

## Falling and Rising

### Korean Protestant Preaching and the Possibility of Apophatic Theology

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#### **Abstract**

*This article proposes that the Korean Protestant Church, which has lost its dynamism and is declining, needs a theological reformation. Greatly influenced by Puritan theology, Korean Protestantism has deteriorated into a largely individualistic and consumerist faith. Its credibility has collapsed as it pursued power and turned away from the other. This article identifies Evagrius' negative theology as a promising theological corrective for the Korean Protestant church. Evagrius' mystical theology remains largely unknown but his ethical and devotional moral vision provides a viable model for the Korean Protestant Church, which stands at a crossroad today.*

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#### **All that Falls Has Wings**

In the novel *All that Falls Has Wings*,<sup>1</sup> Moon-Yeol Lee, a nationally renowned South Korean writer explores themes of power and wealth, tracing the arc of a couple whose winged pursuit for power results in fatality. The Korean Protestant Church is crashing like the couple in the novel. It may have surged high with wings once, but it is now falling fast. At its peak, 20–25% of South Korean population identified as Christians, but in the last two decades, the numbers have plummeted repeatedly. More sobering is that Protestantism's credibility is at a record low compared to other religions and denominations; a sharp decline of membership among underage population is also noted.<sup>2</sup> The prevailing discourse of crisis and panic has overwhelmed Korean Protestantism in the last decade, with church members as well as ministers disoriented and directionless.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mun-Yeol Lee*, 추락하는 것은 날개가 있다 (All that falls has wings), Seoul 1989. The author borrowed this novel's name from *Ingeborg Bachmann*, who was an Austrian poet. Bachmann borrows her motive from Greek Myths.

<sup>2</sup> *Hyeok-Ryul Kwon*, 교계 포커스 13: 신뢰의 위기, 한국교회는 어떻게 극복할 것인가? (Focus on Denomination 13: Crisis of Credibility, How Will the Korean Church Overcome?), in: 기독교 사상 675 (Christian Thought 675) (2015).

Multiple analyses of the crisis have been undertaken from diverse perspectives, but what's clear is that the Korean Protestant church, far from being a beacon of hope, has failed to perform even the basic function of providing ministerial care to the world. Although South Korea has emerged from the utter ruins of the Korean War to become the world's 10<sup>th</sup> largest economy (according to GDP) in just 60 years, its suicide rate is the highest among OECD countries, which reveals a dark shadow of crushed and depleted souls amid the glow of success.<sup>3</sup> What has the church, which has long presented itself as an advocate of the people, been doing during this time? Henceforth, how and with whom will the Korean Protestant Church rise? And what is the ultimate purpose of rising? What theology shall furnish the ground for its preaching?

### **1. A Power-Driven Church**

From its very inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Korean Protestant Church served as an escape route for a people who faced severe political and economic adversity. Following its founding in 1885 by Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries, the church helped pave the way for civilizing efforts through the building of schools and hospitals. When Korea was forcibly occupied by Japanese imperialists the church, which was also under threat, preached Exodus and the prophetic texts, rising as the center of resistance and as a refuge from imperialist powers. When Korea was liberated, only to be thrown into a catastrophic war, the church remained standing. In the era of postwar reconstruction, economic growth mirrored church growth. And in no time, faith was equated to material abundance and prosperity was legitimized by the church. This is the history of the Korean Protestant Church as most view it. But an overview of the Korean Protestant Church's history told from a crisis discourse tells a more brutal tale.

Many view moral corruption of church leaders as the main reason for the Korean Protestant Church's downturn. But moral corruption should be viewed as a symptom, not its cause. Sinful and criminal behaviors of church leaders stem from greater forces and principalities of power. A macroscopic analysis of Korean society, one that enlarges the scope beyond individual actors, is necessary for a more accurate understanding. One must consider the larger forces of patriotism, democratization, and capitalism – in particular – as well as how all three interacted with Korean Protestantism. The Korean Protestant Church gained momentum by aligning itself with these forces, but now these movements and their secular world-views threaten to overwhelm and wipe

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<sup>3</sup> It is the criteria according to the OECD report (2014). Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/korea/OECD-SocietyAtaGlance2014-Highlights-Korea.pdf> (accessed: 9 August 2018).

out what is distinctively Christian about the church.<sup>4</sup> The cause for the current predicament of a church that has turned its back to society can be traced to a church that has deserted its call by way of an indiscriminate pursuit of secular values, which has resulted in the privatization of faith and disregard for community. When the history of the Korean Protestant Church is viewed from this perspective, one cannot shake the suspicion that perhaps the church was corrupt from the very start, greedily seeking power and domination.

While Catholicism was viewed as a foreign power and thus rejected from the very start of its missionary efforts, Protestantism, with its establishment of schools and hospitals, was received as a “civilizing mission” and became equated with political and economic power.<sup>5</sup> More than the material aspect of power was emphasized; Protestantism was perceived as more spiritually powerful than folk religion, and it was this faith, one indivisible with power that was evangelized.<sup>6</sup> Protestantism was associated with power, perceived as a stronger institution than Japanese imperialism, celebrated as a mightier force that fought and vanquished communism, and enthusiastically received as an affluent religion that could solve poverty and hunger.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the church’s pursuit of power was ineluctable given the systemic backdrop of widespread poverty and socio-economic oppression, but this decision has set the church on an inexorable path that continues to the present. Koreans trusted the Protestant Church when it struggled for and alongside the weak and the oppressed. But when the church was aligned with the powers and church leaders colluded with politicians for political strength and material prosperity, Koreans looked to other denominations like Roman Catholicism or turned to other faiths. Seen from this perspective, the Korean Protestant Church’s reach for power was its downfall.

Retracing the story of church’s intoxication with power and strength reveals the unmasked face of the Korean Protestant Church. At the risk of generalization, it is not difficult to see that the church has become consumed with satisfying its greed. Greed sets the stage for the exercise of power and the pursuit of power always results in violence. As Walter Brueggemann points out, the pursuit of power and greed are inextricably linked. For the sake of having more, human beings are degraded into commodities to be owned; and it is this mentality that explains the abuse of power

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<sup>4</sup> *Seong-Kuk Jo*, 한국교회 위축현상의 거시적 원인 분석과 대응적 교육방안 모색 (Macroscopic perspective on the decline of Korean churches and a search for responsive educational strategies), in: *복음과 교육* 11 (Gospel And Education 11) (2012), 15–17.

<sup>5</sup> *Kyeong-Duk Jo*, 기독교 담론의 근대서사화 과정 연구 (The study of narrativisation of modernity in Christian discourse), *고려대학교 대학원* (Korea University), 2011, 2, 11f.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Hyeong-Muk Choi, 욕망과 배제의 구조로서의 기독교적 가치 (Christian values as structure of the desire and exclusion), in: *시대와 민중신학* 7 (The time and Minjung theology 7) (2002).

and the violence of church pastors. The church becomes preoccupied with material success. Under such circumstances, religion becomes a vassal of prevailing power structures, treated merely as a tool to maintain the status quo. An empire satiated with power becomes numb to its rampant exercise of violence.<sup>8</sup> The cycle of greed, power, oppression, and resulting spiritual and material death seen under Solomonic reign is being played out in the present in South Korea.

The Korean Protestant Church's vision and practice have been co-opted by secular materialism, revealing its hollow faith in this crisis; yet, this situation is far from new. The source of its corruption runs so deep since it traces all the way back to the very founding of the church. But before retracing the current of history anew, an overview of social and religious factors that contributed to the revival of Korean Protestantism is necessary.

Behind the dramatic rise of Korean Protestantism are a host of factors such as revival meetings, dawn prayer services, impassioned sermons, church work, and an imported hierarchical model of leadership and church organization that dovetailed smoothly with existing Confucian power structures that emphasized top-down authority. The practices that helped launch this church are the *Kibok*<sup>9</sup> sermon, emotionally charged revival and worship services, emphasis on spiritual gifts, and an authoritarian leadership style that is often mistaken as the pastor's charisma. These practices helped fuel the church's growth even as they caused the church to depart from the core values of Christianity. Within a corrupt structure, pastors shirked their moral responsibilities and engaged in various criminal activities to fill their greed only to be despised by a disillusioned public. Such is the state of a church that has regressed to local church-ism, an outgrowth of individualism,<sup>10</sup> a church unrecognizable from its earlier state as a community that served the marginalized and preached messages of justice, peace, and love.

## 2. What Lies on the Underside of Progress

While there remain healthy congregations in Korean Protestantism, there must be a concerted and proactive effort to prevent the church from further ghettoization and degeneration. If the church wants to restore its credibility and to become God's instrument, it must recognize that it is at a

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Walter Brueggemann*/김기철 역(tr. by Ki-Cheol Kim), *예언자적 상상력* (The Prophetic Imagination), 서울 (Seoul) 2009, 78–90; *Walter Brueggemann*/주승중 소을순 역 (tr. by Seung-Jung Joo, Eul-Sun So), *설교자는 시인이 되어야 한다* (Finally comes the poet), 서울 Seoul 2007; *Walter Brueggemann*/박규태 역 (tr. by Kyu-Tae Park), *안식일은 저항이다* (Sabbath as Resistance), 서울 Seoul 2015; *John F. Kavanaugh*, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, Maryknoll (NY) 2006, 51–56.

<sup>9</sup> Kibok is comparable to prosperity gospel, but has distinctive characteristics of shamanism.

<sup>10</sup> Local churchism is an attitude that focuses on one's church over against larger denomination or Christian culture. It could be understood as church individualism.

critical juncture. And it needs to overcome the following phenomena that commonly plague it: fundamentalism, emotionalism, consumerism, and individualism. These phenomena interplay and interact and manifest most commonly through what I call *Kibokism*, a strong tendency found in Korean Christianity. What was preached during the dramatic rise of Korean Protestant Church was *Kibokism*, which coalesced as a synergistic effect between indigenous Shamanism and the imported Puritanical faith.

Although many find fault with Max Weber's thesis connecting the rise of capitalism with the Protestant spirit, it is resoundingly true in the case of South Korea.<sup>11</sup> Puritanism influenced early North American missionaries in Korea who regarded drinking and gambling as immoral.

Christianity thus came to be identified in South Korea as a civilizing and potent religion practiced by a group of people who abstained from smoking and drinking and who observed Sunday worship. Soon it was behavior, one's works, which was prioritized. Moreover, the church's theology has been influenced by mysticism towards excess emotionalism that has roots in Korean shamanism,<sup>12</sup> which gives further rise to individualistic faith.

All the while, early Korean Protestants who led the modernization efforts of Korea later lost their influence, as they were unable to shape the country's political and economic directions. Although the church was instrumental in freeing the country from military dictatorship, the church shifted from the political and became solely concerned with the individual.<sup>13</sup> This privatization of faith only deepened the already conservative nature of faith that was implanted by missionaries. The Korean Protestant Church has become an engorged denomination swollen with power, leaving no room for liberation theology.

Consumerism and individualization are not recent developments that emerged after or in tandem with country's rapid modernization; their roots can be traced to the very beginning of missionary efforts in Korea. Missionaries who came to Korea brought with them modernization and individualism. Koreans who did not convert to Christianity criticized Christians for being individualistic and flying against the larger cultural ethos of collectivity; they likened the church as a group of selfish individuals who were exclusive and indifferent to non-Christians.<sup>14</sup> Missionaries

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<sup>11</sup> *Dong-Min Jang*, *한국의 근대화와 한국장로교회: 회고와 전망* (The Modernization of Korea and the Korean Presbyterian Church: Retrospect and Prospect), in: *장로교회와 신학 9* (Presbyterian Church and Theology 9) (2012), 206f.

<sup>12</sup> Korean shamanism emphasizes ecstatic experiences and individual feelings which undermine rational discourse and collectivity of church.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

<sup>14</sup> *Duk-Ju Lee*, *한국 초대교회사에 나타난 오류와 한계* (Error and limits in the early Korean Christianity), in: *기독교 사상 49* (Christian thoughts 49), no. 12 (2005), 226f.

not only brought their middle-class consumerism, which fueled material greed in the onlookers, but they also engaged in economic activities, blurring yet again the line between faith and profit.<sup>15</sup> Theologically, the missionaries emphasized reason and doctrines; the early missionaries' rationalistic dogmatism continues to hold sway in the largely conservative Korean Protestant church. In sum, a capitalist ethos that encourages profit, and seeks (and colludes with) worldly power has prevailed to the present moment, leaving the church increasingly insular, discriminative, and detached.

In the face of such crisis, Korean theologians have consistently called for a reformation in the Protestant church. There are those who advocate for a maintenance approach who want to work within the prevailing system; they value the prevailing theology and the evangelical pietism that was brought over by Puritan missionaries.<sup>16</sup> There are also those who call for the churches to respond to the challenges of secularization and postmodernism. They demand that the church shed its insular fundamentalism, adopt a more open Christian worldview and remain in active engagement with the world.<sup>17</sup>

Many alternatives have been proposed as correctives to the current predicament but what they all have in common is their emphasis that the reformation of Korean Protestant church must come from preaching. Given the widespread corruption of mainstream Protestant leaders today, preaching has to lead the way. This is so because preaching provides a “way of *resistance* to the powers,” an “alternative to violent domination,” even if the violence is found within the church.<sup>18</sup> And in the Korean Protestant Church, sermons have always played a formative role, both in the growth of the church and in the present church context. Generally, pastors preach six sermons in a given week not including the homilies offered in pastoral visits.

A reformation in preaching is crucial at this critical juncture but reforming preaching should not be understood as reforming the sermon, i.e. tinkering with the sermonic form. Rather, the primary concern is in questioning the predominant theology that undergirds present preaching. There is very little space for different theologies in the Korean Protestant Church and the entrenched theological mood restricts the pastors to go beyond what is clear and established.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Dae-Young Ryu*, Understanding Early American Missionaries in Korea (1884–1910): Capitalist Middle-Class Values and Weber's Thesis, in: Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions 113 (2001), 93–117.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Jae-Kyeong Yoo*, 영국 청교도 영성의 한국교회의 수용 가능성에 대한 연구 (The study on the possibility of accommodation of British Puritanical spirituality by Korean churches), in: 신학과 실천 48 (Theology and Praxis 48) (2016).

<sup>17</sup> *Sung-Guk Jo* (note 4), 23–25.

<sup>18</sup> *Charles L. Campbell*, The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching, 1st ed. Louisville, Ky. 2002, 76–78.

What is most needed in the Korean Protestant Church today is an interrogation of privatized faith by attending to spiritual theology's teachings. As is the case in the West, there is a heightened interest in spirituality among those who have left the church.<sup>19</sup> Many who are disillusioned by materialism are taking a renewed interest in ultimate concerns and asking questions; the church can respond to them by its rich tradition of spiritual theology.<sup>20</sup> Although spiritual theology has been widely utilized, the Korean Protestant church has largely neglected the teachings of apophatic theology.

This article, which draws on apophatic theology in relation to preaching, may be the first of its kind in South Korea. Interest in this theology has been cemented only in the past few years, and apophatic theological texts are just beginning to be translated here. In this nascent stage, it is noteworthy that there is less of the knee-jerk opposition than one might expect. Even among the Protestants, there is more openness and curiosity regarding apophatic theology. Indeed, given the urgent need for the church to give up its individualism and embrace inclusiveness and unity, a turn towards apophatic theology is apt.

In the following section, features and implications of apophatic theology will be introduced; and detailed theoretical explanations and criticisms brought forth from differing denominations will be eschewed for the purpose of charting the possibilities that are opened up by Evagrius' apophatic theology.

### 3. The Possibility of Apophatic Theology: Towards Evagrius' Theology

The reform of the Korean Protestant Church must begin with a reform of its theology. Apophatic theology (or negative theology) is often understood as the counterpoint to kataphatic theology (or descriptive theology) and its formulation can be traced back to the early church. Kataphatic theology dominates Western Christian tradition with its rational and positivist foundation that has resulted in systematization and conceptualization of faith. Apophatic theology does not hold the belief that God can be defined or known through reason. Apophatic theology can be traced to Platonism and it offers up a *via negativa*, an alternative path to natural theology or theology of revelation. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita believed that humans could not know or express God's essence through human speculation. The Cappadocian fathers formulated core affirmations of apophatic theology and they have profoundly influenced the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. 정재영, 종교 세속화의 한 측면으로서 소속 없는 신앙인들에 대한 연구, in: 신학과 실천 39 (2014).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jae-Kyeong Yoo, 왜 이시대에 기독교 영성인가? (Why Discuss Spirituality Now?), in: 신학과 목회 35 (Theology and Ministry 35) (2011).

West, Aquinas and Eckhart became bearers of apophatic thought. According to Matthew Fox, traces of apophatic theology are all but lost in the Western church, including its Protestant church. The *via negativa* has attenuated into asceticism in Roman Catholicism and to an overemphasis on sin and atonement in Protestantism.<sup>21</sup> Apophatic theology is often equated with the third and last part in the three-way process of soul (purgation – illumination – union) and spirituality or mystical theology is understood as union with Christ.

In the current context of secular materialism where the “I” has become the center, apophatic theology loosens the “I” into a wider vista and understanding through its particularly humane and open vision.<sup>22</sup> Apophatic theology remains foreign to the majority of those who are not part of the Eastern Orthodox Church. When the church faced a crisis in its identity under large-scale secularization in 4<sup>th</sup> century, the desert fathers and mothers formulated apophatic theology as a response to the encroaching secularization of the church. Hence this theology is particularly appropriate for the Korean Protestant Church’s context.

Among the many church fathers who laid the foundation for apophatic theology, particular attention will be given to Evagrius Ponticus (345–399). Evagrius was a foundational thinker of spiritual theology who has had a profound impact in Western literary and cultural tradition; his theology offers rich resources in terms of inspiration and model for the Korean Protestant Church.<sup>23</sup> The main movements of his theology are as follows.

### ***3.1 The Three-Phase Way of the Soul***

Through his writings, Evagrius offers a concrete roadmap of the spiritual life. He shows how the ascetic way of *praktike*, *physike* and *theologia* could help one overcome evil thoughts and live with perfect purity of heart. Through *praktike* or ascetic practice, the soul can be liberated from passions and empowered to cultivate virtues. This way of the soul begins in faith and is paved by battling one’s appetites. The *physike* is the second stage when one contemplates created things, which

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew Fox/황종렬 역 (tr. by Jong-Ryeol Hwang), 원복 (Original Blessing), 칠곡군 (Chilgok-Gun) 2011, 138f. The influence of apophatic theology can be found over the length and breadth of the intellectual history, including philosophy. This article offers general overview and does not offer a detailed analysis of apophatic theology’s influence on Protestantism or Catholicism.

<sup>22</sup> 차광호, 포스트모던에서의 부정신학, in: 가톨릭신학 3 (2003), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Evagrius who was born in Pontus became the pupil of Basilus, Gregorius of Nazianzus, Gregorius Nyssenus after entering the clergy of Cappadocia. He practiced asceticism for the rest of his life in the deep desert of Kellia. Cf. *Evagrius Ponticus*/남성현 역 (tr. by Sunghyun Nam), 폰투스의 에바그리오스 실천학 (Evagrius Ponticus Praktikos), trans., Antoine Guillaumont, Claire Guillaumont, and Gabriel Bunge. 서울 (Seoul) 2015, 20–27; *Andrew Louth*/배성욱 역 (tr. by Sungok Bae). 서양 신비사상의 기원 (The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys), 칠곡군 (Chilgok-Gun) 2001, 153–155.

prepares one to contemplate the Creator.<sup>24</sup> The final stage of spiritual life is *theologia*, wherein one receives knowledge (*gnosis*) of God and is brought to true contemplation of God.<sup>25</sup> The one who has previously clung to the flesh is liberated; having overcome one's passions, one is united and able to forge a living relationship with God.

### 3.2 The Tripartite Soul

To better understand Evagrius' teaching regarding the soul, the soul and its conception of three corresponding parts must be understood. The first part is the *nous*, synonymous with *pneuma* and in a state of angelic purity before the fall. The second is *epithymia*, the human desire or appetite. The third is *thymos*, the passion, which influences the *epithymia* and the *nous*. Because humans are dominated by *epithymia* and *thymos*, which inhibit proper knowledge, humans have to undertake the three-phase way that begins with *praktike* to overcome the passions of *epithymia* and *thymos*.<sup>26</sup> Evagrius' classifications differ from Plato's conception as Plato conceives of *thymos* to be dominated by reason while Evagrius posits the necessity of both *thymos* and *epithymia* to be brought under control.<sup>27</sup> Evagrius argues thus because rage stirs when desires are unmet. Our desires or appetite should be reoriented towards God and *thymos* or passions should be channeled towards battling with evil that prevents us from desiring God.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.3 Roadblocks to the Way of Eternity: The Eight Evil Thoughts (logismoi)

In the battle with the devil, evil thoughts prevent one from entering into contemplation and silence. Evagrius identified eight of these false thoughts—gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, dejection, acedia, vainglory, and pride. These eight evils are forerunners of the Seven Deadly Sins in the Western tradition.<sup>29</sup> Each of these is threatening because it can disrupt and cause one to abandon the spiritual way. Gluttony and lust can lead one to crave sensual pleasure and give up on ascetic life.

<sup>24</sup> *Evagrius Ponticus*/허성석 역, 그노스티코스. 서울 2016, 81. 본문 49장.

<sup>25</sup> *Evagrius Ponticus* (note 23); Louth/배성옥 역 (tr. by Sung-Ok Bae), 서양 신비사상의 기원 (The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys), 156–161.

<sup>26</sup> *Evagrius Ponticus* (note 23), 35–37.

<sup>27</sup> *Leslie Stevenson/David L. Haberman*/박중서 역, 인간의 본성에 관한 10가지 이론 (Ten Theories of Human Nature). 4th ed. 서울 2006, 146f.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Sung-Hyun Nam*, 플라톤의 영혼의 삼분법과 에바그리오스의 영성신학 (The Tripartite Division of the Soul of Plato and a Spiritual Theology of Evagrius), in: 장신논단 48 (Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology 48), no. 2 (2016); *Sung-Hyun Nam*, 폰투스의 에바그리오스의 영성 테라피 (A Spiritual Therapy of Evagrius of Pontus – The Tripartite Division of the Soul and Its Treatment), in: 서양고대사연구 43 (Journal for the promotion of classical studies 43) (2015); *Jae-Kyeong Yoo*, 영적 성장의 관점에서 본 에바그리우스의 인간 이해 (The Spiritual Understanding of Human Beings According to Evagrius of Pontus), in: 한국기독교신학논총 79 (Korea Journal of Christian Studies 79), no. 1 (2012).

<sup>29</sup> *Sung-Hyun Nam* (note 28), 67.

Avarice poisons all manner of relationships. The root of all of these evils is self-conceit (*philautia*), an ingrown affection that has a “strong tendency toward the self.” Evagrius warns that rage and unrest ensue when the self’s appetites are not satisfied.<sup>30</sup>

### **3.4 Apatheia as the Purpose of Asceticism**

The end goal of *Praktike* is *apatheia*, literally “passionlessness,” or freedom from passions. Although it is a pure state of mind, it does not mean that one is freed from sin. As Evagrius notes, “The attainment of freedom from passion does not [necessarily mean] one is already truly praying; it is possible to have simple thoughts, but be taken up with their stories, and thus still be far from God.”<sup>31</sup> Even so, *apatheia* is essential to the true contemplation of God. Human striving can only go so far in true prayer, contemplation can only be attained with God’s intervention: “The Holy Spirit, out of compassion for our weakness, comes to us even when we are impure. And if only He finds our intellect truly praying to Him, He enters it and puts to flight the whole array of thoughts and ideas circling within it, and He arouses it to a longing for spiritual prayer.”<sup>32</sup>

## **4. Apophatic Theology and Its Implications**

Exposing the Korean Protestant Church’s corruption and crisis may just be the first step towards reform. However, paying attention to Evagrius, who himself weathered powerful storms of secularization, may yield deeper insights to the current predicament as well as possible solutions.

The implications of Evagrius’ theology for the Korean Protestant Church for its ministry and preaching are as follows.

### **4.1 Apophatic as Corrective**

Application of Evagrius’ theology offers a corrective that can redress the pernicious trends that have taken hold in the Korean Protestant Church. What follows are key correctives from the standpoint of apophatic theology to some of the major problems that plague the church today.

*Rejection of desire:* The most pertinent aspect of Evagrius’ theology for the Korean Protestant Church is his analysis and challenge of reorienting our desire. Desires call forth rage. Moderation of desire may be praised as it leads to diligence but there is no justification for any desire that can be given, however moderate, when the question of ultimate purpose is asked. As Evagrius teaches, all worldly desires stem from evil. And since this desire can never be quenched, it leads to division.

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<sup>30</sup> *Louth/배성옥 역* (tr. by Sung-Ok Bae), *서양 신비사상의 기원* (The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys), 159-160; *Evagrius Ponticus* (note 23), 46–49, 86ff.

<sup>31</sup> *Evagrius Ponticus/전경미 이재길 역* (tr. by Kyeung-Mi Jeong, Jae-Kil Lee), *에바그리우스의 기도와 묵상* (Ad monachos), 서울 (Seoul) 2011, 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

The devil promotes desire in us because it prevents us from seeing God. Evagrius' analysis and emphasis of human emotions was revolutionary for his time. His proposal that the passions must first be tamed before any spiritual or physical undertaking remains especially relevant for the present-day church that also suffers from dualism of spirit and flesh.

The crisis of Korean society lies in being trapped in an endless loop of desire-rage-violence-death. The preaching in the Korean Protestant church must expose and envision a way out of this deadly cycle. A hermeneutic that questions the normalization of desire is necessary for a proclamation that unmasks desire's deadliness for faith and community. Although existing theologies of the Sabbath can take on this role,<sup>33</sup> Evagrius' theology is distinctive for calling for its practice every moment of everyday.

*Transcending reason-centered faith:* Reason-centered faith conflates faith with rational understanding of God's grace; it mistakes salvation with human effort, with having cognitive and intellectual understanding of the Bible. Such a view also distorts the belief that salvation is God's prerogative by rendering unnecessary all human works of faith. Such reason-centered faith has led to a vitiation of works, of practices of faith that are demanded throughout the New Testament. Hence Sundays have been severed from non-church days, and religious life disconnected from everyday life.

One of the roots of reason-centered faith can be traced back to Puritanism. Puritans opted for the kataphatic as opposed to the apophatic and as a result have emphasized Bible-reading and meditation of creeds. And as it was with the Puritans, the Korean Protestant church also brought forth numerous preachers, and it was preaching that was prioritized and privileged. In contrast to apophatic theology that calls for emptying out and silence, preachers sought to fill themselves with intellectual convictions and believed that God could be defined and known through exercise of reason.<sup>34</sup>

This hunger for clear and defined truths can also be explained historically. Under the trauma of Japanese occupation that made life precarious, the search for clear truth was a matter of life and death. But now that survival has been secured, deeper questions of values and meanings must be asked and put in to practice. Here practice, which contrasts reason and intellect, entails more than just an execution of Biblical teaching. We should examine that which lies beyond and makes practice possible, what drives practice forward. Spiritual theology teaches that spiritual practices

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<sup>33</sup> *Walter Brueggemann*/박규태 역 (note 8).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Jae-Kyeong Yoo* (note 16), 377–380.

enable the transformation of understanding of the mind towards an awakening of the heart (*kardia*).<sup>35</sup>

*Theological analysis of rage:* Koreans demonstrate the contradiction of both outwardly expressing yet inwardly repressing anger. *Hwa-byong*, caused by the festering of anger, is a common illness unique to Koreans.<sup>36</sup> Despite the ubiquity of rage, a disregard exists for the anger of others. Hence Koreans are in need of emotional and mental caregiving. Evagrius thought *epithymia* that gives rise to anger must be treated, but urgent care was reserved for rage that result from failures of desire. Such rage goes beyond the basic emotion of anger to also include resentment that stems from feeling uncared for and arrogance that rises from feeling disrespected. The devil uses *epithymia* and leads one to attack another. Evagrius' perspective here is very different from Plato who perceives *epithymia* positively for enabling the soul's ascension.<sup>37</sup> Evagrius saw the aim of *praktike* as the disappearance of *epithymia*'s stirrings. Healing comes from purification of the soul and is made possible through Christ who makes possible *praktike*.<sup>38</sup> Christ is the minister of the soul. Real inroads can be made when we practice Evagrius' precept that we should not take our anger out on the object of our anger, but instead on the devil that exploits and further inflames our anger. Evagrius asserts that *epithymia* can be utilized to drive out evil thoughts.<sup>39</sup> Our anger is not quelled by taking it out on others. That only leads to greater violence and vengeance. It is when *epithymia* is directed towards evil that evil may be incapacitated.

Individual suffering has deepened as competition has become more entrenched in Korean society. As people are increasingly neglected, rage has swelled and life has become unendurable. This suffering cannot be reduced or treated merely as a psychological matter since it destroys relationships and unmakes communities. Thus the preacher must remain actively engaged in exposing and resisting such powers through preaching.

*Correcting what has been misused and exploited: mysticism*

In Korean Protestantism, mysticism denotes supernatural experiences or phenomena. Speaking in tongues, faith healings, ecstatic experiences, and visions are commonly accepted forms of mysticism. Mysticism at its base is related to primitive and elementary religious sentiments inherent

<sup>35</sup> 김수천, 4세기의 이집트 수도자 마카리우스와 에바그리우스의 영성사상 고찰, in: 신학과 실천 19, no. 1 (2009), 252f.

<sup>36</sup> Hwa-byung symptom is a kind of sickness caused by pent-up anger. It literally means rage sickness in English. According to Lin, its manifestations include both physiological and psychological symptoms. Cf. K. M. Lin, Hwa-Byung: a Korean culture-bound syndrome? American Journal of Psychiatry 140, no. 1 (1973), 105–107.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Sung-Hyun Nam* (note 28).

<sup>38</sup> Evagrius Ponticus (note 23), 49–51.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. Chapter 24.

in humans. The problem lies in an unhealthy or imbalanced pursuit of mysticism. There are too many cases where mystical experiences are absolutized and made the primary end of religion. Korean Protestant preachers have been criticized for overemphasizing mystical experiences and for taking on shamanic role that mediates the spirit world while preaching. Apophatic theology teaches instead that the proper end of mysticism is union with God, which reduces ecstatic experiences to a means to that supreme objective; furthermore, the cross of Christ remains the core mystery of mysticism in the apophatic tradition.<sup>40</sup> Thus all believers are able and invited to experience mysticism through Christ. The preacher faces the critical task of promoting and encouraging proper theological reflection and application of mysticism that is centered on Christ.

*Magnification of love:* Apophatic theology teaches that love, as related to the mystery of Christ, does not have a personal object but is instead directed towards the ultimate being. The corrupted human loves what they lust after within its narrow confines but God loves all, loving even that which is worthless. Mysticism leads to desiring God's extravagant love. Humans confine their love to the realm of the personal. The self-absorption that characterizes narcissism has become an emblem of modern society's misshapen desire. Evagrius, however, does not dismiss the physical; there is a positive element to the love of flesh. The soul reaches a state of peace through the body. But it is not the body's beauty that is the requisite for soul's peace. It is in the discipline of the body that peace is attained, enabling pure prayer that leads to true contemplation of God.<sup>41</sup>

#### **4.2 Apophatic theology as affirmation**

Evagrius' apophatic theology serves to affirm what the Korean Protestant Church has already been practicing.

*Interest in the Trinity:* The doctrine of Trinity is chiefly regarded as foundational in Christian theology. The Korean Protestant Church, however, has failed to emphasize its importance and neglected to study either the doctrine's intricacies or its implications. In apophatic theology, the doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with soteriology. God's self-revelation is manifest "in the mystery of incarnation caused by the Spirit in the person of Christ."<sup>42</sup> The mystery of the Trinity is too great for rational understanding and resists intellectual mastery. Our explanations run the risk of becoming reductionist and wrong. The doctrine cannot be understood through human

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<sup>40</sup> *Louis Bouyer/정대식 역* (tr. by Dae-Sik Jeong), *영성 생활 입문* (Introduction la vie spirituelle), 서울 (Seoul) 1992, 396f.411f.

<sup>41</sup> *Sung-Hyun Nam* (note 28), 85–87.

<sup>42</sup> *Seung-Ryong Kwak*, *부정신학* (Apophatic Theology), in: *가톨릭 신학과 사상* (Catholic Theology and Thoughts), no. 66 (2010), 120f.

reason but it can be experienced in God's presence that sustains all individual and communal life and is active in the church.

*The primacy of relationship:* The bonds of relationship in the Korean Protestant Church are strong as they have been shaped and defined by a larger culture of Confucianism which privileges collectivity. However strong these bonds are, these relationship networks are narrowly confined and very restrictive. Individualism was present in the very beginning of missionary efforts and although the church has been shaped by a cultural tradition that privileges collectivity, the collectivity that was privileged was a family-based network, resulting in the privileging of individual churches against the denomination or larger communities. As the church categorized and excluded others in pursuit of its selfish desires, the church turned increasingly inward and spiraled into an individualistic faith.

Theology is an interpretation of human life in relation to God,<sup>43</sup> and apophatic theology's confession that we cannot know or express God results not in an abandonment of the pursuit of God but a greater desire to know and express God. Instead of formulating God as an impersonal and absolute being who is wholly indifferent to us, apophatic theology preaches a relational God who seeks intimacy with us.<sup>44</sup> This makes way for new possibilities. Preaching is proclaiming our connection to this God. Preaching is proclaiming that God's way lies in solidarity and in the overcoming of individualism. Preaching is proclaiming the Spirit who moves in and through community, undoing individualism.

With a view to practical application, Evagrius observed that meek and humble minds maintain relationships with others. Meekness is attained with the emptying of hate, humility when we are not attached to anything and see ourselves as we are.<sup>45</sup> Conflict with others can be minimized when we see others in light of and through our relationship with God.

*Resisting foolishness and injustice:* Anger seems a natural response when we encounter unfairness or injustice. Evagrius, however, argues that anger is never the right response to our neighbors:

When you pray suitably, you will come up against matters of the sort that make you to imagine it would be completely justifiable to use indignation [*thumos*]. But there is no such thing as justifiable indignation against your neighbor. If you investigate [this], you will

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Oxford 2000, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Kwang-Ho Cha, *포스트모던에서의 부정신학* (Apophatic theology in postmodernity), 76f.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Vladimir Lossky/박노양 역 (tr. by No-Yang Park), *동방교회 신비신학에 대하여* (Sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient), 서울 (Seoul) 2003; Evagrius Ponticus/전경미 이재길 역 (tr. by Kyeung-Mi Jeong, Jae-Kil Lee), *에바그리우스의 기도와 묵상* (Ad monachos), Chapters 19, 31, 33, 34, 35, 61.

discover that it is possible for the matter to be settled fairly without indignation. Employ every possible means to avoid exploding in indignation.<sup>46</sup>

Evagrius categorically rejected indignation. How then are we to resist indignation that holds us captive this very moment? Evagrius responded that we should fight the devil behind our anger. Evagrius himself would perform all manner of strange actions to overcome and resist evil thoughts. Evagrius once stood naked by the well during wintertime until his body was frozen to overcome lust. He let his body be infested with ticks for forty days because he was pestered by blasphemous thoughts.<sup>47</sup> As bizarre as some of his acts were, they recall the strange symbolic actions performed by Old Testament prophets and recall the figure of the fool who sees the ways in which the powers have become corrupt and is unafraid to mock and draw attention to their corruption.<sup>48</sup> Such acts flow from a self that is liberated from the fear of death and grip of self-preservation; these acts create cracks in the system of demonic power.

In Korea, one can locate similar actions that were performed by Buddhist monks.<sup>49</sup> Evagrius writes from a Christian perspective and offers the purpose and goal of such actions. There is a long tradition of spiritual practice that has its roots in apophatic theology's emphasis on *kenosis* and self-humiliation and this tradition is seen in the lineage of "sacred fools" or "fools for Christ" in Russia from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. These saints made themselves vulnerable to insult and humiliation as they challenged and provoked their communities; their presence have significantly shaped Russian spirituality.<sup>50</sup>

To suffer insults and humiliation is to refuse violence. Jesus was opposed to violence in the face of violence. Jesus never once retaliated in violence. As Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers write, Jesus himself played the fool, ridiculing the destructiveness and senselessness of violence.<sup>51</sup> The more the Korean Protestant Church follows its clenched fist, the further it strays from Jesus' teaching. Preachers must proclaim apophatic theology's teachings of *kenotic* folly and the foolishness of the cross.

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<sup>46</sup> *Evagrius Ponticus* (note 45), 15; [http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/03\\_Prayer/00a\\_start.htm](http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/03_Prayer/00a_start.htm) [accessed August 9, 2018].

<sup>47</sup> *Sung-Jun Heo, 사막에서 길을 묻다 (Asking the way on the desert), 서울 (Seoul) 2008, 54–56.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Charles L. Campbell/Johan H. Cilliers/김대진 역 (tr. by Dae-Jin Kim), 하나님의 어릿광대 (Preaching Fools), 서울 (Seoul) 2014.*

<sup>49</sup> 문화권에 따라서 자기 비움과 같은 개념은 쉽게 받아들이기 어려울 수도 있다. 그러나 한국의 경우는 자기 비움의 수도 전통이 이미 유사한 형태로 지속되었다. Cf. *ibid*, 48f.

<sup>50</sup> *곽승룡, (도스토예프스키의)비움과 충만의 그리스도. 서울 1998, 72f.*

<sup>51</sup> *Campbell/Cilliers (note 48), 270f.*

*On ascetic practices such as prayer and fasting:* Ascetic practices of prayer and fasting are key practices in the Korean church. For corporate prayer, the Korean Protestant church tends towards *tongsung-kido*<sup>52</sup> rather than written prayers; for individuals, prayer is strongly emphasized as a key spiritual practice. Fasting is also conventional in the Korean Protestant church, to the point where forty-day fasts are regularly undertaken regardless of liturgical season or existence of prayer requests.

Evagrius can be helpful in affirming what is already being practiced while calling us to remember the purpose and motivation of our ascetic practices. If the Korean Protestant church takes ascetic practices of prayer, temperance, and fasting as ends in themselves, then it has failed to properly embody Christian tradition. Prayer should be directed towards relationship with God, for the peace that follows the emptying of one's soul. Evagrius emphasized the primacy of prayer when he said that prayer is the most important practice, coming before abstinence, work, and silence. Prayer is the door to the self, a way of depending on God. We must pray ceaselessly as prayer paves our spiritual journey towards God.<sup>53</sup>

### ***4.3 Apophatic Theology as Indigenous Theology***

Apophatic theology may be perceived as an example of minor theology that differs significantly from the dominant theology. However, given that the apophatic tradition has historically helped shape mainstream theology and practice from its origins in the early church, it cannot be considered wholly foreign. In the case of Korea, apophatic theology shares continuities with Korea's indigenous religious tradition and larger cultural ethos.

*Bible-centrism:* Bible-centrism in the Korean Protestant church is more than just an outgrowth of Reformed theology, but an effect of Confucian and Buddhist culture that prizes sacred texts. Toddlers are given bible verses to memorize and daily scripture reading is a common faith practice. Among elderly believers, the hand copying of Scripture is not uncommon. Evagrius regarded the meditation and memorization of the Bible as specific tools within spiritual discipline. In *Antirrheticus*, Evagrius argues for the recitation of corresponding Bible verses to combat specific temptations or evil thoughts. He also considered Bible reading as essential to the practice of prayer. Evagrius argued that at the heart of mystical theology is prayer, and prayer is possible when one's

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<sup>52</sup> In *Tongsungkido*, individuals pray out loud. This prayer can be done privately or corporately. *Tongsung Prayer* is often called Korean prayer.

<sup>53</sup> Jun-Ki Jeong, *사막교부 에바그리우스 폰티쿠스의 <수도사에게> 연구* (The Study on 'To a monk' of Evagrius), in: *光神論壇* 19 (The Journal of Kwangshin 19) (2010), 201–203.

mind is purified, which reading the Bible makes possible. The Bible verses bear fruit through meditation and secure one's salvation.<sup>54</sup>

It is not the case in Protestant Korea that believers have gone so far off track theologically as to treat the words of the Bible to be magical or enchanted. Even so, we must sound the alarm and guard against memorization of Scripture as an end in itself or equated with one's faith.

*Continuities:* Evagrius' emphasis on ascetic practices and prayer may appear similar in form with the existing spiritual practices of Buddhist and Taoist traditions in Korea. Even the language of emptying out echoes that of other religions in Korea. These continuities may provoke criticism and resistance against the introduction of apophatic theology to Korean Protestantism. But these continuities may also serve to smooth transition when adopting apophaticism.

Similarities can be observed between Korean affective culture and apophatic theology. Both tend towards obliqueness and opacity; the same can be said about Korean language and culture. Koreans never call on their fathers by their names. Positive emotions are often expressed negatively. The state of utter happiness is often rendered, "I'm dying from happiness." Negative phrases and formulations are used to express strong feelings.<sup>55</sup>

Differences are seen when Christian identity is maintained alongside indigenous religious formations. There were Korean spiritualists who developed their own apophatic theologies rooted in indigenous faith traditions, Dasuk Young-Mo Ryu being a key figure (1890–1981). Scholars are studying Ryu's theology as he constructed a systematic theology by way of apophaticism. He was regarded as an eccentric for his distinctive lifestyle; some regarded him as a saint. He came of faith at the age of 15 and was deeply affected by Tolstoy and a series of spiritual experiences he underwent. He fasted by having one daily meal and practiced celibacy in his marriage;<sup>56</sup> he lived each day as his last as he regarded nocturnal sleeping as dying and so received each new morning as new life. Ryu denied substance to "self" and maintained that the absolute being of God was emptiness. He believed that human beings were ultimately spiritual beings whose home is heaven, calling for people to transcend the material world instead of being bound by it. While it is

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Evagrius Ponticus*/허성석 역 (tr. by Sung-Suk Heo), 안티레티코스 (Antirrheticus), 칠곡군 (Chilgok-Gun) 2014; *Anselm Grün*/김영철 역 (tr. by Yeung-Cheol Kim), 내 영혼의 치유제 (Die Spirituelle Hausapotheke), 칠곡군 (Chilgok-Gun) 2014. In Grün's book he easily explains antirrheticus of Evagrius with today's language.

<sup>55</sup> *Seung-Ryong Kwak* (note 42), 139.

<sup>56</sup> *Young-Mo Ryu*'s penname Dasuk means 'eating one meal per day at evening'.

impossible to summarize his entire theology here, it is clear that apophatic theology marked his thought and practice.<sup>57</sup>

This paper examined the ways in which apophatic theology may be applied to the Korean Protestant Church as a corrective for healing as well as an affirmation of its features. Moreover, apophatic theology can soothe more than individual troubles as it has the potential to provide healing and relief of societal, political, and economic woes. Despite the urgent need for reunification between the two Koreas, the prospect of reconciliation and forgiveness seems ever more distant. If we follow Evagrius' teaching and preach that South Korea must first forgive and embrace North Korea without any judgment, we would be mocked as fools who do not know the ways of the world. And yet, that is what the Gospel demands, that is what the Gospel preaches.

Furthermore, to listen to the teachings of apophatic theology is to embrace ecumenism. Apophatic theology was deemed heretical and neglected from the very beginning of Korean Christianity. In Western Christianity also, it was often actively suppressed or neglected. The Western tradition has been theologically shaped by the apophatic tradition, but has failed to practice its vision; perhaps Korean Protestantism will not fare any better. If the Gospel is essentially self-emptying and marked by openness and hospitality towards the other, then it would be a mistake to dismiss the mystical theology of Evagrius, who has been a longstanding witness to the truth of the Gospel.

## Conclusion

Rising spells falling. The Korean Protestant Church has shed its distinctive Christian identity by adopting an individualistic and consumerist faith; it has become engorged and satiated as it wildly pursued its desires for riches and power. And so, it is quickly falling. But what falls still has wings; is rising, then, impossible? Jesus, emptying himself, was crucified. The more Jesus emptied himself, the higher he was hung, and more people were saved through seeing him (Num 21:9). For the Korean Protestant Church to become a witness of salvation, it must fall even more. Only by falling can it return (rise) to God.

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Yeong-Mo Yoo/Yeong-Ho Park*, *다석 류영모의 기독교 사상* (Christian Thought of Dasuk Young-Mo Ryu), 서울 (Seoul) 1995; *Yang-Mo Jeong et al.*, *하루를 일생처럼* (Live life like it ends today), 서울 (Seoul) 2011; *Yeong-Ho Park*, *다석 류영모의 생애와 사상* (Dasuk Young-Mo Ryu's Life and Thought), 서울 (Seoul) 1996; id., *多夕 柳永模의 생각과 믿음* (Dasuk Young-Mo Ryu's thinking and belief), 서울 (Seoul) 1995; *Yun-Ju Choi*, *다석 류영모의 '생명의 영성'에 관한 연구* (The study on 'spirituality of life' of Dasuk Young-Mo Ryu), 성공회대학교 신학전문 대학원 (Sungkonghoe University), 2007.

And as we fall, we must not give up on the possibilities of apophatic theology. As Evagrius teaches, our desire should be for God and our *epithymia* directed towards fighting against evil. We must enter into *apatheia* by overcoming evil thoughts through the practice of prayer and scripture reading. When we practice this in our daily lives, the death that awaits us in the cycle of desire-rage-violence will be transformed into life. Kataphatic theology remains all too familiar and predominant. Apophatic theology may tame our rage against others and bring forth forgiveness and reconciliation. Mysticism fueled by excess emotionalism and sealed hearts will be opened to the cross of Christ and towards others. Walter Brueggemann points out that preaching must dismantle narcissism and apathy towards others by resisting desires for busyness.<sup>58</sup> As we continue to resist in our living and preaching, we will expose the devil's tricks for what they are. We may become unpopular and be called fools by the powerful. Our influence may continue to diminish, as individualism grows stronger. But we do well to remember Evagrius's teaching that we are already renewed; we have already won against evil and conflicts as we meditate on the Bible and pray every moment. And when we preach as such, a power and strength not our own will build and restore communities, preaching salvation for all. All that rises has wings.

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Brueggemann* (note 8).  
IJH vol 3: 43–61