Abstract: The relationship between modernization and religion is contested, with the literature differing in how and in what ways religion helps or hinders countries’ social, economic, and political development. This paper draws upon the history of Christianity in South Korea to critically explore the links between religion and modernization. It makes two arguments. First, discussions of the link between religion and modernization frequently employ static definitions of religion, but Christianity is characterized by oscillations between worldly (institutionalizing) and unworldly (countercultural) impulses that theoretically make very different contributions to social, economic, and political development. Second, in the case of South Korea, it is shown that both impulses have made vital contributions to the country’s modernization at different times. This suggests that the dynamic tug-of-war between the institutional and countercultural facets of Korean Christianity, although problematic for individual believers and religious leaders, helped it become an important contributor to the country’s success story. However, this paper concludes on a cautionary note by warning that extreme instances of these impulses have caused cleavages between Christianity and the Korean state and society and could undermine its future contributions. This suggests that diversity and toleration—a hallmark of Korean Christianity—will continue to be the best pathway forward.

Keywords: modernization; South Korea; religion; Christianity; democratization; development

1. Introduction

The Korean government’s celebration of its rise from the ashes of war to an economic powerhouse—detailed in leader’s speeches, reports, and promotional videos—frequently omits discussing Christianity as a factor in the country’s success. But the absence of religion from official accounts of Korea’s development contrasts with suggestions by sociologists and religious scholars that “the cause of Korea’s development is deeply rooted in the Christian church” (S.-C. Choi 1974, p. 170) or that “Korean churches led the transformation of society” (W. G. Lee 2016, p. 3; also see K. Kim 2010; Y.-S. Park 2000; Sohn and Cho 2012; E. Kim 2018). Moreover, the continued political and social significance of Christianity in South Korea is impossible to ignore. Christians, including Catholics, comprise approximately 27 percent of the population, but they play an oversized role in the country’s social, economic, and political life. Not only is South Korea home to some of the largest megachurches, particularly the Yoido Full Gospel Church, but it is also one of the world’s most fervent exporters of Christian missionaries (K. Lee 2020, p. 1). Tellingly, these South Korean missionaries preach the message that Christianity was the key element in their country’s development (Han 2015).

The omissions and ambiguities surrounding the contributions of Christianity to South Korea’s remarkable economic and political rise are not surprising when one considers that the relationship between modernization and religion is deeply contested, with the academic literature on the topic disagreeing whether and in what ways religion helps or hinders countries’ social, economic, or political modernization. The contributions of religion are...
often dismissed outright because classical secularization theory assumes a fundamental difference between modernity, science, and rationality on one side and religiosity on the other (see Gorski 2003). But for some scholars, the durability of religious values after modernization is an important puzzle (see Inglehart and Welzel 2009, pp. 37–38). Others see religious values as a variable for explaining why some countries successfully experience democratization and economic development and others do not (Kuran 2018; Hofmann 2004; Makrides 2019; McCleary and Barro 2006). Especially, there is a prominent strand of the literature emphasizing the contribution of Protestant Christianity to the modernization process (Woodberry 2012; Huntington 1991; also see Marshall 1982). Nevertheless, empirical evidence detailing the pathways whereby religion assists or hinders various aspects of modernization remains contradictory and contested (Clark 2012; Basedau et al. 2017; Palanca 1986; J. Anderson 2009).

This paper draws upon the history of Christianity in South Korea to provide a fresh perspective of the link between religion and modernization. South Korea is an important case study for investigating this linkage because of its rapid development and its vibrant Christian community. The paper is developed in two steps. The first is the presentation of a new theoretical framework that replaces static understandings of Christianity with a dynamic model of the religion as the ongoing product of two contradictory impulses. On one hand, there is what we call a worldly Christianity that seeks to make itself politically, socially, and economically relevant for the lives of its participants through the creation of institutions with dense interconnections to the host society, a process frequently involving pragmatism, hybridization, and the provision of secular services. On the other hand, there is an unworldly Christianity that is deeply critical of the concessions needed to forge such connections with the host society. As a result, this strand of Christian practice tends to manifest as a counterculture that criticizes human institutions and seeks their transcendence. Important for our purposes, these two impulses potentially make very different contributions to social, economic, and political development. Specifically, the development of Christian institutions with deep connections to a local society can act as a vector for modernizing influences and transnational actors or resources, while the emergence of Christian countercultures can be an important catalyst for challenging dysfunctional institutions. However, both impulses can also lead to suboptimal outcomes when taken to extremes.

The second part of this paper conducts a plausibility probe of the model by applying it to a case study of South Korea’s social, economic, and political modernization from the late 19th century to the 1990s. Although many details about individual Christian thinkers and movements are unfortunately omitted at this level of analysis, a broad chronological approach permits us to identify important shifts in institutionalizing and countercultural logics during three key periods of modernization. The pre- and colonial period (late 19th century to 1945) showcases how worldly Christianity facilitated social modernization by establishing medical and educational institutions—many of which continue to be key fixtures in South Korean society today—but then shows how this institutionalizing process was vulnerable to co-option by Japanese imperialism, which articulated an alternative vision of Christian modernity. It was the emergence of an indigenous Christian counterculture, exemplified by grassroots participation in the March First Independence Movement, which ultimately prevented this co-option from being successful. In the post-liberation period (1945 to 1970s), the US occupation authorities and the Republic of Korea government adopted favorable policies towards Christianity, facilitating its institutional expansion. In this period, Christianity’s contribution to economic modernization was most obviously seen by the way churches emerged as formidable economic actors, coordinators of foreign aid, and promoters of a prosperity gospel that encouraged and legitimized the pursuit of economic success. But this process also left many Christian institutions deeply implicated in the Korean state’s violent anticommunist and authoritarian policies. Had this situation continued, Korea might have ended up as a case of stalled or partial modernization. But a Christian counterculture emerged during the democratization movement (1970s–1990s) that emphasized human rights and liberal values, criticizing both the state and the main-
stream Christian institutions that supported it and by doing so, helped pave the way for Korea’s successful political modernization.2

The significance of this study is two-fold. First, it has been recognized that social scientists’ understandings of the impact of religion on modernization are often based on problematic operationalizations of the term or the outright neglect of it as a variable (Basedau et al. 2017, pp. 10–11; Selinger 2004; C. Lee and Suh 2017, p. 466). The model presented here, which bridges material and cultural approaches by identifying institutionalizing impulses as a vector for modernization and countercultural impulses as a catalyst for system change, is a modest step towards integrating a more dynamic and historical understanding of Christianity’s impact that can be applied to other national contexts or periods. Especially, our model’s perspective of the overall religious ecosystem as the product of a shifting configuration of institutional and countercultural logics can supplement existing approaches of categorizing religious groups by differences in belief, church attendance, or theological positions on specific issues. Second, this new interpretation of Christianity’s impact on modernization helps us better understand the contemporary crisis facing South Korean Christianity, which is fueled by extreme institutional and countercultural logics. This suggests that tolerance and diversity are essential for recreating the equilibrium that had contributed so much to Korea’s successful modernization.

2. Christianity and Modernization

Before discussing its relationship with religion, it is necessary to identify the various aspects of modernization. Modernization is a multifaceted process involving transformations related to culture, economy, and politics (Hall and Gieben 1993; Hall et al. 1996; Giddens 1990). Cultural modernization is associated with such cultural changes as secularization and the rise of, and adherence to, nationalist ideologies. Social modernization involves improved hygiene and health care, improved standards of living, increasing literacy, the provision of mass education, urbanization, and the decline of traditional authority. Economic modernization is associated with an increasing division of labor, the use of management techniques, improved technology, and the growth of commercial facilities. Lastly, political modernization involves the development of democracy and democratic institutions and practices, including political parties, parliaments, and the right to vote.

The next definitional challenge is religion, which is also a slippery concept. Many quantitative studies seek to measure religion by looking at church attendance or survey data where respondents self-report their religious beliefs (Glahe and Vorhies 1989; Clark 2012, p. 181; Basedau et al. 2017, p. 11), but this is widely acknowledged as not offering a precise measure because religions are complex and articulate multiple visions of the world and cannot be viewed as static variables, a problem that J. Anderson (2009, p. 192) describes as “the impossibility of essentializing religious traditions”. In other words, what a scholar codes as a Christian belief not only changes over time but may also be contested and interpreted differently by contemporaries within the same religion. Linked to this point are criticisms that previous studies focused too much on religious beliefs or values and not enough on the behavior of religious actors (see Basedau et al. 2017, p. 36; Selinger 2004, p. 535). So instead of looking at religion as a static belief system, it is important to historicize it as a shifting configuration of social actors articulating multiple visions of the world via discourse and practice (see Wessels 2009, p. 335).

Although all religions are characterized by the coexistence of multiple alternative visions of the world, or “multi-vocality” (J. Anderson 2009, p. 202), this article focuses on two contradictory visions that have historically shaped Christianity. These two visions stem from a debate, which has existed at least since the normalization of Christianity in the fourth century CE (Lynch and Adamo 2014), over the proper way to structure the relationship between the Christian religion and its host society. The first is what we call a worldly Christianity that seeks to establish powerful ties with society and is frequently marked by the emergence of hierarchies, institutions, and centralization. Although ‘worldliness’ is often disparaged by Christian thinkers, we use this terminology to describe a type of
Christianity that seeks to make itself politically, socially, and economically relevant for the lives of its participants. Historically, this has often entailed the pragmatic emulation and synthesis of local cultural and religious features, such as making Christian versions of local holidays or religious practices, the creation of institutions that provide non-religious services or goods, and, as in the case of Clement of Alexandria, reinterpreting scripture to facilitate the participation of local elites (Hayden 2021). The medieval Catholic Church is perhaps the best example of this process. It was not only a religious institution but became “a transnational corporation that was considerably more powerful than any single national government” (G. M. Anderson 1988, p. 1080).

In contrast, the second current is an unworldly or transcendent Christianity that acts as a counterculture seeking alternative configurations of society or even its transcendence. This strand of Christianity is often highly individualistic, spiritual, and rebellious, what Eisenstadt (1999, p. 24) refers to as its “utopian and eschatological orientations”. This type of Christianity draws upon the tradition of a Biblical interpretation of Jesus as a revolutionary figure who expected “the world order in his day to be subverted, either by divine intervention, human action, or both” (Hayden 2021, p. 8). In the medieval world, this tendency was exemplified by the emergence of hermits and monks who “represented traditions of religious behavior that directly or indirectly criticized the development of a structured church with many ties to society” (Lynch and Adamo 2014, p. 30). Rather than conforming and creating a synthesis with the host society, unworldly Christianity involves attempts to criticize it, reform it, or even abandon it altogether in the pursuit of individual salvation. An extreme example of this attitude is evoked by Coffey’s (2022, pp. 42–43) description of some strands of early evangelical preaching: “Saving souls was more important than improving society”.

In practice, of course, these two impulses are often deeply intermingled. All Christian thought, organizations, and behavior can be seen as ongoing attempts to work out the contradictions between institutional and countercultural logics. For example, consider a pastor trying to build a church, which requires paying employees, navigating zoning requirements for a new building, and perhaps even a lawsuit over a disputed property line, but then also trying to live a life like Christ, deeply rebellious against mainstream society. At some point, these two impulses will become difficult to reconcile, leading to a crisis and readjustment. These tensions mean that Christianity is marked by a high degree of fluidity, with some discourses and practices becoming hegemonic, only to be replaced by their opposites (Clark 2012, p. 189). While individual Christian groups or pastors will embody unique mixes of institutional or countercultural logics, the overall religious ecosystem will reflect the dominant configuration of logics at any given time. It is probable that moderate forms of these logics flourish in situations where they are balanced against each other. For example, if supporters of the two perspectives are members of the same organization or network, they may force each other to make compromises. Conversely, these logics are more likely to become extreme in situations where they face little resistance, such as the successful co-option of rivals in the same organization or the emergence of a fractured religious landscape where disconnected organizations are free to pursue their own agendas. A deeper examination of how these impulses have historically shaped Christianity is outside the scope of this paper, but analytically separating the two logics is important because they potentially have very different impacts on modernization.

Table 1 presents a theoretical model of how worldly and unworldly Christianity contribute to modernization. The first column of the diagram shows the central logic of each type of Christianity as well as the kinds of behavior it encourages, noting especially that institutionalizing and countercultural logics come in moderate and more extreme forms. The second column sums up the potential benefits of each type of Christianity in their moderate forms on modernization, identifying how these logics act as a vector and as a catalyst, respectively. The last column, however, shows the dysfunctional consequences that may result if these logics are taken to extremes. In both types of Christianity, the potential complications can be categorized as diversionary (i.e., they take resources away
from modernization efforts) or antisocial (i.e., they change the relationship between the religion and its host society). These potential benefits and complications are discussed in more detail below.

Table 1. The impact of Christianity on modernization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Logic</th>
<th>Potential Benefits</th>
<th>Potential Complications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worldly Christianity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A logic of institution building that seeks to establish ties with the host society that is socially, economically, and politically relevant</td>
<td>A vector for modernizing influences</td>
<td>Diversionary — religious institutions become synonymous with the host society’s elite structures and divert resources and human capital for their own self-replication rather than democratization, economic growth, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exemplified by service-providing institutions such as schools, hospitals, and charities</td>
<td>Supplements existing governance structures and can be foundational for the creation of civil society</td>
<td>Antisocial — religious institutions are victims of their own success as modernizing agents and seek to undo societal changes or freeze them using coercion (legal, physical, etc.) to preserve their institutions, resulting in an adversarial relationship with mainstream society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In moderate forms, the institutions pragmatically make themselves useful for society, but in extreme forms, they may coerce society to serve the interests of the institution</td>
<td>A conduit for international funding and flows of human capital by co-religionists outside the country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unworldly Christianity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Countercultural logic that criticizes mainstream religious or secular institutions and seeks to create more sacred or spiritual life</td>
<td>A catalyst shaping modernization</td>
<td>Diversionary — a strong focus on transcendence causes the misallocation of resources and human capital away from modernization and towards spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exemplified by an emphasis on individual spirituality and the desire for the transcendence of human institutions</td>
<td>A source of reform pressures directed against state or religious institutions that have become dysfunctional</td>
<td>Antisocial — the counterculture views the host society as irredeemably flawed and seeks to either supplant it or create its own splinter society, which may involve various types of illegal behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate forms seek to protect society from injustice, but more extreme versions may see society itself as the source of evil</td>
<td>Facilitates the articulation of individual human rights and justice claims that can offset the negative externalities of modernization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Offers psychological support in periods of traumatic change</td>
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As suggested by Table 1, worldly Christianity has the most direct potential impact on modernization. Especially for an undeveloped host society with weak state structures, the growth of Christian institutions can help create the foundations of civil society, supplement a lack of state support, and provide essential services for local people. It also facilitates the creation of transnational linkages with external sources of finances or human capital. Especially in cases where these institutions spread through pragmatism (such as missionaries providing education or health services as an enticement to church membership), it creates many opportunities for potential spillovers for the local society. In this regard, worldly Christianity acts as a vector for modernization influences because creating institutions with deep links to local society inevitably entails the transfer of a wide basket of skills, technologies, and techniques associated with modernity. A good example of this process is the case of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in the late nineteenth century, which contributed to the creation of a global civil society and pragmatically promoted a ‘Protestant modernity’ through secular activities (see Fischer-Tiné et al. 2021).
Conversely, the countercultural logic of unworldly Christianity is often seen as an obstacle to modernization because it emphasizes transcendental concerns. It has been suggested in other contexts that a focus on transcendentalism, such as the belief in an afterlife, may undermine modernization by encouraging people to be satisfied with their current life of poverty (see Makrides 2019, pp. 24–25). However, not all Christian countercultures simply seek to escape our earthly existence, many seek to reform it. Historically, these movements have been a vibrant source of ideas and discourses emphasizing individual rights and justice that were useful for critiquing unjust religious and secular institutions. Therefore, in our model, the most important potential contribution of the countercultural impulse in Christianity is not by starting modernization but by acting as a catalyst of reform when crises or dysfunctional institutions emerge in the modernization process. Because modernity is not singular but has “alternative, parallel, vernacular, colonial . . . forms” (Thomas 2011, p. 731), we suggest that the ability of Christian countercultures to contest state and religious institutions plays a significant role in deciding the final shape of modernity.

However, extreme forms of both impulses can have potentially negative consequences for modernization. As laid out in Table 1, institutional logics can result in diversionary effects if they become so powerful and widespread that the growth of religious institutions absorbs most of a society’s resources and human capital, leaving little left for economic development. Conversely, an antisocial effect can result if the religious institutions resort to coercion rather than pragmatism to control society. In both cases, the institutions are no longer seeking relevancy by providing services to society; rather, they are forcing society to serve the interests of the institution. Although historically rare, theocracies are an expression of this extreme logic because they create governance structures that focus “on the upholding and servicing of the ways of life that the church views as its mission to enforce, or elicit from, the lay society” (Ferrero 2013, p. 724).

Similar patterns can be seen in cases of extreme countercultural logics. The exact set of ideas motivating Christian countercultures can vary considerably—in large part because Biblical interpretation can support many different theological positions (see Morgan 1998)—but negative complications become more likely if these cultures position themselves as inimically hostile to the corporeal world or mainstream society. For example, if the host society is successfully encouraged to prioritize other-worldly concerns above all else, it can cause diversionary effects when individuals seek spirituality rather than social, economic, and political development. An extreme example of this is apocalyptic cults where believers are encouraged to commit mass suicide (Robbins 1986). Similarly, if the counterculture views the host society as irredeemably evil, it may adopt antisocial strategies such as violence or turning upon itself and seeking isolation. As a result, instead of acting as a public source of critique and reform pressures, these extreme countercultures become alternative societies, often secretly and perhaps even illegally. Both of these outcomes can result in “destructive” relationships with the host society (see Bohm and Alison 2001).

To sum up, this model of Christianity’s impacts on modernization is not determinate. The potential benefits of these two impulses require a creative tension or balancing between institutionalizing and countercultural logics. A useful metaphor for understanding the relationship between these two impulses is what astrobiologists refer to as the “Goldilocks Zone”, a thin habitable zone around a star that is neither too hot nor too cold. Similarly, modernization is best served by an overall religious ecosystem exhibiting moderate oscillations between the two logics, which help self-correct each other’s negative features, while extreme swings are likely to interrupt or even stall modernization. In the sections that follow, the interplay between Christianity’s institutional and countercultural logics in South Korea’s modernization will be explored in detail.

3. Social Modernization

Of the different spheres of modernization, Christianity had the greatest impact on the social modernization of Korea. Specifically, the spread of Christian health and education
services in the late nineteenth century and early colonial period illustrates how the institutional impulses underpinning much of the early missionary work in Korea generated positive spillovers for the host society and acted as a vector for modernizing influences.

It may have been a pure coincidence that the first Protestant missionary to Korea was a physician, namely Dr. Horace Newton Allen (1858–1932), and that he began his missionary work by taking care of the sick. But the first missionaries in Korea made conscious efforts to make the provision of medical care a key part of their Christian mission (see The Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church 1912). This attempt to indirectly promote Christianity by providing health services is an example of what our model describes as pragmatic institution building. In fact, medical care soon became the area in which the missionaries found no equals and for which they were most admired (Yi 2003). Subsequent arrivals of medically trained missionaries—including renowned figures in the annals of Korean Christianity, such as Drs. H. G. Underwood, William Scranton, J. B. Ross, O. R. Avison, and John Heron—facilitated further medical work. The establishment of dispensaries all over the country ensured that people in the countryside were not beyond the reach of missionaries. The administration of vaccinations in hospitals and in nearly every village—through which they introduced public health practices—earned the missionaries the highest respect and admiration. As Ensign George C. Foulk, a naval aide to the first Envoy of the United States to Korea, wrote, “the readiness with which people of all classes, ages, and sexes patronize the hospital is very remarkable when it is considered how distrustful Orientals are in other countries accepting western medical treatment” (quoted in Hunt 1980, pp. 33–34). The healing missionary became so important that it had become, by 1902, the “policy” of all missionary agencies in Korea not to establish a new mission station unless a doctor could be on its staff.

This process facilitated the flow of medical resources and human capital to Korea. For example, in their analysis of the history of medical missionary works in Korea from 1884 to 1941, Hwang and Kee (1994) found that a total of 280 medical missionaries came to Korea to provide medical services, i.e., 133 medical doctors, 5 dentists, and 136 nurses. An additional thirty-one Western medical personnel were not affiliated with any missionary society. Another important spillover was the establishment of Western-style medical institutions. Between 1886 and 1910, the missionaries from the United States, Canada, and Australia established more than 30 hospitals and clinics throughout the peninsula (cited from M.-C. Kim 2012, p. 190). The most prominent of these was Gwanghyewon (also known as Jejungwon), the country’s first Western-style hospital that was established in 1885, then reborn as the Severance Hospital in 1904 when Dr. Avison refurbished it with modern equipment. In 1917, moreover, Dr. Avison founded Korea’s first medical school, Severance Medical School, which is now part of Yonsei University, the most prestigious Christian university in Korea. As the first Western-style medical school, the school trained a total of 548 medical doctors by 1940, and its sister school, the College of Nursing, produced 188 nurses, all of whom were Protestants, by 1936 (I.-C. Kang 1996, p. 204). At the time of the country’s liberation from Japan in 1945, roughly a third of all doctors were graduates of Severance Medical School, and they were considered the best in the field.5

In addition to health services, church organizations played central roles in the provision of mass education and the increase in literacy. The missionaries were the first to establish a complete system of education, from kindergarten to college, and they were the first to implement a modern curriculum in schools, including science, social sciences, and medical science, all of which contributed to the modernization of education in Korea (Jongeneel et al. 2009). The first missionary school in Korea opened in October 1885. Mary F. Scranton, who came to Korea in June 1885 with her only son, Dr. William B. Scranton, acted independently in opening the girls’ school, which was named Ewha Hakdang (translated as “Pear Blossom Institute of Learning”) by the queen. In contrast to medical services, there were initial challenges in making Christian educational institutions relevant to the locals. At first, the school had difficulty attracting and keeping students because rumors spread that the missionaries might kidnap children and take them to the United States. Gradually,
Mrs. Scranton was able to win the trust of the parents, and by 1888, eighteen girls were enrolled in the school (Paik 1971, p. 127). Permission to open a similar school for boys was granted by the king in 1886, and he named it Baejae Hakdang (translated as “Hall for Rearing Useful Men”) a year later. In October of the first year, more than 20 students were enrolled and by 1887, over 60.6

Aware of Koreans’ zeal for education, the missionaries continued to expand their involvement in educational work, pragmatically perceiving it as method of “indirect evangelicalism” (Cha 2022, p. 113). By 1910, the number of schools founded by Christian organizations totaled 823, which amounted to about 37 percent of the total number of schools at the time (2250) (B.-G. Lee 1973, p. 69). Also, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the church oversaw the only complete educational system in Korea at the time—for only the church provided education from the primary to college level. Indeed, by the early 1900s, institutions of higher learning were first introduced by the missionaries. In 1906, Soongsil Academy, established by the Presbyterian mission in Pyongyang in 1900, added a college department with twelve students in two classes. In 1910, Ewah Hakdang opened the first college department for girls, and in 1915, Yonhui College (Yonsei University) was founded. Missionaries also played a critical role in introducing Korean students to American education and university systems. The fact that both Presbyterian and Methodist denominations were the only organizations that offered systematic scholarship opportunities to study in the United States further ensured the social prominence of Protestantism in Korean society (I.-C. Kang 1996, p. 199).

The expansion of Christian educational services and their conformity with local demand exemplify institutional logics, but countercultural logics were also evident in the way that missionaries sought to re-engineer Korean society. For example, the missionaries introduced modern public education to Korea, where education had traditionally been the preserve of the yangban aristocracy and did away with the traditional concentration on Confucian classics. The missionaries wrote science textbooks, such as chemistry and physics, and made the natural sciences an important part of their curriculum (Paik 1971, p. 129), which exposed Korean students to the new world of science which hitherto had been wholly absent in the traditional schools. Also, they popularized the use of the Korean script, hangeul, in teaching and translation, which helped undermine the traditional hegemony of the Chinese script used by Korean elites (see C.-W. Park et al. 2015; J.-H. Lee 2010). In most cases, these countercultural logics were moderate enough to challenge injustices without challenging society itself, which facilitated institution building. By opening the doors of their schools to ordinary Koreans and helping them shed traditional mindsets, missionaries believed that they were not only gaining converts but also providing the country with a modernized leadership: “From their number will arise the men who in politics, commerce, industry, education, and religion will influence and direct the destinies of multiplied thousands of men and women” (Jones 1910, p. 16).

During the Japanese colonial period, Protestant groups were responsible for 20–40 percent of secondary education, and many of the graduates of these schools were or became Christians (C.-J. Noh 1992, p. 89). Also, the number of graduates from the Christian-founded institutions of higher learning totaled more than 4000 before the liberation: until 1944, the number of graduates of Yonhui College and Severance Medical College totaled 2888; graduates from Ewah College (Ewahjeonmunhakgyo) numbered 711; and until its closing in 1938, Soongsil College had 446 graduates (I.-C. Kang 1996, p. 201). Given the fact that the total number of Koreans who were students, graduates, or dropouts of college level education or above was 29,438 as of May 1944 (National Statistical Office 1993), the number of Christian graduates represented more than 13 percent of the total (I.-C. Kang 1996, p. 201). If we look at only the figures for graduates, it can be said that the Christian total represented about 15–18 percent, a striking figure given the fact that Christians comprised less than one percent of the total population at the time. More than any other group, therefore, the Protestant Christian community had the largest number of highly educated individuals, a considerable number of whom also studied in the United States.
But Christianity was not the only self-declared modernizing agent in Korea, particularly after the peninsula’s annexation by Imperial Japan in 1910. Imperial Japan promoted an alternative version of Christian modernity, even sponsoring its own Christian missionary movement on the peninsula (see Neuhaus 2021), and sought to exercise control over pre-existing Christian institutions, particularly in the field of education (Fisher 1928; Cha 2022). An address by Dr. Rentaro Mizuno, Administrative Superintendent of the Government-general of Chosen, at the tenth annual conference of the Federal Council of Protestant Evangelical Missions in Korea, 21 September 1921, illustrates how this Japanese co-option of churches was framed:

Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, are not you and we coworkers in Chosen and both aiming at the same object though from different standpoints? Nothing is so essential as religious influence for the betterment of social conditions, and your work is of great help to the Government and directly or indirectly promotes the happiness and prosperity of the whole people. (Mizuno 1921, p. 2)

This narrative of civilizing together as coworkers was difficult to resist because the institutional logic that helped make Christianity such an effective vector for modernization in Korea—such as the vast sums of time and money invested in churches, hospitals, and schools—left it vulnerable to the exercise of state control. Missionaries criticized the Japanese branch of Christianity for being, in the terminology of our model, so focused on institutional logics and pragmatism that they were becoming secularized (see Speer 1897), but in practice, they too were reluctant to directly challenge colonial rule and focused on preserving their institutions by working within the concept of a shared civilizing mission (see Fisher 1928; see also Cha 2022, pp. 12–13, 99–101).

At this point, a counterculture emerged from the grassroots of Korean Christianity that was highly critical of the Japanese version of modernity as well as the church leadership that indirectly supported the colonial authorities through a policy of political neutrality. Admittedly, the Korean nationalist movement was diverse, but the Christian element played a prominent role. Perhaps part of the reason for this was that Koreans first became acquainted with several of the key values that mark modernity, such as freedom, human rights, democracy, and equality, largely through exposure to Christianity (see W.-J. Kang 1997; C.-S. Park 2003). This provided nationalists with a powerful vocabulary for articulating their demands, not only against the Japanese but also against the church leadership. Thus, even when missionaries explicitly called for religious institutions to be obedient to the Japanese authorities and disclaimed any responsibility for the independence movement, they could not help but implicitly acknowledge the moral authority of the counterculture, admitting that “Christianity itself is the seed of democracy” (Cynn 1921, p. 65; also see Fisher 1928). This tension reached a critical juncture during the March First movement in 1919, which saw widespread participation by Christians, who acted without missionaries’ permission (Cha 2022, p. 122). This bottom-up resistance is cited by Kane and Park (2009) as a key reason for the long-term success and indigenization of Christianity in Korea. For our purposes, the movement is also an important illustration of how Christian counter-cultures mobilize religious discourses and imagery to shape the direction of modernizing processes. The events of 1919, although they did not directly lead to Korea’s political independence, nevertheless played a key role in delegitimizing Japan’s vision of modernity and successfully contested its co-option of Christianity on the peninsula (Neuhaus 2021, pp. 93–94).

4. Economic Modernization

Following Korea’s liberation by the Allied powers at the end of World War II, the tension between countercultural and institutional logics seemed to abate as the country gained independence. Christian churches quickly established relationships with the American occupation authorities (USAMGIK) and then the Republic of Korea government. Returning missionaries—who had been expelled after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—also supported this new era of institutional expansion. Although Christianity continued to be a
vector for social modernization by providing education and health services and continued also to be a source of countercultural critiques of traditional social ills, the post-liberation era is particularly important because of Christianity’s impact on economic modernization.

First, at the material level, Protestant churches emerged from this period as “a nationwide political and social organization with power and authority” (K. Lee 2020, p. 148). Aided by the presence of American missionaries as advisors to the USAMGIK, many properties formerly owned by the Japanese government, and properties that had formerly belonged to other religious groups, were given to Protestant Christian organizations (K. Lee 2020, pp. 146–47). Implicit state support helped the rapid expansion of church membership. Between 1952 and 1960, the number of Protestants in Korea increased by 50 percent (D.-C. Kim 2017, p. 223; also C. Lee and Suh 2017, p. 478). As a result, one of the most direct ways that Christian churches became economically relevant to society was by acting as an employer, providing the economic livelihood for religious professionals and their families. The number of pastors soared over the years in step with the rapidly expanding number of churches and Christians. For example, the number of Protestant churches grew steadily throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, increasing more than seven-fold. The total jumped from 5011 in 1960 to 12,866 in 1970, a 157 percent increase, and to 21,243 in 1980 and 35,819 in 1990, which was a 68.6 percent jump from 1980. Given the fact that many churches each had more than two pastors, there were probably more than 50,000 pastors in Korea by 1990. Add to this the tens of thousands of church secretaries and caretakers; employees of religious publishing companies; parochial school teachers, as well as clerical and secretarial staff for area, provincial, regional, and national denominations; social workers employed by religious welfare agencies, and the like, which means that roughly half a million families in Korea derived part or all of their family income from Protestant churches and their related organizations. Churches and religious organizations also played an important economic role as owners of property and builders of facilities. The property value of more than 35,000 Protestant churches, along with their prayer and retreat centers as well as other landholdings, has never been calculated, but estimates would have placed the churches collectively as the largest asset holder in the country at the time.

Churches were also key nodes in the redistribution of overseas resources, especially foreign aid and missionary funds (D.-C. Kim 2017, p. 224; Yoon 2017, p. 240). Christian groups were able to mobilize more resources than other religious groups because of their extensive connections with foreign churches, especially those in the United States (Cho 2014, p. 314). As a result, Protestant groups played a dominant role in the work of the KAVA (Korea Association of Voluntary Agencies), which was created in 1952 and included fifty-one aid agencies (K. Lee 2020, pp. 147–48; see Church World Service 1953). The re-establishment of overseas religious networks also facilitated the introduction of new technologies. For example, the introduction of radiation therapy technology for cancer treatment in the late 1950s and the introduction of pacemaker procedures in the 1960s were made possible through the help of the missionaries (M.-C. Kim 2012, p. 195).

Due to their wealth and access to overseas resources, Christian organizations became the largest nongovernmental contributors to philanthropic causes in Korea (M. Kim et al. 1999; I. Kim 1998). In the postwar period, the low capacity of the South Korean state meant that contributions of non-state actors were essential. In this context, Christians operated more welfare institutions than any other organization, governmental or nongovernmental, from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, and continue to play a significant role today. It was the Protestant missionaries who first introduced institutional philanthropy by founding the nation’s first orphanages and schools for the blind. Korean churches, Protestant and Catholic, have followed in their footsteps by operating an estimated two thousand-plus welfare centers across the country, including those for the poor, orphans, abandoned children, the elderly, and those with disabilities (M. Kim et al. 1999, p. 57). During this period, institutional logics were encouraging both liberal and conservative churches to become welfare providers, but there was an important nuance in their respective approaches. Even when providing local assistance, the former were more critical of the structural factors in
state and society, and therefore exhibited signs of what our model classifies as countercultural logics, whereas the latter focused on the immediate alleviation of individual suffering (see Chung 2020).

The second major contribution of major Christian churches to economic modernization was the ideological support they provided to the Korean government’s industrialization policies: “The church leadership believed that the growth of Christianity and the growth of national economy went hand-in-hand” (S. C. H. Kim 2007, p. 46). It needs to be noted that this encouragement of industrialization was the result of deliberate choices by Korean pastors rather than an innate characteristic of the religion. Christianity, like other world religions, has faced a dilemma regarding economic attitudes and behavior. Early Christianity viewed poverty as a virtue and discouraged the adherent from becoming engrossed with material goods and successes. The Bible often exalts poverty, as shown in the following verses: “Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth” and “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven”. Max Weber (1963) calls this a “theodicy of despair” or “theodicy of disprivilege”, which was used as a rationalization of one’s poor economic and social status as a virtue and as an advantage concerning salvation. In contrast, there is a “theodicy of good fortune”, which serves as theological justification for one’s superior economic and social status (Weber 1946, p. 271).

The mainstream of Korean Protestantism embraced a theodicy of good fortune known as giboksinsang, or seeking blessings, which encouraged the faithful to believe that accepting Jesus Christ as the Savior meant not only salvation and eternal life but also material successes on earth. From the perspective of our model, this linkage of material success and religion, as well as the way it pragmatically drew upon traditional Korean shamanistic practices (S. C. H. Kim 2007, p. 42; D.-C. Kim 2017), exemplifies worldly Christianity’s emphasis on adapting religious institutions to the social and economic needs of the host society. This stress on God’s material blessings in the present life was most conspicuously found in the message of Paul Yonggi Cho, the pastor of what would become the world’s largest church, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul. Cho preached the “theology of prosperity”, advancing the idea that the acceptance of the Holy Spirit can mean that one is, besides being blessed with salvation in the next life, also graced with health and materialistic successes in this world. Conversely, poverty was framed as a punishment or curse for those who had wronged God (S. C. H. Kim 2007).

By exalting the theodicy of good fortune, Christianity indirectly encouraged entrepreneurship and economic participation among the faithful. Protestant Christians were, and are, conspicuously present in the economic sphere. In 1962, for example, 5 of the 22 top conglomerates were founded by Protestants (I.-C. Kang 1996, p. 207). Also, especially in Protestant churches, the strong emphasis on material outcomes and work ethic helped weaken the traditional distaste for manual labor in Korean society. By emphasizing one’s work as a “calling”, the church advanced the notion that one’s hard work in his or her secular occupation, however menial it may be, adds to the glorification of God and to one’s success (Baldacchino 2012). Problematically, though, this prosperity gospel also acted as a form of social control because it encouraged people to improve their individual ranking in existing hierarchies rather than pursuing social justice (see S.-G. Kim 2016; Suh 2019, p. 572). Another problem was how the prioritization of church growth led to corruption, a close relationship with state authorities, and a zero-sum religious landscape of intense competition: “Like commercial businesses, the Churches drove their adherents to take action to pack the church buildings with people” (Cho 2014, p. 315). Thus, the institutional logic of Christianity was extremely powerful in this period—arguably to the point of becoming an “over-development” of churches (D.-C. Kim 2017, p. 228).

Ultimately, these mainstream South Korean Christian churches played a key role in choosing which type of economic development was possible by giving social and political support to the state’s virulent anticommunist policies. The tension between communism and Christianity in Korea—described as a serious problem in the 1920s (Fisher
became existential with the division of the peninsula in 1945 and the Korean War (1950–1953). Buoyed by large numbers of North Korean Christians fleeing persecution, a militant anticommunist version of Christianity emerged in South Korea. Southern churches accommodated this counterculture relatively easily because it was critical of the Northern regime rather than their institutional interests, but this process still had important domestic repercussions. As described by Yoon (2017), this Christian sùnggong (victory against communism) movement ultimately supported the emergence of a military dictatorship in South Korea. The military governments reciprocated by granting special privileges to many Christian groups, which enhanced the power and authority of their networks (see D.-C. Kim 2017). The Chun Doo-wan regime, for example, enjoyed the public support of influential conservative Protestant pastors, even during the 1980 Gwangju massacre of civilian protestors, and in exchange, exempted major Christian events such as the ‘80 World Evangelization Crusade from government curfews (K. Lee 2020, p. 150). In this way, the anticommunist counterculture originating from North Korean refugees dovetailed with the institutional logics of major South Korea churches, and together they synthesized into “a kind of political organization that sought to stabilize anti-Communist capitalism” (D.-C. Kim 2017, pp. 213–14).

5. Political Modernization

The cooperation between major Christian groups and the state following the Korean War helped facilitate South Korea’s unique brand of state-led industrialization, but this process risked leading to a modernization trap or an illiberal version of modernity (Snyder 2017). This danger was particularly evident in the early 1970s as Park Chung Hee succeeded in establishing a stranglehold on the presidency through a manipulation of the constitution (C.-S. Park 2003). In October 1972, after a narrow electoral victory, Park dissolved the National Assembly and began work on a new constitution. The resulting Yusin Constitution in December 1972 became the constitution of South Korea’s Fourth Republic (1972–1979). The Yusin Constitution granted immense powers to the president, as the president’s term was extended to six years, without any limits on re-election. The constitution also did away with direct popular votes for presidential elections. Instead, an electoral college responsible for electing the president was created, namely the National Conference for Unification. The requirements for candidacy to become a member of the electoral college were so strict that only one candidate made it to the ballot, and only Park’s friends and cronies of the regime successfully became members of the electoral college. Park was elected without opposition in 1972 and 1978, and the system remained in effect even after Park’s death in 1979 until the 1987 presidential election. The new constitution also guaranteed Park a parliamentary majority, for he had the power to appoint a large proportion of the members of the National Assembly. The regime also resorted to using the National Security Act to punish any antigovernment activity as subversive acts attempting to overthrow the government. Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime enjoyed the support of many Christian groups, and in turn he facilitated their continued institutional expansion, such as facilitating conversion work within the military (C. Lee and Suh 2017, pp. 480, 493–94). Many of these groups cooperated with the state’s agenda because they shared its anticommunist ideology, but it is also likely that many Korean churches had no other recourse but to choose between conformity and resistance. Jongchul Choi (1992) claims that churches during the 1960s and 1970s can be categorized into four groups in terms of their stance toward the authoritarian regimes: conformists, negotiators, adapters, and resisters (see Table 2).
As suggested by Table 2, the authoritarian period witnessed the co-option of many Christian organizations but also the emergence of a diverse Christian countercultural movement criticizing the state and calling for new political possibilities, what Suh (2019, p. 564) describes as “a voice of dissent and protest against the oppressive state”. As with the independence movement in the 1920s, this Christian countercultural movement fed into a broader social movement challenging the authoritarian state. Especially when the Yushin Constitution changed Park’s presidency into a legal dictatorship, there was an upsurge of demonstrations by the intelligentsia, Christian organizations, workers, and most vocally and militantly, university students. In response, Park promulgated emergency decrees in 1974 and 1975 to enable authorities to arrest and imprison agitators at will, resulting in the imprisonment of hundreds of dissidents. All the while, political corruption and the economic disparity between rural and urban residents, white- and blue-collar workers, and the rich and the poor became increasingly critical, leading to popular dismay and discontent. The regime of Chun Doo-hwan, the president of South Korea from 1980 to 1988, who maintained a similar pattern of military authoritarianism combined with poor social policies, was met with the same, if not more fervent, grassroots demands and demonstrations for democracy and for a more equal distribution of wealth.

An important part of this Christian counterculture was the emergence of a Korean form of indigenized liberation theology called minjungsinhak, literally meaning the “theology of the people”, which became a towering symbol of the rally for democracy, equality, social justice, and human rights (see Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia 1981). Like other variants of liberation theology, minjungsinhak views the struggle for democracy, justice, and equality as a spiritual struggle. In the Korean Christian Manifesto, issued in 1973, it is evident how religious values were drawn upon to critique an unjust society and justify protest mobilization:

No one is above the law except God. Power is created by God and entrusted to rulers for justice and peace in human society. Whoever puts himself above
the law and violates the mandate of justice is in rebellion with God . . . We as Christians must fight against any system of deception and manipulation for we are witness to truth; truthtelling should be our life. (Korean Christian Manifesto 1973, pp. i–ii)

The proponents of this protest theology became engaged in a variety of religiously based social activities to remedy social injustice and inequalities and stood in opposition to more conservative versions of Protestant Christianity (A. E. Kim 2018, p. 5). Even though many members of this movement were persecuted by state authorities, it was not only concerned with political modernization. Rather, minjungsinhak exemplifies the long tradition of Korean Christian theological indigenization and the culmination of social and economic modernization efforts from below. As described by Küster (2010, p. xvi), it was “not just a political theology or just a cultural theology” but transcended both categories. In this way, minjungsinhak became “a major instrument of civil movement that has challenged both the church and society to deal with the problems of socio-economic and political injustice” (S. C. H. Kim 2007, p. 48).

This emergent Christian counterculture was also reflected in activism for fairer labor laws for the working class and a more equal distribution of the nation’s newly created wealth. Due in large part to anticommunist ideology, the antilabor measures of the South Korean government from the 1960s to the 1980s were appalling: labor strikes were illegal; labor organizers were often arrested on outlandish charges of antigovernment activities; and missionaries who got involved in the labor movement were deported while Korean ministers had to endure imprisonment and even torture. In response, some Christian groups made strong demands for improvement in working conditions and for more equitable labor laws. This counterculture introduced a system of industrial evangelism that catered to the needs of the industrial labor force. For example, the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) of Protestant churches and the Jeunes Ouvriers Catholiques (JOC or Young Catholic Workers) of the Catholic Church instituted programs to not only help factory workers with their practical needs, such as medical insurance and workers’ credit unions, but also to raise their political consciousness.

Minjung groups and labor activists were among the most radical proponents of change, but they were not alone. As Dohyup Shin (1994) argues, there were three factors which drove many Korean churches to engage in the democratization movement. First, as political oppression and socioeconomic inequality reached new heights in the 1960s and 1970s, many churches rightfully thought that their legitimacy rested on their support for human rights and the dignity of the repressed and poor masses. Second, various social movements pressured churches to support their causes, and when the churches complied, it provided moral authority to the movements. Religion is, of course, one of the most powerful and influential sources of legitimation, and both the powerful and the powerless often seek to gain the support of religious organizations for legitimacy. While it is true that many Protestant denominations and churches supported the Park Chung Hee regime, those denominations and churches which protested the regime represented the most important institutional presence, along with the Catholic Church, in the democratization movement. Third, as public pressure for change accumulated, many churches pragmatically perceived that support for democratization would enhance their reputation which, in turn, would boost their competitive edge in gaining more followers in the religious market. Under these circumstances, many churches thought best to engage in various sociopolitical movements, including the democratization movement.

From the 1970s onward, important segments of the Catholic and Protestant churches became increasingly critical of the authoritarian state. They championed the values of freedom and individual rights, acting as the strongest supporters of the democratic movement against the unprecedented sociopolitical role of the military (see Y.-H. Han 1987). The churches collectively questioned the regimes’ commitment to human rights and democracy, confronting it over labor relations, human rights abuse, and political oppression. Among the Protestant groups that played a leading role in establishing antigovernment coalitions
of students, intellectuals, workers, and farmers, the most prominent included the KNCC, the Christian Academy, the Christian Professors’ Conference, the Korean Student Christian Federation (KSCF), and the Korean Christian Women’s Association. Among these groups, the KNCC, comprising 12,700 pastors, representing nearly a third of all Protestant clergy and six denominations, played the most significant role in the democratization movement by serving as the umbrella group for organizing antigovernment activities (H.-B. Im 2006, p. 141).

Churches also sheltered antigovernment activists, allowing them to seek refuge in places of worship or denominational offices. For example, the Korean Christian Center in downtown Seoul was a renowned place for staging sit-ins and hunger strikes as well as holding news conferences about antigovernment activities. Myungdong Cathedral, also located in downtown Seoul, served similar purposes. As Jang Jip Choi (1989, p. 104) argues, “churches assumed a key role in political opposition movements and served as a kind of refuge for dissident forces” (quoted in H.-B. Im 2006, p. 136). Hyug Baeg Im (2006) argues that Korean churches contributed to the democratization movement by becoming an incubator for it. As the only institution largely impervious to regime intrusion, churches were effective sanctuaries for dissidents. One of the key reasons why churches enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the state is that they maintained a close relationship with their counterparts in the United States, the patron state that the Korean government heavily depended on for support and legitimacy. The same was largely true for the Catholic Church, as it maintained close links with Vatican City and Western countries. In this way, countercultural logics acted as a catalyst, but reform pressures were ultimately successful only when they successfully synthesized with powerful religious institutions.

Although most large, conservative Protestant denominations and churches either maintained neutrality or provided support to authoritarian governments from the 1960s to the 1980s, it is significant that the pro-democracy Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, along with university student associations, were the only other major organizations capable of opposing state authority and control. Christians were not the only reason for Korean democratization, but they played a key role. This prominence is reflected by the large proportion of Christians who were incarcerated for antigovernment activities, including priests, pastors, union leaders, students, and journalists, and may also explain the outsized participation of Christians in South Korean public life since democratization.

6. Conclusions

This paper has shown how Christianity played a key role in the social, economic, and political modernization of South Korea. These beneficial contributions were the result of oscillations between two contrary impulses at the heart of Christianity. The first, which we term worldly Christianity, is an institutional impulse seeking to make Christian organizations socially, economically, and politically relevant to the host society. The second, unworlly Christianity, is a rebellious or countercultural logic that seeks individual salvation and the transcendence of human institutions. The tension between these two logics is visible in all Christian organizations and individuals. Extremes in either direction can lead to socially harmful behaviors and retard modernization, but when the two logics moderate one another, it can create beneficial conditions, or a “Goldilocks zone”, for the modernization of the host society. South Korea, we argue, was a successful case of this process. Christian institutions acted as vectors for modernizing influences as they pragmatically embedded themselves in the host society, but these organizations were vulnerable to state co-option—such as by the Japanese imperial government, US occupation authorities, and South Korean authoritarian rulers. However, the timely emergence of Christian countercultures demanding individual rights, salvation, and justice helped offset these tendencies and acted as catalysts influencing which pathway to modernity should be taken. Although the “multi-vocality” of religion can make it difficult to determine its impact on modernization (J. Anderson 2009), this paper has shown how oscillations between the two main logics of Christianity created positive spillovers in the case of South Korea.
But is this relationship still positive today? There is a perception that Korean Christianity has fallen into a crisis in the post-democratization era. Although there are many causes cited for this, such as the lingering influence of shamanism or Confucianism in church leadership (S.-R. Lee and Smith 2011) or the lack of spirituality and societal trust (W.-G. Lee 2016, pp. 5–6), a deeper reason appears to be that modernization has posed fundamental challenges to all religions, particularly by creating more competition among them as well as changing peoples’ lifestyles and values. It appears that some Christian leaders and organizations have responded to these pressures by pursuing extreme forms of countercultural or institutional logics, and the split between progressive and conservative Protestant groups has become a defining aspect of the religious landscape (Chung 2020). Particularly, the emergence of the Christian new right in South Korean politics has led to many of the negative effects identified in our model. These groups, as discussed by Cho (2014, p. 321), have used political and legal interventions in an attempt to “restore democratized society to social conditions favorable to itself”. Similarly, controversies stemming from excessive materialism, such as family succession and financial fraud in megachurches (K. Lee 2020) as well as the opposition of some Korean Protestant churches and religious sects to disease controls for economic reasons during COVID-19 (S. Lee and Oh 2021), have created a sense that some Christian organizations are pursuing their institutional aggrandizement at the expense of their host society, what our model calls a diversionary effect. Simultaneously, countercultures are aggressively attacking the host society, not just corrupt institutions. This leads to behavior that our model terms antisocial, such as acts of vandalism against other religions (K. Lee 2020, pp. 6–8; Cho 2014, p. 318) as well as hate campaigns against sexual minorities, women’s rights, and foreign refugees (Heo 2021; N. Kim 2016).

This suggests that toleration and diversity remain the best path forward. Today, Korea is still facing many challenges from its rapid industrialization, including social inequality, intense competition, and a looming birthrate crisis described as worse than the Black Death (Douthat 2023). Therefore, it is important to take stock of the extent of Christianity’s contributions to the country’s social, economic, and political modernization but also how and why these contributions were possible. Christianity mattered in the Korean context because its institutions were modernizing vectors that pragmatically made themselves relevant to society as valuable providers of services while simultaneously acting as a source of countercultures that criticized injustices and promoted societal public goods like human rights and justice. But today, these logics are imbalanced. This is not merely a problem of progressive or conservative denominations but is better understood as a crosscutting issue. Institutional logics, when taken to extremes, can lead to the state or societal co-option of Christian organizations and their irrelevance. This can be seen in corruption scandals or claims that groups are becoming too politicized or secular. Conversely, extreme countercultures can lead to hostile relationships with the host society. This can happen both when groups are too reactionary, as in the case of conservative groups, but also when they are too progressive. Therefore, our model can serve as a diagnostic template for evaluating the health of the religious ecosystem and determining when Christian groups’ institutional and countercultural logics are moderate and when they are extreme and potentially leading to diversionary and antisocial results. Although this exploratory study did not quantify the variables of institutionalizing and countercultural logics, a fruitful avenue of future research could be to precisely measure these logics and map them within Christian organizations as well as at the national scale.

Lastly, this model is an important reminder that contestation and conflict are not necessarily bad. The moderate and beneficial oscillations between the two logics described in this paper stemmed from collisions between different Christian groups as well as controversies within them. This suggests that being willing to engage in debates and dialogue about these two logics is important, while groups that turn away from dialogue to specialize in one or the other can be problematic. Historically, maintaining a Korean religious ecosystem in the ‘Goldilocks zone’ required messy compromises full of dilemmas and conflicts for Christian leaders and organizations because institutional and countercultural logics constantly
pulled them in different directions. For example, in 1919, a missionary lamented that the two biggest inadequacies of his mission in Korea were a lack of “passionate, Pentecostal spirit of prayer” but also not enough “responsibility of stewardship . . . of material things” (Hill 1919, p. 19). As our model suggests, keeping this contradiction alive by trying to do both things, and not giving exclusive priority to one logic over the other, was what allowed Christianity to successfully act as both a vector and a catalyst for Korean modernization.

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**Notes**

1. This paper adopts a broad and nondenominational definition of Christianity, but in keeping with the theme of this Special Issue, it is predominately focused on Protestant Christianity. The case study, though, does distinguish between Catholics and Protestants where relevant. For the breakdown of contemporary religions in South Korea, see Lim et al. (2022).

2. Note that the dating of these periods is only approximate. Economic and political modernization overlapped considerably in the post-liberation period but are separated in our text for analytical purposes.

3. At the individual level, this tension often plays out between religion as “the outward and objectified elements of a tradition” and spirituality as “the inner life that is bound up with . . . a search on the part of an individual for reaching . . . one’s greatest potential” (Roof 2003, p. 138).

4. For example, concepts such as a covenant between rulers and the ruled, tolerance, and the right to resist unjust rulers all have religious roots (J. Anderson 2009, p. 194).

5. Christian hospitals and medical schools were among the largest and best equipped in the colonial and post-liberation periods. As of 1960, for example, there were only eight medical schools, and half of these were founded by Christian organizations (three were Protestant and one was Catholic) (M.-C. Kim 2012, p. 195).

6. The first missionaries’ schools did, however, face many problems. First, their schools were looked down upon by the nobility and the learned because the missionaries chose *hangeul*, the vernacular script of the common people, as the medium of instruction. The learned felt that the Korean alphabet had no place in schools because it was a vulgar language, only good for women and children. Second, whereas the missionaries wanted to use their educational work as a means to facilitate proselytizing, the students’ primary reason for attending Christian schools was to learn English, as interpreters were in demand.

7. As pointed out by one of our anonymous reviewers, it is important to note that Catholicism, despite arriving earlier in the peninsula, was much slower to develop secular institutions than Protestant churches, a disparity still evident today. In fact, the harsh prosecution of Catholic missionaries and believers in the early 18th century caused countercultural logics to be relatively stronger in Catholicism. A controversial example of this is the 1801 letter by Hwang Sayŏng to the Bishop of Beijing which sought to subvert the Joseon state to protect the faithful (see Baker and Rausch 2017).

8. As with the case of the medical sector, these institutions would continue to thrive into the modern period. In addition to operating hundreds of kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, the Catholic and Protestant churches operated, as of 1996, nearly one-fourth of the total number of colleges and universities in Korea, including 22 junior colleges and more than 70 four-year universities (Hangukjonggysahoeyeonguso [Research Institute for Korean Religion and Society] 1997).

9. This paper is describing key changes in Korea’s Christian ecosystem over a long period of time, which requires broad generalizations, but we acknowledge that the granularity of countercultural and institutional logics at the level of individual churches and denominations is an important part of the story. For example, the Northern Presbyterians decided to shut down their schools in Pyongyang in 1936 rather than participate in Shinto shrine ceremonies, an example of countercultural logics, whereas in 1939, the General Assembly of the Korean Presbyterian Church complied with the requirement (see Cha 2022, pp. 156–69).

10. A key moment of this process was the Great Revival of 1907 which marked not only an outpouring of indigenous Korean spirituality but also revealed levels of resentment against the missionaries (Cha 2022, pp. 73–75).

11. But it is important not to overstate the cohesiveness of post-liberation Protestantism in Korea. By the 1920s, there was a growing tension between liberal and conservative theologies (see Fisher 1928), and these controversies only heightened in the post-liberation period and “influenced the whole area of modern theological thought” (H. J. Lee 2013, p. 125). Nevertheless,
institutional logics predominated throughout this period as the various denominations, despite their schisms, experienced growth.

12 But, of course, not all pastors made this decision. As we discuss in the subsequent section, the development of minjungsinhak theology during this period reflects the growth of countercultural logics among some smaller Christian churches.

13 For more on the complex and often questionable political, regulatory, and economic deal-making required to build the Yoido Full Gospel Church, see Suh (2019, pp. 567–68).

14 An example of this was the Northwest Youth Association, a paramilitary Christian group responsible for human rights violations before and during the Korean War (Yoon 2017, p. 238).

15 The concept of Yushin, which means “restoration”, comes from the Meiji Restoration of Japan in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

16 We thank one of our anonymous peer reviewers for this observation.

17 The six denominations of the KNCC were the Christ Presbyterian Assembly of Korea, Jesus Presbyterian Church of Korea, Salvation Army, Methodist Church, Anglican Church, and Christ Evangelical Church of Korea.

18 Of course, we are not saying that other religions did not play a role. For example, Confucianism was an important contributor both to economic development and promoting obedience to the state (Horak and Yang 2018; Lew et al. 2011). This paper suggests that the Christian relationship to the Korean state and society was an important contributor, but we acknowledge that properly measuring the relative contributions of all the different factors to Korea’s success story is an ongoing multidisciplinary project.

19 As Hoo Jung Lee (2013, p. 125) notes, the schisms and controversies between progressive and conservative Protestantism were painful, but the debates themselves were productive: “They contributed to knowing ourselves in all human limitations as well as learning to listen to others attentively”.

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