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The Crisis of Authority and Theological Education

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The Crisis of Authority

For Korean Protestant churches, including the Anglican Church, 2007 was an especially historic year. First, it was the centennial of the great revival movement of 1907 in Pyeongyang, present-day North Korea. This revival determined many of the unique characteristics of Christian churches in Korea, and it is therefore considered an archetypal model for Korean church development. Second, 2007 was the twentieth anniversary of the Civil Resistance Movement of June 1987, a turning point in Korean democratization. After the movement of 1987, the nation's first democratically elected government was established. Many churches and their members, including the National Church Council of Korea, became heavily involved in, and often even led, the movement. Many historians have considered the role of the Korean churches in the democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s to be the most positive contribution of the Christian mission in its 120 years in Korea.

To celebrate these two historic milestones, numerous events, conferences, symposiums, and seminars were organized throughout the year by both the ecumenical and evangelical movements in the church. However, the festive mood could not conceal a sense of disappointment looming in the background.[1] Statistics have already revealed an unexpected decline in the number of Christians,[2] and

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[1] Kim Jin Ho, "From Retrogressive Christian Church to Aesthetic Church—The Disturbing Development of Korean Conservatism," *Christian Thought* 582 (June 2007): 45.

[2] Third Age Christian Study Institute, Woori Theology Institute, and Buddhist Academy, ed., *The Changes of Korean Religions Revealed in 2005 National Census* (2006), 1–2. This material is at http://wti.or.kr/bbs/read.cgi?board=wti03&y_number=63.

criticism from the mass media and intellectuals has disclosed an ugly reality of Christian churches: They are lagging behind as participants in the development of civil democratic society. In fact, many of the gatherings were organized as attempts to address this situation, but they did not lead to reflection on the causes of criticism.

Korean society's rapidly weakening trust in Christian churches is not simply the result of recent changes in the churches' social activity. Rather, it is the consequence of long-term failures or errors in the churches' mission. Therefore, I do not think that the situation can be addressed through expedient means, nor by a retrospective attitude that merely calls attention to the churches' past glories. From the beginning of the Protestant mission in the colonial period, Korean intellectuals have severely criticized a very divisive denominationalism in the church,[3] as well as an exclusive attitude toward indigenous religious and cultural traditions. As they passed through the cold war, Christian churches in Korea opted to be the camp of anticommunism, rather than to be reconcilers in the midst of conflict and war. Even now, major Christian denominations would welcome the fact that they are regarded as the last stronghold of right-wing anticommunism in Korean society.

Highly competitive denominationalism has conspired with the commercial spirit of capitalism. As churches are regarded as private properties, the conflicts arising from church ownership are often reported by the media. In terms of theology or doctrine, each of the Protestant churches has claimed to be an orthodox successor to the theology and doctrine delivered by the first missionaries. Whenever a Protestant church has wanted to separate and form an independent denomination, it has asserted that the separation is to preserve the orthodox teachings of the missionaries. In this situation, church authorities have effectively excluded all theologies that are sensitive to the political, economic, and sociocultural context of Korea. Anachronistic religious trials often take place within denominations. Some theologians who urge interfaith dialogue have already been expelled from seminaries as a result. Even now, many theologians are under the threat of expulsion. Thus, it is very true that theological education is

[3] On denominationalism in Korean Christianity, see Hong Hyun Seol, "Mission Policy and Denominationalism," *Christian Thought* 86 (April 1965): 24–30.

being held captive by church authorities. At the same time, Korean people's trust in them is radically weakening.

What I have offered so far are my observations on Christian churches in Korea, and the true environment surrounding the issue of theological education. Although my observations may not be a complete picture of all Korean churches, it is nevertheless true that these churches are facing a more serious crisis of trust than they have ever faced.

This crisis of trust is also a crisis of authority, as Aloysius Pieris showed in his book *An Asian Theology of Liberation.*[4] This is not, however, an issue of identity; the question is not whether to preserve or inherit the church and theology that the first missionaries brought from their homelands. Rather, the crisis of trust or authority means that Korean society does not respect Christian churches as a reliable symbol of the Kingdom of God. In other words, the crisis of trust means that churches have failed to be born again as a new missionary community who deserves to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Some critics might point out that I am still too concerned with the old issue of contextualization in this postcolonial, postmodern time. However, the most urgent issue for churches in any time and place is still whether they can establish a reliable symbol or missionary community that is truly able to incarnate the message of the gospel in its own distinctive context.

Of course, the crisis of trust that Korean churches are facing is caused not only by the colonial legacy of mission or the failure of contextualization. Korea is already a highly developed country. Around 30 percent of the total population is Christian. If that is so, the church can be regarded as one of the most powerful groups in the political, economic, and social arenas. Therefore, we can say that the crisis of trust is caused by the combination of past and present elements, including the corruption of churches by power, the uncritical use of colonial legacies, and the misuse or abuse of Christian messages by church leaders to gain power. The most urgent question that Korean churches, including the Anglican Church, have to ask themselves is how to reestablish a reliable missionary community in this crisis of trust. That is also the most valid context for us to discuss the role of

[4] Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, trans. Seong Yeom (Waegwan: Bundo, 1988), 70.

theological education in the transformation of churches—the "ecclesiological revolution,"[5] as Aloysius Pieris has called it.

The Problems of Theological Education in Korea

Although theological education may not be the only cause of the crisis of trust or authority, it is certain that theological education has contributed to the crisis, whether directly or indirectly. First of all, theological education, particularly the education of clergy (including education for ordination) has traditionally remained under the control of church authority. This authority was in the hands of missionaries during the colonial period, and it is now held by Korean church leaders who have both power and money. Theological education has to serve the mission and activities of churches; but the relationship between theological education and church authority should be critical as well as cooperative. The institutions and people who are responsible for theological education should be most faithful to the church. At the same time, they should be most critical of the corruption and abuse of church authority. Both tension and service are necessary elements in the relationship between theological education and the churches. The present condition of theological education, which is fully subject to church authority, is one of the main causes of the crisis of trust. In other words, there are not enough efforts to develop the critical and reflective role of theological education. Consequently, the mechanism of self-reflection within the churches is not functioning properly.[6]

Second, theological education in Korea has discriminated against the Korean culture and people; this cognitive and cultural discrimination is a constitutional element of Christian churches. While it is true that Christianity and colonialism did not collaborate in Korea as they did in the European colonies of Africa, Latin America, or South Asia, it can be said that Japanese colonialism and Christianity held the same discriminatory attitudes toward Koreans and their cultures. Culture is more than lifestyle; it has been formed through a long historical journey in which its participants have questioned and resolved the meaning and value of their lives. Therefore, to respect the cultures of others

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[5] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 70.

[6] Kim Sang Keun, "Theology Becoming a Ghetto, the Cartel of Silence, and the Advanced Guard Point for the Globalization of American Christianity," *Christian Thought* 582 (June 2007): 24–37.

means to recognize them as cognitive subjects who can tackle the problems of their lives and suggest solutions to those problems. It also means respecting them as subjects bearing responsibility for their lives. Thus, disrespect toward Korean culture means not recognizing Korean people as qualified cognitive subjects and equal dialogue partners. The politics of identity taken by colonial churches is based on this kind of discrimination toward local culture and people. Colonial churches in Asia or Africa actually behave as if they are merely European or American churches in Asia or Africa, rather than placing themselves in their local contexts, whereas churches in Europe and America are the results of contextualization. Moreover, the power and authority in Korean denominational churches have been established on the same politics of identity. Thus, the leaders of denominational churches are not yet prepared to accept indigenous Korean religious and cultural traditions as assets or to respect participants in those traditions as equal dialogue partners. Theological education programs, including seminary education, are controlled by the leaders of their respective churches. Most curricula adopted by theological seminaries do not provide space for studies of Korean religious and cultural traditions. Sometimes, denominational authorities have even taken action to remove from their seminaries those classes and theologians that have promoted dialogue between Christianity and other religions in Korea.[7]

Third, the other side of these exclusive religious and cultural attitudes is the pro-American and anti-communist stance.[8] With the end of the Second World War, American troops entered the Korean peninsula to replace the colonial power of Japan. However, Korean society had neither enough information about America nor enough personal and institutional networks with Americans, apart from missionaries and Christian churches. US troops were welcomed by Koreans as an army of liberation. The victory of the US against Japan seemed to prove the legitimacy of Christian teaching. America seemed to be a

[7] Kim Sang Keun, "Theology Becoming a Ghetto," 29–30. For example, the General Synod of the Methodist Church in 1991 deprived two theologians of their teaching positions on the charge that they taught that there is salvation outside the church.

[8] Kang In Cheol, "The Production and Reproduction of Anti-Communism in the Korean Protestant Churches," *Korean Historical Studies* 71 (Summer 2005): 202–238; and "Korean Christians' Historical Responsibility on Division and Peace," *Christian Thought* 438 (June 1995): 21–29.

concrete example of the vision that Christian churches suggested for the future of this country. The worship, preaching, and social service of Christian churches became the most important channels to introduce American culture. The curricula of American seminaries were uncritically adopted by Korean seminaries. This uncritical pro-American attitude revealed itself very clearly in the reaction of most Korean Protestant churches to the wars and globalization policies of the current US administration.[9]

Anti-communism is another deeply-rooted problem in Korean Christian churches. Korean churches developed their anti-communist stance during the colonial period. From the 1930s, the anti-colonial liberation struggle started to be distorted by the inner struggle between two political lines, communists and non-communists. Major Protestant denominations such as the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, which were directly influenced by anti-communist zeal in America, very publicly proclaimed their anti-communist positions in Korea. Moreover, they continued to develop anti-communism to the level of doctrine. In the name of protecting churches from communism, church authorities tried to inspect Christian activists participating in the national liberation movement. They encouraged Christians to participate in the struggle against communists. The inner struggle between left-wing national liberation groups and anti-communist groups represented by Christian churches developed into physical and military confrontations after the end of the Second World War. The conflict between communists and Christians was accelerated in North Korea. Many Christians in the region tried to cross the border into South Korea. Meanwhile, in the South, military operations to remove communists continued until the beginning of the Korean War, and volunteer Christian groups assisted those military operations. Through this process, anti-communism became a distinctive characteristic of Christianity in the South. A holy-war ideology had already been applied in Korean Christians' confrontation with communists. The violence and antagonism against communists has always been legitimized in Korean Christian churches, and theological education has never developed concrete or true reflection on the continued history of anti-communism within the church. The "Declaration of the

[9] Kim Jin Ho, "The Grammar of the Colonialism of Faith in the Korean Christian Church—Between Political Interventionism and the Separation of Religion and Politics," *Christian Thought* 587 (November 2007): 67–77.

churches of Korea on national reunification and peace," announced in 1988 by the National Church Council of Korea with support from the World Council of Churches, at first confessed the sin of South Korean churches who had legitimized the antagonism and hatred against their brothers and sisters in North Korea.[10] However, I do not think that this confession has had any influence on seminary curricula.

The most serious consequence of these anti-communist and pro-American attitudes is that they paralyze the prophetic and reconciling role of Christian churches in Korea. In this divided country where several million were wounded and killed by war and several million separated families are still waiting to see their relatives on the other side, the most important missionary task of Christian churches is to work for true peace and reconciliation between North and South. If Christians and churches in South Korea truly want to be reliable peacemakers and reconcilers, they have to overcome, first of all, the anti-communist antagonism deeply rooted within their theologies, practices, and consciousness.

Fourth, a common theme in the discussions about theological education is the estrangement between theory and practice, between academism and pragmatism, or between the rationalist approach and the spiritual approach to theological education. While some critics assert that seminary education focusing on the rationalist approach has lost the connection between theology and spirituality, or between theology and practice in local churches, other critics believe that seminary education focusing on the training of professional clergy skilled in the pragmatics of ministry does not provide the critical thinking that is needed to adapt to a changing environment. Both criticisms have merit, but only as long as both sides of the debate remain connected, or as long as they are seen as equally necessary. Eventually, most writers on theological education look for a holistic position that integrates the rationalist and the spiritual approaches.

Yet, what if churches in a society face a crisis of trust or authority such as the one we now face in Korea? The social environments surrounding churches change very rapidly. Ideas and values clash, compete, and engage each other freely before a society arrives at a new

[10] National Church Council of Korea, "Declaration of the churches of Korea on national reunification and peace," 1988. This declaration can be found at http://www.warc.ch/pc/20th/03.html.

vision for the future. However, amid this change, churches become the targets of criticism rather than the agencies offering alternative visions for the future. Church authorities are critical of the academic training provided by seminaries, and sometimes they think such education is useless to the development of churches. In implementing theological education, authorities tend to emphasize the importance of spiritual and ministerial formation. But their emphasis on spirituality or ministry is usually accompanied by an emphasis on divisive denominational identity and loyalty to particular churches, without criticism or challenge to church authorities or evil social structures. Consequently, the theological education provided by Korean seminaries is limited to the preparation of professional clergy for the skillful management of churches. This is the root of the estrangement between theory and practice. Here, the charge of academism is not simply the criticism of teachers of theology for clinging to academic rigor. Rather, the connotations of academism include not only all the critical reflections on the practices of churches and communities, but also all the challenges against corrupt church authorities. Spiritual and ministerial training connotes uncritical obedience without discernment. This would imply obedience to present practices and authorities of churches, not obedience to the word of God.

Of course, it is true that there are many teachers of theology who cling to academic rigor rather than giving proper attention to the struggles of local churches and communities. It is also true that there are only a few churches and ministers who are searching for ways to be critical and at the same time responsible to local churches and communities. However, in nations whose churches arose from colonial occupation, and which are now struggling to establish their own church identities, the tension between these two groups does not become the main topic for debate or discussion. The issue of estrangement between theology and practice in the seminaries of former colonies is disputed amid conflict between colonial church authorities and the challenges posed by local contexts. Theological education in Korea has not only misunderstood the situation, but has also explained it as a form of discussion of theory and practice. As such, this understanding is an indirect legitimization of colonial power that continues even now.

Finally, I would like to assess the courses on denominational theology and tradition that have been a major portion of seminary curricula in Korea. I do not intend to suggest that such courses should be abandoned in Korea; quite the contrary, they are a very important asset. We are also members of wider global communions who share

those theologies and traditions. I have worked on the diocesan board of education, and I can attest that Anglicanism is one of the most important courses that the diocesan board of education has provided for its students. However, the context in which Anglicanism is delivered and discussed has always been dominated by two demands. One demand comes from the church leadership, including diocesan bishops and administrative boards. In teaching Anglicanism, their main focus has been the unity of parish churches in the diocese, or more exactly, the unified structure and order in which church leadership can confirm the effective functioning of their authorities. Sometimes, church leaders have expressed their concern for Anglicanism in an exclusive form. The Anglican Church of Korea is well-known as the most inclusive church in Korean society. However, there have been cases where seminary courses ran counter to this commitment to inclusion. For example, when a class on the theology of Martin Luther was offered at the Anglican seminary, church leadership questioned whether Anglicans should teach the theology of another denomination. The other demand confronting Anglican education comes mainly from the laity, who hope to ascertain the competitiveness of Anglicanism in the very competitive environment of denominationalism, rather than whether the Anglican Church can be a reliable missionary community in Korea.

The denominational traditions and histories of the Western churches are very important historical assets for churches in Korea. We must remember, however, that those traditions and histories have both positive and negative potential. There is the possibility of a highly constructive interpretation and appropriation of Western traditions by local cultures/churches within their local contexts in order to achieve local mission goals. On the other hand, Western traditions and histories can also be misused in order to preserve the colonial identity and authority of churches, rather than to develop a new identity and authority which is relevant to local contexts. Here, the hermeneutical issue becomes very urgent: Hermeneutical questions should be asked about how to interpret and reappropriate those traditions and histories in the missionary context of Korea. Yet such questions have never been raised seriously in Korean seminary education.

Toward a More Constructive Discussion of Theological Education

Leaving the problems raised above for future studies, I conclude this paper with a few comments on the issue of theological education. First of all, we must recognize that theological education is more than

the training of a professional for the management of a local church. Rather, there remains an urgent demand that the churches within the Anglican Communion read and interpret this rapidly changing world in an innovative way, and discern and demonstrate how people may live holy lives for the future of the world.

Second, we need to understand the changing nature of the missionary and theological crises that local churches in this period of globalization are faced with. In the past, the colonial relationship between the Western churches and the local churches provided clear explanations for those missionary crises. However, we now live in a time when such a colonial relationship is more internalized, localized, and de-territorialized.

Third, we need a more sincere discussion of the role of theological education, particularly in the many churches that are still struggling to cope with the crisis of trust or authority. As we undertake this discussion of theological education within the Anglican Communion, we can hope that it is becoming a starting point for the radical transformation of churches into true symbols of the Kingdom of God.