

# HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND THE ASIAN CITY

*Aspiration and Urbanization  
in the Twenty-First Century*

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments · ix

Introduction: Urban Theory, Asia, and Religion

*Peter van der Veer* · 1

## PART 1. GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

1. In Place of Ritual: Global City, Sacred Space, and the Guanyin Temple in Singapore  
*Daniel P. S. Goh* · 21
2. The City and the Pagoda: Buddhist Spatial Tactics in Shanghai  
*Francesca Tarocco* · 37
3. Territorial Cults and the Urbanization of the Chinese World: A Case Study of Suzhou  
*Vincent Goossaert* · 52
4. Global and Religious: Urban Aspirations and the Governance of Religions in Metro Manila  
*Jayeel Serrano Cornelio* · 69
5. The Muharram Procession of Mumbai: From Seafront to Cemetery  
*Reza Masoudi Nejad* · 89

6. Urban Processions: Colonial Decline and Revival as Heritage in Postcolonial Hong Kong  
*Joseph Bosco* · 110

**PART 2. SPACE, SPECULATION, AND RELIGION**

7. Urban Megachurches and Contentious Religious Politics in Seoul  
*Ju Hui Judy Han* · 133
8. Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good (Trust) Deeds: Parsis, Risk, and Real Estate in Mumbai  
*Leilah Vevaina* · 152
9. The Urban Development and Heritage Contestation of Bangkok's Chinatown  
*Tiamsoon Sirisrisak* · 168
10. Dealing with the Dragon: Urban Planning in Hanoi  
*Tam T. T. Ngo* · 186
11. Contested Religious Space in Jakarta: Negotiating Politics, Capital, and Ethnicity  
*Chang-Yau Hoon* · 201
12. Urban Buddhism in the Thai Postmetropolis  
*James Taylor* · 219

**PART 3. RELIGIOUS PLACE MAKING IN THE CITY**

13. From Village to City: Hinduism and the "Hindu Caste System"  
*Nathaniel Roberts* · 237
14. The Politics of Desecularization: Christian Churches and North Korean Migrants in Seoul  
*Jin-Heon Jung* · 254
15. Parallel Universes: Chinese Temple Networks in Singapore, or What Is Missing in the Singapore Model?  
*Kenneth Dean* · 273

**PART 4. SELF-FASHIONING IN URBAN SPACE**

16. The Flexibility of Religion: Buddhist Temples as Multiinspirational Sites in Contemporary Beijing  
*Gareth Fisher* · 299

17. Cultivating Happiness: Psychotherapy, Spirituality, and Well-Being in a Transforming Urban China  
*Li Zhang* · 315
18. Other Christians as Christian Others: Signs of New Christian Populations and the Urban Expansion of Seoul  
*Nicholas Harkness* · 333
19. Aspiring in Karachi: Breathing Life into the City of Death  
*Noman Baig* · 351
20. Can Commodities Be Sacred? Material Religion in Seoul and Hanoi  
*Laurel Kendall* · 367

#### **PART 5. MEDIA AND MATERIALITY**

21. Cinema and Karachi in the 1960s: Cultural Wounds and National Cohesion  
*Kamran Asdar Ali* · 387
  22. The Cinematic Soteriology of Bollywood  
*Arjun Appadurai* · 403
  23. Media, Urban Aspirations, and Religious Mobilization among Twelver Shi'ites in Mumbai  
*Patrick Eisenlohr* · 415
  24. Internet Hindus: Right-Wingers as New India's Ideological Warriors  
*Sahana Udupa* · 432
- List of Contributors · 451  
Index · 457

## OTHER CHRISTIANS AS CHRISTIAN OTHERS

*Signs of New Christian Populations and the  
Urban Expansion of Seoul*

Nicholas Harkness

### MEGACHURCHES IN THE MEGACITY

This chapter considers the role of semiotic differentiation, class, and denominationalism in the coterminous and interrelated social phenomena of the rapid postwar urbanization of Seoul and the rapid growth of Protestant Christianity in South Korea. I structure my account in terms of three religiously anchored views of the changing city. I argue that these views of the city manifest as perspectives on other Christians—or, in a sense, “Christian others,” those who claim one’s own Christian faith but appear alien or anti-theetical to it. Specifically, I link these views to worship styles that invoke, for Protestant Christians, other kinds of Protestant practices and churches in the city. Alongside the introduction of millions of strangers to a growing urban population, the expansion of Seoul following the Korean War (1950–53) meant the introduction of Christian strangeness to what was a fairly small population of Protestant Christians residing there before the war. I show how the preaching and prayer of other Christians are understood to map on to specific times and places in the expanding city. My argument concerns not the forms of worship themselves but rather the way they are taken up as signs of urban difference.<sup>1</sup>

The story of South Korea’s transformation from one of the poorest countries in the world into one of the richest in just a few decades is well documented, but it is important to rehearse some basic facts.<sup>2</sup> In 1960, the annual GDP per capita was \$155; by 1990, it was \$6,153; in 2012, it was \$22,590.<sup>3</sup> In 1960, South Korea was 28 percent urban; in 1990, nearly 75 percent. Between those years, the population grew from twenty-five

million to nearly forty-four million (a 74 percent increase), and the urban population more than quadrupled, rising from seven million to just over thirty-two million.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, approximately 83.5 percent of the country lived in urban areas.<sup>5</sup> Currently, more than half of the population of approximately fifty million lives in or around Seoul. The common term in Korean studies for this rapid transformation of politics, economy, and society is "compressed modernity."<sup>6</sup>

During this major transformation of town and country, city and state, one of the most striking developments was the growth and persistence of Protestant Christianity, specifically the now ubiquitous spectacle of the megachurch.<sup>7</sup> In 1960, Protestant Christians are estimated to have accounted for somewhere between 3 and 5 percent of South Korea's population; by the late 1990s, approximately 20 percent of the population reported themselves to be Protestants.<sup>8</sup> Some generous estimates set the growth rate of Protestant Christian church members from 1960 to 1970 at more than 400 percent, jumping from around 625,000 to around 3.2 million in just a decade.<sup>9</sup> These days, it is regularly reported that many of the largest Protestant congregations in the world are in Seoul and that more than twenty thousand South Koreans are serving as missionaries abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have marveled at the growth of South Korean Protestant churches and have sought various means to explain it. They point to the missionary establishment of the first Western medical and educational institutions; to the role of Christians in the Korean nationalist movements during Japanese colonial rule; to Korean Christians' fierce anti-communism; to the needs of populations thrust into modernity by economic transformation and industrialization; to specific missionary models, such as the Nevius system; to South Korea's domestic evangelical campaigns; to inherent cultural tendencies toward spirituality; and to urban anomie combined with congregational loyalty within a general culture of neotribalism.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the intersecting sociocultural, political, or psychological influences on the expansion of this particular line of faith, the story of Protestant Christianity in Seoul is inseparable from the postwar migration of South Koreans en masse to the city. Despite the presence of Protestant Christianity throughout the country half a century prior to the Korean War, the current face of South Korean Protestant Christianity in the form of massive evangelical congregations is a thoroughly urban phenomenon that emerged as we know it during the second half of the twentieth century.

Starting with the overlap of the expansion of Seoul and the growth of Protestant Christianity, I consider three churches and the dissonances of worship style among them as a means of illuminating different perspectives on Seoul's urbanization. The differences among these churches, which I will introduce shortly, are, of course, linked to obvious denominational, congregational, and class differences. Such differences are ubiquitous throughout the world, where all sorts of socioeconomic differences, sometimes framed in terms of class or ethnicity, may be linked to religious differences.<sup>12</sup> While such differences are interesting in and of themselves, what I want to show here is that active differentiation of worship style by congregants is linked to the emergence of new religious institutions in particular times and places in the postwar urban migration to Seoul. For

many of my informants, different forms of Christian worship have served as powerful signs of Christian others, locatable in the rapidly changing urban environment.

The churches that I consider are Yöndong Church, established by Western Presbyterian missionaries within the city walls in 1900; the Yoido Full Gospel Church, established by Pentecostal seminary graduates in a shantytown tent in 1958; and Somang Presbyterian Church, established by Christian intellectuals in the newly developed Kangnam area of Seoul in 1977. All three are active presently, yet all three point to different spiritual and social orientations that have captivated large portions of the city at particular points in urbanizing time and space.

More than mere rings in a metaphorical tree trunk of the metropolis, these churches and their members provide an active view—a moral judgment—of the others. That is, they do not just mark points in time and space but also view one point from the perspective of another. They are narrative landmarks in the chronotope of the city.<sup>13</sup> Within this synchronic variation in Seoul, we find an ideology of urban diachrony. In my account, it is the sound of worship—specifically preaching and praying—that serves as a powerful index of temporalized and spatialized urban Christian otherness.<sup>14</sup>

#### URBAN EXPANSION AND SIGNS OF DIFFERENCE

Mr. Ahn witnessed early signs of Seoul's rapid urbanization through the alien sounds of preaching and prayer. Born in 1955, he grew up in the rawness of South Korea after the Korean War. His family belonged to the small population of Protestant Christians who attended one of the churches (mostly Presbyterian or Methodist) established by missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1910, only 1 percent of the Korean population was Protestant Christian; this number grew to more than 3 percent by 1945 but remained around that level throughout the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Ahn's family was Presbyterian and attended Yöndong Church, whose founding pastor was a Canadian named James Scarth Gale (served 1900–1927). Yöndong had been established within the old city walls, near the great east gate (Tongdaemun). Gale was prominent in the intellectual and religious life of early Korean Christians. He was the first president of the Korean Young Men's Christian Association, founded the monthly *Korea Magazine*, founded the Korean Music Society, and wrote numerous books, including a Korean-English dictionary, a Korean translation of the New and Old Testaments, and a *History of the Korean People*. This intellectual legacy shaped Ahn's experience with Protestant Christianity in Korea.

As a young man, Ahn attended special sermons by pastors from around the city who were invited to preach at different churches by a few wealthy Christian high schools around Seoul. These events were usually calm and quiet, the preaching reserved and erudite, and the audience attentive and composed. Ahn recalled attending one of these sermons at Saemunan Presbyterian Church in 1969 or 1970 (he could not quite remember which). He was in his third year at Kyönggi Junior High School, the oldest modern secondary school in Korea, which opened in 1900. Saemunan is the oldest Protestant

church in Korea, established by the missionary Horace Grant Underwood in 1887. Like Gale, Underwood was a teacher and a scholar in addition to being a missionary. He helped translate the Bible into Korean, was the first president of Yonsei University (then called Chosŏn Christian College), established the YMCA with Gale, and wrote a number of books.

As a young, elite Christian at the oldest Protestant church in Korea, Ahn looked around him and saw that the usual number of students had doubled. Many of the new students who had crowded the pews seemed different from him—neither their faces nor their demeanor were familiar. And when the pastor began to speak, Ahn heard something he had never before heard from a pastor—a sort of rough, hissing sound in the man's speech. The preacher raised his voice and called out passionately to the audience. The new members of the audience called back, praying together loudly. Ahn looked around at the new faces and saw veins nearly bursting from their temples and cheeks wet with tears.

When recounting this story to me in a relaxed, informal social setting in 2013, Ahn contorted his face and reproduced the rough, hissing sounds that he had heard. "Sh-sh-sh," he quoted breathily. This sound, a voiceless postalveolar sibilant fricative  $\ʃ$ , which was the result of palatalization in the pastor's speech, was one of the things he remembered most clearly about the event and one of the things that gave him a feeling of forceful repulsion. This was not the sound of the Christianity he knew. It was the sound of David Yonggi Cho, the founder and former head pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which now claims to be the largest Protestant church in the world.

In the 1950s, Ahn became familiar with churches in Seoul that had been established by defectors from the North, where Pyongyang had earlier been known as the Jerusalem of the East for its large Christian population. He explained that although these new postwar churches (e.g., Yŏngnak Church) were clearly marked as "refugee churches," they still were acceptable to the established Christian Seoulites, in large part because they represented a Korean Christian tradition that, despite the splintering of the Presbyterian Church into multiple factions, many Seoulites saw as continuous with their own. But the sound that Ahn heard at Saemunan Church as a junior high school student was something completely unfamiliar to him. To him, the "sh-sh-sh" was the sound of the *chŏnmin*: the caste at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), which included slaves, actors, shamans, and *kisaeng* (female entertainers and courtesans). For Ahn, the sound of Cho's preaching was a sign of difference, a shibboleth of stigmatization in a rapidly changing urban environment. It was a negative sign of the postwar masses entering the city walls.<sup>16</sup>

When Ahn encountered the "sh-sh-sh" of Cho's speech as an early sign of Korean Pentecostalism, Protestant Christians accounted for only around 6 percent of South Korea's population but were poised to swell dramatically over the next two decades.<sup>17</sup> By 2005, when I began conducting ethnographic research in Seoul on the role of the human voice in Korean Protestant Christianity, this percentage had nearly quadrupled. This



proportional increase was due in part to the growth of megachurches like Cho's. By this time, Korean Pentecostalism had become a known presence in Seoul—if still somewhat strange and other to the more orthodox Presbyterians whom I knew.

Another sound I commonly heard in Korean speech captured some of this persistent otherness—a sound that many speakers took to be a powerful demographic shibboleth. I eventually called it the fricative voice gesture (FVG). As I have shown elsewhere, the FVG serves for many younger, educated Koreans as a sign of otherness that is still inherently Korean.<sup>18</sup> When I asked people some basic questions about this sound—who made it, in what contexts, when speaking with whom—they often gave normative accounts of its speakers. They said that it usually was made by older, working-class men (and sometimes older women), especially if these men were drinking. Of course, I heard this sound produced by many more kinds of speakers and in many more contexts than those listed above—women and men, rich and poor, sober and drunk, young and old—but it was quite telling how my interlocutors stereotyped the relationship between the sound and its producers. Initial responses about the FVG often simply pointed to class, age, and gender differences between the wealthy, educated, younger speakers I spoke to and those beneath their social stratum—such as older speakers who lived on as an example of the hypermasculinity of South Korea's militarized past—in whose speech and behavior they perceived roughness and coarseness.<sup>19</sup> But it also became clear that the FVG could serve for younger, wealthier speakers as a shibboleth, in large part because it represented for them a certain period of South Korean history during which Koreans were poor.

It was telling that these younger, wealthier speakers often gave me instructions on where in Seoul I could go to hear this sound. They characterized these places as the prototypical sites where the stereotypical speakers could be found. They mentioned T'apkol Park, where older men congregate, a *sulchip* (bar) where they drink, and Seoul's large markets—such as Namdaemun and Tongdaemun Sijang—where the narrow pathways are bustling with full-throated, working-class vendors. And they often mentioned loud and raucous churches, especially the Yoido Full Gospel Church, and its founder and former head pastor, David Yonggi Cho. For these informants, the FVG was a powerful shibboleth of Christian others, because it fit into a broad, recognizable social register of speech sounds and behaviors that formed the phonosonic residue of an older, impoverished population of Seoul which had arrived from the countryside. For my informants at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the FVG was a sound of a receding past; for Ahn, the “sh-sh-sh” was a sound of postwar shantytowns and the future of South Korea's Pentecostal explosion.

#### SOUNDS OF THE SHANTYTOWN

The Yoido Full Gospel Church is often referred to as the largest Protestant congregation in the world,<sup>20</sup> once boasting more than eight hundred thousand members before a number of satellite churches became independent. In 1958, after graduating from the

Full Gospel Seminary, David Yonggi Cho and Jashil Choi (Cho's future mother-in-law) established the church next to Choi's house in a slum in Taejodong in the northwest of Seoul. During the first decades of Seoul's rapid postwar urbanization, shantytowns sprang up throughout the city. As people flocked to the capital, a word emerged to describe and pejoratively evaluate this behavior: *mujakchǒng*, "without any definite plans." So widespread were shantytowns that some have estimated that as much as 20 to 30 percent of the South Korean population lived in slums and squatter settlements in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>21</sup> These settlements emerged quickly, but most were eventually destroyed as the city government carried out plans for development and beautification.<sup>22</sup> Slums, evictions, and redevelopment are part of the story of South Korea's rapid transformation. Shantytown memories are memories of this precarious, risky past. And the willful erasure of this past is part of present-day policy-level urban aspiration in Seoul.

The structure of the original church was a tent that the U.S. Military had discarded. The church's mission and its evangelical message related directly to the conditions of its impoverished congregants—people who represented a large portion of the country's population. Consider this scene of postwar "devastation when most people despaired in emptiness and frustration," as one proponent of Full Gospel Theology summarized it:

Cho recognized that residents around his church needed not only spiritual salvation but also material blessings, including food and healing. He boldly proclaimed Pentecostal faith with emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the subsequent signs like speaking in tongues with divine healing and blessings based on his threefold gospel: spiritual blessing, divine healing, and blessing. His message of the holistic salvation of Christ in both spirit and body gave enormous comfort and hope to the poverty stricken people who were suffering under absolute poverty and disease. How he began to preach a fivefold gospel and the threefold blessing was deeply based on his unique contextualization of the gospel in the context of his ministry in 1958. Soon six hundred congregants who were poor, sick, and uneducated gathered in the church in 1960. In 1961, the church membership reached to 1,000 and the regular worship attendants were 600, which was more than the total number of people living in the village. The tent became too small and had to be enlarged.<sup>23</sup>

Just as South Koreans often narrate their experiences of increased wealth with stories about the expansion of their living quarters (see below), South Korean Christians often narrate their experience of church growth with stories about the expansion and replacement of church buildings to accommodate swelling congregations. The Taejodong congregation grew to such a size that construction on a new church with a fifteen-hundred-seat chapel began in 1961. This church was in a historical area of Seoul named after the old west gate, Sōdaemun, and opened in 1962 on the site of a revival that had taken place in 1961. According to the church, by 1964 it had three thousand members, and although the building was soon expanded to seat twenty-five hundred, by 1968 the church had to offer three services on Sundays to accommodate its membership of eight thousand.<sup>24</sup>

The Sōdaemun church, like Seoul itself, was overcrowded. In 1973, as the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God of Korea, Cho announced to the Pentecostal world that the Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul had reached eighteen thousand members, that it was completing a new building that would seat ten thousand, and that this building would host the Tenth Pentecostal World Conference in September of that year.<sup>25</sup> The new Full Gospel Church building was constructed on the island of Yoido, an empty, sandy strip of land in the Han River that earlier had served as an airstrip for the Japanese colonial government. In that same announcement, Cho predicted that South Korean churches would grow to be the largest churches in Asia within one generation.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church is the prosperity gospel enacted in the context of post-war South Korea: congregational growth, architectural expansion, and movement from North Seoul toward the center of the city and then southward to an island on the Han River. The story of the Yoido Full Gospel Church mirrors with great precision the story of the South Korean population overall, with the urban migration of peasants from the provinces and those made homeless by the war. The urbanization of Seoul begins with absolute, dire poverty and suffering and ends with relative wealth and stability.

Take, for example, a conversation I had in September 2009, when I was staying in an apartment in Seoul owned by a pastor who served at one of the Yoido Full Gospel satellite churches. The apartment, which was in the Yōnhūi neighborhood of the Sōdaemun district, was the earlier residence of the pastor and his family, who now lived in a newer, larger apartment nearby provided by the church. The older apartment is on the top floor of a five-floor apartment building, which the pastor owned. At that time, the family was using the older apartment mostly for storage. I noticed that it contained multiples of nearly everything of which one would normally need fewer: four televisions, three refrigerators, two microwaves, and so on. The pastor's wife (honorific: Samonim) told me that they were gifts from God. She and her husband received food from the congregants at nearly every church service. Indeed, the three refrigerators were fully stocked.

One evening, after Samonim had sliced a few apples and pears for us to share, she explained to me that Korean Christians were worried about America. She said that America used to be the source of Christian values—after all, it was largely North American Christians who had sacrificed their lives to bring the Gospel to Korea. According to her, the Holy Spirit had led these missionaries to Korea and thereby transformed the country. But now the United States was growing distant from the Holy Spirit, and it was up to Korean Christians to bring the Gospel back to the United States, as they were doing for the rest of the world. South Korea was to be the new Christian leader of the world.<sup>26</sup> And her church, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, was at the center of this effort. The problem was that the United States had grown too comfortable in its prosperity. She worried that South Korea also was growing too comfortable, as exemplified by the numerous churches throughout the city that claimed to be Christian but did not exhibit the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. They were quiet, calm—even scholarly. But when the Holy Spirit was present, she said, there was no way to remain quiet and calm. One had to surrender

to the spirit and pray fervently, with all of one's heart. Indeed, as pastors at the Yoido Full Gospel Church often preached, one should beware of growing too comfortable, because that is when Satan appears.

Samonim discussed the awful poverty experienced by her parents and grandparents, who had moved to Seoul from the rural south. At that time, she told me, South Korea was "as poor as India."<sup>27</sup> There were homeless people throughout the city, living in the most informal and uncomfortable dwellings. People simply did not have enough to eat. Now that the country was rich, she said, it was South Korea's time to help, and she mentioned the medical student from India who occupied one of the rooms in her building and whom she enthusiastically was trying to convert. Samonim spoke about the Korean Peninsula as if it were an *axis mundi*, linking heaven and earth. And at the center of this axis was the church—specifically, for her, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, which presents itself as a leader in the evangelicalization of South Korean Christianity and of the development of the nation.

At the Yoido Full Gospel Church, I saw how each service restated the church's dual role as Christian and urban pioneer. The services began with an animated video narrative projected on a giant screen behind the pulpit, depicting the construction of the new church on Yoido Island in 1973, when there was nothing else there. First there was an empty island, then the Yoido Full Gospel Church (1973), then the National Assembly building (1975), and then the high-rises and office buildings that now cover the island—sometimes referred to as the Manhattan of Seoul. The video depicted the church as leading the development of the city as it urbanized. The kind of prosperity that Samonim had described in her apartment as "gifts of God" was directly linked to this large-scale socioeconomic transformation of the country and its visible manifestation in the city of Seoul, especially in the form of the wealthy Korean megachurch as, at first, a specifically urban social formation.

Korean society has often been construed as historically located at a geopolitical periphery—of China, of Japan, and of the United States. Yet since the end of the Korean War, it has come to see itself more and more as a center of things—of manufacturing (e.g., Hyundai), of technology (e.g., Samsung), of the culture industry (e.g., the Korean Wave), and of religion, in the form of Protestant Christianity. Korean Christians like Samonim are well aware that their country was missionized, that the Gospel was brought to Korea, and that the religious practices of Koreans before missionization were definitely not Christian. Samonim was raised Buddhist and converted to Christianity only after meeting her husband. Most Christians whom I spoke with were comfortable with the fact that Christianity had come from somewhere else. They usually said that the Gospel was something that they had received and now it was Korea's turn to pass it on to others.

But for many other Christians in Seoul, the evangelical style of the Yoido Full Gospel Church is the style of a particular point in the city's rapid urbanization.<sup>28</sup> For those who attend churches more associated with the rise of the middle class, the reserve of their worship style is one of the most emblematic features linking their faith to their



understanding of their country: peaceful, serene, and enlightened. For these members of newer churches, the sounds of Full Gospel worship are linked not only with the impoverished origins of the church and its congregation but also with the purportedly superstitious, even shamanistic tendencies of its theology.<sup>29</sup> For many Korean Christians, the Yoido Full Gospel Church is an example of the dangerous religious syncretism that emerged in South Korea following the war, as the rural flooded the urban, bringing along indigenous, unenlightened, shamanic “folk” practices and superstition.<sup>30</sup> Along with the postwar growth of Christianity, Korea saw the emergence of what Christian traditionalists understand to be heretical cults or sects, which are usually presented as new forms of Protestantism, where the head pastor claims to be an incarnation of the Messiah or at least to have some revelatory access (e.g., the Olive Tree Church or the Unification Church).<sup>31</sup> Some pejoratively characterize these churches as shamanism in a Protestant guise.<sup>32</sup> Others view positively the infusion of “indigenous” elements into the church, as an important localization and contextualization strategy for gaining missiological traction in Korea—even if Cho denies adamantly that there is any shamanic influence over his church.<sup>33</sup>

For the larger Presbyterian churches that have been established since the Full Gospel Church moved to Yoido, and for the smaller Presbyterian congregations that were established before the postwar urban migration to Seoul, the Yoido Full Gospel Church is a dangerous Christian other. It has come to represent a particular point in Seoul’s history, making it both a strange and a familiar presence in the city.

#### A NEW CHRISTIAN CENTER AT THE URBAN PERIPHERY

Members of Somang Presbyterian Church often referred to the Yoido Full Gospel Church as noisy, strange, and scary. When discussing Korean Pentecostal worship with me in 2008, congregants at this church of approximately seventy thousand in the wealthy Kangnam neighborhood of Apkuᅡᅡᅡ pointed to the rough, hissing sounds of the preaching and to the full-throated group prayer that seemed to border on, if not enter directly into, glossolalia. In worship services at Somang Church, when Christians prayed together, they often whispered quietly together. At the Yoido Full Gospel Church, by contrast, yelling, chanting, and wailing marked the worship—sounds my informants at Somang Church considered unbecoming to a Christian population that saw itself as advanced, spiritually mature, and cosmopolitan.

Occasionally, however, these congregants were made to confront Christian otherness in their own church. For example, on a choir retreat into the mountains around Seoul that I attended, a junior pastor led the choir in a praise session and encouraged them to jump, shout, pray out loud, and cry while he played the guitar. Many of the older choir members explained to me that this was far different from their experiences with the church, which they attended in part for the quiet, reserved character of its worship style. They participated as best they could but during the breaks would complain that they

would have much rather sat quietly to discuss the Bible. If they had wanted a more ecstatic prayer experience, they would have attended a different church.

Occasionally, members of Somang Church reported experiencing Christian otherness during their own English-language service. This was held on Sunday afternoons and ministered to members of the church who wanted to practice their English. The service was led by an American Baptist from Missouri, who often called on the congregation to respond with a loud "Amen!" after certain cadences in his sermon. His requests usually fell on unresponsive ears. Many of the congregants reported to me that this style of preaching—a kind of rough, confrontational way of speaking—felt like it belonged to a different church, a different form of Christianity. It was something they were uncomfortable hearing, something unbecoming the history and character of Somang Church. That sort of behavior, they said, not only felt strange and unfamiliar within the church walls but also was linked with certain kinds of people and parts of Seoul that reminded them of their country's developing and urbanizing past.

Just as the Yoido Full Gospel Church is depicted as an urban settler, pioneering the postwar expansion of Seoul beyond the Han River to the island of Yoido, Somang Church is a kind of pioneer of the Kangnam churches that sprouted up in the late 1970s and 1980s in direct relation to the improving South Korean economy and the ongoing expansion of the city. Somang Church, literally the "church of hope," was founded in 1977 as a prayer group led by Reverend Kwak Sŏn-hŭi in the Hyundai apartments of the upper-class neighborhood of Apkujŏng, south of the Han River. These apartments are famous in Seoul, having been constructed in 1975 as luxury apartments for the middle and upper classes as a part of the Seoul Metropolitan Government's push to expand the city beyond the Han River and alleviate overcrowding and substandard housing north of the river. Apkujŏng was incorporated into Seoul only in 1963, formerly belonging to the surrounding Kyŏng-gi Province. The Tongho Bridge, which connects northern Seoul to Apkujŏng, was completed only in 1985. Photographs from the late 1970s show farmers in Apkujŏng plowing the land with cows against the backdrop of newly constructed apartment buildings.<sup>34</sup> In 2010, the census reported that Kangnam was the fourth-most-populous district in Seoul, with 527,641 people, and the third largest in area, covering 39.5 square kilometers.<sup>35</sup>

Like other Presbyterian megachurches that minister to the educated middle and upper classes in Seoul (many of them in Kangnam), Somang Church achieved exponential growth during the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>36</sup> The congregation grew from a small prayer group to nearly forty-five thousand registered members in approximately two decades.<sup>37</sup> In 1987, the main church building, which had been completed in 1982, was expanded from its original size. According to the promotional video *The Story of Somang Church*, membership was about sixty thousand persons in 2006, but news coverage regarding the church usually estimates its membership as seventy thousand.<sup>38</sup>

Just as the establishment of Somang Church belongs to the matter-of-fact story of how the once-peripheral location of Kangnam became an urban center of Christianity in Seoul, it is also part of an aspirational story of how a once-peripheral South Korea can

become a spiritual center of global Christianity. This narrative of the shift from global periphery to spiritual center is made explicit by the stained-glass window in the main building of Somang Church, which depicts the Korean Peninsula, darkened and enlarged in relation to the rest of the world, at the center of a world map (see Harkness 2014, 63, for an image and full analysis).

Situated at the intersecting narratives of urbanization, Christianization, and ethnonational advancement, South Koreans' stories of personal prosperity, like those of ever-increasing church congregations and buildings, are often structured by movement through the city to ever-larger living quarters. For example, Su-yŏn, an upper-middle-class informant in her late thirties who directed a choir at Somang Church, described to me how she had grown up in a modest building in an area called Yaksu, a dense, hilly older neighborhood just north of the Han River. She described the memory of living with her family in cramped quarters and of the poor in substandard housing all around her. Her narrative of her family's class ascent from simple merchants—her father began by importing tropical fruit—to affluent property owners was punctuated by their moves from smaller to larger apartments, much as the story of Somang Church was told through the expansion of the city into Kangnam and through the expansion of the church building as Kangnam expanded. The family began in an apartment of about 285 square feet (8 p'yŏng) and, after numerous moves, ended up in one of about 1,600 square feet (45 p'yŏng) just south of the Han River in the affluent neighborhood of Chŏngdam-dong, to the east of Apkujŏng-dong. Part of their ability to ascend came from lucky investments in the newly built high-rises that replaced the small houses and shacks that surrounded their original neighborhood. As Su-yŏn told this story, she revealed suddenly that she did not know where those who had been evicted from areas zoned for redevelopment and beautification had gone. Certainly they could not have afforded to move into the newly built high-rises, she said. But where had they gone?

This kind of story was common among the more affluent of my informants: clear awareness of their parents' and grandparents' firsthand suffering through Japanese colonialism, civil war, and postwar hunger; clear memories of the receding backdrop of poverty as their families managed to hook into South Korea's economic transformation at the right time and in the right way; poetic structuring of these narratives by pointing out the ever-increasing size of their living quarters (and protein content of their food); and, in the telling of this story, a sudden and sometimes uncomfortable realization that they did not remember what had happened to less affluent others, even other Christians, who also inhabited their memories.

Somang Church draws a fairly strong line between itself and the Yoido Full Gospel Church, not only in terms of denomination and location but also in terms of the causes of its growth. Whereas the Yoido church celebrates its cell strategy, which relies on small prayer groups, often led by women, as a means of recruiting members and growing the church, Somang Church denies having a growth strategy, instead claiming that their mature spiritual interest draws modern intellectuals to it. According to Somang Church

ethnohistory—narrated officially by promotional materials but also confirmed by many of my informants—early congregants appreciated the quiet, reflective atmosphere of its worship as befitting their status as ethnonationally advanced and spiritually mature Christians. Missionary strategy is another point of contrast: whereas the Yoido Full Gospel Church engages in direct missionization and church planting overseas, Somang supports overseas missions but does not aspire to expand by maintaining satellite churches abroad.<sup>39</sup> Its missionary model explicitly outlines an exit strategy, of leaving when the churches that it has helped to support and grow are self-sustaining. In this church of seventy thousand wealthy elites we see a model of South Korea not as a small group of Christians within the old city walls, nor as hungry, impoverished masses crowding a tent after the war, but as an “advanced nation” (*sŏnjin’guk*)—a term often repeated by Lee Myung-bak, a former president of the Republic of Korea (in office 2008–13) and an elder at Somang Church.

For many of my informants at Somang Church and other churches like it, the character of the Yoido Full Gospel Church’s worship practices and the theological positions put forth in its sermons and books had the scent of shamanism—and shamanism was associated with the lower class and poverty, with the rural, folk, and superstitious, and with spiritual settings of earlier times. Somang Church makes both a spiritual and an ethnonational break with any traces of such past forms of religious practice. Take, for example, the following statement by the current Somang pastor, Kim Chi-ch’ŏl, which I have translated from Korean:

In the past in our country, the mental and spiritual leadership was too weak to generate motivational power. It was a country of a lot of idol worship. It was a country of ghost-worshiping shamanism. There were countless people who frequented fortune-tellers whenever hardships and difficulties arose. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ penetrated the hearts of our people. Inside them was a spiritual thirst. The Protestant population doubled and the church grew. The churches developed to lead in the promotion of the values of social change in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup>

For upper-class Christians like those of Somang Church, the association of shamanism with the past, with the lower classes, and with the unenlightened countryside is strong. When I played field recordings of the Wednesday morning “healing worship” service at the Yoido Full Gospel Church for some of my wealthier Presbyterian informants, they quickly condemned what they heard as noisy and even scary. If they did not directly link the sounds of Korean Pentecostalism with shamanism, they still characterized the repetitive chanting as juvenile and immature, invoking a narrative of spiritual maturity structured in relation to a narrative of ethnonational advancement.<sup>41</sup> To their eyes and ears, the differences between their style of worship and that of the Yoido Full Gospel Church was based not only on class and denomination but also on time and space. For them, the rough, loud preaching and ecstatic prayer at the Yoido Full Gospel



Church were signs of a population bound to the ethnonational past, located at a prior point in the development of their country and the expansion of Seoul.

#### CONCLUSION: THE RINGS OF A RELIGIOUS CITY

For Korean Christians, the growth of Korean Christianity is the growth of the nation. The emergence of South Korea from the ashes of war and its transformation into an economic and spiritual center is, according to them, because of the grace and blessings of God. The stories that these churches tell about themselves are also about the social, economic, and political transformation of their country. But the respective perspectives of ethnonational advancement that the churches put forth are linked not only to their class and denominational positions but also to specific spatiotemporal points in South Korea's ascendance that are hooked into the urban expansion of Seoul. These churches represent different points in time, different locations, and different perspectives on the urban aspirations of their members.

I began my discussion with the way certain sounds of preaching and praying that one group of Christians associated with another group of Christians were situated in a history of urbanization and the growth of Protestant churches in Seoul. The sounds and sights associated with the Christian practices of one group exhibit, for another group, the qualities of Christian otherness in the urban environment. That Christians are able to recognize, report on, and even mimic the seemingly odd or different behaviors of other Christians is, of course, no surprise. But such practices of semiotic reportage are ethnographically telling, in the way that certain groups, organized around and institutionalized in terms of an explicit faith, can map and sequence forms of Christianity in terms of the time-space of their city.

Western missionaries established a number of early Protestant congregations before Japan annexed Korea in 1910. Predating the evangelical boom of the megachurches in Seoul, during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, these early churches, such as Yöndong and Saemunan, entered a religious space and an urban environment far different from those of postwar churches like Yoido Full Gospel and Somang. The former churches were established in the center of the city, within the city walls, north of the Han River, when both Yoido Island and Kangnam consisted of sandy flats and muddy farmland. Ahn belonged to one of these churches and was astonished when he encountered the first signs of the Korean Pentecostalism that would quickly become one of the most striking and well-known examples of Christianity in his country. A Pentecostal pastor's wife, Samonim, for her part, saw her faith and her church as directly in sync with God's plans for her country. The Holy Spirit was at work in her and Christians like her, and it could be sensed and seen in the powerful preaching and fervent praying of the worship she knew best. In the whispers of the newer, Kangnam Presbyterians, Samonim heard signs of a creeping coldness and complacency that troubled her, for it signaled her country's growing distance from the Holy Spirit. And these whispering Kangnam Presbyterians,

like Su-yŏn, heard Samonim's Pentecostalism as a sign of the suffering past, when Seoul was chaotic and filthy, the people were poor, and the country's stability and safety were constantly under threat. Su-yŏn and Christians like her viewed their church as forming a new Christian center of Seoul in what was once the city's periphery, just as the advanced nation of Korea, once perceived as peripheral to global affairs (even if the "forgotten" Korean War formed a center of global conflict), was emerging as a new spiritual center of world Christianity. Each perspective sits at the intersection of the expansion of Seoul and the growth of Protestant Christianity at particular points in time and space. And from these points, each perspective views the religious landscape of the urban environment in terms of a self-anchoring narrative of advancement. Through semiotic differentiation, these Korean Christians locate other Korean Christians as external Christian others in an interlaminated story of personal, urban, and ethnonational aspiration.

## NOTES

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1. For more detailed studies of the semiotics of Korean Christian worship practice, see Harkness 2010; 2011; 2014. For accounts of the link between semiotic and social differentiation, see Irvine 1982; Irvine 2001; Irvine and Gal 2000; on the semiotics of religious difference, see Keane 2007.

2. See Cumings 2005 and Lie 2000 for social-historical accounts of postwar Korea.

3. World Bank Development Indicators, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx#>.

4. T.S. Lee 2010, 88.

5. World Bank Development Indicators, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx#>.

6. Chang 1999.

7. Jung (2012, 13) notes that there was an increase in the number of Korean religious adherents at this time.

8. Baker 2006, 283–84; Grayson 2006, 13–20; T.S. Lee 2010, 85.

9. W.G. Lee 1999, 238. Grayson (2006, 20) gives a more modest estimate of 1,900,000 adherents by the late 1960s.

10. Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2013, 76. See Han 2009 for a critical discussion of these estimates.

11. For accounts of Christianity's appeal in Korea, see Conn 1966; K.-O. Kim 1990; K.-O. Kim 1993; K.-O. Kim 1998; Baker 2006; Grayson 2006; W. Kim 2006; T.S. Lee 2006; T.S. Lee 2010.

12. For specifically sociolinguistic examples, see Watson-Gegeo and Watson 1991; Titon 1988; Harkness 2010; Harkness 2011.
13. Bakhtin's (1981, 84–248) notion of the chronotope, denoting “the intrinsic connectedness of the temporal and spatial relationships in literature” (84), is helpful for the ethnographic analysis of narrative formulations of social life (e.g., the expansion of a city over time) that are invoked by or made explicit in the narrated social biographies of individuals and groups (Agha 2007; Harkness 2014).
14. See Inoue 2006 and Weidman 2010 on overhearing and reporting on voices in the city as a means of self-location in the timespace of the urban.
15. Grayson 2006, 13–20.
16. Ahn and other Korean Christians later explained to me a commonly held theory that Cho had developed his characteristic style of palatalization by appropriating the phonology of English-speaking missionaries who preached in Korean with markedly foreign accents.
17. Grayson 2006, 20.
18. Harkness 2011; 2013.
19. See Jager 1998; Jager 2003; and Moon 2005 on militarization and masculinity in twentieth-century Korea.
20. See, e.g., [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/08/10/august-10-2012-worlds-biggest-congregation/10162/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/08/10/august-10-2012-worlds-biggest-congregation/10162/), accessed November 12, 2014.
21. Ha 2004, 124.
22. Ha 2004; Kim Davis 2011.
23. S.H. Kim 2009, 184.
24. [http://yfgc.fgtv.com/y1/04\\_01.asp](http://yfgc.fgtv.com/y1/04_01.asp) (in English at [http://english.fgtv.com/a1/a1\\_062.asp](http://english.fgtv.com/a1/a1_062.asp)), accessed November 1, 2013.
25. Cho 1973, 7.
26. See T. S. Lee 2010, 111–12, for a similar statement made by a Korean preacher during the 1988 Crusade, which took place in the same year that South Korea hosted the Summer Olympics.
27. See Han, forthcoming, on the way that Korean missionaries characterize the targets of their missions as resembling their own country's past.
28. For an important example of fervent prayer and glossolalia predating the urban expansion of Seoul, see T. S. Lee 2010, 15–23, on the Pyongyang Great Revival of 1907.
29. See, e.g., Cox 1995; Jang 2004. See Stewart and Shaw 1994, 1; McIntosh 2009; and Rutherford 2002 for critical perspectives on the notion of syncretism.
30. See Kendall 2009 on the labeling of shamanism as superstition in South Korea. See van der Veer 2013 for comparative ethnographic examples from Mumbai and Singapore that counter the notion that cities are necessarily sites of secularization.
31. See Jang 2004, 119–20, 132.
32. For an ethnographic example of the leakiness of these categories in practice, see Kim Harvey 1987.
33. See, e.g., I.-J. Kim 2003, Yoo 1986. Cho ([1979] 1986, 131) states that he is consciously seeking “to show the miraculous power of God to those who still [believe] in shamanism.”
34. See, e.g., [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/01/135\\_79951.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/01/135_79951.html), accessed November 1, 2013.

35. Statistics available at <http://kosis.kr/> (in English at <http://kosis.kr/eng/>).

36. Chong 2008; T. S. Lee 2010.

37. Osmer 2005, 68.

38. Such as in S. Lee 2008.

39. The current head pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, Lee Younghoon, was the head pastor at its satellite church in Los Angeles until he was made head pastor at Yoido in 2008. On January 1, 2010, the Yoido church released twenty satellite congregations, reducing the size of its congregation ([www.charismamag.com/site-archives/570-news/featured-news/12072-pruning-the-worlds-largest-church](http://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/570-news/featured-news/12072-pruning-the-worlds-largest-church), accessed November 1, 2013).

40. See Harkness 2014, 55, for a discussion of the context of this sermon and the original Korean. Reverend Kim, a professor of theology, was made a joint head pastor in 2002 and became the head pastor in 2003 when Reverend Kwak retired.

41. See Harkness, 2015 on Korean chronotopes of Christian maturity.

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