NEGOTIATING PATRIARCHY
South Korean Evangelical Women and the Politics of Gender

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Based on ethnographic research, this study investigates the meaning and impact of women’s involvement in South Korean evangelicalism. While recent works addressing the “paradox” of women’s participation in conservative religions have highlighted the significance of these religions as unexpected vehicles of gender empowerment and contestation, this study finds that the experiences and consequences of Korean evangelical women’s religiosity are highly contradictory; although crucial in women’s efforts to negotiate the injuries of the modern Confucian-patriarchal family, conversion, for many women, also signifies their effective redomestication to this family/gender regime, which helps maintain current gender arrangements. To address this tension, the article explores the meaning of religious submission in the Korean context, focusing on the motivations behind women’s consent to patriarchy, which are rooted in women’s contradictory desires regarding the family system and the ambivalent subjectivities that they evoke.

Keywords: religious traditionalism; patriarchy; South Korea; evangelicalism; consent; resistance

Along with the recent surge of scholarly interest in religious fundamentalisms, scholars have begun to pay greater attention to the question of women’s participation in contemporary traditionalist religious movements. Why are women, many of them well educated and middle class, becoming increasingly attracted to and supportive of religious groups that seem designed to perpetuate their subordination? The question of women’s involvement in traditionalist religions is intriguing because it not only provokes a

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rethinking of the problems of secularization and the role of religion in the modern world but addresses some of the central issues related to gender: the question of women’s engagement with contemporary patriarchy, the nature and dynamics of contemporary gender relations, and the ways in which women negotiate the challenges of modernity and social change.

Recent studies of women and religious traditionalisms have advanced our understanding of this fascinating question in a number of ways. While illuminating the important connections between contemporary women’s turn to religious traditionalism and the processes of modern social transformations across societies, scholars have moved the understanding of the effects and role of these religions in sophisticated new directions. By focusing, for instance, on the complexities inherent in the operations of religious patriarchy, these works have challenged conventional views of traditionalist religions as monolithic sources of oppression and of women as victims of male domination. By attending to matters of women’s agency, as well as to the tensions between ideology and practice, they have illuminated the surprising role that traditionalist religions play for women as sites of gender negotiation, and their unpredictable consequences for altering gender dynamics.

Through an ethnographic investigation of women’s evangelical involvement in contemporary South Korea, this article seeks to expand current research on women and religious traditionalisms. Exploring the distinctive meaning and dynamics of women’s religious participation in this understudied cultural context promises to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon and help reassess current interpretative frameworks.

Evangelical Protestantism first entered Korea around the turn of the twentieth century by way of American Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries. After growing steadily, if sporadically, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, evangelicalism underwent an explosive expansion in South Korea in the decades following the 1960s, to become the second largest religious group in South Korea after Buddhism (Gallup Korea 1998). Although a number of studies examining evangelicalism’s phenomenal growth in post–World War II South Korea have appeared (Clark 1986; Han 1994; Kim 1985; Lee 1996; Martin 1990; Suh 1985)—most of which link this growth to the dislocating conditions generated by the process of rapid industrialization and modernization since the 1960s—little attention has been paid to the role and place of women in this growth. Despite the highly patriarchal theological and cultural orientation of Korean evangelical churches (Lee 1996), women have constituted the most enthusiastic portion of the church membership, serving as a pivotal force in their capacity both as dedicated church workers and as ardent evangelists in the growth and maintenance of Korean churches (Yi 1985).
This article has two major aims. First, through an analysis of the unique character of women’s evangelical involvement within the South Korean context, the article will contribute to broadening and complicating our current understanding of the role of traditionalist religions for women today. This article will also examine the complexity of this religiosity and its impact for women, addressing key interpretative issues in the study of women and religious traditionalism.

Many of the current studies on women and religious traditionalism have been notable for their concern with highlighting the dimensions of resistance and empowerment in the acts of submission to religious patriarchy on the part of women.\(^1\) Although this line of analysis has been invaluable in bringing attention to aspects of women’s religious engagement that have been largely ignored, this focus has led to the elision of other important dynamics of women’s religious engagement, especially the tensions inherent in women’s religiosity.

As I will demonstrate, the profoundly ambiguous and conflict-ridden consequences of evangelical religiosity for women that I reveal in my study—consequences that are as oppressive as they are liberating—obviate any facile interpretations of the women’s actions or situations as empowering or subversive. While it is necessary to recognize the dimension of resistance in Korean women’s actions, the Korean case calls attention to the need to refocus our attention to the issues of patriarchal power and, furthermore, to women’s continued cooperation with patriarchy.

**WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONALISM**

Works that have emerged on women and religious traditionalism since the 1980s encompass several religious and cultural settings. In the American context, studies have included an illuminating set of ethnographic investigations on evangelical/fundamentalist Christian and Orthodox Jewish women; a number of studies have appeared on Pentecostal women in Latin America and on Muslim women as well.

Although diverse in terms of setting, these investigations have made significant contributions to the understanding of women and religious traditionalism. The first lies in providing us with a useful sociological understanding of the motivations behind contemporary women’s turn to traditionalist religious movements. Situating women’s choices within the sociological framework of each society, these studies have demonstrated the extent to which women’s religious involvement can be seen as a reaction to the problems generated by the forces of modernity and sociocultural
transformations across societies, especially those affecting family and gender relations. The other important contribution lies in casting light on the unexpected function of these religions for women, particularly as vehicles in the women’s gender and domestic struggles. By problematizing common perceptions of traditionalist religions simply as tools of gender oppression, and of women as dupes of false consciousness, a number of these studies have demonstrated the significance of these religions as often-subversive instruments in the women’s efforts to deal with domestic strains.

In their explorations of American evangelical and fundamentalist women, for instance, various researchers have shown that women’s accommodation to the church’s conservative teachings on gender, especially the ideology of submission, represents not a simple capitulation to patriarchy but rather women’s efforts to improve and renegotiate gender relations and achieve marital stability (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997; Rose 1987). Stacey (1990) in particular has directed our attention to the often “conscious,” “strategic,” and “instrumental” nature of such efforts, while others have called attention to the discrepancy that exists between ideology and actual practices (Ammerman 1987; Gallagher 2003; Manning 1999). More recent studies on evangelicals not only have underscored such discrepancies—a work by Gallagher and Smith (1999) labels this “symbolic traditionalism and pragmatic egalitarianism”—but have highlighted the diversity that exists among evangelicals with regard to their approaches to the church’s ideology of submission (Bartkowski 2001).

In addition to illuminating the role of traditionalist religions as flexible resources in women’s efforts to pursue their domestic interests, many of these works have emphasized the empowering and liberating functions of traditionalist religions for women. Research on American Orthodox Jewish women (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1989), for example, has highlighted the unexpected ways that orthodox religious beliefs and practices serve as a vehicle of empowerment for women, particularly through feminist reinterpretations of traditionalist ideology that valorizes womanhood and reaffirms female power. Outside of the American setting, works on Latin American Pentecostal women (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993; Gill 1990; Maldonado 1993) have been especially notable for emphasizing the “liberating” potential of traditionalist religions, especially as a resource for raising female status and subverting patriarchal relations within both domestic and religious arenas. Calling attention to the “revolutionary” potential of Colombian Pentecostalism for reforming gender roles, Brusco (1995), for example, has gone so far as to call Colombian evangelicalism a “revolutionary” and “strategic” form of women’s collective action, even
more effective than Western feminism in raising women’s status and altering gender role behavior.

In important ways, these interpretive approaches reflect and draw on recent developments in social scientific and feminist theorizing, developments that have been characterized by a distinctive concern with and emphasis on the issues of agency, resistance, and praxis in the analyses of subordinate groups. These theoretical approaches, broadly characterized as “post-structural” and influenced by the ideas of such thinkers as Foucault ([1978] 1990), Gramsci (1992), and Williams (1973), pivot around “de-centered” notions of power as well as culture as a site of both the inscription of power and resistance to power (Rubin 1996). Furthermore, this line of theorizing draws its inspiration from what Sherry Ortner (1984) has labeled “practice theory,” which began to emerge in the 1980s, a form of theorizing that has reflected a move toward a more “action-based approach” analysis of human behavior, analysis centered on the “doing subject” seen as an active strategizing/calculating agent and what Ortner (1984) calls the “strategic model” of human action.

There is no doubt that incorporation of such poststructuralist insights has helped complicate our understanding of women’s actions and choices in the context of traditionalist religions. But while these works may have successfully problematized the conventional views of traditionalist religions and the passive model of women’s religious engagement, I contend that this fruitful attention to the dimensions of resistance and empowerment in women’s engagement with religious patriarchy has, at the same time, served in some crucial ways to deflect attention away from other central dynamics of this engagement. Of special importance are the problems of patriarchal power and domination, and the particularly thorny issue of women’s assent to patriarchal structures and authority. Although attention to the dimensions of protest or resistance in women’s actions has been valuable for achieving a more thorough understanding of the nature of women’s engagement with religious traditionalisms, the acute tensions that exist between resistance and the more accommodative aspects of women’s actions—aspects that raise questions both of the ambiguity of women’s intentions/subjectivities and of the consequences of their actions with regard to patriarchy—have been less than thoroughly explored in recent works.2

As this article will show, women’s engagement with religious patriarchy is a complex matter whose particular dynamics and effects must be understood as these are shaped within specific sociohistorical contexts and regimes of patriarchy. The Korean case demonstrates that not only the
motivations behind women’s turn to religious traditionalism but the particular forms of their religious engagement, and its consequences, must be comprehended as products of each society’s specific sociohistorical process—of social change, modernity, and the structure and logic of gender/family relations—that give shape to the distinctive gender subjectivities, motivations, and interests of women.

The article begins with an analysis of the motivations behind Korean women’s evangelical involvement, viewing it primarily as a response to the challenges posed by the dramatic social changes generated by South Korea’s post–World War II transformations, particularly the contradictions of contemporary Korean family life. In the two sections that follow, where the role and character of Korean women’s religiosity are closely explored, I show the distinctive ways in which Korean evangelicalism is appropriated—both spiritually and institutionally—by women to deal with these very challenges, especially as resources for transcending and negotiating the oppressiveness and restrictions of the contemporary Korean patriarchal family.

The Korean case illustrates how, despite these liberating and empowering functions of women’s faith, women’s very efforts to cope with their personal dilemmas through religious beliefs also result in consequences that are highly oppressive for women, namely, the effective redomestication of women to the Confucian family system and, by extension, the perpetuation of the current gender/family arrangements. As a means of exploring this tension, I devote the final section of the article to examining the meaning of Korean women’s submission to religious patriarchy, focusing particularly on the motivations behind Korean women’s consent to patriarchal relations, which I argue stem primarily from their conservative desires regarding the family system and the contradictory subjectivities they evoke.

METHOD AND DATA

This article is based on ethnographic field research in two Protestant churches—one Presbyterian and one Methodist—in Seoul, undertaken between 1996 and 1999. In South Korea, Presbyterianism and Methodism represent the two largest Protestant denominations, with Presbyterianism being the largest, constituting about 73 percent of the Protestant population, and Methodism being the second largest, claiming about 11 percent of church membership (Gallup Korea 1998). Given this fact, studying these two churches—which I call the South River church and North River church, respectively—promised the best demographic representation of the general
Protestant population. Although I do not claim that these two churches are representative of all churches belonging to the two denominations, they were consciously selected for possessing a set of qualities thought to belong to a typical mainstream Korean evangelical church, especially with regard to conservative theological orientation and institutional culture, as well as predominantly middle-class characteristics.

The primary methods of the fieldwork were in-depth interviewing and intensive participant observation. Semistructured and open-ended interviews were conducted with 96 individuals, which were obtained mainly through the snowball method. The majority of interviews, totaling 60, were conducted with married women congregants between the ages of 35 and 55. It is noteworthy that women in this age bracket represented the largest membership category in both churches; thus, addressing the significance of evangelicalism for this group of women became the natural focus of my investigation. This study, then, is an investigation primarily of a particular generation of women, those born between Korea’s postliberation (from Japan) era and the early 1960s, and coming of age during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Their experiences reflect the period of South Korea’s late industrialization and modernization. For purposes of comparison, I also conducted interviews with 10 male congregants and with 12 women of younger and older ages than the primary sample. I conducted additional interviews with pastors and outside experts on Christianity. Interviews, which lasted from one to three hours, were mostly taped and carried out in the homes of the interviewees. Many interviews were repeated over days.

In keeping with the broadly middle-class profiles of the two churches, about three-fourths of the women I interviewed fell squarely within the category of the middle class, while the rest were either members of the working class or those on the border between working and middle classes. This study can thus be characterized as a study largely of middle-class women, most of them housewives. Furthermore, it is important to note that although the majority of the women interviewed belonged to what can be characterized as middle class, this was quite a wide category, ranging from the lower end of the middle-class spectrum to the upper end. The findings of this study are not generalizable to those within other socioeconomic strata, for example, poor and lower-class women.

The interviews were semistructured in that I had a basic set of questions I sought to cover in all the interviews, but the interviews were also left open-ended to allow the informant to take conversation in the direction she or he wished. In all of the interviews, I typically began by asking the interviewee
to tell me why and how she or he became a convert to evangelicalism, which commonly led to a series of rich life history and conversion narratives, as well as revelations about the interviewees’ current life situations. In addition to the array of questions regarding the interviewees’ personal and family lives, I sought information about the meanings, patterns, and impact of their church participation.

Intensive participant observation was undertaken in a wide variety of religious and social settings. South Korean evangelical churches typically sponsor a large array of worship and prayer service meetings. My participation included all forms of worship services, from Sunday daytime worship services and Wednesday evening services to daily dawn prayer meetings. I also regularly attended a variety of Bible study meetings and a number of special seminars, such as family and marriage seminars. An important part of my observations also included regular participation in various “cell” home group meetings, home visits, and evangelizing missions and an array of other church-sponsored events. In addition to formal church events, I obtained useful insights through informal socializing with members outside of the church.

CONTEMPORARY CRISIS OF GENDER AND FAMILY IN SOUTH KOREA

In the past few decades, South Korea has undergone dramatic social changes. South Korea overcame the devastations of war (1950-1953) and the socioeconomic distortions of 35 years of colonial rule (1910-1945) to transform itself from a poor, agrarian society into an ostensibly prosperous and modern nation. While this may have made South Korea one of the East Asian economic “miracles,” such single-minded pursuit of economic development and modernization has had its costs; it has engendered a society characterized by enormous cultural contradictions.

In South Korea, these contradictions can be most markedly observed in the realm of family and gender relations. In recent years, the Korean family has undergone some major modernizing changes, especially with the decline of fertility rates, a trend toward nuclearization of the family, and the spread of Western values, particularly the ideals of romantic love and companionate marriage. The contemporary Korean family, however, is characterized by an enormous degree of internal tension, as modern forces clash with powerful ideals and values of the traditional Confucian family system that are both perpetuated and refashioned within the modern patriarchal family (Abelmann 2003; Kendall 2002, 1996; Kim 1997; Lett 1998; Nelson 2000; Palley 1990).
Although such a situation generates conflicts for everyone involved, it has become a particular source of dilemmas for women. In the past few decades, the unprecedented participation by Korean women in both mass and higher education has produced some significant changes in their basic status, outlook, and expectations. Korean women, along with the men, have become an exceptionally well-educated population, the majority of whom are now sophisticated and informed citizens of an aggressively modern and increasingly consumerist, globalized society. The dramatic changes generated by education and the forces of modernity, however, have not been accompanied by a concomitant development of opportunities for women outside of the domestic sphere, nor of full gender equality.5

In fact, South Korea has managed to bring about key modernizing transformations while successfully preserving a set of core traditional cultural elements in the family and gender system.6 Reflecting both a survival of the elements of the neo-Confucian tradition (Deuchler 1992) and their reconfiguration within the postcolonial, modern-capitalist context, this family regime is largely a result of the conscious policies of a patriarchal state whose developmental program was predicated on the maintenance of the traditional family and gender order as the basis of social stability and economic growth, akin to what Heidi Hartmann has called the “partnership between patriarchy and capitalism” (Hartmann 1981).

For many Korean women, across classes, this situation has given rise to acute tensions due to the discrepancy between the rapidly changing expectations of women and the norms of a still-powerful, neotraditionalist family/gender system. For many women, these tensions have generated a set of acute contradictions and conflicts in their domestic lives, as illustrated by the conversion narratives of two middle-class church members:

I am from a very Confucian family, very, very strict, so lived quite a restricted life when I was young. Then I got married through jungmae [arranged marriage] at 23. Although everyone thought I had married well, I was in for a surprise.

What happened was that upon marrying, I had to live with my husband’s family. . . . But for years I had to take care of and serve all of them, all 13 of them: my parents in-law, three sisters-in-law, and cousins. To make things worse, my mother-in-law became seriously ill. Of course, being that my husband was the only son, everything became my sole responsibility. . . . And because she was sick, I also had to take charge of the entire household. Then I had babies of course. . . . So as you can imagine . . . from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning until I went to bed, I had no life of my own.
But because I was so young when I got married, I thought that this was how it was for everyone—I just didn’t know any better. And I was so fragile in mind and emotion that I tried to accept everything. . . . Well, after about 13 years of this, I went into a deep depression. I couldn’t eat, became totally anxious and nervous. But I couldn’t tell anybody. I secretly saw shrinks by myself.

Then one day, there was a deacon of a church near me, and I received an invitation from her to go to church. What struck me about her was that she was always saying that she was happy and that she had no fear of dying. So I asked her why she believed this, and she said it was because she knew that she was going to heaven. At the time, I had no idea what she was talking about, but the statement that she had no worries intrigued me, and I started going to her Bible study. (Mi-Won, a housewife, aged 45, mother of two children)

From the very first, my married life was incredibly difficult. You see, when I first had a marriage interview with my husband, what struck me about him was that he seemed to be very honest. And he also had a good job. . . . I knew that living with a mother-in-law would be difficult, but foolishly, I thought that if I was just all good, obedient, and faithful, everything would be OK.

But things didn’t turn out that way. From the beginning, my mother-in-law treated me very badly. . . . My mother-in-law has a horribly sharp tongue. . . . She is the type of person who just spits things out without thinking of the consequences, how it’ll hurt other people. I have the opposite personality. I tend to keep things to myself because I am afraid to talk and afraid of how it’ll affect other people.

And you see, my husband, he always took his parents’ side from the beginning. You’ve got to understand; my husband is the most traditionally Confucian man. When we first got married, he said to me that his parents were like his limbs, irreplaceable and with him forever, but I was like clothing, disposable and interchangeable. My husband’s way of thinking is that the wife is an inferior member of the family, so there is no need to respect a woman. He just did whatever he wanted. . . . And his personality—it gets more difficult to deal with the longer I stay married to him. . . . But I am the only one who accommodates. It’s so hard for me. I still have so many scars from him, do you know what I mean? So you see, without God, I wouldn’t be able to continue with my life, I couldn’t live. And I won’t get divorced either. . . . If I got divorced, it’ll follow me around for the rest of my life. (Hyung-Soon, a housewife, aged 43, mother of two children)
Stories of acute domestic crises, such as described above, emerge ubiquitously in the conversion narratives of most of the women whom I interviewed, especially as a key motivating factor behind their church participation or conversion. Although the particular trajectories or reasons for conversion may vary for each individual, these narratives of domestic crises—focused on problems of loveless marriages, intense conflicts with husbands and mothers-in-law, unmanageable domestic burdens, and frustrations from unfulfilled individual aspirations—are often bound by common themes and reveal the central contradictions of the family and gender system.

I argue, then, that a useful place to begin comprehending the evangelical involvement of many Korean women is to view it as a part of their response to a current crisis of gender and family facing South Korean society: more specifically, the contradictions of the modern patriarchal family. Indeed, what my findings strongly suggest is that for many women, evangelical involvement is a central means for helping women deal with an array of domestic dilemmas and conflicts arising from these contradictions.

Most of the women I interviewed discussed their altered expectations regarding domestic and marital life. Although these women could not by any means be described as feminists, most did enter marriage anticipating a romantic, companionate marital relationship, one that was to be an improvement over their mothers’ marital experiences. Intense conflicts arose, however, when the realities of Korean family and marital life clashed with these changed subjective expectations, generating what some observers call a “marriage shock” (Choi 1994; Kim 1992; Rhi 1986).

Many women, for instance, found that companionate marriages were difficult to achieve, especially when they had entered semi-arranged matches with men with whom they turned out to be incompatible. Other women discovered that once married, their spouses were a great deal more traditional and than they had anticipated, spawning deep personal disappointments and domestic conflicts. For a majority of the women, conflicts with mothers-in-law presented a major source of personal suffering, as they experienced the traditional demands of and treatments by their mothers-in-law as deeply unjust and humiliating. Finally, several found the demands of day-to-day domestic burdens and obligations of a conventional Korean marriage difficult to cope with, often requiring a great deal more sacrifice than they expected.

Korean women are also under increased stresses generated by the reconfigured tasks of the modern “housewife” and their subjective understandings
as modern women (Chong 2002; Kendall 1996; Moon 2002). In South Korea, the reconfiguration of women’s responsibilities within the modern nuclear family, while helping to endow women’s domestic roles with greater status and significance, has also become a source of new kinds of demands on women, especially for middle-class women. The stresses and burdens Korean women experience within the contemporary family, then, must also be understood within the context of these transformations of women’s tasks within the modern nuclear family. These tasks, revolving around a set of activities that Hanna Papanek (1979) has called “status production,” have included the all-important work of ensuring children’s education and engaging in informal income-generating activities to supplement family income. Furthermore, the increasing sexualization of femininity that has transformed both the societal perception and self-perception of South Korean womanhood in a new direction has further intensified pressures on women (Cho 2002; Kendall 1996; Lee 2002).

As hinted in the preceding narratives, another striking aspect of the conversion stories of Korean evangelical women is that they contain frequent accounts of physical illness or breakdown, which supports the view that a crisis experience is a central factor in conversion. Very few women said that attending church was motivated directly by the goal of attaining a cure for their ailments, which were both physical and psychosomatic. However, most women interpreted their illnesses as symptoms of their domestic anguish that they felt had to be addressed, and they turned to the church, especially after other methods to deal with problems had failed. As related by one church member,

My husband was the first son so was the head of his family because his father was dead, but I married him because his economic prospects looked good, given that he had gotten a license as an accountant. But once I got married, it was so difficult for me . . . as the first daughter-in-law. You know that in Korean society, mothers-in-law torment [hakdae hada] their daughters-in-law like something crazy, and since I was also a learned daughter-in-law, she was jealous and abused me even worse. . . . And I was weak, my mind was fragile, and wasn’t used to that kind of suffering and hardship [gosaeng hada]. So I got sick a lot. For example, I’d go on a school field trip with my kids, and I’d just faint and lose consciousness. The burdens and stresses were too much. At first, it was so hard that I’d refuse to go to church even though my mother-in-law wanted me to. Since I worked myself to death every day, I would have no day of rest if I went to church on Sunday. So on Sunday, I rested in secret, like I’d leave the house as if I was going to church but would just wander around
the market or the neighborhood mindlessly before going back home. . . But one summer, I got so sick that my mouth finally “turned.”8 And this is when Jesus appeared to me, robed in all white, when I was half conscious. This is when I came to North River church. And while here, I received enormous grace from a revivalist pastor, realizing for the first time the truth about salvation. I was 45. From that day on, I became so “hot” that I couldn’t stop evangelizing everybody I met. On my way home that day, I was evangelizing everyone on the street. They all thought I was crazy. Then I was on the phone for hours for days on end, evangelizing to everyone I could. I couldn’t help it. I had received the evangelization “fire” [yeol]. (In-Hae, aged 65, mother of three)

In the Korean context, women’s experience of domestic distress and anguish appear to be further aggravated by another crucial factor: the relative dearth of other legitimate avenues through which women can express their grievances and seek help for their problems. In a society in which revealing one’s domestic problems, even to health professionals, is considered improper and embarrassing, women are often left feeling alone, isolated, and helpless. As one woman, Soon-Yi, put it, “Things were so piled up inside me that if anyone even touched me, I would just break into a river of tears. There was no one to console me, no one to talk to.” For women like Soon-Yi, church involvement represents a compelling and acceptable option for dealing with personal anguish long borne in silence.

IN SEARCH OF HEALING

In the sociology of religion, religious conversion is understood as a process of dramatic transformation, involving a fundamental change in the self-identity and worldview of the convert (Bainbridge 1992; Lofland and Stark 1966; Rambo 1992). In evangelical terms, conversion typically signifies a process of self-transformation as it occurs through rebirth and salvation in Jesus Christ. Conversion, however, is not necessarily a uniform, predictably patterned process; even within the same religious tradition, conversion can be meaningful to and experienced by people in different ways. For Korean evangelical women, the significance and meaning of evangelical conversion begins with what I refer to as “opening up,” one of the three central components of the spiritual healing process.

“Opening up” refers to the process by which a believer, in developing a direct, personal relationship with God, is able to reveal and articulate his
or her inner self and concerns to God, seeking God’s help in dealing with them. For women whose psychic distress has its source as much in the silent, long-term repression of their sufferings as in the problems themselves, this act of release appears to be tremendously significant in their attempts to achieve healing. As one woman stated, “I found a God who responds to all my cries, however small, a God that watches over me, who consoles me when things are difficult and painful. I was always so oppressed [nulida] and had no means to express myself, but now I can because I know I am a child of God.”

In this effort, prayer is one of the central vehicles through which such intimate communication with God is pursued. Continually stressed by the church as one of the most central activities to being an evangelical, prayer in Korean churches is seen as a channel for approaching and communicating with God and also as a vehicle for fervent emotional release, regularized self-revelation, and spiritual/physical experience of the divine.

In the Korean evangelical context, opening up, however, occurs not only individually but collectively as well, in venues such as cell meetings. “Cell meetings” refer to small (5 to 10 persons), typically sex-segregated, Bible study/fellowship meetings held in the homes of the members on a rotating basis. A weekly cell meeting, a combination of a guided small-group Bible study and an intensive fellowship, is a highly effective institutionalized vehicle for fostering openness and sharing of personal lives and problems among women members. In both churches that I studied, intimate sharing of personal lives through such small-group interaction provided collective opportunities for release, emotional ventilation, and mutual consolation, often functioning as the first step in the conversion process. One member described her experiences in a cell group this way: “When I went to a cell meeting for the first time, I experienced an indescribably peaceful feeling. What I realized there was that other people were not different from me, in their lives, problems, and feelings. Until then, I thought my life was peculiar, but that was not the case. And I received consolation from that, before anything else.”

In the process of conversion, another central means by which women are moved toward healing and strengthened in their ability to cope with domestic situations is through the act of self-surrender. In general discussions of evangelical conversion, surrendering is considered a step necessary to and constitutive of genuine commitment, a point at which a person, after admitting that she is a sinner, delivers herself up to God. In the Korean evangelical worldview as well, surrendering is an act that occupies a crucial place in the conversion process, but one that has special implications for women.
In Korean evangelicalism, surrender emphasizes a total relinquishment of the self and will to divine control, along with unquestioning obedience to God. Despite the criticism that such an orientation leads to the development of powerless and dependent feminine self-conceptions, I have discovered that for Korean evangelical women, the act of self-surrender takes on an important significance as a path to internal healing, especially by serving as a means toward profound psychic unburdening that liberates women from day-to-day worries and suffering. This process is illustrated in an interesting way by Ok-Ja, a 40-year-old mother of two who recently converted to evangelicalism: “I think I am beginning to see why people seek God. I am beginning to understand the feeling of, okay, let’s forget it, I’ll just trust in God to watch over me and take care of everything, you know, the feeling of being a child throwing a tantrum at God to take care of everything. I am beginning to feel like that.”

The final aspect of the conversion process that is pivotal to the healing and coping efforts of Korean evangelical women is the experience of divine love. In evangelicalism, to be reborn signifies a reconstitution of identity, most importantly, as someone who learns to live in the knowledge and experience of God’s love. While the experience of divine love can be meaningful for any believer, it has, in the Korean context, particularly profound ramifications for women, especially by fostering a sense of empowerment and deep internal transformations that promote the healing process.

According to my research, one of the major sources of psychic injury for Korean women is the problem of emotional deprivation in marriage, especially the felt absence of marital love, intimacy, and spousal respect, set especially against women’s expectations for conjugal love. For many women, the experience of God’s love can be transformative and healing both by alleviating emotional pain and by providing a kind of ongoing, empowering experience that helps transform their sense of self. This can help to rebuild a sense of inner confidence and self-worth that better equips them to deal with their domestic situations and defend against emotional harm. As one woman remarked, “I never felt like I received much love from anyone. But all this was compensated for by God. For the first time in my life, I felt loved, blessed, and special.”

NEGOTIATING WOMEN’S SPACE

In most South Korean churches, women have historically been, and still are, strictly subordinated within the church hierarchy and authority structure. In most Protestant denominations in South Korea, the ordination of
women is prohibited. Women, in most churches, are not only kept from positions of authority and decision making but are generally relegated to support-level tasks within the church, where they are regarded primarily as helpers (do-eum baepil) and service workers (bojoja). Regardless, church participation, for many women, serves as a crucial vehicle for experiencing autonomy and empowerment, particularly by facilitating the creation of an autonomous women’s sphere and opportunities for utilizing nondomestic talents and abilities.

By coming together daily for a myriad of religious activities, women use the church to forge a space of their own, especially away from their families. Although most women I interviewed believed sincerely that they were going to church to carry out their duties as Christians, it was also clear that these frequent gatherings often became central to them as a focal point of their social lives and as a crucial form of social outlet that was acceptable in the eyes of their families.

Several women actually described the church as a place of “escape” from home, in which they experienced a sense of autonomy and relief from domestic pressures, however temporary. For many women, church participation also clearly functioned as an important means of resistance against male authority and the constraints of domestic situations. One 42-year-old woman, a small store owner, convinced her formerly abusive husband that the only way she could remain healthy and sane was for him to let her faithfully attend church:

Yes, people tell me I’m “hanging” too much onto God. But my husband knows that if I don’t go to church like I do, I’d be a sick person! So now he says to me, for you, work is not the most important thing. What’s the point if you have money but get sick so we have to pay the hospital bills? My husband knows this, so going to church is one thing he doesn’t say anything about. For me, church comes before everything else. Even if I’m with nonchurch friends, I leave and go to church if a church matter comes up. But everyone knows what God means to me, that I can’t live without Him.

For this woman, sickness and subsequent church participation were employed as a direct instrument of gender resistance.

Despite the subordinate role of women within the church—indeed, many women cynically referred to themselves as “kitchen slaves” and “army of laborers for the church”—many church activities offer women opportunities to exercise nondomestic talents and abilities, providing them with a chance to experience a sense of achievement outside of the
domestic arena, even to “exercise the brain.” These opportunities—which include a range of lay leadership roles reserved for women, such as deaconships, serving as leaders of cell groups and as teachers (of other women, rarely men)—gave women legitimate outlets for their suppressed talents and energies and for pursuing individual fulfillment in a society where there were few other such avenues available for women outside the domestic arena.

Although some women voiced resentment at the often heavy demands made on them by the church, it was clear that church participation for many others led to a visible enhancement of self-esteem and confidence, even to dramatic internal transformations. Many women, for instance, reported having undergone major personality transformations, from being “meek” and “shy” to becoming more “confident,” “bold,” and “outspoken.” Achieving positions of leadership, such as being appointed a cell leader or a deacon, seemed to offer a particularly rewarding sense of achievement and self-esteem for many women.

What my study has also uncovered is that for many women, attaining self-satisfaction, esteem, and fulfillment comes from gaining public acknowledgement of their accomplishments and contributions—even by the pastors—which reflects the deep needs many women appear to have for social recognition. These forms of external and social recognition (injung) occupy a central place in many women’s motivation for church involvement: “I think in a lot of cases for women, doing church service is for self-fulfillment, satisfaction of ego [chashin chungman]. It’s not for Jesus, to pay him back for what He’s done for us. It’s to receive recognition from others, for others to think you are good. That’s a good feeling, so you try even harder, to look good to other people” (Kyung-Hee, aged 62, mother of two).

For Korean evangelical women, church participation, along with spirituality, is an important resource in their domestic struggles. By enabling them to acquire a measure of emancipation from the stresses of domestic problems and oppression, and by providing them with the inner resources with which to deal with conflicts and suffering, church involvement plays a key role in helping women better cope with the difficult challenges of their daily lives.

For many women, however, church participation is more than just a coping mechanism; it is an important instrument of gender resistance as well, especially against male control and restrictions imposed by the family system. Church involvement can become an obvious weapon of resistance against male authority and control when a woman becomes so involved in
the church that she practically abandons her home and husband, becoming “Jesus-crazy.” God may replace the husband as the central object of her devotions and source of her authority, intensifying marital discord but empowering the wife to transcend internally her oppressive situation.

THE QUESTION OF CONSENT

In spite of their appropriation of evangelical beliefs and practices as an instrument of gender emancipation, conversion for Korean evangelical women may also signify a sincere recommitment to the traditional patriarchal family. Indeed, despite the initial resistance, one of the most surprising and ironic dimensions of evangelical women’s religious engagement is the deep belief many come to develop for a set of ideologies that lie at the root of their predicament, those that buttress the legitimacy of the traditional Confucian family system.

This ideology of gender and family, asserted as a divinely sanctioned set of Christian beliefs, unequivocally reflects the basic principles of the Confucian family and gender relations, including the absolute and inherent superiority of men, strict division of gender spheres into inside and outside realms, and the necessity of women’s total obedience and endurance as the prerequisite for family harmony and cohesion. Although it must be noted that Korean evangelical ideology is by no means monolithic in its position—some pastors do encourage the husbands to love their wives in return—the prominent emphasis on the unquestionable necessity of female submission clearly reflects an interpretation of Christian ideology refracted through the Confucian cultural lens. One cell leader described her church’s belief this way: “I really believe sincerely that for any woman, obedience is something she has to deal with and accept. Without the wife obeying the husband, God will not use that home. We think the husband has to treat the wife well for the wife to obey, but that’s not the case. A wife has to obey first, unconditionally. . . . A wife obeying, raising her husband continuously and making him the leader, that is the most essential aspect of marriage, the most important part to which everything else will follow.”

In this section, I explore the meaning of women’s submission within the Korean evangelical and cultural context. Many of the recent works have successfully challenged conventional interpretations of feminine engagement with religious patriarchy, bringing to light important contestatory or “strategic” dimensions of women’s religious activity (Brusco 1995; Griffith 1997; McLeod 1992; Stacey 1990). My study reveals that women’s submission in
the Korean evangelical context is a highly complex matter, involving a contradictory interplay between feminine accommodation and resistance to religious patriarchy. That is, while submission can serve as a “strategy” in women’s attempts to negotiate patriarchal relations, submission for many women also signifies an ideological assent to the patriarchal family, reflecting their ambivalent desires and interests regarding the family system.

In many ways, submission of Korean evangelical women can be understood as a strategy, an instrument in the efforts of women to negotiate their domestic situations. Similar to what has been described for American evangelical or Orthodox Jewish women (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1989), acquiescence of Korean evangelical women to the religiously sanctioned ideologies of gender and family does not simply indicate a capitulation to patriarchy but represents a rational effort at improving their domestic situation, especially for renegotiating gender relations.

One important way that accommodation comes to be seen as a means for domestic negotiation for women is as a tool for reforming the behavior of others, especially the husband. For many women, the belief is that through their own perfect adherence to the rules of virtuous feminine behavior as endorsed by the church, the wives can inspire the husbands to change. Indeed, several women declared their success at transforming their husbands by their own diligent efforts to become ideal wives. Some said, for instance, that they were able to change their “dictatorial” and stubbornly “Confucian” (yugyo jok) husbands to become more respectful, loving, or affectionate.

Other women spoke of helping their husbands become more “communicative.” One of the common complaints that Korean women have of their husbands is that the husbands do not like to talk. The behavior of “silent” and “closed-mouthed” husbands may in part reflect men’s attempts to live up to the ideal image of the traditional Korean man, but it frequently also expresses the husbands’ resentment of the “aggressive” and “nagging” wives. Many women said, however, that when they began to behave in a more gentle, submissive, and less assertive manner, their husbands began to “soften up,” becoming more “open-hearted.” Various women reported a more long-lasting character change in their husbands as well, such as when husbands were transformed from being “domineering” and “selfish” to being more considerate and understanding.

Finally, enabling the husband to become more “domestic” or “family oriented” was another recurring theme, which not only signified the husbands’ willingness to be more attentive to the home and children but also the taking on of more moral responsibility for domestic matters, instead of holding the wife responsible for everything that occurs in the home.
This, in particular, represented an effective way for Korean women to redefine the boundary of traditional gender roles. Of course, when the wife’s efforts result in the conversion of the husband, this is considered the ultimate victory.

Another intriguing aspect of female submission in the Korean context is that it is appropriated by women not only as a means of gender bargaining but also as a weapon of passive resistance. For example, my research showed that women often employ a strategy of radical subservience—what I call “obeying with a vengeance”—as a subversive means of enforcing on others, such as husbands or mothers-in-law, the debt of long-term gratitude. As one woman put it, “You know, if I didn’t obey, and just ran off like I wanted to, would my husband have the gratitude he now has for me, for what I have endured in the past?” Such strategies of perfect submission can also become a powerful weapon of internal resistance and defense by enabling women to feel a sense of moral superiority, even acquire greater domestic status and power.

Viewing submission simply as a strategy, or as a hidden weapon in women’s domestic and gender struggles is, however, inadequate in the Korean context. Moving beyond a focus on feminine dissent and resistance, it is important to address the crucial issue of women’s conservative desires, especially for preserving and maintaining the existing family and gender order. On the first cut, we can say that women’s interests in maintaining the status quo arise out of the constraints they face in society, which define and limit the options and choices available to them. In comparison to their American counterparts, Korean women are subject to a far greater degree of societal constraints and limitations, defined primarily by the path of marriage, domesticity, and motherhood. Given these constraints and lack of life options, women’s support of the existing gender/family arrangements may be seen, at one level, as their effort to survive and defend their places within the system.

What my research strongly suggests, however, is that Korean women’s motivations for supporting the status quo are not simply a function of lack of choice; they also arise out of positive desires for maintaining and preserving the integrity of the existing social structure, especially the family system. I will discuss three aspects of this.

One place from which to understand the conservative yearnings of contemporary Korean women lies in recognizing their powerful and continuing attraction to motherhood. A tremendous value and power is placed on women’s domestic roles, especially as mothers of sons, which has served as a kind of compensatory mechanism for women in an intensely patriarchal family system, especially as women became mothers-in-law (Cho
1986; Kandiyoti 1988). Despite recent changes that have attenuated the level of women’s domestic power, the value and importance accorded to motherhood and women’s domestic role in general—especially as sources of reward, status, and identity—still hold true in Korean society today, rendering traditional domestic roles highly desirable for women.

In Korea, however, sources of women’s conservatism must also be sought at deeper levels of feminine identity and subjectivity. As discussed by Kandiyoti (1987) and Mohanty (1991), the meaning and experience of being a woman, and therefore of being a mother, wife, or daughter, is distinctive in each culture, producing subtly diverse modes of feminine subjectivity and consciousness. In Korea, whether experienced by women as mothers or wives, a unique aspect of the feminine gendered identity lies in an orientation that seeks the proper fulfillment of one’s family/gender roles as a moral obligation and duty, an orientation that has two main sources.

The first is the intensely relational (as opposed to individualistic) and family-centered vision of Confucian human and social relations, which privileges obligations to others over individual fulfillment, particularly obligations to family members. Second, women, within this family system, were accorded a distinctive task, which has had the effect of intensifying this other-directed orientation. A central aspect of Korea’s highly family-centered social system is the tremendous energy the society invests in maintaining family cohesion, a task for which women were traditionally given primary responsibility. Viewed as the guardians of the household, Korean women were responsible not simply for meeting the physical and emotional needs of the family but for its ultimate integrity and survival. One consequence of this, as I see it, is that in Korea, women have come to evolve not only intensely domestic identities but an extraordinarily strong sense of moral responsibility and commitment to preserving the family structure, and to fulfilling their roles within it, which works in significant ways to counteract emancipatory impulses. In fact, along with frustration, one of the most common emotions expressed by Korean women in regard to their domestic situations is guilt, guilt over their sense of what they view as their failure properly to fulfill their roles as good mothers because of marital conflicts and their feelings of unhappiness within the marriage.

One final aspect of Korean women’s conservative desires regarding the family is related to another distinctive facet of the Korean family system—what I refer to as familism. In the Korean context, familism can be seen as an overriding centrality of the family to the organization and ethos of society and, by extension, to the welfare, status, and identity of its members. One implication of such a system, of course, is that it facilitates the development
of intensely role- and family-centered identities in its members, in which a person’s familial role as the mother, wife, or daughter take precedence over her identity as an individual. At the level of subjectivity, another significance of such a system for women is that the belief in the centrality of the family, and in the ties of family’s fortunes and well-being to their own welfare and status within society, is productive of a desire not only to defend the family but to advance it as a unit. And especially given that Korean women have traditionally been, and still are, vitally responsible for the task of enhancing the family’s well-being and status, women serve not only as active participants in maintaining the integrity of the family but also as its staunchest promoters.

CONCLUSION

Through an examination of the distinctive meaning and dynamics of women’s involvement in contemporary Korean evangelicalism, this article has sought to expand and deepen our comprehension of women’s attraction to religious traditionalism in the contemporary world. The analysis of Korean evangelical women presented in this article confirms some of the important findings of recent research on women and religious traditionalism: Traditionalist religious beliefs and practices continue to serve an important function in the lives of women around the world, especially in helping women navigate the problems and challenges of rapidly changing societies. Evangelicalism serves as an instrument in women’s efforts to cope with their domestic lives, battle domestic oppression, and gain hope and consolation, both spiritually and institutionally.

However, Korean women’s religiosity also departs from and challenges the findings of recent studies. For Korean women, evangelical faith is far more than simply an instrument of gender negotiation or of hidden gender struggle. It also represents their redomestication. Although such dual aspects of religious power—power to both liberate and oppress, injure and heal—have been amply demonstrated (Appleby 2000; McGuire 1983), the Korean case provides a clear example of a case in which religious power, through its interaction with the structures and ideology of South Korea’s regime of patriarchy, operates effectively to bring about women’s recommitment to the existing family and gender system, helping to reproduce the current family/gender arrangements.

As a way of addressing this issue of female conservatism, an important focus of this article, then, has been to engage the issue of Korean women’s consent to religious patriarchy. Recent investigations of women and religious traditionalism have not paid sufficient attention to the issue of
women’s conservative desires for maintaining the status quo. In the course of this inquiry, one finding that has clearly emerged is the ambiguity of women’s desires regarding the patriarchal system, which, in the case of Korean women, is a contradictory mixture of powerful emancipatory impulses and a profound attraction and attachment to the family system. For Korean women, this source of attraction lies not only in the fact that the family system, despite its oppressiveness, still offers women the best form of security and reward in a rapidly changing world, but in women’s powerful sense of obligations to maintain the integrity of the family, both as women and as moral persons.

From this perspective, we can, then, understand a major part of women’s church involvement as a response to two distinct and conflicting feminine desires: (1) to resist the oppressions of the family system and (2) to preserve its integrity. And by the same logic, we can comprehend the role of the Korean church for women in the following way: While providing women with a socially legitimate means to cope with the problems and sufferings of patriarchal oppression, it enables women to fulfill their obligations via the family by revalidating their conservative longings and helping to combat their internal ambivalence. It is perhaps this double role of Korean evangelicalism, as a vehicle for both helping women negotiate their domestic frustrations and redomesticating them for the family, that has made it an effective instrument for maintaining the cohesion of the current family and gender system.

With specific regard to gender, several points are underscored by this study. As stated earlier, one is a need for renewed attention to the question of why women actively collude in perpetuating the conditions of their own subordination in the contemporary world, even while they actively resist. Abu-Lughod (1990) has pointed out that there has been a tendency toward romanticizing “resistance” in recent feminist literature. Others (Baron 1991) have also noted that while women’s “resistance” has been amply documented, the issue of “consent” remains an undertheorized problem in gender studies. Seriously engaging the issue of women’s conservatism is crucial both for comprehending the heterogeneity of women’s experiences across societies and for understanding means to combating oppression.

Furthermore, in pursuing a more accurate understanding of the dynamics of gender relations, power, resistance, and consent, we need approaches and analyses of gender dynamics that are culturally embedded and contextually specific. Carefully nuanced and culturally specific analyses of the systems of patriarchy, family, and operations of power—and the impact these have on the desires, goals, and identity of women—can bring out the diverse forms of gender dynamics across societies. Related to this is the need to
develop a more complex model of gender identity and subjectivity that can account for the complexities of women’s intentions and behaviors across cultures, particularly the capacity of women to participate simultaneously in reproducing and resisting gender hierarchies. Such an approach would involve transcending any simplistic notions regarding emancipatory impulses of women, addressing instead how the very meanings and goals of gender liberation might vary across social settings, and the ways in which women’s actions are shaped by the complex, often contradictory interests, desires, and consciousness as these are structured within particular regimes of patriarchy.

NOTES

1. Recent work by Julie Ingersoll (2003) represents an exception. In this work focusing on gender conflicts within evangelical Christianity in the United States, she takes issue with the currently popular interpretations that for conservative religious women, submission is somehow “really” empowerment.

2. Notable exceptions include works by Arlene McLeod (1992) and Saba Mahmood (2001).

3. The primary class makeup of the two churches ranges from lower-middle class (with some working class) to upper-middle class, generally mirroring the class makeup of the general Christian population, which is predominantly middle class. It can also be safely said that the vast majority of Korean Protestant churches, as much as more than 90 percent, are conservative-fundamentalist theologically and culturally, irrespective of denominational affiliation. See Lee (1996).

4. It is important to note that evaluating class belonging in the Korean context according to objective criteria is a highly problematic endeavor; the class membership in this study was determined both by subjective class identification and conventional objective criteria such as income levels and occupation (see Abelmann 1997).

5. As of 1990, the literacy rate in South Korea was almost 100 percent for both women and men, and 24 percent of women and 51 percent of men were enrolled in institutions of higher education. In comparison, higher education enrollment in neighboring Taiwan was 18 percent for men and 20 percent for women. However, South Korean women, in relation to both Taiwan and Japan, display the lowest rates of formal work participation at every age group (Brinton, Lee, and Parish 1995).

6. Recent analyses focusing on gender and social change in South Korea have also intriguingly pointed to a growing trend toward greater cultural conservatism of that country since the mid 1980s, what Cho (2002) refers to as “neoconservatism.” See also Moon (2002).
7. Several observers have noted that what is commonly perceived as “housework” for contemporary middle-class South Korean women has been grossly mischaracterized. Encompassing far more than fulfilling the traditional role of providing a “safe haven” for husbands, Korean middle-class women’s housework, responding to the demands of an upwardly mobile, status-seeking society, has come to include a wide range of nontraditional activities crucial to the maintenance and improvement of the family’s social and economic status, including property management, stock investments, private money lending, and part-time work such as tutoring (Kim 1992; Moon 1990). Working-class women, who have been generating income through the informal labor market all along, engage in more manual activities such as petty trading, domestic service, and home-based craft production (Lett 1998).

8. “Mouth-turning” is a common colloquial expression to denote loss of muscle control on the face, usually as a result of stroke or of some kind of neurological or nervous disorder, such as Bell’s palsy.

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