

The Protestant Ethic Reversed: A Study in the “Elective Affinity” between Neo-Liberalism and Christian Fundamentalism

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The Elective Affinity, Already Existing: Capitalistic Christianity, the Modern Euro-American Product

In trouble with Shinto shrine worship, George McQuin [a representative missionary of the Korean church] stated to a news reporter that it is the first time in the fifty years of Korean mission history to face such a serious consideration. ... To him, it might be true since he had a “noble” Protestant history of fifty years in the Korean mission, but if we see this in a broader perspective, capturing the entire Christianity in world history, it is a fate from which world Christians could not escape. ... I would like to ask George McQuin to recall how he entered our land. ... Mammonic merchants built the ship which resembled the Noah’s Ark and seduced honest Christian believers into the field of “mission competition” in which Christ and Baal get on board together.¹

It is not the description of our contemporary Korean church in its global economic system. Ham Sök-hön, an historian and critical Christian intellectual in twentieth century Korea, already saw in the 1930s the fundamental problem of the Protestant church in Korea, i.e., its affinity with Western capitalistic civilization. Christianity had been introduced as a “package” of Euro-American products which had been formulated since the eighteenth century.

Liberalism as the ideological social thought for the emerging capitalistic society in the West presupposed the concept of a free, independent individual who is able to produce and trade commercial goods in the market, and who has a natural right of private property as the result of free and responsible work. The modern nation-states’ concept of “civil virtue” performed by independent, free, responsible individuals, which is the core theoretical idea for both political liberalism and economic capitalism in Western Europe, deeply owe Protestantism the religious statement that an individual believer is free from the Roman Catholic church in terms of his/her salvation and daily virtuous life as well.² “Sola fide,” the Protestant motto, encouraged an

¹ Sök-hön, Ham, “Sungyo ui chöngsin” [The Spirit of Martyrdom], *Söngsö Chosön* [Bible-Korea] (January 1936), in *Hamsökhön chönjip* [Collected Works of Ham Sök-hön] vol. 9 (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1983), 189-193.

² Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, trans. Yi Won-gyu (Taehan kidokkyo

individual believer to stand before God as a responsible self and eventually contribute to Western society's transfer from medieval feudal to modern liberal ways.

The faith confession of worldly responsibility for the purpose of otherworldly salvation, what Max Weber called "this-worldly asceticism," was largely accepted as the salient characteristic of the Protestant ethic. In his widely-known book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber reached the conclusion that there was an "elective affinity" between the ethical teachings of ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism in the time of the emerging capitalist modern world in the West. According to Weber, economic rationalism, the unique spirit of capitalism in the West, was reinforced mainly due to the influence of certain religious ideas concerning the development of an economic spirit or the ethos of an economic system.³ The belief in a transcendent God who leads believers to assume ethical responsibility to the world and history, explained Weber, originated from ancient Judaism when prophets denied the magical power of human beings that mediated between the human and the supernatural, and when they proclaimed a universal, transcendent god who created and sustained the world. The message of the prophets underscored a gap or a tension between a transcendent God and human beings, which could not be mediated by human power. Believers could not manipulate God through magical means. Instead, they were supposed to understand God's will and achieve the demands of God in their daily lives through ethical actions. This ethical standpoint was again emphasized alongside the rise of ascetic Protestantism. According to Calvin's doctrine of "predestination," salvation is solely dependent on the will of the transcendent God, reassuring the believer that human effort for salvation is impossible.⁴ According to Weber, this ascetic Protestant belief created uncertainty, anxiety, and loneliness for individual believers in the world because there was no means to guarantee salvation except for trust in the will of a transcendent God. "They should belong to [God's chosen band] and be subjected to its disciplines," Weber said, "not in order thus to attain salvation, that is impossible, but because, for the glory of God, they too must be forced to obey His commandments." Such belief led ascetic Protestants, mainly middle class citizens who were involved in economic activity in the emerging modern capitalist societies, to work hard to glorify God who had absolute power determining their salvation. The world was thus understood as an entity to "serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone." Although individual believers could not be assured of their status of election, they believed that, if they were among the elected, they were in the world "only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the

ch'ulp'ansa, 1984), 177-178.

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 27.

⁴ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 2: 216.

best of [their] ability.” They believed that God requested “social achievement of the Christian because He [willed] that social life [should] be organized according to His Commandments, in accordance with that purpose.”⁵ The world thus became the place of fulfilling the requirements of the believer’s faith-based vocation, but it was never confused with the sacred realm. This is the “rational way” of organizing one’s own daily life solely for the “irrational purpose” to glorify God, to test one’s status of election, and to reduce anxiety of a lonely individual believer who is now alone in responsible life and salvation of the self.

This new religious perspective led believers to see that work was no longer viewed as the penalty of human sin as interpreted in the old biblical tradition. Work now became a means to glorify God. The individual believer was regarded as the instrument of God on earth. Wealth was no longer opposite to piety, as believed in ancient and medieval Christianity, but became the sign of the election of the individual Christian. In Weber’s own words, “the emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labor. In a similar way the providential interpretation of profit-making justified the activities of the business man.”⁶ Weber concluded that the belief in a transcendent God who orders believers’ ethical responsibility for daily work promoted the spirit of capitalism. This statement should not be identified, however, with the belief that the Protestant ethic yielded the capitalistic system. What Weber pinpointed is not that statement, but that Protestant believers—mainly lower and middle class merchants, farmers, and bureaucratic officers who were already in the societal system of the emerging capitalistic modern world—found an “elective affinity” to motivate and justify their this-worldly activities in a religious belief system. This is the religious origin of the spirit of capitalism, which the nineteenth century capitalists shared in their “ascetic” attitudes to earn, re-invest, and save money for greater interests, and in their “rational” attitude to invent, renovate, and apply more advanced techniques and devices to maximize the production results.

The modern Western nation-states earned their legitimate constitutional power after the Protestant Reformation, which set not only individuals but also nations free from the religious legitimacy given by the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval feudal society. The separation of the economic-political realm from the religious one led the church to interpret the concept of salvation as a spiritual matter, not as a “here and now” dimension of life that one is able to achieve by belonging to a certain religious-political community such as the Israelites. Christianity, which had extended towards the world with its “universal” gospel for salvation, met a new company in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, i.e., the capitalistic nation-states that also had an imperialistic world vision in economic-political realms. Of course, it might be an

⁵ Weber, 104, 108.

⁶ Ibid., 111-121, 163.

overstatement if one insists that there was an intentional alliance between imperialistic capitalists and Western missionaries' zeal for world mission. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore or minimize the situation that these two groups entered Asia and other non-Western regions holding hands together: the former one with an imperialistic dream of world domination in the political-economic realm; the latter in the spiritual realm.

The Carrier of Capitalistic Christianity in Korea, Western Missionaries, and the Subjective Meaning of Korean Protestants

Although the first Korean encounter with Christianity was “voluntary” and an “initiative” facilitated by a few Chosŏn Confucian scholars-officials and the merchants in the northern part of Korea,⁷ the mainstream characteristics of the Korean Church, in its forms and faith contents, were mainly the products that Western/American missionaries brought. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the last chapter of the Chosŏn dynasty and the annexation of Korea by imperial Japan, was a critical time for Koreans. Experiencing visible military aggression from the West and from Westernized Japan, and a far subtler cultural invasion from the West, the biggest challenge for Korean people was to maintain some form of national identity as Koreans. They needed a system of belief that could provide a meaningful interpretation of their lives in the midst of these dramatic, rapid changes. Protestantism had been introduced to Korean people by that time. Especially, some Korean intellectuals who wanted to enlighten Korea were interested in Christianity because they understood that Christianity represented modern Western civilization, which held sufficient power to strengthen Koreans for a fight against Imperial Japan. As Chung Chai-sik, a Korean sociologist of religion, sees, “What they found attractive in the Western religion was a close affinity that existed between the Christian ideals and the specific objectives that they had in mind for reforming Korea as an independent and modern Korea.”⁸ They regarded Christianity as the sole spiritual foundation of modern civilization, and the means through which Westerners established strong and advanced nations. Yun Ch'i-ho, a famous Protestant nationalist leader in the early twentieth century, named Christianity “a Can-do Spirit” in his English-written diary.⁹

Not only Korean intellectuals but also common Koreans were attentive to Christianity as a religion that could provide meanings for their daily lives amid such uncertainty and chaos. Ch'oe Che-u, the leader of the *Tonghak* [Eastern learning] movement, observed that, having lost moral criteria and having forgotten the ethical dimension of life given by Heaven, his

⁷ They did not formulate the dynamic collective power of the Korean church for several historical reasons, which are not the major subject matter of this article.

⁸ Chai-sik, Chung, “Tradition and Ideology: Korea's Initial Response to Christianity from a Religious and Sociological Perspective,” *Asia munhwa* [Asian Culture] 4 (Kwandong Province, Hallym University Press : Institute of Asian Culture Studies, 1988), 26.

contemporary common Koreans searched for an alternative religious answer from Christianity, which he called “Western learning.”¹⁰

In responding to the social, cultural, and religious expectations of Koreans the Protestant churches were involved in the nationalistic activities of Korean people both before the annexation and during the early part of the colonial period. However after paying heavily for their leading performance in the 1919 March First Independence Movement (the first non-violent nation-wide civil movement against the colonial government in modern Korea) Korean churches and their congregations decreased in numbers because of intensive and explicit oppression by the colonial government. Witnessing the organized social power of Korean churches in that movement, the Japanese colonial government attempted to eliminate the nationalistic objectives of Korean churches through a process of de-politicalization of the church. In an effort to reach this goal, the colonial government proclaimed the separation of religion from politics.¹¹ With few exceptions, most missionaries tried to preserve their rights and privileges of carrying on missionary endeavors by maintaining good relations with the colonial government, formulating a spirituality-centered approach by which they could avoid unnecessary social and political conflicts with the colonial government. Since Western missionaries provided the majority of leadership for Korean churches, such apolitical and spirituality-centered churches came to dominate the ecclesiastic landscape after the March First Movement. In fact, a spiritual orientation of the church and the idea of the separation of the church from government already existed in the faith and theology of major Western missionaries who can be categorized as “conservative” and “evangelical.”¹² Most missionaries who entered Korea were American Protestants who valued the Calvinistic faith associated with revivalism. According to research on the theological tendency of missionaries in Korea, “conservative” and

⁹ Ch'i-ho, Yun, *Yŏngmun ilgi* [English-written Diary]. 1894. 1. 1

¹⁰ Che-u Ch'oe, “P'odŏk mun” [On spreading virtue], in *Tonghak Kyŏngjŏn* [Eastern learning], trans. Ch'oe, Tong-hi (Seoul: [?], 1961), 15; Yŏng-ho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee and Wm Theodore de Bary, eds. *Sources of Korean Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 2: 231.

¹¹ Wi-jo Kang, *Religion and Politics in Korea under the Japanese Rule Studies in Asian Thought and Religion* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 5: 31.

¹² By the term “conservative” and “evangelical,” is meant the mainstream of Protestant American Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with its effort to “preserve” the faith confessions of the Reformation in the sixteenth century Europe. With disagreement on modern theological attempts to apply rational and historical reinterpretation of the Bible and Church tradition, considerable numbers of aggressive “conservative” Protestants became “fundamentalists” who believed in “fundamental” faith assertions such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, substitutionary atonement by Christ, the physical resurrection of Christ, and the immanent physical second coming of Christ. See the five fundamental doctrines addressed in 1895, in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: McMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 5: 190-197. The term “evangelical” here is used in the same way as that of the American Protestants who participated in The Great Revival in the eighteenth century and the Students Volunteer Movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century calling themselves “evangelists.” Representative figures are Jonathan Edward, Charles G. Finney and Dwight L. Moody, etc. See Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 192.

“evangelical” missionaries who belonged to the described category were up to 92.3 %.¹³ Reinforced by following the active revival movements led by Charismatic Korean church leaders such as Kil ㄸ -ju, Kim Ik-du, and Yi Yong-do in the 1920s, mainstream Korean churches became politically conservative and religiously introverted, focusing on individual spiritual reformation and a transcendent dream of the Last Day, the day when the misery of Korean people would end.

In 1945, national independence did not change the spirituality-oriented characteristic of Korean churches and rather accelerated the tendency in a special historical context of Korean modern history. Celebration of national independence was followed by tragic episodes such as the division of the nation into South and North Korea and the Korean War, the war which cost many deaths and wounded in the name of ideological difference, and which made the land desolate and destroyed most buildings. Most of all, the emotional impact on the common Korean people was critical for their loss of beloved ones and properties and their witness of mass genocide in the fratricidal war. From the First Republic with its corrupted authoritarian rule to President Park Chong Hee’s military governing, anti-government groups could not win the hearts of the middle class who, from the experience of the tragedy of the Korean War, had become strong advocates of Park’s anti-Communist policy based on a primary emphasis on national security.

In addition, a non-intrinsic combination of capitalistic spirit and spirituality-centeredness became apparent as all Koreans were eager to establish a modern independent rich nation. Political conservatism, anti-Communism in particular, the pursuit of material abundance, and Pentecostalism were the distinguishing characteristics of Korean churches in modern times since the 1950s. Of the most, the tendency that won the hearts of lay Christians was found in the social teaching of Korean churches that spiritual faith in Christ is the most effective way to achieve material wealth. Pastor Cho Yong-gi, a famous pastor of Sunbogŭm kyohoe [the Church of the Pure Gospel], one of the world’s biggest churches, and heavily influenced by America-originated Pentecostalism,¹⁴ for example, developed the three-fold blessing—wealth, health, and spiritual peace—as a ministerial strategy.¹⁵ Since the 1950s, the time when national and individuals’ desire for recovery and welfare were at a peak, the combined messages of spiritual peace and materialistic blessings in Pentecostalism had earned the common Korean minds,

¹³ Han’guk kidokkyo yŏksa yŏn’guso, ed., *Han’guk kidokkyo ūi yŏksa* [The History of Korean Christianity] 2 vols. (Seoul: Kidokkyomunsa, 1990), 2: 161-164.

¹⁴ Founded by William Seymour, a poor Afro-African pastor, in the very beginning of the twentieth century America, Pentecostalism characterizes its search for mystical religious experience and high standard of morality and citizenship, and material welfare as the blessing of sincere Christians.

¹⁵ Yong-gi, Cho, *Sach’awon ūi yŏngjŏk saegye* [The Fourth Dimension of the Spiritual Realm] (Seoul: Malssŭmsa, 1996), 188.

resulting in churches which doubled in membership in every ten-year period.¹⁶

In short, there was already a certain “affinity” elective that had been formulated in the emergence of modern capitalistic society in the Western Euro-American context. The capitalist-spirituality combination package of the Western European product entered Korean as “the West religion” which promised wealth and prosperity both in national and individual life, often resulting in identification of Christianity with the spirit of modernity. Furthermore, Western missionaries’ emphasis on the spiritual dimension of salvation and tragic experiences of modern Korean history made a mainstream Korean church that envisioned material blessings and spiritual peace.

Rising Neo-Liberalism and Its Vision for Reorganizing the Human Condition

What we have witnessed since the last quarter of the twentieth century is the triumphant emergence or return of liberalism, called neo-liberalism, with its assertive universalistic vision for reorganizing world order. Modern nation-states have faced a sort of “crisis” as capital, labor, and money go beyond their national boundaries, creating a global world, in which a government cannot control or plan economic realms effectively. Neo-liberalism as the sole, exclusive, universal, and finalistic way to reach the mountain top of financial wealth both in national and individual level has strong advocates in the “world capitalist economic system.”¹⁷ Francis Fukuyama in the *End of History and the Last Man*, for example, addressed a Hegelian conviction on the lineal, universal development of human history and its final stage of liberalism in politics alongside its capitalistic economic order. The evolutionary track in the history of human ideas, asserts Fukuyama, faces liberalism, the final and universal stage that all humankind and nation-states should go through.¹⁸

The rise of neo-liberalism owes its prosperity to a historical turn of depression as the result of which major leading nations’ interest rates are radically lowered alongside the increase of oil prices due to the Palestine wars in the early 1970s. There was no recovery from the long-lasting depression till the 1980s, facilitating socio-economic theorists to consider with urgency

¹⁶ Kidokkyo sahoe sasang yŏn’guhoe, ed., *Han’guk kyohoe paekchunyon chonghap chosa yŏn’gu* [A survey of the Korean Church for one hundred years] (Seoul: Kidokkyo sahoe sasang yŏn’guhoe, 1990), 144.

¹⁷ Malcolm Waters describes in the use of Ronald Dore’s parable of “mountain climbers” that nation-states in the global world are now climbing up the mountain called “the [economic] development.” Some perhaps have disadvantages such as short height, lack of tools, deficiency of advanced technology, but even though they arrive at the top of the mountain in order of first, second, third, etc, even the last one would eventually arrive at the same place. Malcolm Waters, *Globalization*, trans. Yi Chi-ch’öl (Seoul: Hyŏndae mihaksa, 1998), 32-33.

¹⁸ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The Nation Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), 4, 18, quoted in Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, trans. Yi Hŭi-Chae (Seoul: Kimyŏngsa, 2004), 32.

and seriousness the pre-existing paradigm of Keynes' economic theory and Fordian methodology. Seeing the ineffectiveness of massive production through assembly lines (Fordian invention), the neo-liberalists suggest the post-Fordian approach to overcome the negative results of inflexible production lines, the major weak point of which is overproduction - a failure to conceive the total amount of global demands and consumers' personalized favors. Keynes' admonition for the government to participate actively in the economic production and consumption procedure ends up with over-production and inflation both in a national and a global scale, and is now evaluated as "improper" or a "failure" by neo-liberal economists and politicians. To neo-liberalists, the alternative answer is the market; almost to them a god since it is the autonomous omnipotent controller of humankind and the world. The works of Friedrich Hayek, often regarded as the representative example of neo-liberalist economic thought, develop two basic understandings of human nature as imperfect and unstable, on the one hand, and the free market as "*sui generis*" in a Durkhemian sense. To Hayek, along with other Austrian school scholars such as H. Mayer and L. E. v. Mises, a human being is not a "rational being" as the classical liberalists presupposed. While the classical economists considered human nature as reliable in terms of its capacity to capture the market information, and develop and use effective means and apply appropriate decision making, Hayek's concept of human rationality was that of imperfect knowledge and subjective decision-making, which prevents one from getting a synthetic penetrating observation of the global market and making decisions on consistent rational calculative thinking.¹⁹ Such understanding of human nature has been regarded as plausible in a global market, in which not only individuals but also nations fail to perceive the entire market properly and accurately. In contrast, the market, to Austrian school theorists, is not one created but a spontaneously generated order over which certain individuals or groups of people cannot plan or control. Sometimes a continuous balance between supply and demand may not be sustained but the market would eventually find the solution, the neo-liberalists believe. So it is not desirable, actually avoidable, to formulate any artificial order or program, even in the context of a temporary unbalance between demands and supplies. Joseph Schumpeter, who shares the same economic philosophy with Hayek, insists:

The progressive trustification of economic life facilitates the permanent continuance of maladjustments in the great combines themselves and hence outside of them, for practically there can only be complete equilibrium if there is free competition in all branches of production. Furthermore, in consequence of the financial strength of some firms, especially the older ones, the adjustment is not always very urgent, not an

¹⁹ Sang-gu Kang, *Sinjayuchuui ui yōksa wa chinsil* [History and Reality of Neo-Liberalism] (Seoul: Munhwa kwahak sa, 2000; 2006), 101-102.

immediate question of life or death.²⁰

Such strong belief in the “omnipotent” market and its sole virtue of “free competition” lead the neo-liberalists to insist on reducing governmental control over the economy and labor associations. Their unlimited belief in the free market enables them to insist that even depression can be “creative” by destroying an over-accumulation of old systems and preparing a foundation for greater wealth in the future.²¹ As liberalism once became an ideology for those who already possess private property in the emerging Western modern capitalistic world, so does neo-liberalism become an ideology for the winners in the global economy. They are born in, accustomed to, and take for granted this free-competing economic system, in which they, the winners, deserve a decent and safe life style. Everybody becomes fanatical to be the specialists that the system wants, thereby intensifying education programs. In this capitalistic system in which values are determined in their monetary aspect, everyone’s desire is to make the self “sellable,” decorating the body with attractive and sensual stuffs.

Alliance of the Two Gods, Christian God and the Market, in Capitalist Christianity

In awareness that the world today is full of “specialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart,”²² it seems that rising Christian fundamentalism is another distinguished phenomenon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Considerable numbers of religious people are armed with “old ideas and ideals,” but regarding themselves as “prophetic reformers” of a futuristic vision. They can be named “spiritual imperialists” in that they have dreamt of the extension of their belief as universality or completion of *the* truth they exclusively possess and of final world domination in the name of that truth.²³ Christians always have great potential and rationale with their monotheistic belief to be the most vigorous group to profess *the* universal truth alongside its propagation to the world. Such a religious system conducts its adherents to formulate exclusive value systems and devotion based on a religious faith which transcends worldly power and leads them to build a sense of obligation to convert atheists and heretics to be Christians. Malcolm Waters pinpoints the value-oriented characteristic of religious fundamentalism through which believers are eager to reorganize/reconstruct their entire life style.²⁴ Without borders, this vision in religious imperialism has a dream of a universal

²⁰ Joseph Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development: an Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*, trans. Redvers Opie (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 244.

²¹ Kang, *Sinjayuchuui ui yŏksa wa chinsil*, 101-102.

²² These are Max Weber’s poetic expressions in the conclusion of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber, 182.

²³ Machael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, trans. Yun Su-jong (Seoul: Ihaksa, 2001), 204.

²⁴ Waters, 162.

community of world people, in Robertson's model of global *gemeinschaft* 2, "a fully globewide community" of "humankind as the pivotal ingredient of the world-as-a-whole."²⁵ We have already seen in previous sections that, despite the pureness of religious fundamentalist movements for world mission, their passion has been often misused when it accompanies the political imperialism of the world nations. Robertson's model of global *gesellschaft* 2, is a vision for "a strong supranatural polity" "at the global level."²⁶ What I am concerned about and questioning here in this article is contemporary Christian fundamentalist movements' (*gemeinschaft* 2) conflation with the global economic system (*gesellschaft* 2).

Recent Christian fundamentalist movements, both in denominational and trans-denominational dimensions, and in search of a radical value system and goals, dynamically formulate what sociologists call a "collectivity" which has the social power to motivate the components towards a certain action.²⁷ As the global world becomes more pluralistic, complex, and hybridized, fundamentalist movements in various realms arise as the proactive alternative. Although most fundamentalist movements highlight old values they are not "retrospective" at all. The fundamentalist movements are proactive efforts to make history right again based on their strong belief in the right, universal truth that their tradition used to have. Ever since the dichotomized "Cold War" ideology collapsed and other established central discourses became absent, and as advanced technology and communication have created pluralistic cultural realities, religious fundamentalist groups have found rich soil to develop such a "futuristic prophetic" vision for their world order. Their primary task is to lead Christian nations to recover pure faith and faith-bound secular life and to make non-Christian nations follow their examples.²⁸

Most religious fundamentalists, however, are not "old fashioned" in terms of their active use of advanced technology and communication methods. Through global media systems such as satellite dishes, on-line programs, and books circulated world-wide, Christian fundamentalist movements and organizations—mostly formulated in America—envision the remaking of a world order which would rapidly grow in the rest of the world. The important point is that a consciousness of "one world" has grown alongside an intensive degree of mutual independence through advanced communication techniques, which often facilitates some groups of collectivity to think of "reorganizing" the world as "a" system. It seems to be the advent of a

²⁵ Roland Robertson, "Globality, Global Culture and Images of World Order," in *Social Change and Modernity*, eds. Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser (Berkely; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 404-405.

²⁶ Ibid., 405.

²⁷ Roland Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, trans. Yi Won-gyu (Seoul: Taehan kidokkyo ch'ulp'an sa, 1984), 114.

²⁸ Hardt and Negri, 205. For further study in this subject-matter, see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

“network Christianity” in the network world of the World Wide Web.

The Christian fundamentalist contents²⁹ globally transmitted are mainly Anglo-American products.³⁰ Christian fundamentalism, in the use of Berger’s categorized engines to accelerate global culture, fits in the category of “international socio-cultural movement.”³¹ Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority Movement, for example, which has prevailed in the Bible Belt, the southern part of America, and flourished as Ronald Reagan, its strong advocate, became the president of the nation. Formulating the “New Christian Right,” with its proactive vision for remaking America with its religious vision, what the movement demonstrated against with the most viciousness was abortion, homosexuality, pornography, humanism, and corrupted family order.³² In addition, this Christian fundamentalism began to emphasize financial blessings as the nation went through structural economic difficulties in the mid 1990s, gaining radically growing responses from American Christians. Selectively chosen biblical verses that guarantee financial abundance and plenty of dramatic faith testimonies to achieve financial success fill the books and sermons in this trend of the Christian fundamentalist movement.³³

The Pentecostal Church can be the most representative example that fits in this category, sharing similar social teachings and visions with the “New Christian Right” type of Christian fundamentalists. Providing programs for recovery of “traditional family and couple ethics” in Christianity³⁴ to those who are afraid of losing family values in a pluralistic multi-cultural society, and providing God-given promises and tips for financial blessings to those who become involuntary failures in competing global markets, this Pentecostalism has gained large numbers of congregations both in the U.S. and the rest of the world. The contents of the American Pentecostal Church, which Anthony Giddens calls the “electronic church,”³⁵ are delivered through world wide communication methods. Those messages are largely bought especially in the developing countries.³⁶ The major teachings of Pentecostal churches are economic

²⁹ In terms of “fundamentalist contents,” I have overviewed some popular on-line sermons and globally-translated books, which evangelical Korean churches have recommended. With a restriction on article length, I cannot deliver the citations from those materials. Instead, I would pinpoint distinguished characteristics which those materials share in common.

³⁰ Peter Berger and Samuel Huntington, eds., *Many Globalization*, trans. Kim Han-yŏng (Seoul: aip’ild, 2005), 15.

³¹ Ibid., 100-103.

³² Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* 4th edition, trans. Kim Mi-suk et al. (Seoul: Ŭlyumunhwasa, 2003), 500.

³³ Take some examples of books and sermon titles in those times (1994-2000): “31 Secrets for Career Success,” “7 Keys to 1000 Times More,” “Secrets of the Richest Man Who Ever Lived,” “The Covenant of Fifty-eight Blessings,” The Biblical Road to Financial Blessings.” Etc.

³⁴ For further study, see Stephanie Conntz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

³⁵ Giddens, 501.

³⁶ In the Republic of South Africa, for example, since the 1950s, the Pentecostal Church shows a radical growth rate. Emphasizing the spiritual dimension of religious experience through the Holy Spirit, the major approach of the Pentecostal Church meets native African indigenous religious tradition of spirit worship. Following visits of American evangelists such as William Brandham and Oral Roberts,

independence, hard work, and self-restraint (saving) for a better future as the work ethic of a sincere Christian believer. In fact, about 80 percent of the Pentecostal church members in an interview said that they save money for creating their independent work. It is obviously the typical work ethic in Protestantism. Of course, their “other-worldly” pursuit is not replaced by a “this-worldly” desire for wealth, but regarded as the later matter, which they would enjoy after physical death after they finish the enjoyable this-worldly abundant life. Just as the Protestant ethic played a role of motivating power for the Western Protestant believers in the time of emerging capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so it functions the same in the time of economic take-off in the Third World nations.³⁷

The phenomenon that brings my interest is that such eagerness to reformulate their economic realities through religious belief has grown much faster and greater since the 1990s, the time of global financial difficulties in the neo-liberal system. In Latin America, for example, the major religion is no longer Catholic since Pentecostal Protestantism has grown rapidly since that time.³⁸ In Korea, the same social teachings in Pentecostalism have already been imprinted since the 1950s and are now easily found in the major Protestant churches and trans-denominational religious organizations. Numberless family and couple recovery programs are imported from American fundamentalist movements and the American leaders of these movements are invited so frequently to “teach” Korean church members how to get these blessings. As the neo-liberalist global market has produced more failures in the economic area, and as the rational calculative human effort does not work well in such trans-national giant economic systems, the Pentecostal tendency to rely on spiritual power to receive financial blessings has earned more attention of Korean congregations since the IMF era in 1997. The Seed Faith Movement, which has an American origin and also has large numbers of adherents in Korean major churches, for example, shows the representative case of the Capitalist Christianity. In the use of world-wide communication methodologies, the movement propagates “seed faith”

Pentecostal Christian organizations have been established. Pentecostal Church’s messages of physical healing in faith and the promise of abundant life flourishing in this world earned the majority of African common minds in the time of national independence and development. Berger and Huntington, 344-346.

³⁷ In Latin America, also, Protestantism is a symbol of spiritual stability and material prosperity. In Chile, for example, low class people in suburban areas during the recent several decades have become members of the Pentecostal Church that preaches devoted work ethic, ascetic life style, and gives significant consideration to the family value as the holy institute founded by the divine will of God. Giving up the previous life style of drinking, gambling, and jobless days, a man converted to the Pentecostal Church applies an ascetic life style of hard work and devotion to his own family while a converted woman tries to become a sincere housewife whose family and community flourish. It is a repeat or construction of what the eighteenth and nineteenth century Western bourgeois family idealized. The strong belief in divine origin and sustaining of the family leads the advocates in the Pentecostal Church most viciously to reject consideration of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. In those matters, they are conservative and even more aggressive than the Roman Catholic official position. Berger and Huntington, 378, 395, & 410-411.

³⁸ Regarding Latin American Pentecostalism, see David Martin, *Tongs of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

as the symbolic evidence of the financial salvation of a sincere Christian. The concept of seed faith is close to that of seed money or investment money in the market. The leaders of the movement admonish the believers to implant the money for God first in accordance with the believers' faith to see to what extent God will multiply it. When the believer is unemployed with financial difficulties, it is a God-given chance to test one's own faith - so they deliver in their sermons. The preachers insist, "Plant the seed faith" and proclaim that "My best day is just ahead!"³⁹

A Concluding Remark: Is A Reversed Protestant Ethic Valid?

In my eyes, current religious practices in mainline Korean churches show the reversed version of the Protestant ethic, i.e., the irrational means of religious faith for the purpose of the rational goal of worldly success. The Weberian thesis pinpoints the salient characteristics of a Protestant work ethic as: the irrational purpose of the otherworldly salvation of the self acquiring eternal life in the process of glorifying God through a secular vocation and the rational means of this-worldly management of life with calculative, planning, rational, and punctual personality, which became the foundation of modern rationality. When the two majestic gods, the market and a Christian Capitalistic God, met together, however, this meeting eventually has produced the reversed version of the Protestant ethic. Capitalist Christianity searches rational purposes to gain material, this-worldly abundance of life in an economic and social position in the belief that such a success of the sincere Christian is what God is pleased with and eager to give. It is believed that the way to complete such a rational goal is through irrational means, belief in God, the ultimate source of material blessings.

The problematic point, however, is that our contemporary Christian fundamentalists' social teachings—spiritual peace, financial wealth, and recovery of moral life and their passion to make all the nations follow the teaching—have delivered themselves into the neo-liberalist global system in which the final winners of this free competing market system would be restricted only to small numbers of trans-national enterprises and imperialistic nations. This is not only a Third World matter but one which also troubles the First World nations.⁴⁰ In this

³⁹ Mike Murdock, "Seven Master Keys to Living in Financial Peace," the Wisdom Center Television Program DVD edition, 2002.

⁴⁰ During the last fifteen years, eighty percent of American middle class incomes have reduced, while the average working hours of American laborers have increased up to 164 hours longer working time in comparison to that of twenty years ago. England also has similar problems such as unstable employment, lower income, and poverty. In England one out of four working-age men is jobless and one third of the children are fostered in poverty, while societal institutions are reorganized in favorable conditions for the advantaged class, the successor of global economic free competition. Chris Harman, *Economics of the Madhouse Capitalism and the Market Today*, trans. Sim In-suk (Seoul: Ch'aekgalp'i, 2001), 13, 136.

system, the rich become richer than ever in human history, but the poor become poorer than ever and are increasing in number. What we have seen every day is the polarization of human condition in this neo-liberal capitalistic global system. At this point, I would like to question whether the Protestant ethic found in contemporary Protestant fundamentalist movements/church organizations is still “valid” when we know the basic logic and anticipated conclusion of neo-liberalism and its institutional practices. Without questioning the structural evil in neo-liberalist economic composition, can a Christian be sincere by working hard, saving more, and sharing the money with the poor? In the globally competing free market, devoted Christians have to work hard to belong to those of final success, and to defeat their rivals. If they happen to belong to the rest and the most, the failures in the system, they pray for extraordinary supernatural blessings to recover from their financial difficulties. At any rate, however, the majority have to be “failures” in this neo-liberal system, living in the status of jobless or part-time workers. In Christian circles, what we need with urgency is, I believe, not only the world-transcending faith but also an historical consciousness through which we analyze, evaluate, and make decisions on our human condition, of which the largest subject matter is the close affinity between neo-liberalism and Christian fundamentalism and the conflation of the two with imperialistic zeal. We have to be both “pure” like a dove and “wise” like a snake.

Abstract

“The Protestant Ethic Reversed: A Study in the “Elective Affinity” Between Neo-Liberalism and Christian Fundamentalism”

This article pays attention to a close affinity between the spirit and practices of the neo-liberalist global market system and those of Christian fundamentalism, especially in the Korean context. The problematic point in this affinity is located in their shared conviction of the universality or complete truth of their assertions, often resulting in imperialistic world domination without consideration of possible alternatives that other traditions have suggested. In an emerging global world, in which we now have a strong consciousness of “one world” and “global citizenship” alongside advanced technological communication/transportation methods, these two imperialistic groups of neo-liberalist economic-political adherents and Christian fundamentalists are transcending their national boundaries and go to the end of the world in order to complete

their missions.

In Korea, Protestantism as a “package” of modern Western civilization was introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the time of national crisis when Korea was experiencing visible military aggression from the West and the Westernized imperial Japan. Purchased as a “Western religion” which promises wealth and prosperity both in national and individual life, the Korean churches have formulated a so-called “Capitalist Christianity” that envisions material blessings and spiritual peace. When this “Capitalist Christianity” meets the neo-liberalist global economic system, which emphasizes the absolute power of the free competing market, it accelerates its materialistic tendency providing an “irrational method” of God-given power to the believers’ rational profit-making calling. It is the exactly the reversed version of the spirit of Protestantism, which flourishes in the globally-transmitted Christian fundamentalist social teachings.

Bringing some examples of Capitalist Christianity and its conflation with the spirit of neo-liberalism, this article aims to call forth the attention of the mainline Korean churches to develop an historical consciousness to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions on our contemporary human conditions.

Keywords

capitalist Christianity, Protestant ethic, neo-liberalism, elective affinity, civil virtue, responsible self, profit-making as a Protestant calling, this-worldly asceticism, Christianity as the Western learning, evangelical and conservative, spirituality-centered, free-competing market as the neo-liberal God, alliance of the two gods, Christian God and the market, seed-faith movement, Pentecostalism, historical consciousness.