

ANALYTICAL COMPARISON OF CHURCH GROWTH IN KOREA AND JAPAN

Eiko Takamizawa*

In spite of the physiological, cultural, lifestyle, social structure, and worldview similarities between Korea and Japan, church situations in both countries widely differ from each other. The Christian population in Korea reaches 19% of its total population, whereas the regular church attendants in Japan barely reach 0.3%.¹⁸⁹ The phenomenon in Japan has been lasting for more than a half century¹⁹⁰. The reason for differences between the two nations is often questioned by missionaries and missiologists. This paper tries to analyze the possible reasons behind the differences of church growth patterns in Korea and Japan.

POLITICAL ASPECT¹⁹¹

Korea has a long history of suffering from foreign invasions by China, Japan, Russia and Mongolia.¹⁹² Japan attempted to colonize Korea since the 16th century, along with the expansion of the Shogunate's power within Japan.¹⁹³ During the years of occupation by

*Eiko Takamizawa, Ph.D., is a Japanese missiologist, and is Associate Professor of Missiology and Dean of Students at Torch Trinity. She frequently speaks at domestic and international conferences and seminars. She is currently conducting research on the Judeo-Christian influence upon Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism. Dr. Takamizawa serves as pastor of the Japanese congregation at Onnuri Community Church, in Seoul, Korea.

¹⁸⁹This implies one out of four Korean people is a Christian, whereas in Japan, it is one out of 500.

¹⁹⁰According to a research on Japanese Church Growth after WWII conducted by Hue Trevor, some denominations demonstrated successful church growth. However, it did not help change the total Christian population due to the decline of other denominations.

¹⁹¹The primary focus of this section is not on the chronological historical events, but on the political situation in general that might influence upon the two countries' religious openness or resistance toward Christianity. For a chronological perspective, see, Mamoru Ogata, *Nikkan Kyokai Seicho Hikaku (Comparison between Japanese Church and Korean Church: Cultural and Historical Perspective)* (Tokyo: Hope Shuppan, Inochino Kotobasha Oroshibu).

¹⁹²Some may add the United States of America to this list.

¹⁹³Shoguns held Buddhism as their spiritual and mental grid to rule the whole nation of Japan as a counterpart of the Emperors whose backbone was Shinto.

the Japanese military government after annexing Korea in 1910, the Korean people suffered from losing their national identity (deprived of their names), freedom, property, political power, and lives of loved ones. Especially, Christians suffered because the Japanese government imposed the Imperial Shinto shrine worship as a sign of fidelity to the Japanese regime. Korean Christians resisted the demand to renounce their faith in Christ and became primary advocates for the independence movement and nationalism. On March 1, 1919, when the Korean non-violent independent movement arose, Christian leaders who initiated the movement were severely punished. The Nammang district records report,

We cannot count the number of those who were victimized in atrocious massacre in Nammang district. . . the Hawanjong Chapel was burnt down, Whajongja Chapel is used as barn, all the houses of the believers and books in their houses were burnt. We lost the place for worship, and escaped into mountains. . . the life in there was beyond description.¹⁹⁴

In the oppression, 7,509 Korean died, 15,961 were injured, and 46,948 were arrested. As seen in the Chae Amri Church in Suwon, churches and mission schools were burnt down or forced to close. After this incident, the Japanese enhanced the oppression toward Christians by enforcing the Imperial Shrine worship in each locality, which lasted until 1945.

When China became a communist country, she tried to colonize Korea, which resulted in the tragic division of the nation between north and south. In the aftermath of this division, North Korea embraced communism under Kim, Il-sung's fascism.¹⁹⁵ Under severe control from the government, more than a quarter of the population of the North Korea escaped to South Korea.¹⁹⁶ The flux of devoted Christians from the North at height of the crisis brought the prayer revival to South.

Noteworthy is the fact that none of these nations that occupied Korea was not Christian. Christianity came with the delivering power

¹⁹⁴*Chosen Iesukyo Chorokai Shiki*, vol. II, 393; quoted in *Korean Church History*, 127-128.

¹⁹⁵Kim at first tried to cooperate with Christianity. But when he found that Christians would not submit to him, he began persecuting churches (Ogata, 183).

¹⁹⁶Masahiko Sawa, *Nanboku Chosen Kirisutokyo shi* [Christian History in South and North Korea] (Tokyo: Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan Shuppankyoku, 1982), 279-288.

of the US army at the peak of the crisis. Korean people might have positive image about Christianity and openness to it. They suffered under communism and Shinto religion but did not have painful experience with Christianity.

Japan, in contrast, had more protected history in terms of foreign invasion and colonization due to its topographic advantage as islands. The concern was more on the domestic conflicts and foreign expansion. However, politics and religion interweaved closely throughout Japanese history. Shinto and Buddhism have been used as the mental backbone or national bond for patriotism.¹⁹⁷ In this situation, Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, brought by Western missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries, was perceived as a foreign religion that might pose a threat to national unity. The primary reason for this suspicion seems to be in the Christian teaching against Japanese custom and belief as well as its teaching of equality of all mankind.¹⁹⁸ Politically, Japanese ruler might have been warned about the foreign invasion that happened in South East Asian nations, which received missionaries from Europe and enjoyed the trade for a while, but were finally colonized by the European nations.¹⁹⁹

There was a possibility that Roman Catholicism could have been employed as a new mental/spiritual backbone of the new government when the Shogunate tried to unify the nation with a new religious system in the 16th century. However, Christianity faced persecution and embargo instead. It is suspected that Japanese Shoguns determined to ban Christianity upon hearing about the intra-mission conflict among Catholic orders regarding authority over Japan as a mission field. Shoguns decided to protect Japan from foreign invasion by banning foreign influences, including trading and Christianity.²⁰⁰

Internally the government tried to annihilate Christianity by organizing nation-wide anti-Christian campaign, which lasted throughout the Tokugawa period for more than 270 years. During this

¹⁹⁷While Shinto is the original Japanese religion, Buddhism was believed or employed as a religious counterpart of the Shinto by the new rising leaders. In such situation, there was an effort to syncretize the two into one for the purpose of unifying the nation. This phenomena is called “*Shinbutsu Shugo*” fusion of Shinto and Buddhism) .

¹⁹⁸Details will be discussed under the section, “Theological Aspect.”

¹⁹⁹This is called 3 Ms of colonialistic Mission: Missionary, Merchant, and Military.

²⁰⁰This closure is called, “Sakoku,” which means chaining the nation.

period, the government invented a method to find out and to torture Christians for apostasy. One of the systems was “*Gonin gumi Seido* (5-household system).” If one person found to be a Christian within a unit, the whole five households would be tortured or persecuted.²⁰¹ Thus, the negative image of Christianity was widely spread as evil and dangerous, which is against the nation. The images of Christianity that developed as a result from political intention were very different between Korea and Japan.

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECT

Korean society is highly family oriented. This is evidenced in the fact that three major names cover more than 45% of the total population of Korea.²⁰² Family gathering for festival, which is often accompanied by ancestral veneration, plays a significant role for the reaffirming and enhancing of the family tie. Due to the strong family tie system in Korean society, the initial approach of evangelization can be difficult; but once the Gospel begins spreading out, the accomplishment was quick through family network. Min Keun-bae analyzes that this family network was developed into a nation-wide tie system.

We can find the core factors for the Korean Church Growth in its social structure and the concept that the structure produces. Koreans have developed society that was based on family-like relationship within the society itself, and therefore, its psychology was characterized by the security similar to that of family belongingness. This sense of belonging was a shortcut for mission, at the same time it could be a detour for the mission, too. This psychology influenced to make Korea as a nation of “multiple individual”. The sense of belonging to Church was developed into patriotic movements, for it provided the place to belong to the people who lost their nation to which they used to belong.²⁰³

Due to the developed family system, human relationship in Korea is highly hierarchical. Age differences, social statuses, and gender are significant factors for the hierarchy. The attitude toward the others in

²⁰¹The system is still functioning today as communication a network from the government or the mutual support community in times of funeral or other local rituals as “*Chokai* (local assembly).”

²⁰²Information and a chart are available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:KimLi_Park.png; accessed April 11, 2006.

²⁰³Keunbae Min, *Kankoku Kirisutokyoshi* (Korean Church History), trans. by Masahiko Sawa (Tokyo: Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan Shuppan Kyoku, 1986), 124. Re-translated into English by Eiko Takamizawa.

any human relationship expresses the hierarchical orders.²⁰⁴ Korean churches contextualized the church social order in accordance with the social hierarchy present in Korean society. To become an elder in a church is a social achievement. Therefore, whatever church one belongs to, if he or she gets a position of an elder, people call them elder so and so. To be a leader in a local church connotes social status in addition to the concept of ministry position.

Japan is also characterized with family orientation. However, the religious structure was developed in a different way than that of Korea. For Japanese there are three levels of religious involvement: national, family/local and personal. In the three layered religious structure, family ties did not function as network for the Gospel.²⁰⁵ Reiji Oyama points out that local ties in Japanese society are often much stronger than family ties.²⁰⁶ And this local tie originated from the Goningumi System (Five Household system), which was used as the method to annihilate Christians. In this antagonistic milieu against Christians, the demand for the social conformity through religious bond was a great obstacle for the Gospel to spread. Being different, especially in religious fidelity, is a hard choice for the converts.

One more noticeable factor for Korean church growth is about the women's involvement in church activities. Traditionally, women were expected to be submissive and socially invisible in Korean society. Women have fewer chances to exercise their talents and gifts than men. Consequently, they cannot enjoy significance in the society as well as recognition from people. However, the church provided a whole new society that various positions and opportunities for women can occupy. As church structures grow, women can achieve higher social status, such as leaders for women association, or other association within the church. Furthermore, some enjoy social and spiritual achievements by having opportunity to contribute to greater capacity than just a local church. The Presbyterian Women's History records,

²⁰⁴The Korean language has developed three honorific expressions: toward higher, friends/family, and younger/lower age.

²⁰⁵In Japan, there were three layers of religious involvement: personal, family (societal), and national. National religion is Shinto/Japanism. Family religion often relates to local deities, while the personal level refers to the individual religious involvement, which does not allow the Gospel to spread through family ties.

²⁰⁶Reiji Oyama, *Nihonjin to Kirisutokyo no Juyo (Japanese Acceptance of Christianity)* (Tokyo: Yoganusha, 1995), 150.

Korean women played a remarkable role in establishing new churches. In 1899, about forty housewives gathered and organized a witnessing committee in Chang Yun, Kyung San Nam Do. They opened the map of the five neighboring subcounties and marked places where the gospel of Christ should be spread. They visited each place, witnessing for Jesus and established churches.²⁰⁷

Today it is estimated that more than 70 percent of the Korean church is composed of women. This is evidence and fruit of the previous devotion of women in Korean church.

SPIRITUAL ASPECT

As discussed above, in the 20th century, under the Japanese colonization for 36 years, Korean people suffered from being deprived of their property, economy, culture, and lives of their loved ones. Following the Japanese invasion, the Korean War occurred and the consequent division of the nation into two. This long suffering of foreign colonization and division of their own nation is similar to what the Israelites experienced both in the Old and New Testament times. Korean people might have easily understood or even identified themselves with the Israelites who suffered the domination of the surrounding large nations. Korean people knew the suffering of life and brokenness of heart. Normally broken people tend to be more vulnerable and become open toward God. They realize their need for healing, comfort, and salvation by a higher authority. They are humble enough to yield to God.

Another spiritual factor for church growth in Korea is seen in its eradication of Buddhist influence from Seoul Area. Korean religious structure is often related to the leader's policy in society. As new leaders rose, religious organization also often changed. Ogata points out that the Lee Dynasty (14 century to 20th century) employed Confucianism instead of Buddhism, which was prosperous during the Shilla Dynasty. There was not a strong Buddhist body to resist Christianity. Rather, people were looking for something new and strong for spiritual support that can fill the spiritual void in the people's mind.

²⁰⁷Quoted in Youn-Ok Lee, "The Role of Women in Korean Church Growth," in *Explosion: Korean Church Growth: Centennial of the Protestant Church 1884-1984*, ed. Bong-Rin Ro and Marlin Nelson (Seoul: Word of Life Press & Asia Theological Association 11983), 235.

Banning of Confucianism and Buddhism from Seoul area allowed Christianity to fill the spiritual vacancy in Seoul.²⁰⁸

To the contrary, the Japanese concept of religion, throughout its history, remained as the instrument for blessing of the nation. For politicians, religions are tools for the national unity and social order. For common people religion were to bring peace, health and prosperity to their lives. So, religion had political meaning as well as religious. In both ways, religions exist for the purpose of blessing people and the state.

While Korea had spiritual vacuum when Christianity was introduced, Japan was enthusiastic about Buddhism when Roman Catholic missionaries arrived. The reason was that the Shogunate needed to employ Buddhism as new spiritual backup for the unification of the nation instead of Shintoism that assumed final authority of the Emperor.²⁰⁹ In 17th century, when Japan opened up to international relations after 270 years of self-isolation as a nation, there were pendulum movements of westernization and nationalism that occurred in a cycle.²¹⁰ The phenomena of church growth emerged several times during the period of westernization. However, these movements were subdued under the nationalistic movement and saw its peak in military fascism.

MISSIOLOGICAL ASPECT

Although the initial missionary thrust led by H. N. Allen in 1884 related to the ministry to royal family, majority of the missionaries who came after 1890 developed ministries for common people in major cities across the Korean peninsula. When John Nevius and his wife advocated the three-self principle in missions, the missionaries accepted the concept well and practiced it. The ministry was effective because the Nevius Method was not merely stressing on principles of independence, but it also involved the following various aspects of the Christian mission: (1) personal evangelism by missionary; (2) the centrality of the Bible in every activity; (3) self-propagation; (4) self-

²⁰⁸K. S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, vol. III (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961), 449.

²⁰⁹Shinto is the religion of the Imperial family, which teaches that the Emperor is the descendant of the Sun god--the primary god of Shinto pantheon.

²¹⁰Yasuo Furuya observes that the cycle was about 20 years.

governing; (5) organized Bible study for all Christians; (6) strict training according to Biblical principles; (7) cooperation with other mission organizations; (8) non-involvement in court cases; and (9) attempting the possible support for the economic development of Korea.²¹¹ As noted, the Nevius Method played a significant role in Korean church growth because of its focus on Bible study. Nevius focused on the common or lower class people as the target of the ministry.²¹²

In contrast, missionary activities in Japan focused primarily on medical mission and education. Various mission agencies built mission schools, but most of the students are from middle and high class families. They belonged mostly to learned soldiers of class children who are interested in personal discipline. Thus, Christianity in Japan spread to the educated urban people but not among the common people or lower class of the society. The primacy of establishing mission school was common among Protestant missionary organizations across the nation. Later the school approach in mission related to management and shifted from its original purpose.²¹³ Both Yamamori and Ogata point out that the phenomenon of focusing primarily on school management by mission organizations prevented mass conversion of Japanese common people into Christianity.

LINGUISTIC ASPECT

Korean Language seems to contribute to the rapid growth of Christianity in Korea. The Korean peninsula at the dawn of modernization was mono-linguistic and mono-cultural. No language barriers hindered the spread of the Gospel like other Asian nations.²¹⁴ Ogata points out that the simplicity of Hangeul character contributed to the high literacy and eventually rapid diffusion of the Bible.²¹⁵ The Bible

²¹¹ Charles A. Clark, *The Nevius Plan for Mission Work* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1937), 42.

²¹² Ogata, 102.

²¹³ This phenomenon was discussed in detail by Tetsunao Yamamori, in his book, *Church Growth in Japan* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

²¹⁴ Marlin Nelson lists the mono-linguistic situation in Korea as one of the church growth factors in his book, *Principles of Church Growth* (Seoul: Seoul Bible College Press, 1991), 20-21.

²¹⁵ Ogata, 71

was translated into Hangul in 1882 and circulated widely in Korean society.²¹⁶

Japanese Bible, to the contrary, was translated with more Chinese characters that were only understood by the learned class in society. The difficulty of language in Japanese Bible opened doors only to the limited privileged people, and, naturally common people were less attracted to Christianity. This approach to intellectuals in society casts a significant effect on church growth in Japan, which will be discussed more later in this essay.

One more linguistic influence that might contribute to the difference between Korean church and Japanese church situation is about the terminology for God. The Korean translation for God is *Hananim*, which means the Only Being, whereas the Japanese translation, *Kami*, means pantheon of Shinto deities. Missionaries struggled with the term to translate Deus, and as part of their contextualization efforts, they chose the Shinto term, *Kami*, for the Creator God, which bounds Japanese mind to deities within the universe. The concept of high God, who is the creator and the sustainer, is often seen in animistic belief that is totally alien to Japanese worldview.

THEOLOGICAL ASPECT

The theological orientation of Korean churches during its rapid growth was shaped primarily by a conservative theology that strongly emphasizes the inerrancy of the Word of God. Additionally the pioneering missionaries from the United States were Presbyterians and Methodists who just experienced a revival movement in their own country. Missionaries brought enthusiasm into Korean society. Later, when the Holy Spirit movement arose, Korean Christians never left the conservative theological stance as foundation of the movement. Their theology, according to Ogata, was quite wholistic. The balanced emphasis on both Great Commandment and Great Commission was observed. Missionaries were active in tract distribution, and churches were influenced by their evangelical and evangelistic orientation.²¹⁷

²¹⁶Reiji Oyama, *Nihonjin to Kirisutokyo no Juyo (Japanese acceptance of Christianity)* (Tokyo: Yoganisha, 1995), 158-163.

²¹⁷Most missionaries did not baptize a convert unless he or she brings another person to Christ.

While Korean churches founded themselves upon the solid biblical teaching, Japanese churches were inclined toward the influence from German theologies. When liberalism encroached on Japanese churches, Christians lost the vitality of faith and the enthusiasm for evangelism.²¹⁸ Hiromichi Ozaki, a leader of Congregational Church, reviews the history of his own denomination and found the unignorable influence of liberalism upon the decline of church attendance. Ozaki was convinced that the greatest reason for the decline of the denomination was the lack of the conviction of Christian teaching under the influence of liberal theologies. He laments, "Liberal theology deprived not only evangelists from our group but also the vitality of faith among Christians."²¹⁹ The theological orientation of the two countries contributed to the vitality of faith and the lack of it.

WITNESS OF BELIEVERS

In Korea, missionaries demonstrated great examples of Christian witnesses under severe circumstances. The British missionary, Thomas, was the first Protestant martyr to die for the cause of mission in Korea. At the time of his martyrdom, he offered the Bible to a Korean soldier who killed him with a sword. Along with Underwood, W. B. Scranton served as a medical missionary. His devoted service at the time of cholera epidemic for Korean patients impacted many across the nation. His mother, Mary Scranton, founded Ewha University from where many women leaders graduated and contributed greatly to Korean society.²²⁰ H. G. Appenzeller established *Baejae Hakdang* for education.

Following the model of missionaries, Korean Christians also witnessed the value of their faith in martyrdom. Especially, under the Japanese occupation Ju Gichol, Lee Gisong, Han Sangdon, and others resisted the forced shrine worship imposed by the Japanese military government. Most of them were imprisoned and, consequently, tortured to death. In 1939 alone, about 2000 pastors and believers were arrested, and 50 pastors died in prison. During the WWII, the numbers of the

²¹⁸There was a liberal theological movement known as Minjung theology in Korea, but the influence was limited and did not hinder the momentum of church growth.

²¹⁹Shizuo Ono, *Nihon Purotesutanto Dendoshi* (Hiroshima: Nihon Kirisuto Kaikakuha Kyokai. 1989), 41, 42.

²²⁰Min., 80-86.

pastors and believers in prison increased to 3000,000 and the churches closed went up to 200. Among those persecuted were missionaries such as Hunt and Byram.²²¹ Their suffering encouraged Korean Christians to be faithful to their faith under severe oppression. The testimony of the lives of Korean Christians proved that what they believe was worth dying for. Not a few realize the power of the Christian witness of Korean martyrs that laid the foundation of great revival in the ensuing years.

In Japan, contrary to Korean resistance against the forced shrine worship, churches compromised with the government policy under severe control and threat. When the government issued the Religious Organization Act (宗教団体会法), it actually placed all the religious organization under government control; most churches submitted to the authority and formed *Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan* (Japan Christ Denomination). Some churches that resisted to affiliate to the umbrella of Kyodan were persecuted and labeled as national traitors. Kanzo Uchimura, the advocate of non-church movement was one of the few who refused to venerate the imperial shrine. Soon the government issued another law, the Maintenance of the Public Order Act (治安維持法), which gave the government authority over any religious organization. Saburo Ouchi describes:

These two rules were real threat to the church; Religious Organization Act as a military force demanding total control at the entrance of churches, and the Maintenance of the Public Order Act as the troop with the blades of persecution at the back door of the churches.²²²

Under the pressure of fascism by the military government, the church began losing the voice for righteousness and testimony of Christ's followers. In 1931, when the Manchurian Incident occurred, Japanese churches remained silent about the colonization of Manchuria. Meanwhile, the Christian leaders agreed that imperial shrine veneration was not a religious act but a national custom. Thus, Christians compromised to venerate the imperial shrine. After ten years, the president of *Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan*, Mitsuru Tomita, visited Ise Shrine for the rite of veneration. Christian testimony was not only weak, but destructive to the life of churches. Japanese Christians did not

²²¹Ogata, 167-168.

²²²Saburo Ouchi, *Nihon Kirisutokyoshi* (Tokyo: Nihon Kirisutokyodan Shuppanyoku, 1970), 564.

witnesses the value of belief and faith as much as Korean people did at the risk of their own lives.²²³

ECCLESIOLOGICAL ASPECT

In Korea, local churches were the primary subject of spiritual revival, and at the same time the source of energy for church growth. In Japan revival movements happened as a result of interdenominational efforts in conducting revival meetings. When the zeal of revival is transferred to the local church, the regular church meetings including regional service can serve as the vein to retain the spirit of revival. Bible study, dawn prayer meetings, revival meetings and other activities were both expression and education for the fervent faith of the Korean believers. To the contrary, the revival programs in Japan faced difficulties in involving local churches and the zeal or spiritual revival was not transferred to the spiritual vitality of local churches across the nation. Observing the significance of participation of the local church, Ogata notes.

Japanese revival in 20c were on the wave of Westernization, which did not go deeper than surface of the Japanese believers. The movements were interdenominational crusade type of movement. Program-oriented revival movement. Because it did not involve local churches where believer grow their faith, it was dispersed as program influence faded.²²⁴

Korea was blessed with strong Charismatic leaders from its development stage as mentioned above. Church organization was rather simple and clear under strong single leadership. The pastors were good role models to follow within the leadership structure in the church. This strength, of course, was not free from weaknesses, depending upon certain individuals who were slow in developing a democratic structure in the local church. However, so long as the charismatic leader leads the congregation with biblical principles, churches remain active.

The Korean church emphasized education along with worship and prayer. Not only had children attending Sunday school, but adults also had various opportunities to study the Bible. Eventually, the Korean

²²³Many denominations in Japan made official confession and repentance for participating in the invasive war without witnessing Christ half a century after the war. One example is seen in the Confession of Responsibility During World War by Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan. Available at http://www.kohara.ac/church/kyodan/schuld_bekenntnis.html; accessed May 2, 2006.

²²⁴Ogata, 128-129.

church produced a number of influential teachers. Many of them became specialists for certain ministry targets that later developed as para-church organizations.

The Japanese church emphasized Sunday service. Christians struggled to attend one meeting in a week due to the visible and unseen persecutions from the family or society. The Bible study was not readily available to the ordinary lay people, though some intellectual Christians enjoyed highly sophisticated biblical knowledge. Due to the lack of house meeting which, in Korea, a vital part of Christian life, Japanese Christians exercise their faith primarily in a local church setting. Thus, in Japan, Christianity remained a minority in society.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of the church situation between Korea and Japan showed God's sovereignty of God church growth patterns in both countries. God chose the weak and humble over the proud and the stubborn. God allows the church to grow when the latter listens to God's voice and obey. God purifies the church through hardships and blesses the same when there is sincere repentance. Today, Korea is one of the most influential nations in mission activities around the world. God can continue to use the Korean church as a witness and channel of His power and love just as was promised to Abraham.

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