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# **THE IMPACT OF COMPETITION ON RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHICS IN KOREA**

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## **Abstract**

Korea has undergone dramatic change since the 1970s when economic development kicked into high gear. Unprecedentedly fast industrialization accelerated the phenomenon of rural-urban migration. As a result, traditional society which had previously been centered by regional ties and kinship began eroding. The values and norms that were common in the past came to lose their power as Korean people have pursued 'free market values,' 'growth,' and 'social stability.' In other words, the acceleration of the free market compelled competition among individuals. The victories earned from these competitions secured capital surpluses whereas failure meant being degraded to the urban lower class. Due to this fear, the tendency to pursue stability became dominant among Koreans. During this era in the 1970s, religion explosively expanded for a certain period of time owing to social and psychological anxieties that had been born from previously unknown levels of competition in Korea.

**Keywords:** Competition, Religious population, Religious nones, Secularization, Korean society.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid growth of capitalism forced 'competition' on Korean individuals. Within this framework, victory attained from competition refers to securing surplus capital whereas failure means degenerating into the lower-class (e.g.: the urban poor). Because of this, social stability took up

10

deep roots in the minds of Korean people. Religions in Korean society achieved constant growth at that time, and to a certain degree, this was based on social and psychological anxiety produced by competition (Ro, 2002, p. 54). However, even though competition accounted for a part of Korean societal changes, contrary to expectation, the growth rate of religions has decreased from the 2000s onward. With this background in mind, this study aims to demonstrate from a sociological perspective how the growth and fall of religions are related to competition. The forms of competition examined in this study focus on general societal trends rather than specific instances of competition within various entities.

## **THE TWO SIDES OF COMPETITION AND RELIGION IN KOREA**

Competition entails an individual or a group pursuing exclusive goals, which can vary from what is destructive to what is constructive (Deutsch, 2006, p. 30). Even when competition takes on a variety of forms such as defeating opponents for one's own psychological satisfaction, be unwillingly driven into contention, or improving one's own life, competition can be roughly classified into two categories: competition to improve present circumstances and ontological competition for sustenance. In other words, competition can play a positive role in life, yet at the same time, it can be imbued with negative motivations. However, competition is ultimately related to individual well-being. It invariably requires effort. Especially if outperformed by another, one will feel oppressed psychologically and physically.

Stress refers to the psychological and emotional experience depicted when a participant in a competition recognizes threats against their well-being in the gap between personal resources and situational demands (Lazarus, 1999). Hans Selye (1975) attempted to draw positive aspects of stress by dividing stress into 'eustress,' which is a positive stimulus such as achievable challenges, and 'distress' generating when one is hindered from obtaining personal resources. In spite of his attempt, stress of both varieties definitely has negative influences on competition participants.

At this point, what we have to pay attention to is the fact that stress generates gaps in terms of intensity and quality according to which form of stress is being experienced. If the form of stress is positive and related improving a present situation, this stress is beneficial in some regards

because since one might be able to move onto other challenges even in the case of losing. In this context, one's stress levels are likely to remain within a range that is ultimately tolerable. In the meantime, if competition reveals threats to one's existence or failure would leave one with no recourse, stress worsens (Wittchen et al., 2013, p. 322); sometimes even to the extent of being unbearable.

In Korea, competition demonstrates itself in the forms of hope-oriented situational improvement rather than stability-oriented maintenance of present conditions. Specifically, hope-oriented competition prevailed Korea around the 1970s while in the midst of economic development and then again before the global financial crisis (2007-2008) that began as a subprime mortgage market crisis in the United States. Korean society has been prone to stability-orientation competition from that time onward. This is reasonably well reflected by data on GNP per capita as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. GDP per capita in Korea

Year	'60	'70	'80	'90	'95	'00	'05	'10	'12	'14	'16	'17
GNP	9	80	919	4,112	8,448	11,972	16,896	22,801	24,728	26,120	28,653	30,009

Source: Korea National Statistical Office

The economic volume of Korea has dramatically increased since the 1970s while growth has slowed down since 2010. The increase of economic volume led to aspiration to attain individual wealth. In this context, there was no choice but to engage in bitter contests. Beginning in the 1970s, prestigious colleges became recognized as stepping-stones for attaining wealth or elevating one's social status. Thereby, Koreans were driven to severe competition over university admissions. Admission into a good school was not the end of competition either. Ideal job placement and promotions were such limited opportunities that excessive competition remained a factor even post-graduation. From the 1970s up until the mid-2000s, competition was characterized by the attainment of increasingly expensive houses, savory foods, desirable spouses, prestigious schools, and higher and higher positions. In other words, this type of competition was more prone to securing a better future.

Economic growth provides people with strong hopes for success. On the other hand, morality was replaced by depravity, extreme selfishness came to prevail, and opportunism came to thrive. Producing such adverse effects broadens awareness that competition is not actually impartial. Through contests, most Korean people still fail to attain wealth. It seems that fair redistribution of wealth is impossible (Kim, 2007, p. 120). Accordingly, there emerged a demand for relieving such adverse effects and comforting people's minds with spirituality in order to resolve the stress caused by competition. This resulted in the rapid growth of Korea's religious population. Before 1980, national statistics on Korea's religious demographics could not be found, and as such, this study face some limitations. Yet, in Table 2, growth in the segment of the population claiming religious affiliation can be seen to have grown.

Table 2. Religious Population in Korea

Year	1985	1995	2005	2015
Whole Population	40,419,652	44,553,710	47,041,434	49,052,389
Religious Population	17,203,296 (42.5%)	22,597,824 (50.7%)	24,970,766 (53.1%)	21,553,674 (43.9%)

Source: Korea National Statistical Office

What is particularly unique about this period is that many new religions based in earlier Korean traditions emerged alongside the growth of Christianity. The number of newly founded religious orders or factions was 31 before 1945, the year of Independence, dropped to 14 around the 1950s, rose to 26 in the 1960s, dropped again to 19 in the 1970s, and rose to a new high of 33 in the 1980s (Kwon, 2013, p. 122). Those new religions and factions rapidly expanded in membership as well.

For example, Daesoon Jinrihoe, one of the new religions that is rooted in a faith in Kang Jeungsan (1871-1909), a figure from the end of Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), was established in 1969 by Park Wudang (1917-1996) with the doctrine of grievance-resolution and grateful reciprocation of favors for mutual beneficence. The order grew and the number of followers

eventually grew to the point of exceeding 1.8 million. This growth of Korean new religions was attributed to the fact that isolated individuals such as laborers, farmers, and lower-class urbanites who had been left behind in competition for wealth and those who felt weary of competition came to entrust indigenous Korean religions as their spiritual shelters (Lee, 2000).

By way of contrast, in Western countries, many laborers had to fight due to organizations having increased efficiency. For example, organizational restructuring, outsourcing, mergers, and acquisitions. This change was related to redundancies in general, which increased the number of short-term laborers and thereby triggered job-insecurity. This phenomenon appeared relatively late in Korea, yet, after the financial crisis of December 1997, it accelerated as the country came very close to national bankruptcy. Fortunately, Korea was able to overcome within a short-period of time due to the financial intervention of the IMF in August of 2001. As shown in Tab. 1, in 2005, the Korean economy grew as high as 40% when compared to 2000. Nevertheless, involuntary resignations or layoffs occurred regularly. At the same time, contract workers accounted for over 30% of overall workers every year. Job-instability worsened. In addition, the financial crisis triggered by America in 2007 also threatened Korean society tremendously, and global contests required Korean enterprises to downsize their scale. This led to shrinkage in the labor market.

Since 2007, job instability and the uncertainty of life caused by it transformed competition from future-oriented hopefulness to present-oriented preservationism. In other words, fear over losing work, rather than fear over increasing income or fear over losing colleagues at work began to linger in many workers. This is indicative of failure in competition signifying existential threats (Meltzer et al., 2010, p. 1041). The fact that unstable living influences mental health and suicidality is attributed to the cause of mortality (Reichert & Tauchmann, 2017; Caroli & Godard, 2016). This claim was underpinned by many earlier studies. Now what we call competition has actually become a 'competition for survival' and failure is simply intolerable.

Such anxiety brought introduced new problems to Korean society. For instance, the birth rate plunged to unprecedented levels. As of 2017, the birth rate of Korea was 1.05 per woman of reproductive age; a level notably

barely over 1. For the year 2018, it is expected to fall to 0.96-0.97, which, if true, would be an all time low. (see Table 3).

Table 3. Total Fertility Rate in Korea

Year	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017	2018 (estimated)
Fertility Rate	4.65	2.92	1.57	1.68	1.50	1.21	1.17	1.05	1.05	0.96-0.97

Source: Korea National Statistical Office

For reference, as of 2015, Korea took first place (1.05) in terms of low birth rate among the 36 OECD countries while Japan, which has communal traits that are similar from geographical, sociological, and economic perspectives, managed to sustain a rate of 1.41 (the eighth lowest, see OECD database). Furthermore, suicidality in Korea started increasing in 2005, and reached a record high in 2010. It did decrease a little in 2015, but it still remains very high compared to figures prior to the 2000s (see Table 4). With a rate of 24.6 per 100,000, suicidality in Korea also scores first place out of the 36 countries that make up the OECD. This figure is slightly higher than Lithuania, the second runner up, but considerably higher than Latvia (24.4 and 18.1 respectively, refer to 2018 OECD database).

Table 4. Suicide Mortality per 100,000 population in Korea

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2013	2015	2017
Suicide	11.2	8.8	12.7	16.6	29.9	33.5	28.7	25.8	24.6

Source: 2017 OECD Health Statistics: Health status

The anxiety caused by uncertainty brings about remarkable changes to the segment of the population that is religiously affiliated. The non-religious population diminished roughly 10% to 56.1%; halting growth in 2015 compared to 46.9% in 2010 (see Table 2). Indeed, the decrease of the non-religious population cannot be interpreted as reflecting instability living conditions. The reason for this is because religions were unsuccessful in consoling people who were spiritually healing from severe competition for living or even competition for survival. Critical acknowledgment related to

religions such as criticism of religion in general, criticism of particular religions, or interreligious criticism has gradually risen in Korea from the 2000s onward. This phenomenon was unprecedented in previous times (Kang, 2017, p. 263).

The major religions formed in Korea consist of Buddhism, Catholicism, and Christianity. They focused on enlarging their temples or churches instead of standing for the needy and this led to the expansion of critical views on religion. This could be seen in competitions, conflicts among religions, and increased discord between secular and religious entities and social institutions (Lee & Oh, 2015, p. 109). Modern Korean religions pursue peace and co-existence outwardly while still participating in competition, tensions, and conflicts less visibly (Lee & Oh, 2015, p. 129). Even the anti-religious movement has been ongoing due to prejudice, pridefulness, exclusivism, weaponized demonization, authoritarianism, indifference towards neighbors, and corruption (Kang, 2017, p. 263). As religions start to lose their previous societal functions and roles, the Korean people have turned their backs on religion.

## **CONCLUSION**

Industrialization was a reflection of westernization in Korea. In its midst, wealth pervaded the entirety of Korean society. As the growth of the economy required the incrementation of wealth, intense competitions developed among many social sectors such as enterprises, governments, schools, and households all of which sought to create wealth. Yet, such competitions drove people into unaddressed fatigue and also collapsed many of the values embedded in traditional society. Thereby, people started to seek alternatives to comfort themselves spiritually, and this led to rapid growth of religiously affiliated individuals in the population. However, the Korean economy halted its growth around 2007 and started to agonize over the gust of vicious winds known as large-scale restructuring. Making a living grew ever more difficult and uncertainty in life became even more poignant. At the height of these phenomena, the suicide rate skyrocketed and the birth rate plunged. Even religions turned away from the high degree of psychological stress that people suffered and pursued the enlargement of



their own scale via interreligious competition instead. This resulted in anti-religion movement or religiominia far beyond simple ostracism.

The empirical quotients which underpin decreases in Korea's religious demography highlighted the decadence of religions, at least outwardly. On the contrary though, it might not be proper to say that decreasing participation in religions can be attributed to the abandonment of religions as caused by secularization. Wilkins-LaFlamme (2015) found that even though the number of individuals as religious nones increased and fewer people remained in institutionalized religions, these religious nones still had complex interests in faith either mentally or spiritually. The ontological struggle for existence and extensive uncertainty accelerate the routinization of anxiety so tremendously that individuals may even tremble in fright.

Despite self-identifying as 'nones,' they often pursue spirituality in their lives in some way or another (Park, 2011, p. 14). The increase of people without religion should not be interpreted as a rejection of Korean religions. Rather, these religious identities are generally considered acceptable even by those who do not wish to participate in them (Kim, 2013, p. 4). At this point, it is worth looking into Habermas's theory (2008, p. 19) that religions have kept their own seats in Western societies. Regardless of how competition transforms Korean society in the future, many individuals maintain their spiritualities. Likewise, this is expected to continue into the future.

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