Introduction

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Anyone who has visited the South Korean capital of Seoul will have noticed the myriad church steeples that dominate the cityscape, especially at night when the crosses atop them light up in red or white neon. The prevalence of these steeples in Seoul—as in other cities and towns across the southern half of the Korean peninsula—speaks to the ubiquity of Christianity in modern South Korea. For understanding modern Korean culture, society, and politics, the importance of Christianity cannot be underestimated. It may be somewhat of an exaggeration to claim that Christianity is to modern Korea what Buddhism was to the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties, or Confucianism to the Chosŏn; but it is certainly not an overstatement to say that a modern South Korea without Christianity is hardly conceivable. The mere fact that at the end of the twentieth century more than 25 percent of South Koreans identify themselves as Protestants or Catholics attests to Christianity’s wide-ranging influence.

As was the case with Buddhism and Confucianism, interaction between Christianity and Korea has been reciprocal. Christianity made major contributions to the shaping of modern Korea. Protestants articulated a viable religious faith that also promised economic prosperity and social relevance in an increasingly secular modern world. Christian missionaries were the first to bring Western-style higher education and health care to Korea, and Christianity became synonymous with progress and modernity. Korean Christian leaders were also at the vanguard of the independence movement against Japanese colonial occupation, and still today are among the most vocal and articulate exponents of democratization. Minjung Theology, or theology for the masses, has been extremely influential in contemporary Korean philosophical, social, and religious thought, spawning similar movements even in rival religions.

Just as Christianity helped to shape a modern Korea, so too have Koreans contributed to the formation of a global Christianity. This growing international presence for Korean Christianity is attested by the fact that in
1999, for example, the Korean Protestant churches commissioned more missionaries than did any other national church except the United States. More than twelve thousand Korean missionaries are active around the world, with their efforts focused in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Latin America. Korean Christians are also engaged in widespread eleemosynary activities both domestically and internationally, spearheading recently, for example, the famine relief drive in North Korea.

Given these premises, it stands to reason that an adequate understanding of both modern Korean society and global Christianity requires consideration of Korean Christianity in its unique national context. Such an understanding of Korean Christianity, however, has been hard to come by in the West. For one thing, in the last quarter-century, only a handful of volumes relating to Korean Christianity have been published in Western languages; and what little research has been done on the tradition has typically occurred in the context of Christian seminaries and theological schools, rather than in research universities. More books exist from earlier periods, but nearly all of them treat Christianity in Korea from a missiological perspective, neglecting the specifically Korean context of the religion. This volume seeks to take an important step toward remedying the deficiency in both Korean Studies and Christian Studies. We believe that it provides the most comprehensive treatment of Korean Christianity to date in a Western language. And it is comprehensive at several different levels. For one thing, the chapters were written in the hopes of attracting both neophytes and specialists to the study of Korean Christianity. Neophytes will find in James H. Grayson’s lucid overview chapter the background necessary to launch into the more specialized chapters that follow. Specialists will appreciate the multidisciplinary perspectives the volume offers in its seventeen chapters. Presented here are at least four disciplinary approaches: history (Cho Kwang, Sung-Deuk Oak, Wi Jo Kang, Jacqueline Pak, Yi Mahn-yol, Gari Ledyard, Donald Clark, and Chong Bum Kim), sociology (Byung-suh Kim, Paul Yun-sik Chang, Kelly Chong), theology (Anselm Min and Wonil Kim), and comparative religion (Kangnam Oh). In addition, three of the chapters straddle disciplinary boundaries—Donald Baker and Timothy S. Lee bridge history and sociology, and James Grayson bridges history and theology. The volume is also noteworthy in that its contributors hail from four different countries—South Korea, Britain, Canada, and the United States—illustrating how global both Korean Studies and Korean Christianity have become. Differences in romanization and terminology reflect an author’s preference.

Volumes on Korean Christianity published in both Korea and the West have tended to focus upon one or the other of the two major Christian communions in Korea—Catholicism and Protestantism—usually to the
exclusion of the other. This volume, admittedly, cannot claim to provide even treatment of these communcions, since most of its chapters focus on Protestantism. Nevertheless, two of the chapters (Cho and Ledyard) deal exclusively with Korean Catholicism and at least half of another (Baker) is devoted to the same subject. A mea culpa is also in order for another lacuna: coverage of the Korean Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church arrived in Korea in 1899 from Russia, but because of setbacks it suffered during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), the Russian Revolution (1917), and the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), the church never effloresced in Korea as did the other two communcions; at the end of the twentieth century, it was barely surviving, with only a few thousand adherents. As a result, the Orthodox Church has remained more or less invisible in the historiography of Korean Christianity. We regret that we are here able only to make a point of this neglect, in the hope that enterprising scholars will soon take it upon themselves to redress it.

Other than that omission, this volume includes a comprehensive overview of the tradition and specific chapters that cover all periods of the Korean Christian church—from the late Choson dynasty to the last decade of the twentieth century—and hits many of the key issues in the history and life of the church, from church growth to domestic politics, Evangelical dominance, minjung theology, Korean apocalyptic thought, interreligious dialogue, and the role of women in building the church. We hope the reader will find this volume to be a worthy guide in better understanding Christianity, Korea, and Christianity in Korea.