Creatures always hope for salvation; that is their nature.

—Joachim Wach

In 1907, two years after it became a Japanese protectorate and three years before it was forcibly annexed to Japan, Korea was known in the West as a hermit nation, a backward and introverted country, unwilling to be assimilated into modernity. For Korean Protestants, however, 1907 was a watershed year in which a great nationwide revival, under the auspices of foreign missionaries, swept through their churches, indelibly defining their religion’s character.

Eighty-one years later, something of a coming-out took place in Korea—South Korea—as it sponsored the twenty-fourth Summer Olympics, with the motto “Seoul to the World, the World to Seoul.” In mid-August 1988, a few weeks before the games were to begin in modernistic stadiums that signified Korea’s newly emerging status, hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered at the capacious Yŏŭido Plaza for what one revivalist called Soulympic, a four-day-long revival officially named the ’88 World Evangelization Crusade—entirely under Korean auspices.

The eight decades between the great revival of 1907 and the ’88 World Evangelization Crusade were one of the most turbulent periods in Korean history. Politically, this was when Chosŏn (1392–1910), the half-millennial neo-Confucian dynasty, suffered its demise. In its stead, Korea’s political fate was determined, in turns, by a Japanese colonialism that left a deep-seated anti-Japanese sentiment in the collective consciousness of Koreans; occupational forces of the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which valued Korea mainly for its utility as a political buffer; and the governments of North and South Korea, which waged against each other the most devastating war ever fought in the peninsula. Economically, this was the period when Koreans fully
embraced a modern industrial economy, becoming quite proficient at it—especially in the South. Culturally, Korea was transformed from elitist Chosŏn, in which the mastery of classical Chinese—its official script—was the preserve of a privileged minority, to the mass societies of two Koreas, where the mastery of the native script han’gŭl was expected of every citizen.

Given these profound transformations, it would be peculiar if similarly significant change had not occurred in the nation’s religious landscape. Such change was most apparent in the dislodgment of neo-Confucianism from its place as the regnant ideology and religion of the land. Many Koreans, to be sure, still sought to practice Confucianism as their forefathers had done, and Confucianism’s cultural legacies remained powerfully subjacent in Korea even in the late twentieth century. But as a worldview that oriented expectations of Koreans and an ethos that defined the sacred and structured their lives, Confucianism was all but a shadow of its former glory.

If Confucianism waned in this period, two other traditional religions of Korea waxed. Buddhism had been suppressed by Confucians during the Chosŏn period as an ideological nemesis, but in the twentieth century, it rebounded and once again flourished. Along with Buddhism, Shamanism also fared well, at least in prestige. Formerly disparaged as the crudest of all Korean religions, Shamanism was now in vogue among many educated Koreans as the most pristine of all their religions.

Although Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism underwent significant changes in Korea between 1907 and 1988, for a hundred years earlier they had been enduring terrains in the religious landscape. Nevertheless, two new phenomena had arisen and developed into veritable mountains in Korean religions. One was Kim-Il-Sungism, which towered over the North as a secular cult. The other was Christianity, especially evangelical Protestantism, which became dominant in the South. This study focuses on the latter. More specifically, it is about the rise of evangelicalism in South Korea from the 1880s, when the faith was first introduced, to the late 1980s, when it reached its expansional peak. The study also examines the character of Korean evangelicalism and how it fared in the 1990s, when it became the most successful yet beleaguered religion in South Korea. Because evangelicals vastly predominate in Korean Protestantism, “evangelical” and “Protestant” will be used interchangeably in this study.

Since Kim-Il-Sungism arose in the second half of the twentieth century, it has been practiced exclusively in the North. During the same period in Korea, Christianity was almost exclusively a southern religion, though this was scarcely the case before 1953. In 1900, Christianity—Catholicism and Protestantism—was a heterodox, foreign religion in Korea. Only since around
1890 had Christians been allowed to practice their faith openly, and they con-
stituted less than one percent of the population. After the turn of the century,
Christianity—evangelical Protestantism in particular—grew phenomenally
through the century, claiming around 21 percent of the population by 1985. In
the 1990s the growth of evangelicalism stalled; even so, by 1995, evangelicals
and Catholics constituted upwards of 26 percent of the South Korean popula-
tion. The stall in evangelicalism’s growth in the 1990s is treated in the epi-
logue, but this book’s focus is on the growth or rise of evangelical Protestant-
ism in South Korea, from the turn of the twentieth century to the end of the
1980s.

Between 1885 and 1990, evangelical Protestantism rose to become the
most influential religion of South Korea. This rise—this success—is curious
and cries out for a good accounting. It is curious, for one thing, because evan-
gelicalism outpaced Roman Catholicism even though the latter had arrived in
Korea a hundred years earlier. For another, up until 1990, nowhere in East Asia
was evangelicalism more successful than in Korea. Given that the other major
nations in the region—China and Japan—had also been heavily shaped by
Buddhism and Confucianism, one might suppose that evangelicalism would
have adapted and spread in them as well as it did in South Korea. Also fueling
the curiosity is that evangelicalism had arrived in China and Japan much ear-
lier than it had in Korea: seventy-seven years earlier in China, and twenty-five
in Japan. Moreover, there is also the question of why it is only in South Korea
that evangelicalism has succeeded—why not in the North? Questions such as
these must be addressed in any account that seeks to understand evangelical-
ism’s success in South Korea, a country that Paul Freston calls the “regional
Protestant ‘superpower.’”

Since the early years of the missionary movement in Korea, many have
sought to explain evangelicalism’s success in Korea. To the early missionar-
ies, who were delighted but also baffled by their unexpected success, the best
answer lay in divine providence. Less theologically, others have sought to
puzzle out the problem by seeking some decisive causal factor that was present
in Korea but absent in China and Japan. This search has elicited a number of
candidates, including Koreans’ allegedly affective temperament and receptive
character, and a mode of evangelistic strategy—generally known as the Nevius
method—which insisted that the proselytes take the initiative to govern and
support their churches, as well to propagate their newfound faith. Other fac-
tors considered to be possibilities were homologies between certain aspects of
evangelicalism and traditional Korean beliefs: for example, between the con-
cept of God and Hanŭnim, the Korean high god; and structural similarities
between the polity of the Presbyterian churches (which are especially strong
in Korea) and the organization of traditional Korean society, which is oriented around the extended family. Reasons for Protestantism's success in Korea may even be found in the occasion of a missionary physician's nursing back to life an influential politician gravely wounded in a failed coup d'état, or in the yearning of a great many Koreans for a religion that was more credible and potent than Buddhism or Confucianism.

Each of these factors may be contributory, but in accounting for a complex historical development like the rise of evangelicalism in Korea, no single explanation will suffice. Any attempt to address this issue definitively must duly consider all of the major factors, like those mentioned above. Such an attempt, however, is not the object of our study. Our goal is more modest—more in line with what Paul Ricoeur has espoused in his *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. In this treatise, Ricoeur rejects Carl Hempel's covering-law theory of historical explanations and posits that whether a historical account is adequate or not depends not so much on its predictability (as would be the case in the natural sciences, which informed Hempel's model) as on its acceptability. Ricoeur states, “Looking back from the conclusion towards the episodes which led up to it, we must be able to say that this end required those events and that chain of action. But this retrospective glance is made possible by the teleologically guided movement of our expectations when we follow the story. Such is the paradox of the contingency, ‘acceptable after all’, which characterises the understanding of any story.” Ricoeur goes on to say, “If history is thus rooted in our ability to follow a story, then the distinctive features of historical explanation must be regarded as developments at the service of the capacity of the basic story to be followed. In other words, *explanations have no other function than to help the reader to follow further*. . . . Explanations must therefore be woven into the narrative tissue.”

This book seeks to gain the reader’s acceptance of the way it accounts for evangelicalism’s rise in South Korea. To do so, it presents a tripartite thesis, each part intended to “help the reader to follow further”—that is, to help explain evangelicalism's cogent appeal to Koreans. The first subthesis is that evangelicalism succeeded in South Korea partly because it appealed powerfully to multitudes of Koreans as a religion of salvation. Having been disseminated at a time when Korea was engulfed in unprecedented crises—discrediting Koreans’ traditional weltanschauung and social structures and imperiling their integrity as a people—evangelicalism attracted and empowered Koreans by offering them a more compelling worldview and a more meaningful basis for association. The second subthesis is that evangelicalism succeeded in South Korea partly because it interacted sympathetically with Korean nationalism and South Korean anticommunism. Such coalescence of interests was
crucial, for it enabled evangelicalism to share in the aspirations and hardships of South Korean people and become legitimated in that society. And the third subthesis is that evangelicalism succeeded in South Korea partly owing to the relentless proselytization efforts it pursued throughout its history in the country, especially in the second part of the twentieth century when it implemented mammoth evangelistic campaigns that drew millions in attendance.

Using the framework afforded by these three arguments, the first three chapters narrate the rise of evangelicalism in Korea. The first chapter treats the period from the 1880s to the end of the 1910s, focusing on the spiritual revivals of 1903–1907 and the March First Independence Movement of 1919. Both these events were breakthrough moments for Protestantism in Korea, marking it indelibly as evangelical and fusing it with Korean nationalism. The second chapter treats the period from 1920 to 1953, from the aftermath of the March First Independence Movement to the end of the Korean War. During this period, evangelicalism underwent further annealing in Korea, particularly through its conflicts with Shintōism and communism, conflicts exemplified in the introversive spirituality of Kil Sŏnju, Kim Iktu, and Yi Yong-do—the leading revivalists of Korean evangelicalism. The third chapter focuses on a series of massive evangelistic campaigns that took place in the South between 1953 and 1988. These campaigns brought into focus the drive to proselytize that has always characterized evangelicalism in general and Korean evangelicalism in particular. The chapter also shows that as these campaigns proceeded, Korean evangelicals gained in numbers and confidence, such that by 1988 they saw themselves as standard-bearers of global evangelicalism.

If the first three chapters of this study befit what Ricoeur calls the “episodic dimension” of historical narrative, the fourth and fifth chapters befit his “configurational dimension”—the dimension that “constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events.” The fourth chapter seeks to achieve two objectives: One is to reinforce a point that has been argued for in the narratives—that Korean Protestantism has been dominated by an evangelical ethos—by examining the beliefs and practices of Korean Protestants. This chapter, in other words, shows that Korean Protestantism, by and large, fits the commonly used definition of evangelicalism: a species of Protestantism (broadly defined to include movements more specifically known as Fundamentalism and Pentecostalism) whose hallmarks are a literalist bent in biblical interpretation, a high Christology grounded in the substitutionary theory of atonement, a soteriology that values the individual over society, and a fervent advocacy of evangelism. In evangelicalism, salvation is achieved typically through a conversion experience, wherein one accepts Jesus Christ as personal savior and resolves to live in accordance with the Gospel.
The other objective of the fourth chapter is to answer this question: if evangelicalism has indeed dominated Korean Protestantism, what can be said about its character? For example, what common ground, if any, does Korean Protestantism have with its counterparts elsewhere, especially in the United States, whose missionaries played a crucial role in laying the basis of the faith in Korea? What is distinctive about Korean evangelicalism? How much of its character is attributable to evangelicalism's general disposition? Which of it is owed to the historical and cultural context of Korea? The chapter addresses these questions—again by examining the beliefs and practices of Korean evangelicalism—and argues that an intensely practical and devotional bent characterizes Korean evangelicalism.

Finally in the epilogue, the configurational dimension is presented in a sociologically oriented essay that examines Korean evangelicalism in the last decade of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, Korean evangelicalism found itself in an ambiguous state. On the one hand, it had become the most influential religion in South Korean society—in politics, the economy, and civil society. But the success had come with a cost: evangelicalism was beleaguered by a variety of problems—a stalemate in its growth, shortcomings of its leaders, and conflicts with other religions. The beleaguerment attested that evangelicalism not only had risen to dominance but also had become part of the establishment.