Cultural Tug of War and Korean Americans and Their Religions

reviewed by David Yoo in the July 26, 2003 issue

Why have religion and spirituality been so central for the approximately 1.1 million people of Korean ancestry in the United States? The answer, in part, lies in their history. Many immigrant groups have turned to their religious traditions as a means of surviving and negotiating an often harsh and hostile environment.

Surveys indicate that approximately 75 percent of Korean-Americans are active participants in Protestant congregations. Of the other 25 percent some are Catholic, some are Buddhist and some have no affiliation. Since only a quarter of South Korea's population is Christian, something obviously is taking place in the migration and settlement process, even if one assumes that a greater proportion of those who chose to come to the U.S. are Christian.

Although Koreans have been in this country since 1903, they did not come in large numbers until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, which lifted longstanding discriminatory and restrictive quotas aimed at Asian countries. However, the earliest arrivals set the pattern that made churches the core of the community. From the sugar-cane plantations of Hawaii to settlements scattered across the mainland, immigrant churches served Korean-Americans in need of social services, ethnic solidarity, meaning and faith. Although differentiated by era, Korean-Americans have always looked to the churches to address a range of concerns and to provide the space for community development.

Two recent publications examine contemporary Korean-American religion and spirituality. Young Lee Hertig, associate professor of world Christianity at United Theological Seminary, draws upon her 20 years of ministry experience in the Midwest and southern California. Showcasing interview materials with Korean-Americans across a generational spectrum, Hertig allows men and women to speak in their own voices.

Hertig uses ethnography to foster understanding both among those unfamiliar with Korean-American populations and those within the churches who may be having difficulty traversing generational, linguistic and cultural lines. Even the structure of the book, which contains English and Korean language versions in one volume, exemplifies the effort to aid communication and understanding across barriers. The book includes discussion questions, practical tips for young people, parents and church leaders, and brief biblical and theological reflections.

Geared to a lay audience, this is a primer of sorts, introducing those outside the Korean-American church context to some of the pressing issues that church faces.

The book's primary weakness is its lack of a coherent framework. The absence of an introduction describing basic aspects of Korean-American church and family life leaves the case studies in a vacuum. More background information about the cases and a fuller explication of the larger issues involved (e.g., intergenerational conflict, church leadership styles) would have added depth and insight to the ethnographic materials. The lack of such information sometimes makes the stories merely anecdotal.

Ironically, the generic nature of much of the interview material undermines the complexity and diversity of the experiences the author tries to capture. Furthermore, the omission of standard oral-history documentation blurs the lines between the author and the subjects that she obviously cares deeply about. Nevertheless, *Cultural Tug of War* is a commendable effort to highlight the Korean-American family and church in transition. *Korean Americans and Their Religions* is a collection of articles that originated as papers delivered at a symposium on Korean-American religion and society sponsored by North Park University in Chicago in 1996.
The editors place the Korean-American religious experience into the larger frame of U.S. immigration, ethnicity and religion, contextualizing the Korean experience.

The volume's main contribution is its sustained examination of Korean-American religious life. Almost all of the authors point to the centrality of the immigrant church in the Korean-American experience. The inclusion of material on Buddhists helps to round out and broaden the discussion. There is also an extensive treatment of generational differences.

A number of the essays are too sweeping in their generalizations about the acculturation process. The result is a rather static rendering of what is really a highly

varied culture. The book provides a broad composite sketch that is at odds with its narrow focus on its single theme, religion. The case studies that incorporate interview materials fare better in this regard but provide too little close analysis. The nod to gender in the one article about Korean-American women, while containing some good material, is faulty in its neat distinctions between cultural and gender issues. The authors could better have explored the complexity of ethnicity, gender and identity formation by grounding their discussion in the context of actual congregational life.

Also, more direct comparative work concerning Christianity and Buddhism would have given readers a better basis for thinking about religion as a social force in Korean-American communities. What is the nature of relations between Korean-American Christians and Buddhists? Is their much interfaith mixing? Both of these books make a strong case that Korean-American religiosity deserves far more attention than it has received.