

Choi Hee An. *A Postcolonial Self: Korean Immigrant Theology and Church*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015. 185 pages. \$75.

This book claims that the Korean Immigrant Church and its theology help its people not only overcome their marginalized self-image, but also form a new transformative, individual, and collective identity that can lead to a better life in America where immigrants, especially nonwhites and women, have to maneuver challenges of many “toxic” prejudices like racism and sexism. Defining colonialism as “a physical, psychological, and even spiritual exercise of a nation’s sovereign power beyond its borders, involving physical, geographical dominion; psychological oppression and spiritual manipulation,” the author says, “Immigrant experiences in America are a result of direct colonial influence” (2). She also says that racism, sexism, and classism on nonwhite immigrants in contemporary America accelerate the negative impact of such (post)colonial influences.

Drawing mainly upon postcolonial criticism and feminist/womanist perspectives, the author describes and analyzes how the awareness of self-identity of first-generation Korean immigrants is compromised by the pressure of dominant white culture in America and shows how their native patriarchal culture aggravates women’s self-image in Korean immigrant churches. Nonetheless, the author “found hope” (ix) in the Korean immigrant church because the church has the unique quality of family-like radical hospitality and mutual sharing and provides through its activities and programs not just “a psychological and spiritual force that can transform their despair into new hope and faith” but also “a socio-political force” (135) that can motivate and equip them to join wider communities beyond their own to be part of American society. One of the key phrases for this work is “a postcolonial self” for Korean immigrants, which the author hopes can be a model for other ethnic communities to adopt not only to overcome the marginalized self, but also to have a “life transformation” in our multiracial immigrant society (5).

The book has three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the meaning of *Woori* (we), a Korean communal ethnic self, from historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Drawing on Descartes, Nietzsche, and Ricoeur, the author brings the Western understanding of self, “I,” which is individualistic and independent from others, to compare with Korean concept of “I,” which is part of “we” and cannot be weighed separately; in most Korean women’s cases, “self is a disowned self . . . but at the same, it is an owned self, owned already by the community in which the ‘we’ and the ‘I’ belong together” (45).

Chapter 2 describes how this ethnic communal identity is viewed negatively in American individualistic culture and how Korean immigrants feel compartmentalized into three identities: the Korean ethnic self (we), the social ideal self (I) of Western individualism, and the marginalized self (I as the other and we as the other) from prejudices and discrimination (71).

Chapter 3 suggests that the Korean immigrant church, as a cultural and theological agent of formation, helps immigrants “make a transition from I as the other/we as the other to the I and we,” through which they not only overcome marginalization but transform their self-consciousness to the inclusiveness and togetherness of “we with others.” This transformation potentially offers an integral resource to reach out to other ethnic groups (129, 131, 154).

Throughout the book, the author mentions Korean immigrant theology and its positive role in the church. The subtitle of this book is “Korean Immigrant Theology and Church.” However, the text does not deal fully with or clearly define that theology in detail. Similarly, many complex words such as racism, sexism, classism, and postcolonialism are repeatedly

mentioned throughout the book but specific examples are not always given for each of them. Notwithstanding, this book may be good for students and teachers who need an in-depth study of immigrants in America from psychological, sociological, linguistical, and cultural perspectives. Many readers will appreciate the interdisciplinary aspect of this work.

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