treated as a prison camp in some senses, with military police asserting their authority everywhere including conducting surveillance even in villages (Kim and Kim 1990).

As a result of the oppressiveness of the Japanese government, a renewed sense of Korean resistance and nationalism emerged. The newly planted Protestant churches that operated independently became natural allies and bastions of support for emerging nationalist movements during the Japanese occupation (Chung 2014). Adherents of Korean Nationalism would find an ally in these self-sufficient Korean churches. In fact, because the Korean churches preached a message that was counter to the national Japanese religion, Korean nationalists would find themselves in friendly territory in the church.

By 1919, the most radical nationalist leaders were exiled or put in jail (Eckert and Yi 1990). The church became the focal point of nationalist coordination and leadership development (Eckert and Yi, 1990). Again, the independence of the Korean churches was a fertile soil for the resistance movements to take root and grow. By 1920, it is estimated that two percent of the population of Korea were Christians (Kim and Kim 2014).

The Japanese government feared Christianity because it viewed the religion as a potential threat to Japanese colonial ambitions. Soo Kim, who wrote about the Japanese Governor-General in power in 1909 stated, "He believed that the church was the strongest anti-Japanese organization in Korea. To him it seemed impossible to rule over Korea efficiently unless he dismantled this organization (Kim 2011). Persecution and oppression of Christians in churches and Christian schools became routine throughout the period of Japanese occupation (Kim 2011). The Christian Korean nationalism and resistance to Japanese rule resulted in torture, public beatings, and murder (Kim 2011). Although the oppression of the Japanese slowed the growth of Christianity, it did not stop it altogether (Johnson and Zurlo 2018). In fact, persecution actually served as a way to increase the observability of Christianity in the public sphere. The early adopters, to reference Rogers' (2003) term, saw an increase in their social status even as they resisted Japanese rule.

The Japanese oppression of Christianity culminated in requiring Christians to bow down before Japanese Shinto shrines (Kim and Kim 2014). This was required to show respect to the emperor and deceased Japanese soldiers. Shrines were established in churches and in Christian

schools and those who refused to bow suffered punishments included expulsion from school, revoked licenses, and sometimes execution (Kim and Kim 2014). The churches in Korea were divided on the issue of bowing to the shrines. Some viewed it as simply a Japanese national ceremony, while others viewed it as idolatry (Kim 2011). Nonetheless, the focus of the Japanese occupiers on requiring this activity in churches is a testament to the strength of the Korean nationalism prevalent in the churches.

An important change took place during the Japanese occupation. Christianity, once viewed as a foreign faith, had now become compatible with Korean culture because Koreans looked for a faith that was not viewed as subservient to Japan (Kim and Kim, 2014). This analysis follows Rogers, who defined compatibility as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” (Rogers 2013:15). Christianity provided a religion and belief system that was thoroughly un-Japanese.

In some ways, the Japanese occupation acted like a furnace that melded together the Christian churches and Korean nationalism. The resulting alloy, the Korean Christian church, would be further developed and refined during the next period of societal upheaval, The Korean War.

Division and War (1945-1953)

After the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, the Allies divided control of the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel (Eckert and Yi 1990). The Soviet forces controlled the North, while the Americans controlled the South. Pyongyang, once the center of Christianity in Korea, was now located in Communist-controlled Korea. Japanese occupation had already served to create an environment for Christianity to grow in Korea. Next, the Korean War would concentrate that growth into South Korea.

The Christian communities in the North of Korea began to experience persecution from the communist governing forces, while in contrast the Christian communities in the South experienced growth due to special favor with the U.S. Military and subsequent South Korean governments (Chung 2014). In the five years after the Japanese defeat in World War II, the protestant population in the United States governed South Korea doubled from 240,000 to 500,000 (Chung 2014).

The causes of the Korean War are beyond the scope of this article. But, suffice it to say that after several years of tenuous division, war broke out between the Communist North and the Democratic South. Over one million Christian refugees fled to South Korea which served to concentrate the Korean Christian population in the South (Chung 2014).

The Christians that escaped the anti-Christian Northern forces planted churches and created refugee communities in South Korea (Chung 2014). Some of these churches exist to this day. Youngnak Church in downtown Seoul, for example. Significantly, the South was not only viewed as friendly to Christians, but in some sense was seen as ‘pro-Christian’ as South Korea’s first president, Syungman Rhee was a Christian (Kim 2014).

The Korean War devastated the country. An estimated three million people were killed (Chung 2014). Additionally, nearly half of the industrial capacity and a third of the housing were destroyed (Eckert and Yi 1990). The boundary between the North and the South remains at the 38th parallel. For South Korea, the war resulted in a decreased population, a concentration of

Christians in the South, a deep anti-communist nationalism, and the lasting presence and influence of the U.S. and United Nation Forces. The war played a pivotal role in the explosion of Christianity in South Korea.

Rapid Urbanization and Growth

Post-war Korea was in disarray. The civil war left South Korea experiencing the phenomenon of anomie, or a state of normlessness (Kim 2011). Urbanization filled the void left by the war. In 1955, 75.6% of the population lived outside of the cities (Jang 2006). By 1980 the percentage of rural dwellers was almost halved down to 42.8% (Jang 2006). In the same period of time, the population of the country residing in the capital of Seoul grew from 7.3% to 22.4% (Jang 2006).

One indisputable cause of the movement of people from rural areas to the burgeoning urban areas is industrialization. During the 1960's and 1970's there was rapid economic growth throughout South Korea in the manufacturing and heavy industry sector (Jang 2006). The growth in these areas meant a need for more workers in the cities (Kim 1985). Thus, more and more people moved to urban centers for economic opportunities.

Urbanization created a mass migration of rural individuals to the urban centers where the churches had been established since the end of the Korean War (Chung, 2014). Looking to the diffusion of innovation theory, the mass migration of people to the urban centers increased the observability and trialability for Christianity as an innovation (Rogers 2003). Put simply, there were more people living near churches that could then “watch” and “try” Christianity for themselves. Additionally, the society elites were congregated into the cities and their spheres of influence began to overlap (Hunter 2010). These new interactions increased the potential for elites to influence a cultural shift towards Christianity.

Nationalism in Korea did not disappear after the Japanese occupation. Rather, it was strengthened as a result of the Korean War, and the ongoing threat of attack from the North. In the midst of rabid urbanization, the church embraced the nationalism and pro-government stances and policies (Kim 1985). The government, in turn, used churches to gain support among the population (Kim 1985). The Korean church, which had been at the center of Korean nationalism during the Japanese occupation was once again in the center of nationalism against the communist North.

Hunter's (2010) theory of culture change posits that the periphery of society, rather than the center of society, is where culture changers reside. This describes the emerging group of Christian elites that grew as a result of their ties with a friendly South Korean government. Because Christians supported the government, they were welcomed into the societal circles, sometimes receiving preferential treatment (Chung 2014).

In addition to urban Christians, military officers were also becoming a part of the elite in society. Korean nationalism was naturally embraced by the Korean military in which service is conscription based; all abled bodied men must serve for several years (Kim 2011). As a result, many Christians served in the military exposing it to the Christian faith. The Korean military began a chaplain system in 1948, which was expanded after the Korean War (Kim 2011). Then, in the early 1970's 1st Army Commander General Shin Han, influenced by what he saw as the strength behind Israel's army, commanded his troops to believe in a religion (Kim 2011). The Chief Chaplain of the 1st Army then launched a movement to convert the entire army to

Christianity (Kim 2011). Mass baptisms of soldiers became a new phenomenon, as thousands of military members would convert on at the same time (Kim 2011).

The Korean army's decision to embrace religious belief is an example of an authority innovation decision (Rogers 2003). Interestingly enough, there is no evidence from a bottom up movement for the spread of Christianity in the Korean army. Here again, the diffusion and culture change take place from the top down, as Hunter described (Hunter 2010).

As has been stated, rapid urbanization caused a mass migration of population from rural areas to the urban centers. By 2015, almost 86% of South Koreans lived in urban centers (Johnson and Zurlo 2018). This phenomenon is one way in which Christianity grew throughout South Korea.

Discussion

According to diffusion of innovation theory, a normal distribution would see the cumulative adopters plotted over time take the shape of an S-curve (Rogers 2003). One drawback to this theory is the assumption that the curve moves towards complete adoption. As such the model is not full proof because the majority of countries generally do not have full adoption of one particular faith. However, when the data is graphed over time the percentage of Korean Christians peaks at close to one third of the population (Figure 1). The graph below demonstrates this 'tipping point' (Gladwell 2000).

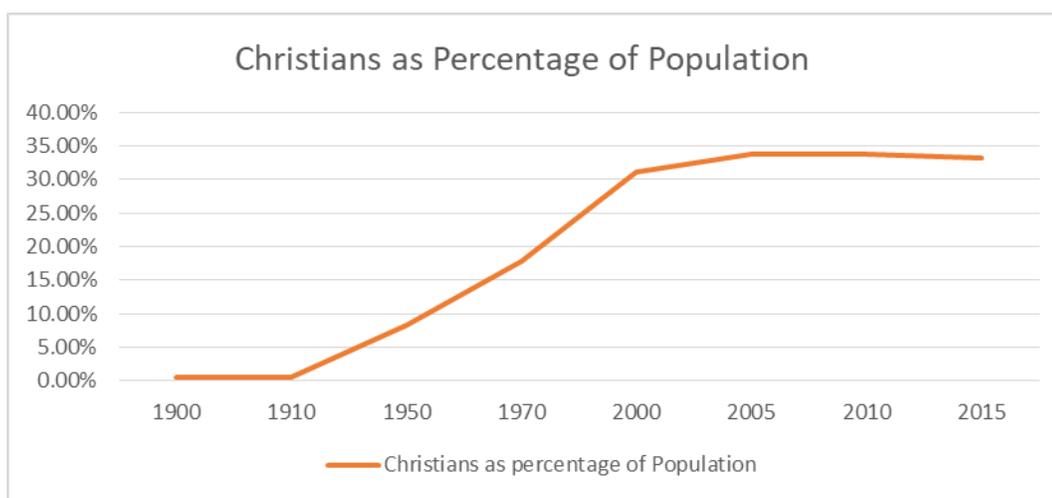


Figure 1. Christians as a Percentage of Population in South Korea

In this case, the tipping point is reached around the 10% adoption rate, which coincides shortly after the Korean War. After the tipping point is reached, the adoption rate then increases rapidly, peaking at 33% by 2010 (Johnson and Zurlo 2018). The early majority seems to adopt Christianity during the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War. These historical pressures, combined with nationalism, pushed the early majority to adopt Christianity. The late majority follows shortly the Korean War until around the year 2000, after which the laggards slowly adopt. Perhaps late majority and laggards adopted Christianity for economic opportunities or due to increasing societal pressure.

There are several contributing factors which impacted the timing of the tipping point. As previously stated, Christian refugees from the North had become relocated to the South,

increasing the percentage of post-war Christians. Additionally, the intense evangelistic activities of the North Korean Christian refugees acted as fuel for the growing fire of Christianity (Chung 2014). The increase in the Christian population combined with a simultaneous increase in evangelistic activity synergized to see a rapid increase in number of Christians as a percentage of the population.

The Korean War also created a new society that had a high degree of homophily, or the degree of similarity between individuals (Rogers 2003). The war impacted the entire population. Everyone experienced similar traumas and the old socio-economic classes were leveled (Rogers 2003). Because the degree of homophily among a population is positively related to the diffusion potential of an innovation post-war South Korea was fertile for a diffusion event (Rogers 2003).

Additionally, nationalism was shown to be a powerful tool in diffusing Christianity. While some discourse has suggested that Christianity and nationalism are, or should be, mutually exclusive (Boyd 2007), it remains that nationalism was very significant in the spread of Christianity in South Korea. In other words, in South Korea nationalism facilitated culture change.

Conclusion

The explosive growth of Christianity in South Korea was a rare event. The initial Protestant innovators were able to begin to diffuse Christianity to the population. The pressures of the Japanese Occupation, the Korean War, and rapid urbanization synergized with the Christian elites' embrace nationalism.

Above we suggested that Hunter's (2010) argument that elites are integral to culture change is compelling. While Hunter (2010) uses his theory to argue for a faithful presence of Christians to change culture, an important lesson can be drawn for any would-be change agents. Potential change agents would be wise to focus their initiatives on the elites who sit at the periphery of the center of power.

Perhaps the most significant practical application that can be learned from the diffusion of Christianity in South Korea is perseverance. Christianity did not immediately flourish. However, after some time and in spite of some significant pressures, Christianity began to spread. This diffusion was begun by Protestant missionaries who persevered when it appeared that Christianity was going to be altogether rejected. Potential change agents may face initial rejection and failures, but with perseverance change will happen.

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