

Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea.

By Timothy S. Lee. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2010. Pp. xvi, 228. \$40.

South Korea occupies a unique position on the religious map of the world. Normally a country is either secular, like China, or it is dominated by one particular religion, as in Buddhist Japan, Islamic Indonesia, or Hindu India. Korea is neither. Official census records show that over half of the {182} South Korean population has adopted a specific religious affiliation, so Korea cannot be called a secular society. Yet no one religious community dominates. According to those same census figures (from 2005), 22.8 percent of Koreans said they were Buddhists, and 29.2 percent said they were Christians. Moreover, in a part of the world in which countries that have substantial Christian communities, such as the Philippines and East Timor, tend to be predominantly Catholic, in Korea Protestants outnumber Catholics almost two to one.

Timothy Lee, a professor at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, is the leading authority in North America on Korean evangelicals. In this insightful study he explains how Protestant Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, became the most vibrant religious force in South Korea in the second half of the twentieth century. Lee argues that a tradition of enthusiastic revivals, dating back to the first decade of the twentieth century, has drawn Koreans into evangelical churches and, once they were there, filled them with proselytizing fervor, which has then brought even more Koreans into those churches. Koreans found those revivals, and the evangelical Christianity behind them, attractive for a couple of reasons. First of all, modernization had rendered traditional religions irrelevant to many Koreans in search of spiritual guidance in a rapidly changing world. In addition, evangelical Christianity, seen as a manifestation of modern—that is, Western—civilization, offered hope for salvation not only from sin but also from the many secular problems Koreans encountered in the twentieth century, such as Japanese colonial rule and the threat of Communism from the north. The result is a South Korea with many more Protestant churches than Buddhist temples and with 75–90 percent of the people in the pews of those Protestant churches professing an evangelical approach to Christianity.

This book is trying to understand why evangelical Christianity has been so much more successful in South Korea than elsewhere in Asia.

—Don Baker

Don Baker is Director of the Centre for Korean Research and Associate Professor of Korean History and Civilization in the Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.