Contextualization in Pentecostalism:
A Multicultural Perspective

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*Introduction*

In this paper I will begin with discussing contextualization, what it is and is not, and why it is an important concept to understand in the practice and theology of Christian mission. Then I will suggest that Pentecostalism has a fairly good record of contextualizing its message and mission, and explain why. Pentecostalism, through its offer of the power of the Spirit to enable every believer to witness to the ends of the earth, provides a contemporary example of the contextual flexibility of Christian mission in proclamation and practice. The second half of the paper will look at one well-known case study of Pentecostal contextualization in the nation of South Korea, showing both its strengths and its weaknesses.

*Indigenization and Contextualization*

**Contextualization is not the same as “indigenization”, which is making something that is constant (like the Christian church) into something that is “indigenous”. This is usually understood to mean a “Three Self” church, a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church. This idea has been an important feature of many Pentecostal missions and especially of the largest and most international Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God. Protestant mission administrators and scholars promoted “indigenization” since the mid-19th Century, and in the case of Jesuit missionaries in the Roman Catholic Church, for almost three centuries before that. But the theory has usually not become the practice. Whiteman points out that “there still remains an enormous gulf between the models of contextualization… and the practice of contextualized mission by North American and European missionaries”.**[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Anglo-Catholic missionary in China, Roland Allen (1868-1947) was a radical, provocative mission strategist far ahead of his time. He tirelessly advocated a post-western Christianity and mission methods that focussed on local rather than foreign talent. He was undoubtedly influenced by his predecessors the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) administrator Henry Venn, the American Board (Congregationalist) mission leader Rufus Anderson, Methodist Episcopal Bishop William Taylor, and Presbyterian missionary to China John Nevius. These had all advocated that missions had to create “three self” churches: self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. But Allen went much further than they did in advocating a truly “indigenous church” completely independent of foreign influences. What resonated so much with those Pentecostals who, directly or indirectly, came in contact with his principles, was his focus on mission as being primarily the work of the Spirit. Allen constantly emphasized that the Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost was a Spirit who both empowered and motivated ordinary believers to propagate the Christian message. He opposed the mission station model because it perpetuated the missionaries’ foreign culture and their permanence. He believed in the spontaneous expansion of “indigenous”, local churches as a result of a proper understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and that of the missionary. His best-known work, *Missionary Methods: St Paul’s or Ours?* was first published in 1912 and a second edition appeared in 1927. But as he predicted, it was years after his death before his critique came to be appreciated.[[2]](#endnote-2) Allen’s strategies would undoubtedly have resonated with Pentecostal convictions:

[St Paul] was always glad when his converts could progress without his aid. He welcomed their liberty. He withheld no gift from them which might enable them to dispense with his presence. … He gave as a right to the Spirit-bearing body the powers which duly belong to a Spirit-bearing body. He gave freely, and then he retired from them that they might learn to exercise the powers which they possessed in Christ. …

To do this required great faith; and this faith is the spiritual power in which St Paul won his victory. He believed in the Holy Ghost… as a Person indwelling his converts. He believed therefore in his converts. He could trust them.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Allen’s books were probably already circulating in Pentecostal circles as early as 1921, when the Englishwoman Alice Luce (1873-1955), an American Assemblies of God (AG) missionary to Hispanic Americans from 1916, wrote a series of three remarkable articles, probably based on Allen’s teachings entitled “Paul’s Missionary Method’s”. Luce was a CMS missionary in India when she was attracted to Pentecostalism through the ministry of the Indian woman Shorat Chuckerbutty, a colleague of Ramabai, who laid hands on her for Spirit baptism in 1910. Although she acknowledged the important contribution to her thinking of a book called *Missionary Methods,* she could not remember the name of its author. She thought she had read it in India, but as she left there in 1912 when Allen’s book was first published, it is unlikely—although she might have read Taylor’s *Pauline Methods of Missionary Work,* first published in 1879. As Bundy points out, “Taylor argued that the goal of Pauline mission is independent churches that are self-supporting, entrusted with their own governance, and committed to an evangelistic style that enables them to grow according to their own cultural patterns. Missionaries are to model and encourage that development”.[[4]](#endnote-4) Luce may have come across these principles in preparation for her CMS work.

Alice Luce had remarkable insights for Pentecostals in 1921. She wrote that her initial Pentecostal experience had taught her that “there is such a thing as doing an apostolic work along apostolic lines”. She was surprised at how very quickly the “heathen” were able to recognize “the difference between those who went to them with a hidden sense of their own superiority and those who really had the spirit of a servant”. How important it was to declare the equality of all nations before God and to train “native workers”, the only ones who would ever accomplish the evangelization of their own nations and who had “many advantages over the foreigner”, she wrote. Paul’s aim was to found everywhere a “self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church”, with trained leaders who were independent of the foreign missionary and became missionaries in their own right. Unlike Allen though, she thought it might be necessary for new churches to have “foreign supervision” for a long time, but this was only because of maturity and experience and had nothing to do with nationality or race. Once there were “spiritually qualified leaders” in the national church, the foreign missionary must “be subject to them, and to let them take the lead as the Spirit Himself shall guide them”.[[5]](#endnote-5)

In the early 1950s the AG mission strategist Melvin Hodges (1909-1988) through his widely influential book *The Indigenous Church* (1953) not only emphasized creating “indigenous churches”, but also stressed church-planting – a fundamental principle of Pentecostal mission strategy. Hodges was undoubtedly indebted to both Allen’s and Luce’s ideas in framing his own missiology. But the influence of Hodges on AG missions contributed further towards their commitment to national leadership and establishing theological training institutes (“Bible schools”) and in-service training structures throughout the world. This in turn resulted in the much more rapid growth of national Pentecostal churches. Hodges was a missionary in Central America who articulated what had always been at the heart of Pentecostal growth in different cultural contexts. He said that the aim of all mission activity was to build an “indigenous New Testament church” that followed “New Testament methods”. He emphasized that the church itself (and not the evangelist) is “God’s agent for evangelism”. The role of the cross-cultural missionary was to ensure that a church became self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating-- he enthusiastically embraced and enlarged a “three self” policy of church planting, the main theme of his book.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Hodges’ emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in “indigenization” was lacking in the earlier works on the subject by nineteenth century mission strategists, but had been introduced by Allen. Hodges wrote:

There is no place on earth where, if the gospel seed be properly planted, it will not produce an indigenous church. The Holy Spirit can work in one country as well as in another. To proceed on the assumption that the infant church in any land must always be cared for and provided for by the mother mission is an unconscious insult to the people that we endeavor to serve, and is evidence of a lack of faith in God and in the power of the gospel.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Despite using “us” and “them” language, Hodges had remarkable insights:

We have done everything for them except acknowledge any equality. We have done everything for them, but very little with them. We have done everything for them except give place to them. We have treated them as “dear children” but not as “brethren”.[[8]](#endnote-8)

William Burton discussed the principle of indigenization in a 1933 publication, stating that the idea first found prominence among Pentecostal missionaries at about the time of the Great War. He wrote that “white missionaries” were “a mere passing phase in the introduction of Christianity to a heathen people” and that native Christians were given “from the very commencement, the responsibility for the support and propagation of the young church” (significantly, Burton also mentions self-government, thus supporting the “three-self” principle). Burton’s own mission, however, was governed by white missionaries until they were forced to leave the Congo in the 1960 civil war, opening up the way for national leaders to take the denomination much further than the missionaries had been able to.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Despite the exhortations that so greatly influenced the policies of Pentecostal missions, there are still areas of world Pentecostalism dominated physically, financially, and ideologically by foreign western missionaries. Pentecostal missiological writing is sometimes limited by an ideology that sees the mission enterprise in terms of successful procedures and strategies. It appears that the ideal of a “three-self” independent church was slow in being realised in many of the expatriate mission efforts, with only occasional exceptions. By the middle of the century, among denominations planted by western Pentecostals, the great majority of converts in the majority world remained objects of mission and marginalized. Fortunately, these same converts are now beginning to produce scholars who challenge the presuppositions of the past and are not content to follow foreign mission ideologies and strategies blindly. These missionaries placed their emphasis on aggressive evangelism and church-planting, and the training of indigenous leaders was to further this emphasis. Social uplift was of secondary importance and only a few engaged in this sort of activity in the early years. But the stage was set for a profound change in the nature of world Christianity itself in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**Generally speaking, indigenization assumes that the gospel message and Christian theology is the same in all cultures and contexts, and so it tries to relate this “constant” Christian message to so-called “traditional” cultures. On the one hand it is easy to confuse the gospel message with the particular form it reached Europe and North America; and on the other hand it assumes that cultures do not change. Sometimes it assumes that as long as there are “indigenous” leaders and the use of local languages, perhaps local music in worship, and so on, then its goal is achieved. “Contextualization”, on the other hand, assumes that every theology and form of church is shaped by its particular context, and must be so to be relevant and meaningful. It relates the Christian message to all social contexts and cultures, especially including those undergoing rapid change. In other words, contextualization is dynamic and not static, because it allows for constant change.**

**The verb “contextualize” is used more generally to mean “**to [consider](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/consider) an [idea](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/idea), [event](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/event), [activity](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/activity) etc. together with everything [relating](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/relate_1) to it in [order](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/order_1) to [understand](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/understand) it [better](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/better_1)**”.**[[10]](#endnote-10) **So in theology, we need to think carefully about “everything relating to it” (its context) before we can “understand it better”. The concept of “contextual theologies” was first formulated in the World Council of Churches in 1972, and so for many years contextualization was regarded with a great deal of suspicion by evangelicals outside the ecumenical movement.**[[11]](#endnote-11) **In the West, particularly in North America where the evangelical/ ecumenical divide was most obvious, these ideas were difficult for evangelicals to accept—although some of their mission scholars had used different words to describe the same ideas, like a “deeper indigenization” or words to that effect. Then came particular contextual theologies like “liberation theology” in Latin America, “Black theology” in the United States and South Africa, and “Minjung theology” in Korea. These new theological ideas increased evangelical concerns that this new trend in theology would lead to “syncretism” and a placing of the social and political context above God’s revelation in the Bible.**

**But gradually, some evangelical scholars began to give prominence to the importance of culture, and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena took the lead.**[[12]](#endnote-12) **Charles Kraft wrote of “the constant message in alternative forms”, and of “dynamic-equivalence theologizing”,** **and that “all theologizing is culture-bound interpretation and communication of God’s revelation”.**[[13]](#endnote-13) **Dean Gilliland was one of the first evangelicals to actively promote the term “contextualization”. He defined its goal as “to enable, insofar as it is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every human situation”.**[[14]](#endnote-14) **He wrote that the Christian message must be proclaimed in the framework of the worldview of the particular people to whom it is addressed, it must emphasize those parts of the message that answer their particular questions and needs, and it must be expressed through the medium of their own cultural gifts. Culture and worldview, of necessity, include religious beliefs; and in a discussion of a “contextual” theology we cannot avoid questions of religious pluralism.** Paul Hiebert discusses “critical contextualization” as the ongoing process of “embodying the gospel in an ever-changing world”,[[15]](#endnote-15) while Darrell Whiteman writes that “contextualization is concerned with how the Gospel and culture relate to one another across geographic space and down through time”.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Alice Luce, Melvin Hodges and William Burton were western Pentecostal mission strategists ahead of their time, and their ideas about an “indigenous church” have been promoted in mission training.** Hodges’ views had a profound impact on the subsequent growth of the AG, which prescribed the reading of *The Indigenous Church* to future missionaries. But of course, attaining “three-selfhood” does not guarantee real contextualization unless the “three selfs” are no longer patterned on foreign forms and are grounded in the thought patterns and symbolism of the popular culture. Yet, Pentecostalism’s religious creativity and spontaneously contextual character were characteristics held as ideals by missionaries and mission strategists for over a century. “Indigenization” was automatically and, so it seemed, effortlessly achieved by Pentecostal churches long before this goal was realised by older missions. For Hodges (and again, with echoes of Allen), the foundation for mission and the reason for the continued expansion of Pentecostalism is the “personal filling of the Holy Spirit” who gives gifts of ministry to untold thousands of common people, creating active, vibrantly expanding and “indigenous churches” all over the world.[[17]](#endnote-17)

*Pentecostalism and Contextualization*

**Contextualization goes a huge step further, because it is much more than presenting the gospel in a culturally relevant way. Contextualization is important to questions of culture, because** missionaries sometimes think that their culture’s way of practising Christianity is the only way to do it. The result can be disastrous, for these missionaries once in a different culture, may share not only the gospel but also their own cultural traditions as being the “right” way to practise Christianity or model the church.

Pentecostalism has contextualized Christianity, mostly unconscious of the various theories behind the process, and mostly unnoticed by outsiders. The experience of the fullness of the Spirit is the central plank of Pentecostal and Charismatic theology, and it is in this focus on experience that contextualization occurs. In the holistic worldview of most societies, all existing things are seen as a present material-spiritual or holistic unity in a pervading spiritual world. In Pentecostalism worldwide, the all-encompassing Spirit is involved in every aspect of both individual and community life, the context. Prophetic or charismatic leaders are seen as men or women of the Spirit. Rather than being theorized about, a contextual theology is acted out in the rituals, liturgies and daily experiences of these Pentecostals. Gary Badcock says that the role of the Spirit in African Christianity is closely related to the “theme of wholeness, in terms of the perception and realization of the vitalist principle that ultimately binds the whole of society and world together, in the normal expectation of healing and visions, in the simple celebration of life”.[[18]](#endnote-18) In the worldview of most people, action and expression are as important as reflection, and religion is especially something that you *do*. The tendency to minimize the emotional in Christian worship made some forms of Christianity unattractive, but the emphasis on the Spirit in Pentecostalism gave Christianity new vibrancy and contextual relevance. God through the Spirit was intervening in human affairs, and believers could see this happening in tangible ways. The Holy Spirit is given the credit for everything that takes place. The Spirit causes people to worship, sing, prophesy, speak in tongues, heal, exorcize demons, have visions and dreams, live holy lives—and generally the Spirit directs the life and worship of these churches.

Pentecostalism has made a real and vital contribution to a dynamic contextualization. The so-called “contextual theologies” were often articulated within the parameters of western theology, whereas much of the enacted theology in Pentecostalism is a theology from the people. This makes a dialogue between popular religions and Christianity possible at an existential level. Both the Bible and human experience in most of the world often transcend and defy explanations and rationalizations. The late American Vineyard leader John Wimber described the modern western worldview dominated by secularism that assumes that life goes on “in a universe closed off from divine intervention, in which truth is arrived at through empirical means and rational thought”. Materialism “warps our thinking, softening convictions about the supernatural world” and that people in the global North live as if “material cause-and-effect explains all of what happens to us”. Rationalism becomes the “chief guide in all matters of life” and anything that cannot be explained scientifically is denied.[[19]](#endnote-19) As a result, direct experience of the spirit world and the supernatural is often missing in secular societies, except for the realm of science fiction. As God is only concerned with “spiritual” and “sacred” matters, people can look after all their “secular” needs by their increasing knowledge. If Christianity is not disentangled from this overemphasis on rationalistic thought, it becomes irrelevant for most of the world. As Badcock observes, “the tendency of the Western institutional churches toward a more rationally definable ecclesial life ordered through ministerial office, the Word, and the sacraments tends to be regarded as culturally alien and religiously undesirable” in many other contexts.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Africa is illustrative of this tension, where many people regarded western missionaries with their logical, doctrinal and theoretical presentations as out of touch with the real, holistic world that Africans experienced. Their deepest felt needs were not addressed and their questions remained unanswered. Because the full implications of the questions arising from the African worldview were not fully grasped by many missionaries in Africa, the full significance of the Christian answer was also overlooked. In contrast, Pentecostal and Spirit churches were motivated by a desire to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of Africa, offering solutions to life’s problems and ways to cope in a threatening and hostile world. Their pastors, prophets, bishops and evangelists proclaimed that the same God who saves the ‘soul’ also heals the body and is a ‘good God’ interested in providing answers to human fears and insecurities, accepting people as having genuine problems and trying conscientiously to find solutions to them. The God who forgives sin is also concerned about poverty, sickness, barrenness, oppression by evil spirits and liberation from all forms of human affliction and bondage. This truly contextualized message makes Pentecostalism attractive. The insight of African and other societies that life is a totality, that there can be no ultimate separation between sacred and secular, and that religion must be relevant to all human problems is their great contribution, a faith that may yet rescue the global North from the onslaught of secularization.[[21]](#endnote-21)

*The Contextual Theology of Yonggi Cho*

Christianity in general and Pentecostalism in particular had taken on a distinctive form in Korea, quite different from that found in the West. Observers who have tried to emphasize the “North American” nature of Pentecostalism throughout the world or the “Americanization” of Christianity in Korea and elsewhere often miss this important fact. However much Korean Christianity may be influenced by its associations with the USA, creative innovations and the selective transformation of foreign symbols are constantly occurring. Quite naturally, a synthesising process takes place as Christianity interacts with older Korean religions like shamanism and Buddhism. For example, the prayer mountain movement is well known, and there are hundreds of Christian prayer mountains all over South Korea. Mountains and hills as places of spiritual retreat and pilgrimage have been a characteristic of Korean religions for centuries. Buddhist temples are usually built on mountainsides and Korean cemeteries are found on hills outside residential areas. Traditionally, the many mountains of Korea were believed to be places where good spirits lived, and both shamans and ordinary pilgrims would receive power from the particular spirit on each mountain. Beliefs in the mountain as the place to which God descends, are not only part of Korean tradition but are also ideas fully at home in the Old Testament.[[22]](#endnote-22) At the risk of oversimplification, the prayer mountain movement may be said to be a culturally relevant form of Christian practice that reflects the ancient spirituality of Korean people. Similarly, the dominant conservative Protestant Christianity, with its strict moral law, finds fertile ground in peoples whose cultures are heavily influenced by Confucianism – as is clearly the case in Korean and Chinese societies. These are examples of how Korean Christianity is contextualized by taking the good practices of ancient religions and transforming them with new biblical Christian meanings.

The impressive growth of Pentecostalism in the majority world was partly attributable to its enterprising, entrepreneurial local preachers and leaders. The most remarkable growth of a single congregation took place under the ministry of **David (earlier, “Paul”) Yonggi Cho (1936-)** and his future mother-in-law Jashil Choi (1915-89). In the aftermath of the devastating Korean War, Choi began a tent church in a slum area of Seoul in 1958 with five members and Cho as its pastor. By 1962 this congregation had grown to 800 and two years later it erected a building with seating for 2,000 in the Seodaemun district of Seoul. In 1969, Cho bought property on Yoido, then a derelict island on the Han River that is now the business and government centre of Seoul. Cho dedicated a new 10,000-seat auditorium there in 1973, and the Full Gospel Central Church received international attention. The growth of Pentecostalism in Korea became virtually synonymous with the ministry of Cho. By 2000 the Korean Full Gospel (AG) churches had overtaken the Methodists as the second largest Protestant denomination with over a million members. The majority of these were in the Yoido congregation and its satellites, which had become Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) in 1984. Cho became the second chairman of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship in 1992, and YFGC planted churches all over Korea, in Japan and internationally. By 1993 YFGC reported 700,000 members under 700 pastors and was the largest Christian congregation in the world. When the church joined the Korean National Council of Churches in 1999, it was the first time any national AG had entered an ecumenical council. Cho retired in 2008 and his position as senior pastor was taken by his long-time disciple Young Hoon Lee, who had an earned doctorate from Temple University, Philadelphia. It is now public knowledge that Cho and his oldest son were found guilty in 2014 of causing financial losses to the YFGC of more than US$12 million, and was given a three year suspended jail sentence and fined US$5 million. Cho’s defence was that he loved and trusted his son and wanted to help him recover from substantial financial losses and certain ruin.[[23]](#endnote-23)

**For Pentecostals in different parts of the world, the “freedom in the Spirit” allows them to formulate, often unconsciously, ideologies that have meaning for people in different life situations, and Cho’s ministry is a leading example of this inherent contextualization.** The vibrancy, enthusiasm, spontaneity and spirituality for which Pentecostals are so well known and their willingness to address problems of sick­ness, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits, and sorcery has directly contributed to this growth. **As we have seen, the idea of a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church has been an important feature of Pentecostal missions. Contextualization assumes that every form of Christianity is shaped by its particular context and must be so shaped to be meaningful. It relates the Christian message to all social contexts and cultures, especially those undergoing rapid change.**

**Cho’s theology must be assessed from the perspective of the post Korean War context in which it was shaped.** Korean people suffering from their accumulated grief or *han* seek healing and “blessings” from traditional shamans to alleviate their deep pain, such as in these years following the Korean War or more recently, during the IMF crisis. The fact that a prominent part of Cho’s message is to proclaim that God brings “blessings” and healings is a readily accepted contextual message for Korean people. Some scholars have suggested that Korean Pentecostalism in general and YFGC in particular have succeeded because they have combined Christianity with shamanism. **Korean Pentecostalism should be interpreted from the categories of a shamanistic culture rather than from historical and theological categories imposed from outside. This idea of a link between Korean Pentecostalism and shamanism has been assumed and perpetuated by westerners.** As Harvey Cox contends, “primal spirituality now surfacing in Korea… [and] underlies the original biblical faith as well”, the main reason for the growth of Pentecostalism in Korea and in other countries of the world.

However, the “link” with shamanism should be assessed in a quite different way. It is more appropriate to consider Cho’s Pentecostalism as a contextual form of Korean Christianity *interacting with* shamanism, for Korean Pentecostals justify their practices of healing and doctrine of blessings by referring to the Bible as their prime source. Cho’s reaction to shamanism and his teachings on healing and “threefold blessings” are better viewed within the context of his contact with international Pentecostalism, and must be assessed not only within the internal cultural and religious context of Korea, but also in light of the external influence of globalization and international Pentecostalism. Western scholars may not have reflected enough on the enormous difference between interacting with shamanism (as Korean Pentecostals obviously do) and *becoming* shamanistic. The latter is an untenable position for Pentecostals; Cho himself clearly rejects traditional shamanism and says that shamans “serve demons”.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Consideration must be given to whether Cho’s message has adapted to and transformed its cultural and religious environment. Clearly, Cho himself has wanted to be seen in these terms, although he does not use the word “contextual”:

Being a Korean and having been saved out of the Buddhist religion, I have been able to appreciate the distinctive position of Christians who come from the Third World… We evangelical Korean Christians have developed our own traditions. This is very important because it makes it possible for us to be Christian without being less Korean. In the past, missionaries not only brought their religion but also their culture to the countries they evangelized. So it became apparent that the new converts lost much of their natural heritage. I believe that this produced an unnecessary hindrance to the acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Nevertheless, Cho does not advocate uncritical use of Korean cultural principles. This is especially apparent in his “revolutionary” use of women workers, especially as home group leaders. Despite the “male-oriented” Korean culture, Cho took these steps because “God showed me”. Cho was one of the first Pentecostals to use the cell system to provide care and leadership for the world’s largest congregation, making use of thousands of women to lead small groups of church members in relation to both the local community and the church leadership structure. This method is particularly effective in maintaining cohesion in megachurches.[[26]](#endnote-26) The “cell church” strategy with its emphasis on the home cell group as the focus of pastoral care, discipleship and evangelism is now widely used in Pentecostal churches.

The success of Cho’s Pentecostalism should be seen as a response to the influence of the worldview of shamanism that permeates and underlies Korean society. Both Korean Pentecostalism and older Korean religions acknowledge and respond to the world of spirits, as Korean Pentecostal scholars have pointed out. Shamanism provides a fertile ground into which the “full gospel” is more easily planted. If pentecostal pastors like Cho sometimes appear to be functioning as “shamans”, it is because they respond to needs arising from a shamanistic world; but, like Pentecostals worldwide, they emphatically deny any mixture with shamanistic religions. So too, Cho often refers to the Confucian background of Korea in a favourable light, and usually points out that Confucianism is not a religion but an ethical system observed by Koreans.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Cho’s many writings and sermons demonstrate, firstly, that his “contextual theology” is born in Korean suffering, but secondly, that he has advocated a “pentecostal theology” that is standard classical pentecostal theology worldwide, influenced by healing evangelists like Oral Roberts and years of working with American Pentecostals. Cho is uncompromising and polemical with regard to the religious background of Korea: his former experience as a “devout Buddhist” could not help him solve his problems, he considered it foreign to the compassion of Christ, and he had known only what he calls “well-organized and sterile Buddhist philosophies and rituals”, which were “theoretically very profound”, but which he refers to as “heathenism” and “doctrines of devils”. Zen Buddhism in particular is singled out for critical treatment, and Cho compares and contrasts it with Holy Spirit “Fourth-Dimensional Christianity”. But at the same time, Cho’s concept of the “fourth dimension” is linked to his familiarity with Eastern religions with their own miraculous powers. He refers to the “evil spirit world” in this “fourth dimension” that is “under the power and authority of almighty God”. Although these ideas have brought serious criticism from evangelical polemicists, Cho carefully maintains the distinction between the Asian religious world and the Christian revelation. But his experience of this Asian religious spirituality and its element of the miraculous has brought him to the understanding of the “fourth dimension”, where visions and dreams are the language and “incubation” or “pregnancy” is the process through which believers receive their requests from God. This “incubation” in the “fourth dimension”, he declares, is also the way that miracles happen in other religions. This particular teaching can only be understood by reference to the Asian pluralistic religious background in which Koreans are immersed.[[28]](#endnote-28)

While Korean Pentecostal scholars appreciate the importance of the ancient religious system to Pentecostalism, they also point out its dangers. The 1950s, when Cho was converted from Buddhism to Christianity and the Full Gospel Central Church was founded in the slums of Seoul, was a traumatic time. That trauma was a very significant part of Cho’s message and the foundation of the theology he developed. He refers to the sufferings created by the Japanese occupation and the Korean War, and his own personal poverty and gradual healing from tuberculosis. This was a time when many were “struggling for existence”, when he identified himself with the hundreds of refugees on the streets and became “one of the hopeless” himself. In the aftermath of the Korean War, when people lost families and businesses, had mental breakdowns, and became “completely possessed by the devil”, his ministry began in a poverty-stricken area where people were not interested in a message about heaven and hell in their daily struggle for survival. His teaching on healing was closely related to this rampant poverty and sickness. His teaching on blessings and prosperity was his “theological counteraction” to the *han* caused by the ravages of the Korean War. For Cho, the message of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit gave hope to a suffering and destitute community.[[29]](#endnote-29)

His views on poverty are clear, again determined by his context:

Poverty is a curse from Satan. God desires that all His people prosper and be healthy as their soul prospers (3 John 1:2). Yet much of the world has not really seen poverty as I have seen it. Especially in the Third World, people live their lives in despair, struggling to survive for one more day. I am from the Third World. I know first-hand what it is not to have anything to eat.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Elsewhere he writes that it is because of his “oppressed background” that he has been able “to understand the plight of many oppressed people who have no hope for a future”. Cho’s views on poverty and prosperity come out of his own Korean context. But Cho is also influenced by American Pentecostalism and was arguably the most influential minister in the AG during the late twentieth century. He was trained in the denomination’s Bible school in Seoul, where he received his own experience of “baptism of the Spirit”. Even though he may be regarded in many ways as a theological innovator (one of the reasons why his books have been so popular), his theology is unmistakably classical Pentecostal. He stresses the importance of being “filled with the Holy Spirit” and speaking in tongues.Cho sees this as an experience subsequent to and distinct from regeneration or conversion, and distinguishes between speaking in tongues as a “sign” and as a “gift”. Like many pentecostals, for him speaking or praying in tongues is very important. Cho distinguishes between being “filled with” and having “fellowship with” the Spirit, between speaking in tongues and being filled with the Spirit, as the latter results in people having an “overflowing blessing” to share with others. The fellowship with the Holy Spirit for every believer is an important emphasis, and perhaps one of the many theological innovations that tends to give Cho’s theology a pneumatological rather than Christological centre. The Holy Spirit is the “Senior Partner” in his ministry, and Cho says that intimacy or communion with the Holy Spirit is “the greatest experience” of his life. Cho’s understanding of evangelism is also pentecostal, motivated by and completely dependent upon the enabling of the Spirit. His preaching is based on the goodness of God, the redemption of Christ, and biblical “principles of success”, so that meeting the personal needs of people is his priority above theology, history, and politics.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Cho’s teaching on sickness and emphasis on healing is also Pentecostal; physical healing is seen as part of Christ’s redemption; sickness is “from the devil” and a “curse”; and all people can be healed. There can be little doubt that healing was probably the strongest feature of his appeal. However, Cho’s emphasis on healing did not emerge only from Pentecostal sources, for it was already prominent in the revival movements within Korean Presbyterianism, the dominant Protestant group. The healing Presbyterian preacher Kim Ik Du was particularly effective in drawing large crowds to his mass services in the 1920s and 1930s, where there were claims of 10,000 healed from all sorts of illness and delivered from demons. Cho and other popular Korean preachers from the 1960s onwards continued in this tradition.

Like most Pentecostal preachers, Cho makes extensive use of personal experience or “testimony” to illustrate his theology. This is particularly noticeable on the subject of healing, as Cho often refers to his own sicknesses and healing, and gives testimonies of people healed during his ministry to them. Cho makes much of the experience of being “born again” and all his books have a strong soteriological and Christocentric tone. This holistic view of salvation is one of the reasons why the pentecostal message has spread rapidly among people in need. Cho even espouses premillennial eschatology complete with end-time apocalyptic predictions about the union of Europe, the revival of Israel, and anti-communist rhetoric. In all these emphases, Cho is probably influenced by the ideology of the American AG.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Another innovation in Cho’s teaching is the addition of “threefold blessings” to the fourfold gospel of Jesus the Saviour, Healer, Baptizer with the Holy Spirit, and Soon Coming King, making it a “five-fold” gospel. A passage Cho quotes often, a favorite with American “prosperity preachers”, is 3 John 2: “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers”. Cho’s message of threefold blessings emerged in the midst of poverty and destitution after the Korean War, and this was to become the foundation of all his preaching and ministry thereafter. The way to receive the threefold blessings is to believe that God is a “good God” and that salvation includes forgiveness of sins, health, and prosperity, intended to bring “overflowing blessings” to those outsiders in contact with believers. The “threefold blessings” doctrine is the most emphasized in all Cho’s writings. The official brochure of YFGC states that the “five-fold message of the Gospel” includes: (1) renewal, or “salvation”, expressed in classical pentecostal terms; (2) the fullness of the Spirit; (3) healing, one of the main emphases of Cho’s ministry; (4) blessing, Cho’s addition to the “fourfold” gospel, which is declared to be “an abundant life of blessing which would be enough to share with others”; and (5) the Second Coming of Christ. The “three-fold blessings of salvation” are further explained to include “soul prosperity”, “prosperity in all things,” and “a healthy life”, based on 3 John 2. Although this is a clear promise of health and prosperity for believers, Cho writes that happiness does not come from “mere material gain”, but from “solutions to our deep, inner problems”, and he condemns those who think that happiness comes from power and wealth.[[33]](#endnote-33)

**Cho’s theology is also Christocentric, focusing on Jesus Christ and his redemptive work as Saviour from sin, sickness, demon possession, poverty, and trouble of every kind.** For Cho, “prosperity” cannot be an end in itself, for God blesses his people only so that they may meet the needs of the poor and the needy. Keeping up with the modernization of Korea that occurred from the 1980s onwards, Cho adapted to the changing context and also attracted the emerging middle class with his message of overcoming success in all circumstances, including business ventures. Yet **Cho condemns modern western culture with its rapid pace, pleasure-loving activities, and entertainment-centred churches. These things, he declares, hinder people and churches from having “the full blessings of the Lord”, because people need time for prayer (“waiting upon the Lord”), worship, and the preaching of God’s Word, the emphases of Cho’s services. He says that many “traditional churches” in the West have “forgotten the vitality of Christianity and have become dead and sterile”. Pentecostalism has been a world-denying movement that saw the churches of the day as dry, formal, and lifeless, needing to be restored by experiencing the power of God.** Cho also teaches that in the kingdom of God there is no poverty without explaining whether this is in heaven or on earth. Unfortunately, the latter is probably his intended meaning.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Those who censure Korean Pentecostals for their alleged “shamanism” often fail to see that the practices thought to parallel ancient religions are also found in the biblical record. These Pentecostals define their healing and deliverance practices by reference to the Bible rather than to shamanism and see their activities as creative adaptations to the local context. At the same time, Pentecostals themselves might need a greater appreciation for the diversity of their cultural and religious past. Demonizing this past does not explain the present attraction of Pentecostalism for peoples deeply influenced by their ancient religions and cultures, even though such a demonization might help in the religious competition that is a feature of pluralist societies. Many Pentecostals have found both cultural and biblical alternatives to and adaptations from the practices of their ancient religions and seek to provide answers to the needs inherent in their own context. It is the ability to make these adaptations that has transformed world Christianity in the last century. Healing was the major attraction of Pentecostalism in various parts of the world; and miracles, exorcisms and “power encounters” became standard pentecostal practices. But these practices did not occur in a vacuum – in most of the world they were conditioned by a context of poverty, marginalization, and despair. These were reasons for the appeal of teachings relating to healing and prosperity in the global South, but there were obviously corresponding dangers.

Cho has been criticised as being unconcerned with social change and structures of oppression, but his church has extensive social care programs of its own and has been involved in national relief and economic aid for North Korea. This has not received sufficient attention with the controversies about Cho; as Young-gi Hong points out, “Cho’s social ministry does not draw proper recognition compared to its contribution”. Although Minjung theology, a form of Korean liberation theology, espoused the concerns of the poor and oppressed, it is to Pentecostal churches like YFGC to which the poor and oppressed have flocked for relief. Ig-Jin Kim has pointed out that the social ethics of Korean Pentecostalism’s “fivefold gospel” is characterized by its transformative nature, so as to transform society. This transformation and participation in the wider society takes many forms, including “relief activities, the saving of souls, the establishing of facilities for social welfare, and the shaping of public opinion through mass media”. The social activities of the Yoido church are extensive and obvious to any casual observer.[[35]](#endnote-35)Upon his formal retirement in 2008 as senior pastor of YFGC, Cho’s emphasis shifted significantly from an involvement of his church in charitable acts to a commitment of himself and his personal resources to an on-going social ministry. Cho’s ministry among the poor, the opportunities he has given to women leaders, and the social activities of YFGC demonstrate the potential within Pentecostalism to be a force for social transformation.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The patterns established by the new churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have become paradigmatic of Pentecostalism in the twenty-first century. Charismatic Christianity today is full of religious entrepreneurs who, like their predecessors in early Pentecostalism, are on a mission to take their message to as many people as possible. They declare a call from God and have an uncanny ability to communicate with crowds of people. Their message of hope and faith attracts the crowds who give of their substance and enable the enterprise to succeed. A criticism justifiably levelled at Pentecostalism, however, is that sometimes a message of success, prosperity and power is expounded at the expense of a true understanding of the theology of the cross. When the so-called “anointing” of the Spirit becomes a quick-fix solution to human distress and want, and some Christian believers’ needs seem to remain unanswered, the role of suffering is completely overlooked and even considered as unbelief. There are not always instant solutions to life’s problems, and spirituality should not be measured in terms of success. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to bear the fruit of the Spirit, real evidence that the Spirit is present in a life. People are not only convinced by the triumphs of Christianity but also by its perseverance in trials. The Spirit is also a gentle dove, a Spirit of humility, patience and meekness, of love, joy and peace. Overemphasizing the power of the Spirit often leads to bitter disappointment and disillusionment when that power is not evidently and immediately manifested. The Holy Spirit not only provide power when there is a lack of it, but also is able to sustain people through life’s tragedies and failures, and especially when there is no visible outward success.[[37]](#endnote-37)

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