Pentecostalism in East Asia: Indigenous Oriental Christianity?

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The extent of Pentecostal forms of Christianity in the religious diversity of the Orient has seldom been recognized. Many forms of Pentecostalism in much of the world are fundamentally different from the Pentecostal and charismatic phenomenon in the western world. This was brought home quite forcibly on a visit to Korea in April-May 1998 at the invitation of a former student and Korean Pentecostal pastor. A visitor to South Korea soon notices that this is a pluralistic society that has been, in the words of David Martin, “exposed to religious and cultural radiation from the USA.” During visits to various churches of the main three Protestant groupings (Presbyterian, Methodist and Pentecostal) and many discussions with Korean pastors and theologians, the influence from North American conservative evangelicalism was apparent. Yet, Christianity in general and Pentecostalism in particular had taken on a distinctive form in Korea that was indeed different from that found in the West. Observers who have tried to emphasize the “North American” nature of Pentecostalism throughout the world or the “Americanization” of Christianity in Africa, Korea and elsewhere often miss this important fact. Creative innovations and the selective transformation of “foreign” symbols is constantly occurring, and naturally, a synthesizing process takes place as new religious forms interact with older ones. Because of a personal interest in “non-western” forms of Pentecostalism and many years of research among indigenous African forms, this experience of Korean Pentecostalism was certainly fascinating. In addition, preliminary research into Chinese indigenous Christianity had made me wonder whether there were any parallels

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between the two very different contexts of Africa and East Asia that might help explain the remarkable growth of Pentecostalism in the non-western world. This article attempts to formulate a few preliminary and tentative principles, and is not intended to be definitive. Korean Pentecostalism in particular is examined after a more general discussion of Pentecostalism in other countries of East and South East Asia where the Pentecostal impact has been greatest: in Indonesia, the Philippines and China.

The Growth of Pentecostalism in Asia

Excluding the former Soviet Union countries of Central Asia and the predominantly Muslim Middle East, it was estimated that Christians formed 8% of the total population of Asia in 1990, some 229 million people. Of this number, there were at least 50 million Pentecostals and charismatic Protestants, 22% of the Christian population. The greatest increase in Christian adherence took place during the 1980s, when the number of evangelicals doubled. It has been estimated that there are more evangelicals in Asia today than in the entire western world. However, most of the recent growth has taken place in three countries: China, South Korea and Indonesia, and that mainly among Pentecostals.3 Harvey Cox speaks of "the rapid spread of the Spirit-oriented forms of Christianity in Asia."4 This article will examine some of the possible reasons for this development.

One of the earliest Pentecostal movements in Asia was that associated with the 1905-1907 revival that occurred at a girls' home in Pandita Ramabai's mission in Mukti, India. There it was reported that girls were "baptized by the Spirit" and had seen visions, fallen into trances and spoken in tongues. Ramabai herself understood this revival as the means by which the Holy Spirit was creating an indigenous form of Indian Christianity. Notably, the Mukti revival seems to have preceded and to have been unrelated to the Azusa Street revival,5 often regarded as the cradle of Pentecostalism. Although Pentecostalism seems to have had significant increases in India only recently, there are now some three million Pentecostals in this country. Revival movements, particularly in the north-east states of Nagaland in 1976 and Mizoram in the 1980s, have made a significance difference to religious

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