As one rides the train in the evening in Seoul and looks out of the window as the scenery races by, one can observe a most striking sight: countless red neon crosses dotting the hilly landscape like thousands of fireflies. Watching these bright red crosses blurring by, one is left to wonder how there could be so many churches in one place; crosses seem to be atop every other building on the cityscape, all fiercely competing for attention. Walking around some of Seoul’s residential neighborhoods, one seems to find a church practically on every other block—some in majestic stand-alone structures, and others as storefront operations occupying a floor or a section in one of the gray, generic office buildings ubiquitous to the city.

For anyone visiting Seoul, these initial visual impressions of the city help to capture something of the unique reality of Seoul’s religious landscape. Present-day Seoul is a city of churches, the numbers and density of which would not fail to provoke amazement in any observer. First introduced from the United States in the late 1800s, evangelical Protestantism—to which I will refer herein simply as evangelicalism—began its vigorous expansion in South Korea starting in the early 1960s, exploding in the 1970s and 1980s. Membership numbers for evangelical churches, which constitute the vast majority of Protestant churches in South Korea, have surged, from a little over 500,000 adherents in the 1950s to 6.5 million by 1985, growing more than ten times in three decades. As of 1997, the number of Protestants was estimated to be over 12 million, over 21 percent of South Korea’s population, with over
33,000 churches around the country and about 40,000 pastors (Gallup Korea 1998: 164–67). Together with Catholics, estimated to comprise about a third of the Christian population, Christians now constitute the largest religious group in South Korea.²

South Korean evangelicalism, however, has not only distinguished itself for its impressive rate of growth, but for the size of its churches, some of which are now the largest in the world. South Korea currently boasts the world’s largest congregation, the Yeoido Full Gospel Church, and the world’s largest Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist congregations.³ South Korean evangelicalism, just as importantly, is notable in another respect: the particular fervor and devotional enthusiasm with which many of its adherents seem to approach the religion. Reflecting what one scholar has called its “intensely practical and devotional bent” (Lee 1996: 234), South Korean evangelicals have developed a dedication to a range of devotional practices—such as frequent and fervent prayers, strict observance of the Sabbath, dedicated Bible study, regular tithing, and revival meetings—with an intensity difficult to match anywhere around the world.⁴

A fascinating phenomenon in and of itself, the remarkable success of evangelicalism in post–World War II South Korea has drawn a number of efforts by scholars to explain its “puzzling” nature.⁵ Echoing the analyses of some earlier works on the growth of Protestantism in Latin America,⁶ many of these studies have tended to offer broad historical or macro-sociological explanations, locating the causes of evangelicalism’s ascendance in South Korea within the dislocating socio-cultural conditions generated by the “late-late” developmental and industrialization process of the 1960s and 1970s. According to these explanations, the appeal of evangelicalism for many ordinary Koreans lay in its capacity to provide a kind of spiritual and material “refuge” for those suffering the effects of innumerable social and economic ills, including poverty, despair, and a sense of urban anomie. Evangelical churches helped by offering community, practical aid, enduring values, and hope through the prospect of other-worldly salvation.

Although useful as a starting point for thinking about the success of Korean evangelicalism, these macro-level explanations succeed only in offering us a limited understanding of the South Korean evangelical phenomenon. Very few of these studies are rooted in an on-the-ground
analysis of the converts' experiences and the conversion processes that can help to capture both the uniqueness and complexities of South Korean evangelicalism and its distinctive success in East Asia. The effort to understand the special character and impact of Korean evangelicalism, in particular, has been marred by a persistent neglect of the experiences of women. Not only do women constitute the majority—estimated at anywhere between 60 to 75 percent—of the Protestant population, but their fervent spirituality, institutional dedication, and evangelical zeal have been the driving forces behind the expansion and maintenance of Korean evangelical churches.

Based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in two evangelical churches in Seoul, this book attempts to correct this lack of attention by investigating the meaning of—and the reasons behind—the involvement of contemporary middle-class women in South Korean evangelicalism and tracing the consequences of their conversion. Utilizing an ethnographic mode of research and analysis, an approach that allows us to capture the unique character of Korean evangelical women's religiosity by attending closely to the women's own words, experiences, and perspectives, this study not only brings to light the relevance of women to Korean evangelicalism but helps provide a fuller picture of the success of the evangelical movement in South Korea.

In addition to incorporating the dimension of gender into the analysis of Korean evangelicalism, this focus on women has another key aim: addressing the important sociological question or the apparent “paradox” of the involvement of women in contemporary conservative-fundamentalist religious movements. The growing attraction to, and support for, many varieties of conservative-fundamentalist religious groups among women around the world has become an increasing focus of attention in recent years. From studies of women in American evangelical and fundamentalist groups to Pentecostal women in Latin America and women of traditionalist Islam, a growing body of literature attempts to explicate this important global phenomenon. Why are so many women, across classes and cultures, enthusiastically joining and supporting religions that advocate patriarchal structures of authority and morality, and therefore, seem designed to perpetuate their subordination?

Owing to a unique set of historical and social factors, Korean evangelicalism has, over the last century, developed into a highly patriarchal
religion, one that embraces both theologically and culturally a highly conservative, in many cases fundamentalist, belief system (Lee 2006; Hong, Won, and Kim 1966; Ro and Nelson 1995). In regard to gender and family relations in particular, a majority of Korean evangelical churches espouse a traditionalist model that upholds female submission and conventional gender roles—a model that is rooted, as we will see, in an amalgam of Confucian and evangelical conceptions of the ideal family and gender order. In spite of this, contemporary Korean women, many of them well educated and self-identified as middle class, participate in this religion with a degree of fervor and a sense of dedication difficult to observe in many other locales. By interrogating the tensions and “paradox” implied in the attraction between this rigorously patriarchal religion and a class of “modern,” well-educated women, this study of middle-class Korean evangelical women, then, offers a fruitful opportunity to examine further the meaning of contemporary women’s involvement in religious traditionalism, promising a deeper understanding of its dynamics and appeal.

An inquiry into the question of contemporary women’s attraction to religious traditionalism is an endeavor that engages some of the most important and enduring sociological questions. With regard to religion, it directly addresses the long-standing debate on secularization and the question of religion’s role in the modern world, especially in relation to modernizing social transformations across societies. With regard to gender, it sheds light upon the varied nature of women’s engagement with contemporary patriarchies, the dynamics of changing gender relations, and the creative means by which women negotiate the challenges of modernity and social change. Through an examination of the unique engagement of middle-class women with the evangelical religion in South Korea, this book will show both how these issues play out in the context of modern South Korea, and consider how the South Korean case illuminates the issue of women and religious traditionalism in general.

Among the important issues central to women and religious traditionalism with which this book is concerned—the relationship of religion to modernities, the nature of religion’s role in contemporary women’s struggles, and the dynamics of the conversion process—a question of particular interest is the understanding of the complex and
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The contradictory impact of traditionalist beliefs and practices on the lives of women, as well as the patterns of resistance and accommodation in women’s engagement with religious patriarchy. With regard to South Korea in particular, this book not only clarifies the place and workings of the evangelical religion in contemporary society by elucidating the dimension of gender, but also, by depicting the struggles of women in the context of their daily lives, offers another important window through which to view South Korea’s recent socio-cultural transformative processes and its engagement with modernity.

Women and Religious Traditionalism: Power, Agency, Resistance

When I embarked on this study of Korean evangelical women, I benefited from a growing body of emerging research on women and traditionalist religious movements that had begun to provide a wealth of valuable insights into the topic. Collectively, one major contribution made by these studies has been the examination of women’s motivations for joining traditionalist religious groups. Analyzing the actions and choices of women within the sociological and historical context of each society, these studies suggest that the involvement of contemporary women in patriarchally-oriented religious groups can be seen in large part as a reaction to the problems and challenges generated by the forces of modernity and modernizing socio-cultural transformation that have affected different societies, especially those affecting family and gender relations.

For instance, in studies focusing on conservative-fundamentalist religious groups in America such as evangelical/fundamentalist Protestantism and Orthodox Judaism, various researchers have discovered that the attraction of middle-class women to conservatively-oriented religions is motivated in part by the perceived “failures” of feminism and the values of modern individualism to bring women stable domestic life, meaningful relationships, and a sense of identity. Given that many of these women are joining groups that articulate the problems of family, gender, and sexual and social morality as central concerns, it is clear that these issues reflect the focal concerns of women. In works focusing on Latin American evangelicalism, the major finding is that the growing involvement of lower-class women in evangelical or Pentecostal religions in many Latin American countries is driven by
severe social and economic dislocations stemming from rapid societal changes, and represents efforts by women to cope with the economic insecurities and the breakdown of family structures brought about by these changes.9

In addition to illuminating the motivations behind conversion, these studies further contribute by revealing the significance and impact of these religions on the lives of women. Across societies, traditionalist religions appeal to women as important sources of support as women struggle with economic difficulties and domestic upheavals; these religions, for instance, offer material, social, and spiritual resources to aid women achieve stability in these spheres. But because traditionalist religions also advocate conservative beliefs regarding gender, they have been viewed as oppressive to women. By revealing the actual complexities involved in women’s religious engagements in different societies and religious traditions, many recent studies have helped challenge such conventional interpretations. One central insight here has been that contrary to simply functioning as a source of oppression for women, religious patriarchy can actually serve women in surprising ways—namely, as “flexible resources” for negotiating gender relations and pursuing domestic interests and as vehicles in women’s gender and domestic struggles.

Explorations of American evangelical and fundamentalist women, for instance, have shown that women’s accommodation to the church’s conservative teachings on gender, especially the ideology of “submission,” cannot be seen as a simple capitulation to patriarchy, but rather as an effort to re-negotiate gender relations and achieve marital stability, especially by reforming men.10 Scholars such as Judith Stacey (1990) have, moreover, directed our attention to the often “conscious,” “strategic,” and “instrumental” nature of such efforts, highlighting the importance of women’s agency. Others have called attention to the discrepancy that exists among women between formal ideology and actual practice.11 Indeed, more recent studies on evangelicals have not only underscored such discrepancies—a work by Gallagher and Smith (1999) labels this “symbolic traditionalism and pragmatic egalitarianism”—but have highlighted the diversity that exists among evangelicals with regard to their church’s ideology of submission (Bartkowski 2001).

Going beyond the analysis of traditionalist religions as resources in women’s efforts to negotiate patriarchal relations, many of these works
have also brought to light some of the “liberating” aspects of traditionalist religions, pointing to the ways in which these religions open up spaces for subtle forms of dissent and resistance on the part of women against patriarchal structures. Research on American Orthodox Jewish women (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1989), for example, has highlighted the unexpected ways that orthodox religious beliefs and practices serve as a vehicle of empowerment for women, not only in the ways these beliefs help women reconstitute stable identities and kinship relations, but also through “feminist” reinterpretations of traditionalist ideology that valorizes womanhood and reaffirms female power.12 Outside of the American setting, works on Latin American Pentecostal women have been especially notable for emphasizing the liberating potential of traditionalist religions, especially as a resource for raising female status and subverting patriarchal relations within both domestic and religious spheres.13 Calling attention to the “revolutionary” potential of Colombian Pentecostalism for reforming gender roles, Brusco (1995), for example, has gone as far as to call Colombian evangelicalism a “revolutionary” and “strategic” form of women’s collective action that has been even more effective than Western feminism in raising women’s status and altering gender role behavior.14

In addition to illuminating the factors that shape women’s decisions to embrace religious traditionalism, this body of work, then, has made important contributions in helping us better understand the surprising ways traditionalist religions are relevant in the lives of women. Their major contribution lies in uncovering the phenomenon that while conservative religions, across societies, serve as important instruments in women’s efforts to deal with domestic and social instabilities, they are also availed by women in an array of creative and unexpected ways, including as sites of gender negotiation and resistance. By emphasizing the issues of women’s dissent, agency, and the complexities inherent in the operations of religious power, these studies have helped problematize the view of traditionalist religions as monolithic sources of gender domination, as well as of women as simple “dupes” of false consciousness, moving our understanding of traditionalist religions in sophisticated new directions.15

By capturing and delineating the nature of and meaning inscribed in the religious beliefs and practices of Korean evangelical women, this
study significantly expands our perspective on these issues, opening up new avenues for understanding. The Korean case accomplishes this by affirming some of the current findings as well as challenging them in important ways. As we will see, the dynamics of religious engagement of the women found in this study, while displaying some commonalities with women in other cultural settings, are also distinctive, both in the ways evangelicalism is appropriated by these women and its consequences, offering significant implications for altering our current understandings of women and religious traditionalism.

To begin, this study will show that Korean women’s motivations for religious involvement are driven by a distinctive set of gender dilemmas that are generated within the historical, structural, and ideological context of a unique patriarchal system and its contradictions. This not only influences directly the character of women’s religious engagement, but its impact on their lives. In particular, the Korean case highlights the complex interplay that holds between the “liberating” and “oppressive” dimensions of women’s religious engagement and its consequences—a situation that poses interesting challenges to current interpretative frameworks regarding women and religious traditionalism.

I begin my argument by suggesting that the motivations behind conversions of evangelical women must be understood within the framework of a complex set of problems affecting contemporary family and gender relations—which I broadly describe as crises or contradictions of modern patriarchy—that have been generated by the tumultuous social and cultural transformations in post–World War II South Korea. The reasons for and the anatomy of this crisis are highly complex, but they have their roots in the growing contradictions between the powerful social and economic transformative forces that are rapidly liberalizing the wider culture as well as the subjectivities of women, and a social system that continues to uphold key patriarchal structures at the level of both society and family. This system of modern patriarchy, however, does not simply represent the survival of “tradition” but one that has been reconfigured and reconstituted within the contemporary social context by political design, primarily through the efforts of a patriarchal-developmental state concerned to ensure social stability in the process of nation-building. For the generation of married middle-class housewives investigated in this study, many of whom are caught in
a welter of objective and subjective contradictions induced by the fluctuating and conflicting topography of “tradition,” “modernity,” even “post-modernity,” this situation has given rise to a highly challenging set of tensions and dilemmas, especially within the domestic sphere.

One major thrust of my argument is that the church participation of evangelical women found in these pages can in many ways be seen as a response to these crises and contradictions of the contemporary South Korean gender and family system, an effort on the part of women to cope with and resolve an array of domestic and personal conflicts stemming from the predicaments posed by modern patriarchal relations. Although I believe that this cultural crisis does pose a number of dilemmas that are broadly common to women across classes in South Korea, my main concern in this book is to examine and illuminate the nature, meaning, and consequences of this crisis for middle-class women in particular, and their responses to them. Indeed, despite some of the basic cultural and experiential similarities shared by women across different social groups that I have observed throughout this research, the specific differences reflected in the situations and predicaments of women along class lines—as related especially to the divergences in class-specific gender ideologies, power structures, and how these ideologies are actually practiced and lived—render the experiences of middle-class women in many ways distinctive and suitable for separate analysis.

Although I make no claims that the women’s actions are driven solely by conscious or instrumental motives, I demonstrate that many of the women in this study seek and experience their churches and the evangelical belief system for the ways they help them cope with their domestic distress and suffering. I have found, for instance, that the churches help women deal with their domestic situations by providing ways to pursue spiritual healing and a sense of empowerment, and by offering a space in which to experience a measure of psychic and social autonomy from the family. As such, the Korean evangelical church can first and foremost be seen as a vehicle in women’s struggle for deliverance from gender oppression, even for resisting patriarchal authority.

Despite the liberating impulse that is clearly evident in women’s religiosity, the engagement of Korean women with evangelical beliefs and practices, however, is at the same time characterized by acute contra-
dictions that symbolize the significant tensions between their desire for liberation from the patriarchal structures and an impulse toward acquiescence. Indeed, along with their efforts at resistance against the patriarchal system through the spiritual and social spaces provided by the church, as well as through their creative engagement with religious patriarchy, we also find among many women a striking willingness to accommodate to the church’s ideologies of gender, especially as a strategy for resolving their domestic contradictions. Exploring these tensions, which are revealed through a complex interplay of emancipation and subordination, resistance and accommodation, will be a major focus of this work.

Attending to the tensions in Korean evangelical women’s religiosity poses interesting theoretical challenges to the problem of women and religious traditionalism. I contend that the recent interpretative emphasis on “resistance” and “liberating” dimensions of women’s engagement with religious patriarchy has been fruitful; but at the same time, it has deflected attention in some crucial ways from other central dynamics of this engagement. In particular, the crucial problems of patriarchal power and domination tend to be elided, along with the thorny issue of women’s assent to patriarchal structures and authority. Although the recent scholarly attention to the dimensions of protest or resistance in women’s actions has been valuable for achieving a more thorough understanding of the nature of women’s engagement with religious traditionalisms, the acute tensions that exist between “resistance” and the more accommodative aspects of women’s actions—aspects that raise questions both of the ambiguity of women’s intentions/subjectivities and the consequences of their actions with regard to patriarchy—have been explored less thoroughly.

In important ways, these interpretive approaches reflect and draw on recent developments in social scientific and feminist theorizing, developments that have been characterized by a distinctive concern with and emphasis on the issues of agency, resistance, and praxis in the analysis of subordinate groups. These theoretical approaches, broadly characterized as “poststructural” and influenced by the ideas of such thinkers as Michel Foucault (1990), Antonio Gramsci (1992), and Raymond Williams (1973), pivot around “de-centered” conceptions of power, where culture is a field of both the inscription of and resistance to
power (Rubin 1996). Furthermore, this line of theorizing draws its inspiration from what Sherry Ortner (1984) has labeled “practice theory,” a form of theorizing that emerged in the 1980s that embraces a more “action-based approach” to analyzing human behavior centered on the “doing subject” (seen as an active strategizing/calculating agent) and what Ortner calls the “strategic model” of human action.

Although these approaches have been extremely valuable in comprehending the complexities of human actions and motivations, the engagement of women with religious patriarchy is a complex matter, the particular dynamics and effects of which must be understood as shaped within specific socio-historical contexts and regimes of patriarchy. The Korean case demonstrates that we must comprehend not only the motivations behind women’s turn to religious traditionalism, but also the particular forms of their religious engagement and its consequences as products of each society’s specific socio-historical processes—of social change, modernity, and the structure and logic of gender/family relations—that give shape to the distinctive gendered subjectivities, motivations, and interests of women.

Hence, this book will be concerned with one final crucial issue: the question of women’s “consent” to patriarchy. The issue of consent, in general, remains an undertheorized problem in gender studies (Anyon 1983; Baron 1991; Barrett 1997). Although there has been a great deal of attention in recent years in the human and social sciences to the issue of resistance among the subordinated—revealing a tendency toward what Abu-Lughod (1990) refers to as the “romanticization” of resistance—there have been far less serious explorations of the question of consent, that is, why the “oppressed” would assent to and participate in perpetuating their oppression and subordinate status, even while they resist such oppressive structures. This study will investigate women’s consent through a close, socially contextualized analysis of the Korean family/gender system, namely, the configurations of the dominant gender ideology and the workings of power within this gender and family regime. Attending, then, to how women’s subjectivities, motives, and interests are formed and configured within such a structural context, we will move toward understanding the complex investments made by many contemporary middle-class Korean women regarding patriarchy, and the workings of their feminine agency.
In Chapter 1, I present a brief overview of the history and character of Korean evangelicalism and describe the fieldwork setting and my research methods. In Chapter 2, I offer an analysis of the larger socio-cultural context and conditions within which evangelical participation of Korean women might be understood, particularly the recent transformations in the social and cultural milieu that are responsible for the important alterations in the relations of family and gender in South Korea. After elucidating the character of the Korean Neo-Confucian family/gender system and its transformations through intensified engagement with Western modernity and the forces of globalization, I describe how some of these changes have helped destabilize the current patriarchal system and have heightened the conflicts and contradictions within family and gender relations.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I present my observations and analyses of some of the central dimensions of women’s evangelical beliefs and practices, which I argue constitute the primary forms of evangelical women’s response to their domestic contradictions and conflicts. In these chapters, I focus on the dynamics of the spiritual and institutional aspects of women’s religious participation, showing how these serve as central vehicles in women’s efforts to negotiate—and even resist—the restrictions and injuries of the contemporary family system.

In Chapter 3, I focus specifically on the spiritual aspect of women’s gender struggle and its role as a resource in enabling women to transcend and find relief from domestic suffering and oppression; I show how this occurs mainly through spiritual healing, which offers women not only a release from suffering but a sense of empowerment that helps them reconstitute their identities. Chapter 4 focuses on the institutional aspects of women’s religious participation, and the role this participation plays in helping them negotiate their domestic lives by providing a sense of social and psychic autonomy. Through dedicated church participation, women often appropriate the church as a social space in which to carve out a measure of autonomy and independence from the constraints of the domestic sphere and from their husbands. This is accomplished by making the church a focal point of social interaction and female-centered community, as well as a site in which to pursue “learning” and limited kinds of self-achievement and fulfillment.
In Chapter 5, I turn my attention to women’s engagement with traditionalist ideologies of gender and family as articulated by the church, particularly their responses to the church’s efforts at female “redomestication.” Focusing in particular on the dynamics and meaning of women’s accommodation to the ideology of submission/obedience, especially as a strategy for negotiating their domestic situations, I show that submission must be seen as a complex process characterized by attempts at accommodation and resistance. In Chapter 6, I explore the larger implications of this dynamic on the religiosity of evangelical women and then address the issue of “consent” to religious patriarchy. Here, I examine some of the major motivations behind women’s normative consent to the principles of patriarchal relations, especially as they relate to women’s interests and gender subjectivities as these are embedded in and shaped by the ideological, structural, and power configurations of the Korean family/gender regime.