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The Relationship between Religion and Society in the COVID-19 Era: The Case of Protestantism in South Korea

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Abstract: The relationship between Korean Protestantism and society at large can be divided into three parts in terms of the religion's participation in society following the Korean Peninsula's liberation from Japanese colonial rule: (1) conservative social non-participation, (2) far-right social participation, and (3) progressive social participation. In the COVID-19 era, conservative Protestants reluctantly followed the government's quarantine guidelines but remained wary of state control over religion. Far-right Protestants placed a greater emphasis on religious values than on public safety and maintained face-to-face worship services against the government's ban on religious and other largescale gatherings. Progressive Protestants participated in social movements to benefit the public good and were willing to forgo religious gatherings to that end. Overcoming COVID-19 requires many things, particularly material support for the marginalized, an establishment of an intimacy network beyond church-centered communities, ethics of respect for life, and the promotion of ecological justice, and with this in mind, the progressive Protestants' participation in society can be considered an appropriate model.



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1. Introduction

South Korea's quarantine strategy regarding COVID-19 has so far received both praise and criticism from the Western world. In the early days of the outbreak around East Asia, South Korea was praised for effectively controlling the spread of the virus without an extreme lockdown and with the cooperation of its citizens (Hwang 2020, p. 20). However, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic as the virus spread rapidly to the Western world, including the United States and Europe, Western praise for South Korea's preventive measures turned into criticism. South Korea was described as a "surveilled country," a "controlled society," and demonstrating the "collectivism of East Asia" (Cheon 2020, p. 20). The implications of these ambivalent views are as follows: Koreans followed quarantine guidelines well in order to prevent the spread of the virus, did so voluntarily from a positive perspective, or with strong government control from a negative perspective.

These ambivalent views did not come only from outside of Korea. These points of view also appeared in the response of Korean Protestants to preventive guidelines, especially the ban on religious gatherings. Progressive Protestants voluntarily cooperated with the government's guidelines and were willing to forgo religious gatherings for public health. However, conservative Protestants reluctantly followed guidelines but argued that the government's coercion violated their religious freedom. Furthermore, far-right Protestants deliberately violated quarantine guidelines and continued face-to-face services and large-scale rallies. Progressive Protestants criticized far-right Protestants for undermining the public good, while conservative and far-right Protestants criticized the abandonment of traditional face-to-face worship as subordination to the state, arguing that religious freedom

was a basic right. Far-right Protestants were criticized by those both inside and outside the church as they clung to face-to-face worship and consequently became the culprit of cluster infections.

In light of this, the discussion addressing to what extent religion should follow social norms has increased considerably. Practical and theoretical questions have been raised about the relationship between religion and society, from whether it is justifiable to insist on religious freedom even at the risk of endangering public health, to whether religion can have positive effects as well as negative effects in society during a pandemic, and to what a desirable relationship model between religion and society at such a time might look like.

Studies on the relationship between religion and society have specifically dealt with types of social or political participation of religion which are closely related to various approaches to the discourse of the separation of religion and state (O'Dea 1966; Yinger 1970; Oh 1979; Demerath 2007; Haar and Tsuruoka 2007; Wach [1947] 2019). Existing studies generally agree that with historical development, the transition from the fusion of religion and state to a separation of religion and state has occurred. It is undeniable that an essential characteristic of a modernized society is the separation of religion and state, particularly with the state guaranteeing religious freedom and preventing non-elected religious powers or institutions from affecting policy by differentiating religion and the mundane world (Driessen 2009; Yun 2014).¹

Over the past decades, secularization thesis and the religious economy model have been two major approaches explaining the changes in the relationship between religion and society caused by modernization. Both take the separation of religion and state for granted, the former by naturalizing it and the latter by idealizing it (Kang 2014, pp. 159–160). Secularization thesis tends to regard the differentiation of religion and society as an inevitable process and further implicitly assumes the weakening of the social influence of religion in modern society (Wilson [1966] 2016). The religious economy model, formulated against the disappearance of religion as predicted by secularization thesis, still standardizes the separation of religion and state as desirable and ideal in modern society, and accordingly, regards state regulation as harmful to the religious economy and deregulation as beneficial to the religious economy (Stark and Finke 2000). Still, these two approaches fail to explain the dynamic interactions between religion and society.

In the practical world, religion and society are interacting actively and in great complexity. Religion can have a social, political, and cultural influence on civil society because people who belong to specific religious organizations belong to other social groups. The principle of the separation of religion and society does not lead to a complete differentiation of religion and society in reality. Therefore, the relationship between religion and society needs to be explored not ideologically but practically (Yun 2014, p. 229). The dynamics between religion and society in real life can be explained through research into various types of the social participation of religion.

This study examines the relationship between religion and society in the COVID-19 era in terms of the types of social participation undertaken by Korean Protestants. The main discussion will proceed in the following order: Section 2 examines the history of Korean Protestant participation in society before the pandemic and presents the dynamics of the relationship between Protestantism and society in Korea. Section 3 analyzes how Protestants of each type responded to the government's quarantine guidelines. Section 4 explores what type of relationship between religion and society is required to overcome a crisis in which a pandemic increases the opportunity for religion to participate in society.

2. The History of Social Participation by Korean Protestants before COVID-19

When Protestantism was first introduced to the Korean Peninsula by missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the separation of religion and state was considered a basic principle. At that time, the majority of missionaries were from the United States, and early Protestantism on the Korean Peninsula was strongly influenced by them (Lee 2018, pp. 135–36). American missionaries emphasized the separation of

religion and society, reflecting the principle of separation of religion and state in their own country and considering the international diplomatic circumstances surrounding the Korean Peninsula at the time. A few nationalists tried to resist Japanese imperialism through church activities, but early Korean Protestantism was based on the separation of religion and society.

After liberation from Japanese colonial rule in the 1940s, Protestantism functioned as a kind of state religion during Syngman Rhee's regime in South Korea despite the fact that the nation's first constitution declared the separation of religion and state. A prayer was performed at the opening ceremony of the first National Assembly, the president's inaugural address was delivered in the form of prayer, and Protestant rituals were frequently held during national ceremonies (Chang 2006, pp. 122–25; Yoon 2016, pp. 49–51; Lee 2018). In terms of religious policy, the government allowed many privileges to South Korean churches, for example, the authorization of a military chaplain system only for Protestants. As a natural response to such favoritism, South Korean churches enthusiastically cooperated with other governmental policies (Bae 2016). From 1945 to 1960, the collusion between Protestants and the state was severe and overt, yet little criticism was raised about it. During that era, Korean Protestants did not even seem to have a clear understanding of what the separation of religion and state meant.

During the military regimes, Korean Protestants were differentiated into conservatives and progressives. Some Protestants were stirred to action by the April 19 Revolution in 1960, a democratic revolution caused by the people's resistance to the dictatorship of Syngman Rhee's regime. They repented the past when Protestants had enjoyed many privileges in concert with the Syngman Rhee regime and began to participate in social movements thereafter (CISJD 1983, p. 10). These progressive Protestants embraced socio-political values such as democracy, human rights, and equality while pursuing the realization of the public good, as based on Minjung theology, where Minjung means the suffering masses.² They devoted themselves not only to the Korean democratization movement, but also to movements to improve the quality of life of laborers, farmers, and the urban poor (Kim 2020). They played important roles in such movements, especially when secular civil society was unable to join social activities due to severe oppression by authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s (Kang 2013, pp. 185–88; Cho 2014, p. 315; Kim 2019).

Conservative Protestants criticized the activities of progressive Protestants, accusing them of violating the separation of religion and state (Kim 1992; Kim 2008; Kang 2014; Lee 2018). They instead supported the military dictatorships by advocating anti-communist ideology and economic growth and judged religion's interference in political and social issues as not conforming to the Gospel. They were satisfied with the conservative and anti-communist political milieu and thought it was their duty to maintain the status quo (Kang 2013; Cho 2014). Thanks to their support for military dictatorships, conservative Protestants received exclusive benefits from the government during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the government helped conservative churches grow rapidly by helping them hold a series of grand rallies, including Explo' 74 (revival services that were held at the Yeouido Plaza in August 1974), and promote the so-called Total Evangelization Movement in the Military Services (Bae 2016; Yoo and Kim 2018). These conservative Protestants, who were the majority and mainstream of Korean Protestants, argued for a strict separation of religion and society and were passive in social participation.

In contrast, progressive Protestants stressed that the meaning of separating religion and state was not a ban on religion's participation in society but rather a ban on state interference in religion, and so they argued that their faith-based social activities were not against the true meaning of the separation of religion and state (Lee 2018). Furthermore, they believed that participation in social movements did not contradict the Bible because it was akin to missionary work building the Kingdom of God on Earth (Kim 2020). As such, during the era of military dictatorships, Korean Protestantism was divided into a conservative majority insisting on the separation of religion and society and a progressive minority insisting on active social participation.

After South Korea's democratization in 1987, some conservative Protestants who had remained silent on social issues formed a far-right Protestant group. A decline in the Korean Protestant population and a rapid increase in anti-Protestant activities and sentiments were among the factors that changed conservative Protestants' formerly passive attitudes toward social issues. From the late 1980s, the growth of Protestant churches slowed, and from the mid-1990s the Protestant population decline has been more pronounced. According to 2006 Statistics Korea, the number of Protestants, which had risen sharply from 6.48 million in 1985 to 8.76 million in 1995, had decreased by 144,000 to 8.616 million by 2005. Between 1995 and 2005, then, Protestantism was the only major religion to have declined, while all other religions had grown, and the membership decline was the first in Korean Protestant history (So 2006; Cho 2014; Kim 2018). In addition, the atmosphere of anti-Protestantism grew due to sexual and financial scandals and zealous overseas missionaries associated with Korean Protestantism. Many anti-Christian communities have appeared online, and anti-Protestant discourse has spread rapidly.³ In South Korea, Protestantism became a symbol of scandal, corruption, anti-reform, and national and international conflict (Kim 2013; Cho 2014).

Witnessing the decline in population and the loss of social reputation, some conservative Protestants tried to recover through active social participation. In this context, far-right Protestants have grown rapidly in Korean society since the early 2000s and have participated vigorously in public areas such as politics, the economy, and culture, championing the name and values of their faith. Recently, they have formed the most active and influential conservative group in South Korea, voicing opposition to homosexuality, refugees, Muslims, abortion, and North Korea and communism. They have also founded Christian political parties and attempted to intervene in elections and politics (Kim 2018).⁴ These newly emerging far-right Protestants have altered their approach to the separation of religion and state, having previously argued that religion should not attempt to influence social and political issues but now arguing that it should take an active role in society with social responsibility (Bae 2016).

Meanwhile, a number of conservative Protestants remained lukewarm about social participation and stuck to the separation of religion and society. They adhered to the traditional Christian faith that an individual's salvation belongs not to this world but to a transcendent one (see Footnote 1). The progressive Protestants still actively participated in society even after democratization and have continued social movements in partnership with laborers, the urban poor, women, the homeless, the disabled, children, and adolescents to enhance the public, focusing on justice, human rights, ecological justice, health, peace, and equality. In particular, they have been involved in the LGBTQ+ rights movement, the women's right to sexual self-determination movement, and the Korean Peninsula reunification movement, often in stark opposition to the social activities of far-right Protestants (Jung 2014; Kim 2019). During the post-democratization period, with the emergence of far-right Protestants among conservative Protestants sticking to the separation of religion and society, Korean Protestantism was eventually divided further into three groups: conservative social non-participation, progressive social participation, and far-right social participation.

From 1945 to 1960, Korean Protestantism closely colluded with the state, then during the period of military dictatorships from 1960 to 1987, it differentiated into two groups, a conservative group arguing for the separation of religion and society and a progressive group participating in social movements. After democratization in 1987, Protestantism was further divided into three more specific groups, a conservative group arguing for the separation of religion and society, a far-right social participation group, and a progressive social participation group.

3. Types of Relationships between Religion and Society in the COVID-19 Era

The three groups of Korean Protestantism in terms of relationships between religion and society responded differently to the government's quarantine guidelines in the COVID-

19 era. This section analyzes how conservative, far-right, and progressive Protestants responded specifically in regard to social distancing in relation to church services.

Social distancing, a more effective preventive measure than washing hands and wearing masks, refers to the reduction of contact among individuals to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. It includes measures such as maintaining physical distance during face-to-face contact, closing schools, telecommuting, and canceling meetings (Yang 2020, p. 20). In South Korea, various religious gatherings were banned in stages, ranging from “face-to-face gatherings under the conditions of compliance with quarantine rules” to “face-to-face gatherings for major rituals within 20 percent of the number of seats and without sharing meals,” to “strict non-face-to-face gatherings.” Each Protestant group responded to these measures in a different way.

Conservative Protestants who had long insisted on the separation of religion and society and had remained silent on social and political issues tended to reluctantly accept the ban on religious gatherings. This group, which still accounts for the majority of Korean Protestants, initially opposed the ban on gatherings in the early days of the pandemic but afterward accepted it when the spread of the virus became more serious. This attitude was adopted by the United Christian Churches of Korea (UCCK, Hangyochong), the largest Protestant Church association in the nation. At a meeting at Cheongwadae, the Korean presidential office, in August 2020, Taeyeong Kim, chairman of the UCCK, argued that although the government’s administrative order formally asked for cooperation from religious organizations, there was a high risk of violating religious freedom through governmental authority. He strongly criticized president Moon Jae-in for treating religious organizations like general workplaces (Kang 2020). Conservative Protestants agreed that the government’s measures were necessary evils for public health and followed the ban on face-to-face worship, social gatherings, and meals. Nevertheless, they insisted that the guidelines were far too excessive and called for as little coercion as necessary. They remain reluctant now to submit to any governmental exercise of authority, such as punishment.

These conservative Protestants emphasize religious freedom, often regarding the government’s influence as religious oppression and abuse of power. Advocating religious freedom is common among conservative and fundamentalist Christians around the world, but Korean Protestants are especially sensitive on that topic because they experienced religious oppression by communists after liberation from Japanese occupation. The mainstream of Korean Protestants was Wolnam Christians who had migrated to South Korea from Pyeongan and Hwanghae Provinces in North Korea and were wealthy and intellectual. When Soviet agents entered North Korea and helped Il-sung Kim establish a communist regime, Protestants had no choice but to migrate to South Korea to avoid severe religious oppression by communists. As a result, the mainstream of Korean Protestants antagonizes communism and cherishes religious freedom (Kang 2007; Yoon 2015).

As mentioned earlier, Korean Protestantism was significantly influenced by missionaries from the United States, where the separation of religion and state is characterized by religious institutions and organizations refusing state interference in return for not receiving state financial support. In other words, the separation of religion and state in American Protestantism means the prohibition of state interference in religions. During the Japanese colonial period, however, the political and historical conditions of Korea changed the meaning of the religion-state separation. The emphasis shifted from the prohibition of state interference in religions to the prohibition of religion’s social and political intervention (Lee 2018, pp. 135–36). A few Protestants with nationalist orientation used to attempt political activities against Japanese rule on the Korean Peninsula through churches that had relative autonomy from Japanese imperialism. Missionaries believed that this political practice through churches could jeopardize Protestantism, which had not yet been properly established on the Korean Peninsula, and they tried to block this action (SHCK 2011, pp. 281–83). The Japanese imperialists also demanded that American missionaries not engage in political intervention. In response, the United States government and mission headquarters monitored and controlled the political intervention of missionaries and

churches on the Korean Peninsula (Lee 2018, pp. 137–38). Immediately after liberation, religious oppression by North Korean communists made Protestants prioritize the protection of religious freedom by banning the state from intervening in religion.

Due to these historical experiences, conservative Protestants tend to negatively regard state exertion of force on religion and interference in religious areas. They also do not accept much of the responsibility that religion has in its supposed role in society. Conservative Protestants believe that it is apt for religion and society to be separate and avoid influencing or harming one another. In this way, they can be seen as continuing to support the separation of religion and society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for far-right Protestants who emerged in Korean society in the early 2000s, they actively resist the government's social distancing guidelines and demand face-to-face worship services and gatherings even at the risk of public health. The Christian Council of Korea (CCK, Hangichong), which held a largescale square rally led by Rev. Gwanghoon Jeon, and the Communion of Churches in Korea (CCK, Hangyoyeon), which insisted on conducting face-to-face services despite governmental guidelines, belong to this group (Choi 2020). The Back to Jerusalem (BTJ) Center of InterCP and Segero Church, a megachurch in Busan, which maintained face-to-face services and produced a cluster infection as a result, are also part of far-right Protestantism. InterCP, in particular, was criticized for refusing both vaccines and social distancing measures due to conspiracy theories that Microsoft founder Bill Gates was trying to subjugate the world through vaccines (Choi 2021).⁵

The reasons why far-right Protestants adhere to face-to-face public services can be considered in two dimensions: doctrinal and political. The Korean Protestant Church has doctrinally emphasized keeping Sunday holy from the beginning, and Protestants were strictly taught to stop all secular work and devote themselves to worship then. To that end, attending public community services is more important than any other religious obligation, and this has been supported theologically (Kim 1977; Kim 2011). Since attending public services has become an essential duty, it has also become a custom. Meanwhile, speaking politically, far-right Protestants attempt to clarify their right-wing politics by opposing government policies, particularly those of Moon Jae-in's government, which is considered a relatively progressive administration. After democratization in decades past, far-right Protestants also opposed almost all of the progressive administrations, specifically, those of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, regarding them as the pro-North Korean leftists (Bae 2016). Far-right Protestants opposed the progressive regime's policy of reconciliation with North Korea on the grounds that so-called dissidents, led by liberalist or left-wing ideas, may undermine South Korea's national security and thus provide North Korea with an opportunity to invade South Korea once again. In addition, they evoked Protestant oppression by North Korean communists after liberation, arguing that a ban on religious gatherings, even to safeguard public health, was a breach of religious freedom. These historical and political attitudes are evident from Rev. Gwanghoon Jeon's reference to President Moon Jae-in as a Redman at a large rally held in violation of the quarantine guidelines (Lee 2019).

Far-right Protestants are in line with conservative Protestants in that they emphasize religious freedom and argue that the government's ban on religious gatherings is oppressive. In addition, they share theological justification for attending face-to-face public services. However, unlike conservatives who maintain the separation of religion and society, far-right Protestants are characterized by their desire to break the separation of religion and society and enforce fundamentalist Protestant values in secular governance through active social participation. Since the late 2000s, far-right Protestants have considered the left-leaning civil society, secularization, pluralism, relativism, feminism, queer theory, and anti-discrimination laws as anti-Protestant trends (Kim 2017, pp. 77–78). They framed these issues as culture war and began social activities to realize and expand Protestant values in secular society. In this respect, it can be said that their participation in society puts more weight on the church than on society. Accordingly, during the pandemic, they

have struggled to maintain face-to-face community services regardless of the risk to public health.

The third group, progressive Protestants, actively cooperate with public disease control. They keep stricter social distancing rules than those suggested by the government's guidelines, taking the stance that attending face-to-face services potentially perpetrates health risks towards the socially underprivileged. As cluster infections occurred among far-right Protestants, hindering the government's control of COVID-19, progressives condemned far-right Protestant groups and issued a statement of apology in the name of the Emergency Committee for the Restoration of Protestantism, stating that the Korean Protestant Church has committed "irreparable crimes against society and the people" (Cho 2020). The 2020 Preparatory Committee for Hope Again, which was organized by Korean progressive Protestants during extreme pandemic situations, urged that South Korea's fast-growing far-right Protestantism should reflect on the situation in which they are a major risk factor for society in the pandemic and insisted that the entire Protestant community take the opportunity for Protestant reform, declaring a Day of Confession of Sin and Declaration of Hope for Protestant in Korea (Committee 2020).

Progressive Protestants went beyond cooperating with social distancing guidelines, actively caring for the marginalized. For example, Seed Church in Ilsan, Gyeonggi-do, gave up its church building as face-to-face services continued to be banned and instead provided its building rent to members suffering from job losses or reduced income. Rev. Myeongsu Song objected to some Protestants who insisted that they could not give up the traditional worship because it was like life itself, saying in response, "It is the role of the church to worship life" (Lee 2020b). Seed Church was one of few churches with a politically progressive voice in society, consistently supporting single mothers and the families of Sewol Ferry victims long before the pandemic.⁶

Progressive Protestants have rejected traditional and conservative church-centered theology and argued that the Bible should be interpreted from the perspective of Minjung, or those marginalized in the real world (Ahn 1988). They inherit the historical legacy of awakening the consciousness of social participation through the April 19 Revolution, and of actively participating in the democratization and human rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s based on Minjung theology that the suffering masses are the Messiah. They took social and political action, in line with the historical phase of South Korea, continuously founded on Minjung theology as a theological rationale. In the 1990s, progressive Protestants were a major force supporting human rights, the unification of the Korean Peninsula, and labor union movements. When a relatively progressive regime was established in the 2000s, they supported a mode of reconciliation with North Korea and various institutional reforms, including welfare systems, in cooperation with government policies. However, they have not always cooperated with the progressive administration. They expressed absolute opposition to the deployment of Korean soldiers to Iraq by the Roh Moo-hyun government in 2003 and have criticized the Moon Jae-in government for its suspension of enacting anti-discrimination laws since 2017 (Hankyoreh 2009; Maurice 2020). During the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye regimes, which are considered relatively conservative, they have participated in social activities to protect the socially disadvantaged and promote human rights against the government's policies.

They have pursued general and common values in the public sphere and have responsibly embraced the public role of religion in civil society. They focus more on realizing the public values of faith in society rather than promulgating voices of faith. In this way, they translate religious language into general language, and this is well-expressed in their social movements and the enhancement of the public good. It can be said that while far-right Protestants participate in society by trying to enforce their religious values on society, progressive Protestants participate in society by accepting public values into religion and trying to realize the public good in society.

Throughout the pandemic, conservative Protestants, the majority of Korean Protestants, responded passively and lukewarmly to the government's quarantine guidelines

and adhered to the separation of religion and society. They reluctantly followed the government's ban on religious gatherings but were strongly wary of the government's intervention in religion. Far-right Protestants, a minority of Korean Protestants, fiercely criticized the government's ban on religious gatherings as religious oppression and maintained face-to-face services. They have led social movements that put fundamentalist Protestant values before the public good, and this attitude was expressed as resistance to quarantine guidelines. In contrast, progressive Protestants, also a minority of Korean Protestants, were willing to sacrifice face-to-face religious gatherings for the public good and further participated in activities to support the socially marginalized. They continued the progressive social movements that began during the military dictatorships.

4. Religion-Society Relationship Model for Overcoming the Pandemic

In times of social crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, humans have a tendency to turn to religion for comfort and explanation (Bentzen 2020). Religion is not only a reliable source of psychological and mental stability but one of physical health (Stark and Finke 2000, pp. 31–32). In addition, religion can provide moral and ethical standards in times of crisis. Jürgen Habermas says that in modern society, humans can be at risk of war, economic polarization, poverty, and political discrimination, and in such crises, he argues, religion can contribute to establishing civic morality and conscience and promoting the reproduction of socially desirable motivations and attitudes (Habermas and Ratzinger 2007).

The fact that even in modern society people still rely on religion mentally, physically, and socially contradicts secularization thesis. Many sociologists have raised the secularization thesis, “the process whereby religious thinking, practice, and institutions lose social significance” (Wilson [1966] 2016, p. 6). They have argued that religion and its sentiments would decline and somehow reach to the end, that the religious and secular spheres are differentiated, and that “modern differentiation necessarily entails the marginalization and privatization of religion” with the growth of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization (Casanova 1994, p. 7). However, religion still plays an important role in modernized society, and, in particular, there is an intensified demand for religion to cope with extreme adversity such as COVID-19.

COVID-19 has profoundly changed our lives, destabilizing the most basic foundation of societal well-being and destroying order and the values that had been taken for granted. Religion is required to contribute to the recovery of society in a situation in which social, cultural, and economic systems are collapsing. Here, the question becomes whether the increase in demand for religion is an equal opportunity for all conservative, far-right, and progressive Protestants. To answer this question, we must explore a variety of potential utilizations of religious resources required by society in the COVID-19 era.

First, material support is needed for the socially disadvantaged whose living conditions have deteriorated. Beyond relative deprivation and inequality, the number of people going bankrupt or losing their jobs and therefore suffering from absolute poverty is increasing. The provision and distribution of material support for these economically disadvantaged people is urgently required. In fact, during the pandemic, religious organizations have been key sources of immediate assistance, from food pantries to supplemental funds, to assistance with costs associated with housing, healthcare, and transportation (Baker et al. 2020, p. 365). Opinions have also been raised within Korean Protestants that support for marginalized neighbors should be strengthened. In the 2020 Survey of Protestants' Perceptions of Major Social Issues conducted with 1,000 Protestants nationwide, 51.5 percent of the respondents said yes to the statement “Foreigners, such as international students, refugees, and foreign spouses, should also receive medical, welfare, and financial support equal to the Korean people” (Song 2020). Considering the monitoring results of the National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea that 73.8 percent of foreigners living in Korea experienced institutional discrimination during the pandemic, with many foreigners unable to receive emergency coronavirus relief funds and access medical

services easily, Protestants' attitudes toward foreigners' equal treatment are significant (NHRC 2020). In order to overcome the crisis in the living conditions caused by COVID-19, it can be said that sensitivity to the lives of the poor and practices to ameliorate economic inequality are required.

Second, there is a high demand for emotional and social resources of intimacy, as social networks collapsed during the pandemic.⁷ As this persists, people are becoming more and more familiar with online remote meetings, but this does not mean that the importance and necessity of face-to-face meetings are moot. Although it was predicted that social distancing would accelerate the privatization of religion as religious life was carried out on an individual basis, the desire for face-to-face worship is actually growing. In the 2020 survey mentioned above, 73.6 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "I felt how precious the worship services were," and 85.2 percent agreed with the statement "I think I will physically attend the worship services the same as before" (Lee 2021, pp. 55–56). The reason why many churches want to hold face-to-face worship services and why the longer the noncontact society lasts, the greater the desire for face-to-face gatherings grows, is that people can build high-quality intimacy through face-to-face gatherings.

However, the issue of intimacy in the COVID-19 era cannot be limited to face-to-face worship services or community reconstruction within the church. In both popular and academic commentaries, intimacy is understood as representing a very particular form of "closeness" and being "special" to another person founded on self-disclosure. This self-disclosing or self-expressing intimacy is characterized by knowledge and understanding of each other (Jamieson 2005, p. 2411). In other words, intimacy is "formed and maintained by consideration and interest in the life of others" (Koo 2021). Therefore, it is not enough to restore the network between Protestants or church members after a ban on religious gatherings is lifted. It is necessary to establish an intimacy network that encompasses individuals who are isolated and abandoned in indifference beyond the boundaries of a specific church or religion. This is fundamentally possible only when affection, interest, empathy, and understanding for others have been established.

Third, in the pandemic era, a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the ethics of respect for life and its reestablishment are required. Traditionally, religion has provided the power to endure and survive the ultimate coincidence, meaninglessness, and finitude of human life. Currently, an unpredictable virus has caused human beings to face extreme uncertainty and futility. At times like this, religious answers to the challenges of human life, which is bound to be vulnerable, will be sought after desperately. However, questions about the meaning of human life should be extended to a system of ethics that respects the lives of others beyond individualism in the COVID-19 because disease and death have become immediate problems for everyone, and all lives are ultimately interconnected.

It is not known when the panic caused by COVID-19 will end. Between 40 and 70 percent of the world's population is expected to be infected, and as of November 2021, more than five million people have died of COVID-19 (Hamblin 2020; Coronaboard 2021). To make matters worse, mutant viruses are emerging. There were calls for weakening social ethical standards in such dire circumstances. For example, the medical community in the United Kingdom warned that "National Health Service patients could be denied life-saving care during a severe coronavirus outbreak in Britain if intensive care units are struggling to cope." A so-called "three wise man protocol" was proposed in which "three senior consultants in each hospital would be forced to make decisions on rationing care such as ventilators and beds, in the event hospitals were overwhelmed with patients" (Žižek 2020, pp. 69–70). In reality, limited medical equipment in Europe led to choices of whom to save and whom to sacrifice. In Japan, a controversy was triggered by the distribution of a card, the so-called "concentrated treatment concession card," with its message of conceding priority to access to medical equipment from the elder generation to the younger generation in case of an emergency (Lee 2020a).

The concept of "biopolitics" presented by Michel Foucault explains this reality well. He says that "the classical theory of sovereignty" is about "the right of life and death,"

or, more specifically, “the right to take life or let live.” In the 19th century, sovereignty’s old right was replaced by the new right to “make live and let die” (Foucault [1976] 2003, pp. 178–79). He calls this power “biopolitics” (Foucault [1976] 2003, p. 243), and this has been exercised around the world during the pandemic. The power has chosen which life to actively save and which life to let die and, eventually, violence against those deemed socially insignificant and useless is becoming more extreme. Therefore, it can be said that the ethics of life required in the COVID-19 era goes beyond simply providing a transcendental meaning of life in an extreme crisis and means respect for every human life and the development of mutual responsibility to that end.

Fourth, given that COVID-19 originated from human activity, it is important to promote ecological justice. Coronavirus, like the Ebola virus and the Zika virus, is a zoonosis, an infectious disease that is transmitted between species, from animals to humans or from humans to animals. The underlying cause of the outbreak of zoonosis is that the indiscriminate development of humans has destroyed the habitats of wild animals, increasing contact between humans, wild animals, and livestock. The destruction of forests, the main habitat for wild animals, has been caused by the rapid expansion of cities as well as desertification due to greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, it is said that the wildlife trade, meat consumption, and increased production of waste are among the key causes (Lean 2016; Olivero et al. 2019; Ko et al. 2020). All of this is human activity, and so, to overcome COVID-19 and prevent a second coronavirus outbreak, it is necessary to reflect on human activity and foster ecological justice beyond the scope of human society. Religion and ecology share the same worldview in that religion is an old discourse and practice beyond a human-centered perspective (Yoo 2019). In addition, according to Christian doctrine, nature as well as humans are included in the realm of creation by God, meaning that Christianity already has a spirit of respect for and preservation of nature, besides the logic of justifying human conquest of nature based on Genesis giving Adam dominion over the earth (Chun 2010).

Considering the above discussion, we can determine that the COVID-19 crisis urges religion to participate in active social movements for the public good in human and ecological communities beyond religion’s own traditional boundaries. Efforts to overcome COVID-19 include advocating the interests of the socially disadvantaged, respecting others’ lives based on empathy, and promoting ecological justice.

Despite the increase in social demands for religion in many aspects, conservative Protestants remain fixed only on the traditional role of religion, such as giving power and meaning to life in crises and providing a way to reach comfort and stability of mind. They are passive in religion’s participation in society, sticking fast to the separation of religion and society. Conservative Protestants hesitate to accede to social demands for religious resources, but religion can be an important source of cultural and organizational resources for social movements and change (Williams 2003). Rejecting social demands for religious resources amid the chaotic changes caused by COVID-19 is akin to abandoning religious publicness.

However, far-right Protestants reject the concept of separating religion and society and actively participate in society, but they do so only as long as they can defend religious values rather than the public good. Despite the fact that the public responsibility of religion required by the pandemic is to contribute to the realization of the public good by getting away from a church-centered attitude, far-right Protestants have developed ingroup-oriented attitudes that disregard public health authorities. Maintaining face-to-face services from this self-centered attitude has caused cluster infections, and putting the lives of others at risk for the right to religious freedom is socially unacceptable. Hence, criticism of far-right Protestants has grown. As mentioned in Section 2, anti-Protestant sentiment and activities have increased since the 1990s due to various scandals and reckless overseas missions in troubled countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. In the COVID-19 era, the outbreak of cluster infections has resulted from largescale rallies and face-to-face worship services, thereby further intensifying this criticism.

As Protestant churches who actively resist the ban on religious gatherings pose social risks, trust in Korean Protestants is deteriorating. In a survey of how trust in various social areas has changed compared to before COVID-19, researchers asked respondents whether they had become more trusted or distrusted compared to before COVID-19 and then produced a “trust change index” by subtracting the responses that they became distrustful from the responses that they became trusted. Public trust in the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) and medical institutions had gained +75 and +72, respectively, while trust in religious organizations had fallen to −46 (Cheon 2020, p. 23). It is reasonable to infer that Protestants, especially far-right Protestants who caused cluster infection cases, are responsible for the decline of trust in religious organizations. This confirms how important it is for religion to maintain public responsibility in its social participation.

In this respect, it can be said that Korean progressive Protestants, who have been distinctly aware of the religious publicness and participated in social movements towards the enhancement of the public good and social justice, are ready to meet the social demands required to overcome COVID-19. Although they are a minority of Korean Protestants, they have a long experience and network in social movements for the public good. They have been working to improve the living conditions of laborers and the urban poor, forming close relationships with the homeless, the disabled, children, youth, and sexual minorities outside the church walls, and campaigning to respect and preserve the lives of humans and all living things on Earth for decades. In the history of Korean Protestantism, progressive Protestantism has been advocating and practicing religion’s participation in society with the sense of religious social responsibility, which makes progressive Protestant participation in society an appropriate model for overcoming COVID-19.

5. Conclusions

Korean Protestantism is divided into three types in terms of relationships between religion and society through the post-liberation history. First, conservative Protestants adhere to the separation of religion and society and are reluctant to participate in society. They insist on maintaining the status quo and criticize Protestants who actively participate in society for violating the separation of religion and state. In the COVID-19 era, these Protestants have reluctantly followed the government’s quarantine guidelines and been wary of state control over religion. Second, far-right Protestants refuse to separate religion and society and participate in society with the purpose of promoting their religious values over that of the public good. Throughout the pandemic, they have maintained face-to-face worship services despite the government’s ban on religious gatherings, and this has led to extreme criticism from society. Third, progressive Protestants recognize religious publicness and actively advocate religion’s participation in society. They place more emphasis on the public good rather than on religious rights, and accordingly, they have been willing to forgo religious gatherings in favor of public safety during the pandemic.

In order to overcome COVID-19, progressive Protestant participation in society can be considered appropriate for church behavior. Due to the unprecedented social changes caused by COVID-19, the necessity and significance of progressive religious movements that prioritize the public good are recognized. However, it is also worth noting the argument that the future of the progressive religious movement is negative. Some sociologists have argued that the strategy of progressive religious organizations embracing social order and values without insisting on religious characteristics in response to social fluctuations is doomed to failure (Kelley 1996; Berger 1980, pp. 57–58; 1990, p. 129; Iannaccone 1994). Putting social public good before religious faith can lead to a weakening of religious clarity and the original function of religion. This is why Korea’s Progressive Protestant social movement in the 1970s and 1980s was critically labeled a social movement dressed in religious clothing (Kim 2019, p. 58). It is a criticism that theological rationale or religious affiliation may be mobilized and used for social movements. Therefore, it can be said that advancing religious discourses and practices that preserve religious values in the

generalized and civil language pursuing public good are major problems to be addressed in religion's social participation.

This study focused on the case of Korean Protestantism to examine the relationship between religion and society. A wider range of research, including followers of different religions and people in different countries, is required for comparative research. Further research can provide a comprehensive and more generalized explanation of religion's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the same time, it can reveal specifically the landscape of the discourse and practice of the social participation of Korean Protestants. In addition, case studies on the three groups of Korean Protestants are needed. This paper focused on historical and political contexts, and in addition to this, if research on social-economic backgrounds such as social status, economic class, and education level is supplemented, it could explain the social attitudes of the three Korean Protestants in more detail.

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Notes

- ¹ The separation of religion and state as a norm on a religious level can be understood as a logical extension of the dualism of the sacred and the secular, historical origin of which goes back to the emergence of world-rejecting religions mentioned by Weber (1978; Kang 2014, pp. 144–45). In contrast to inner-worldly religions such as Confucianism and Taoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Christianity in the Middle East emerged as world-rejecting religions in the so-called Axial Age, a period of about 500 years between 800 BCE and 200 BCE (Jaspers [1949] 2021; Arnason et al. 2005; Armstrong 2006). With the emergence of world-rejecting religions, the original unity of religion and the world was broken, salvation and divinity were catapulted into the realm of transcendence, and the demands of the divine were not easily reconciled with the realities of the world. Religious and nonreligious values and activities now existed in a state of tension with one another (Gorski 2003).
- ² The concept of Minjung began to be interpreted theologically by Korean theologians (Suh 1975). The Minjung theologian Byung-mu Ahn (1988, p. 25) paid attention to *ῥαῖος* in the Bible. He said that *ῥαῖος* refers to those who are thrown out of a community and cannot enjoy rights, in contrast to *λαός* who have rights to be protected within a community. He identified this *ῥαῖος* with people living in extreme poverty due to the industrialization and urbanization of modern society and referred to them as Minjung.
- ³ In 2007, twenty members of the Bundang Saemmul Presbyterian Church visited Afghanistan for short-term missions and were joined by three other members of the church who had already been dispatched there. They were abducted by the Taliban and two of them were killed. This incident led to bitter criticism and attacks on Protestantism in Korean society, with many accusing them of not respecting other countries' cultures and religions and creating a diplomatic crisis. Immediately after this incident, anti-Christian communities surged online (Kim 2007).
- ⁴ Kang (2014, pp. 146–47) says that one of the most important common features of "modern fundamentalists," from right-wing Protestants in the United States and South Korea to Islamic, Hindu, and Jewish fundamentalists elsewhere, is the re-convergence of religion and politics.
- ⁵ The case of the Shincheonji Church also needs to be mentioned. In mid-March 2020, the early days of the outbreak in South Korea, the Shincheonji Church was severely criticized as the main culprit in the spread of the coronavirus. Its members conducted face-to-face worship in violation of the government's social distancing guidelines and refused to conduct COVID-19 tests or disclose their travel. Founded in 1984, Shincheonji Church is a messianic cult originating from South Korean Protestantism, but it is now criticized by major Protestant denominations as heretical. It has grown rapidly since early the 2000s through aggressive missionary work, with more than 200,000 members in 2018 (Woo 2019). The Shincheonji Church has a similar attitude to the response of far-right Protestants to social distancing. However, because of its cult characteristics, it is difficult to say that the Shincheonji Church belongs to the far-right Protestant group that pursues active social participation.
- ⁶ On April 16, 2014, the passenger ferry Sewol sank in the Yellow Sea near Jindo-gun, Jeollanam-do, South Korea, and 302 people died in this disaster, most of whom were high school students on a school excursion. The cause of the disaster has not yet been clearly identified, and the government's inability to respond to the accident at the time is still under harsh scrutiny. Civil society's demand for the truth continues, and therefore, it is still considered an unfinished tragedy for Koreans.
- ⁷ In this context, some scholars suggest that the term *social distancing* should be replaced by an alternative term, *physical distancing*, because of its semantic limitations. This means that social care and intimacy between individuals and groups should be

strengthened to prevent social alienation and solitude while physically distancing. In the same vein, Abel and McQueen (2020, p. 231) suggest that *spatial distancing* or *social closeness* are preferable to *social distancing*, and Zaki (2020) suggest the term *distant socializing* by changing the order of the terms.

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