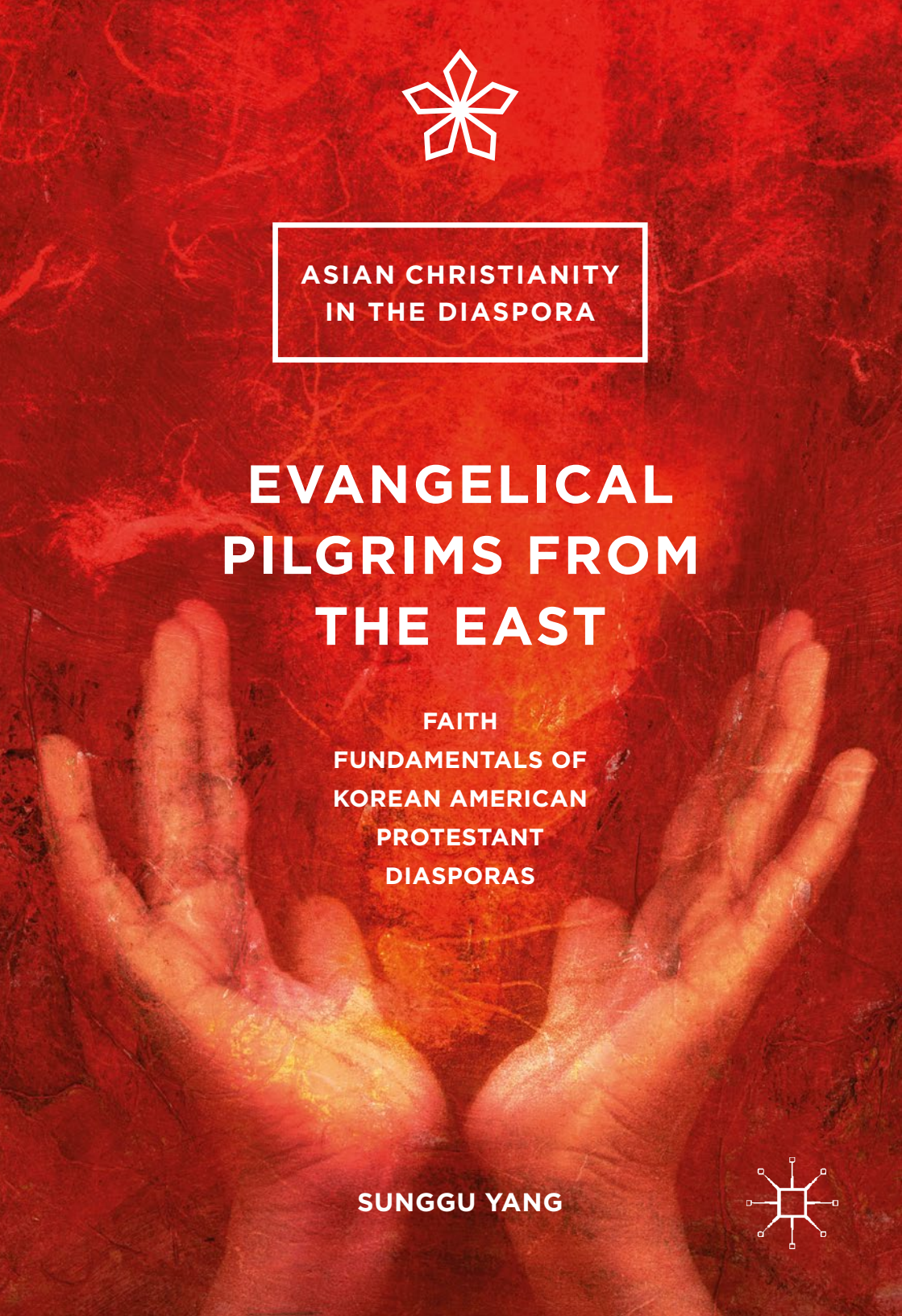
ASIAN CHRISTIANITY
IN THE DIASPORA
EVANGELICAL
PILGRIMS FROM
THE EAST
FAITH
FUNDAMENTALS OF
KOREAN AMERICAN
PROTESTANT
DIASPORAS
SUNGGU YANG

Asian Christianity in the Diaspora

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Evangelical Pilgrims from the East

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Asian Christianity in the Diaspora
ISBN 978-3-319-41563-5 ISBN 978-3-319-41564-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-41564-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016957994

Cover illustration: © Elena Ray / Alamy Stock Photo

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

To Churches in Asia and Asia America

Acknowledgments

I'd like to express deep gratitude to the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University and its doctoral program in Homiletics and Liturgics, which extended enormous support to me throughout my doctoral studies. Only with the Department's generous financial grants and its doctoral program's unmatched academic assistance was I able to produce my dissertation which has now become a book.

My thanks also go to Professor Dale P. Andrews who from the beginning of my dissertation process inspired my critical thinking and broadened my scholarly imagination. His academic care and guidance were incredible. Likewise, I thank Professor John S. McClure for his persistent engagement and enormous intellectual aid. My dissertation—eventually this book—is indeed a multifaceted development of a term paper I submitted to his class during coursework. Dr. McClure saw the potential contribution of my work to the wider homiletic guild of North America and the preaching practice of Asian Americans, and encouraged me to expand upon it. Since then, I have greatly benefited from his wisdom on homiletical philosophy and praxis.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to faculty mentors in homiletics that I met from Emory University's Candler School of Theology and Yale Divinity School. Professor Thomas G. Long provided the foundational inspiration for the sacred task of preaching that eventually led me to study homiletics, while Professor Leonora Tubbs Tisdale taught me to see and embody the pastoral and prophetic dimension of preaching practice. Professor Thomas H. Troeger forever widened my homiletic-theological consciousness. Professor Teresa Fry Brown was a huge supporter of my

exploration of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, theology, oration, and preaching practice.

There are many significant others who have greatly influenced and molded me as a scholar in homiletics and liturgics. Here I mention a few names only. A thank you to Professor Ted A. Smith, who equipped me with a historical and ethical approach to preaching; to Professor Robin M. Jensen, who introduced to me the history of women's preaching and worship practice throughout ages; to Professor David H. Perkins, for teaching me the aesthetical aspect of the theological enterprise; to Professor Eunjoo Mary Kim, who is my model of an Asian/Korean American homiletician; and to my wonderful colleagues and friends from the Homiletics and Liturgics program at Vanderbilt University.

In the immediate past, I have also benefited greatly from the vast support of ATSI faculty (Asian Theological Summer Institute: Professors Tat-siong Benny Liew, Kwok Pui Lan, Nami Kim, Wonhee Annie Joh, J. Paul Rajashekar, Peter C. Phan, and Jayakiran Sebastian) and the AATF editorial team (*The Journal of Asian American Theological Form*). These academic and research entities have deepened my understanding of Asian American theology and spirituality, which is an essential foundation of my book.

Most recently, I owe much to the terrific care and research aid given to me by the Louisville Institute and to the Wake Forest University School of Divinity where I now teach. Especially, I am grateful for the Institute's Director Edwin David Aponte and the School of Divinity's Dean Gail O'Day who encouraged my scholarly development. This book's swift production was only possible thanks to the research semester that the Louisville Institute's postdoctoral fellowship afforded me.

My words of gratitude would be incomplete if I did not acknowledge the series editors Joseph Cheah and Grace Ji-Sun Kim. I appreciate their critical eyes on my book and the colossal work of revision in which they engaged with me so tirelessly. I am also thankful to Alexis Nelson and Philip Getz, religion editors at Palgrave Macmillan, whose excellent editorial management midwifed this book into being.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to my family: first, to my wife Seungyoun Jeong, without whose patience, support, and friendship I would not have become who I am now. As a lifetime scholarly companion and colleague, she is always the kindest critic of my work as well as the one who listens best to my homiletic and liturgical ideas; and second, to my parents and

lovely siblings back in Korea whose continuing prayers, love, and care have been the hidden backbone of my whole academic life. Words are inadequate to express my appreciation to them. I solemnly dedicate this book to them.

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Introduction: In-Between Faith

I begin this research on Korean American evangelical Protestantism with a critical realization: that in the Korean American immigrant context[1] one's Christian faith grows out of and is deeply rooted in a *liminal* experience of living in a foreign land as a stranger or a *pilgrim*.[2] The idea of pilgrimage

[1] Here, by "Korean American" I specifically mean first-generation Korean immigrants who have migrated to North America after the age of 19. For a more detailed description of this focus group, see Key Terms—*Korean American(s)*.

[2] Sang Hyun Lee adopts British anthropologist Victor Turner's term, "liminality," in order to articulate the cultural "in-between" phenomenon or experience of the Asian American immigrants. Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 4–11; cf. Victor W. Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94ff. Lee argues that Asian Americans living "at the edge of America and also between America and Asia are placed in a liminal space … where a person is freed up from the usual ways of thinking and acting and is therefore open to radically new ideas." And he continues, "Freed from structure, persons in liminality are also available to a genuine communion (*communitas*) with others." Lee believes that this liminal experience of the immigrant status has significantly influenced immigrant life in general and the immigrant person's faith formation in particular. As we shall see later, based on this idea of liminality, Lee suggests his creative Asian American Christian understanding of the immigrant life (such as the *pilgrim* image), which is widely accepted in the Korean American socio-ecclesial context. Lee himself, as a Korean American, uses his personal experience and theological interpretation of it to support his argument for a broader social or cultural group of Asian Americans, which includes but is not exclusive to Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Indonesian Americans. He hopes that his Korean American experience, as a part of that of Asian Americans, sheds an important light on the understanding of the latter as a whole. Thus, he prefers the broad term Asian American instead of Korean American, although much of his argument is limited to the cultural and theological situation of Korean Americans. By contrast, in this book when I refer to scholars

is particularly crucial for Korean American Christians. The notion of being a perpetual sojourner walking through a strange world and looking forward to another (heavenly) world shapes the core constructs of Korean Americans' faith. This also means that Korean Americans' faith is formed by their living in two cultures at the same time: Korean (or Asian, more broadly) and Euro-American,[3] an alien context in which their original, genealogical culture inevitably becomes marginalized. This uncomfortable and at times identity-shaking binary cultural experience has significantly influenced many aspects of the Korean American Christian community, especially its spiritual formation, by which I mean their Christian identity, life purpose in faith, their missional activities, and the relation of their faith to the social environment.[4]

Given this binary socio-cultural situation of Korean Americans, my main focus is to identify the Korean American evangelical Protestant community's particular and fundamental faith constructs, and to investigate how they have been actualized in day-to-day faith practices of the church, especially its preaching, as preaching is the most prominent faith practice in Korean and Korean American Protestantism.[5] I employ three key analytical lenses to focus my primary research questions:

i. *The bicultural theological lens*: Socially and existentially, Korean Americans experience a bicultural life owing to their dual backgrounds, being Korean *and* American. Therefore, the bicultural theological focus asks, "What unique theological narratives has this

like Lee who use the term Asian American in order to broaden their articulation of Korean American experiences, I use the term Korean American, as this is the group on which this research focuses.

[3] I acknowledge that the term Euro-American is an oversimplification of North American culture in which many subcultural entities exist, such as African American, Hispanic American, Arabic American, Puerto Rican American, and so on. Notwithstanding, I adopt the term Euro-American throughout this study, because it is Euro-American culture that is still a dominant cultural influence in the U.S. in general and on Koreans in particular, whose first foreign contact either in Korea or in America has been mostly with Euro-Americans (see Chap. 3).

[4] Eunjoo Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 1–10.

[5] Preaching is the Bible-based or the Bible-interpreting religious verbal communication issuing from the preacher to the church community. Preaching in Korean worship services usually aims for religious exhortation, evangelism, doctrinal education, and/or spiritual enhancement. Cf. footnote 6 and Key Terms "preaching."

bicultural life created in the minds of Korean Americans and how have those particular theological perspectives contributed to their ecclesial practices[6] (e.g., prayers, preaching, worship, church leadership, church education, evangelicalism)?"

ii. *The interreligious historical lens*: Korean American Christianity is heavily influenced by historical Korean (or broadly Asian) institutional and folk religions.[7] Thus, the historical considerations of cross-cultural and multireligious encounters ask, "How have traditional Confucianism, Buddhism, Shamanism, and/or other folk religions helped to shape the particularity of Korean American Protestantism?"

iii. *The ecclesial liturgical lens*: Communal worship is the focal time and place at which Korean American Christians most explicitly express their spiritual yearnings and/or despair as spiritual pilgrims. This focus asks, "What fundamentally differentiates Korean American worship from other American counterparts (e.g., Euro-American), especially its preaching practice which is *the* pivotal, sacred moment of worship for Korean Americans?"[8]

Thus, my research first explores the unique socio-cultural and theological narrative that Korean American Protestants have created in their particular circumstances of life. Then, I trace the Korean cultural and religious heritages that originally gave birth to a unique Korean American spiritual life and thus its church practices. Last, but not least, I focus on Korean American worship in which various liturgical elements appear as the most essential and comprehensive expressions of Korean American bicultural

[6] Throughout the book, by "ecclesial practices," I mean faith practices shared and performed by Korean Americans, either individually or communally, in and out of the church context.

[7] Since the given traditional religions are pan-Asian religious phenomena (not exclusively Korean), I will introduce the broad scope or foundational background of each religion and then specific Korean cultural characteristics of those religions when discussing those religions affecting Korean and Korean American Christian religiosity in Chaps. 4 and 5.

[8] Jung Young Lee writes regarding this central position of preaching in Korean American worship, "In fact, preaching is *more than merely a part of the worship service; it is, in fact, a worship service*. Every act of worship can be regarded as preaching. Prayers, music, hymn singing, reading scriptures, the citation of creeds, and the attitude of a congregation are all forms of preaching. Each action conveys the Word of God in its own form and style (emphasis inserted)." Jung Young Lee, *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 41.

and multireligious faith. Obviously, this will not be strictly a linear research process. These three aspects are deeply interrelated throughout this study, as we will see. Yet, these distinctions help to clarify the investigation at each stage on each given subject.

Eventually, I will demonstrate that five socio-ecclesial[9] codes of Korean American faith-constructs have become essential or *fundamentals* in rendering Korean American Christian life culturally and theologically meaningful and purposeful in many aspects: the Wilderness Pilgrimage code, the Diasporic Mission code, the Confucian Egalitarian code, the Buddhist Shamanistic code, and the Pentecostal Liberation code. At the end I propose these five codes, as a whole, as a unique Korean American diasporic hermeneutic and spirituality that is most suitable for Korean American evangelical Protestantism.[10] By "hermeneutic," I mean particular interpretive perspectives that one can bring to biblical exegesis, cultural life, daily practices, and the social environment for critical analysis. The proposal will be both descriptive and strategic. I will not only describe the detailed content of the five codes and the resulting faith practices, but also suggest their strategic or prescriptive use, both theologically and methodologically, to best serve the given Korean American socio-ecclesial context.

The strategic concern mentioned will be the strong focus of the first portion of the book's conclusion chapter where I discuss positive practical theological themes arising from the integrative use of the five codes: (1) the Pilgrimage code as a deep foundation of socio-contextual identity, (2) the Mission code as a propagation of global racial reconciliation and harmony, (3) the Egalitarian code as a sound ideology of socio-pastoral care, (4) the Shamanistic code as an affirmation of one's multireligious self, essentially centered around a Christo-centric faith, and (5) the Liberation code as a demonstration of the Spirit God's transformative presence in the

[9] By the term "socio-ecclesial," I mean the Korean American ecclesial context or its nature that is significantly determined by the social and theological interaction between Korean American Christians and the Euro-American social, economic, and political circumstances around them.

[10] As commonly known, "diaspora(s)" originally mean the ancient or modern Jews—"the people of God"—spread and living all around the world for various reasons (wars, genocides, political or religious persecutions, economic purposes, or any personal reasons). Korean Christians living in many parts of the globe, the majority of whom live in North America, collectively like to call themselves "Korean diasporas," following the example of the Jews. Admittedly, however, the former's specific historical reasons for living outside the homeland are somehow different from the latter's. See Sung-hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma, eds., *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

world. I will show how these five codes and resulting practical theological themes can mutually enhance and develop each other through integrated use.

The scope of this book is limited to Korean American Protestantism or more specifically Korean American evangelical Protestantism, which is the largest population among Korean American Christians (i.e., roughly about 90 % of all Korean immigrant Christians and 70 % of the whole Korean American population).[11] They are the people who brought their Korean cultural and religious heritage, along with their Korean evangelical Christianity, to the States and created their unique faith constructs—Korean American evangelical diasporic faith.[12] Obviously, Korean American life

[11] For detailed information on the immigrant history and census of Korean Americans, see Ilpyong J. Kim, "A Century of Korean Immigration to the United States: 1903–2003" in his *Korean-Americans: Past, Present, and Future* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International Corp., 2004), 13–37. On January 13, 1903, the 101 Koreans who arrived in Hawaii as pineapple and sugar plantation workers began the "first wave" of Korean American immigration—55 men, 21 women, and 25 children among them. By 1905 there were already more than 7226 Koreans in Hawaii alone and by 1910 about 7 Korean American Protestant churches in the U.S. Kim confirms that already by 2000, there were 3402 Korean immigrant churches. Su Yon Pak et al. provide important information and discussion on the Korean American church's sociological status and role in Korean American history over the past century in "A Social History of the Korean American Church in the United States," in their *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1–15. They divide the Korean American immigration history into three periods: (1) The Exile Community (1903–1950) when Koreans came to the States as cheap labor forces; (2) The Hybrid Community (1950–1968) when cheap laborers and other types of immigrants came (e.g., adopted orphans, military spouses, students); and (3) The Immigrant Community (1968–1988/1992) when Koreans came for purposes of study, business, professional career, political asylum, and so on. They recognize the rapid growth of the number of Korean immigrants, as recorded by the US Census: 70,598 Koreans by 1970; 357,393 by 1980; 798,849 by 1990; and 1.07 million by 2000. Finally, Pak et al. acknowledge that almost 70–75 % of the whole Korean American population make up those 3000 Korean American churches. This is roughly 1 church for every 330 Korean Americans. Recently, according to 2011 Korean government statistical sources, in the U.S. alone, there are 2,176,998 Korean immigrants in total. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Current Status of Overseas Compatriots 2011," http://www.mofa.go.kr/travel/overseascitizen/index.jsp?menu=m_10_40 (accessed March 14, 2014). These government statistics include Korean immigrants living in the U.S. as green card holders, temporary visitors, students, and US citizens. The population of Korean immigrants living as US citizens alone is 1,094,290.

[12] My working definition of "evangelical" conveys five commonly understood characteristics of it, yet does not do so exclusively: (1) the Bible as the divinely inspired book with the final authority in all matters of faith; (2) reconciliation between God and humanity made possible by the atoning death of Christ on the cross; (3) individual repentance and conver-

experience in North America and its Christian practices in faith are a part of those of Asian Americans and of Asian American Christianity. Thus, it would be almost impossible to discuss Korean American Protestantism without exploring Asian American Christianity in general (see Chap. 1). That is why along the way this book will rely on many writings by other Asian or Asian American theologians (and pastors), in order to better illuminate my discussion on Korean American Christianity. At the end, however, this book is mainly about Korean American evangelical pilgrims (see Chaps. 2 and 3). Thus, from this point on, when I say "Korean American Christians" without further specification, I usually mean Korean American evangelical Protestant Christians.[13]

Asian Americans are by no means a homogenous group. Many other Asian American Christian groups, including, but not only Chinese-, Japanese-, Vietnamese-, Indonesian-, Indian-, and Taiwanese Americans, demand unique cultural and theological approaches for the exploration of their particular faith constructs. I think that discussions on all these Asian American ethnic groups are to arrive soon as more and more Asians with diverse ethnic backgrounds plant more churches and participate in higher theological education in North America. My twofold hope, therefore, is that this book thoroughly examines the spiritual life of Korean American evangelicals who are still the major player (indeed the largest in quantity) among all Asian American Christians, which in turn paves a way for other Asian American ethic scholars to perform their own researches on their particular ethnic-ecclesial contexts.

sion as markers of a beginning of new life in Christ; (4) the duty of evangelism as a key activity of one's faithful life; and (5) belief in the eternal blissful life after death. See Timothy Larsen, and Daniel J. Treier, *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

[13] Korean American (evangelical) Catholicism is not included in my research for two reasons. First, among Koreans or Korean Americans themselves, Catholicism itself is (wrongly) considered a very separate division of Christianity, which they think of as having a different belief system (e.g., veneration of Mary the Mother of God). Second, as far as I can see, two major socio-ecclesial codes I will introduce later are not really strong in Korean American Catholicism: the Diasporic Mission code and the Pentecostal Liberation code.

Critical Methodological Approaches

The cultural and historical phenomenon of the massive Korean American immigration from the late nineteenth century through the entire twentieth century and up to the present is basically a subject of anthropological studies. Anthropology fundamentally asks and answers the question of what humanity is, what humans do, and how and why they do that in a particular cultural situation.[14] Given that generic understanding of anthropology, I take as my foundational research approach symbolic anthropology (or more generally symbolic and interpretive anthropology), which studies cultural symbols and how we can interpret them to better understand a particular society. Clifford Geertz, a primary developer and supporter of symbolic anthropology, once said, "Believing, with Max Weber, that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." Relying on Geertz's concept of culture and understandings of cultural (or religious) symbols and their social functions, I investigate primary cultural characteristics, religious symbols, and religious symbolic actions in the Korean American socio-ecclesial circle. Because I make limited use of cultural anthropological methodology, however, I will not attempt an ethnographic survey that is often a significant part of anthropological research. I will mainly take the concept of cultural symbol as an analytic tool, applying it to historical and sociological data and church practices. My goal is to outline unique Korean American evangelical faith constructs, namely five socio-ecclesial codes, which serve in the given socio-ecclesial context as a particular kind of spiritual hermeneutic for interpreting biblical texts, developing theology, and faithfully pondering lived experience. In order to help the reader's understanding of those five codes or faith constructs, I will show various sermon examples by Korean American preachers as particular cultural-literary symbols that grow out of these unique faith constructs or fundamentals. Why sermons? Because, as I mentioned earlier, preaching is the single most important faith practice and cultural-symbolic action in Korean American Protestantism. Specifically, throughout the book, I will use the sermons closely associated with the Abrahamic pilgrim narrative—*the* narrative, according to

[14] Marvin Harris, *Cultural Anthropology*, 7th edition (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2006), 2–9.

Sanghyun Lee, that is at the very core of Korean American diasporic faith fundamentals (see Chap. 2).

Besides symbolic anthropology, my research will benefit from broad Asian American theological studies, which over the past several decades have developed unique (practical) theologies for and of Asian American Christianity—an umbrella term and phenomenon for Korean American Christianity. Influential figures include Sanghyun Lee, Jung Young Lee, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Jonathan Y. Tan, Peter C. Phan, Sung-Deuk Oak, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Kwok Pui-lan, among many significant others. Phan is particularly helpful to my research with his postcolonial "intercultural methodology" in developing an Asian American theology and its practices in faith in the complex *Asian* and *American* bicultural context.[15] His research methodology puts the critical experience of immigration of "displacement and suffering" at the center of theological development, which in turn should contribute to the epistemology of inter/multicultural theology of "seeing from the margins."[16] *Seeing from the margins*, he continues, (1) develops Asian American hermeneutics of suspicion vis-à-vis the surrounding dominant culture, (2) retrieves the Asian American "underside of history" as positive theological resources, and (3) then finally reconstructs a unique Asian American theological hermeneutic and its faith practices that best fit a given Asian American theological or spiritual context (e.g., a Korean American Protestant circle).[17] Methodologically, this whole process can be summed up as socio-analytic mediation, hermeneutical mediation, and practical mediation.[18] Relying on Phan's intercultural methodology to a good extent, I begin this book with a discussion on the socio-ecclesial or practical theological situation of Korean Americans living through the immigration experiences of displacement and suffering on a daily basis (see Chap. 1). The main body of the book, as a hermeneutical and practical mediation, then explores the particular theological development from the marginal status of Korean American evangelical pilgrims and its resulting ecclesial practices, particularly sermons.

In relation to Phan's intercultural methodology, the third minor methodological approach I take is a theology of enculturation or encultura-

[15] Phan, Peter C., *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 10–12.
[16] Ibid., 12.
[17] Ibid., 15–18.
[18] Ibid., 18–22.