Chapter 8


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Development studies have recently paid attention to religion as an emerging and important vector of development. Religious actors involved in very different countries have deeply influenced and shaped the processes of modernization of local societies. They have been actively involved in the creation of education systems and the development of health care and social welfare programs. This was certainly the case of South Korea after the Second World War. Christian missionaries, notably American Protestants, who arrived in the Korea at the end of 19th century played a significant role in the country’s modernization. These missionaries were seen by many Koreans as symbols of a religious modernity and as harbingers of new prosperity.

The flow of missionaries into South Korea began to reverse in the 1980s. By the 1990s South Korea was sending thousands of missionaries to other countries, and by 2000 it ranked as the second largest missionary sending country in the world in its number of overseas missionaries, trailing only the United States.

This remarkable growth took place across a broad range of denominations. Korean mission had a global horizon but concentrated especially in Southeast Asia. Along with the Christian gospel these missionaries propose a model of ‘Asian modernity.’ While being involved in humanitarian and charitable work, they seek to embody the ‘success story’ of South Korea and present it as a Protestant model of development. In this chapter I analyze the case of the largest Pentecostal Church in South Korea: the Yoido Full Gospel Church (FBC). This Church also claims to be the Church in South Korea sending the largest number of missionaries abroad.4

I examine the work of Korean missionaries in Southeast Asia, more specifically in aid-driven Cambodia, and their effects on local populations.5 I study how and why they act like development actors while seeking Cambodian converts and building a network of churches. This analysis shows how charity and development programs participate in the ‘national branding’ of South Korea, and how the Full Gospel Church presents Pentecostalism as an icon of Korean hypermodernity, which is offered as a model for attaining prosperity to the poor in Southeast Asia. In so doing I seek to shed light on the ways in which a political goal—the promotion of South Korea as a pre-eminent economic actor in the region—relies on a conjunction of religious and development work deployed through an elaborate techno-bureaucratic organization.

A Traditional Link with the Korean State and Its Policies

Since the formation of the Republic of Korea in 1948, religion and politics have been formally separated. However, even if this separation is explicitly specified in the Korean Constitution, there have always been ambiguous relations between the Korean state and the country’s religions. This ambiguity is not

4 It is difficult to know the exact number of missionaries the Church sends abroad. Since 2010, Church leaders have frequently noted that have been sent by the Church. However, according to a survey that I conducted based on documents published by the Church, I estimate the total number at 636 missionaries which have been sent to 57 countries (until 2011).