A Reflection on Nominal Christians in Contemporary England

A Non-Diasporic Korean Missionary Perspective

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Abstract

This article attends to the religious landscape in contemporary England, particularly those who display some Christian beliefs and practices loosely, while their church attendance is slight, occasional or non-existent. In Western society and churches, they are predominantly characterised as "nominal Christians." From a missiological perspective, I examine the adequacy of this characterisation, drawing upon my empirical findings of non-diasporic Korean missionaries' engagement with the phenomenon of interest. Firstly, I show how nominalism is addressed in the two major sociological approaches that attempt to characterise the religious trend in the contemporary Western culture, namely, secularization theories and de-institutionalization theories. Secondly, I present

empirical findings of Korean missionaries' reflection on nominalism in the light of such a sociological debate. Finally, I examine the missiological implication of their reflection for nominalism in reference to the concept of *missio Dei*. I argue that Korean missionaries' accounts disclose what I call "religious nominals" who have some valid elements of Christian faith in an increasingly deinstitutionalized ecclesial context. They represent a distinctive religious constituency among whom God carries out the redemptive work of Christ, the manner of which is as yet to be explored. This disclosure invites us to review our understanding of nominalism with a serious theological exploration of such a redemptive intervention of God. This exploration also invites further reflection on our current discourse of missional church in this particular theological context.

Introduction

This article draws on research conducted over the course of my doctoral project which investigated non-diasporic Korean missionaries. As missionaries, they focus on doing mission among local people outside their migrant communities in England (Freston, 2010: 162–163). The project explored the sociological and theological meaning of their missionary experience through in-depth interviews with nine missionaries whom I selected out of 44 questionnaire participants across England. One of the major findings from this exploration was about their encounter with a unique religious landscape in England: it consists of those who display some Christian beliefs and practices loosely, while their church attendance is slight, occasional or non-existent.

Two statistics can be used to illustrate this constituency in a tangible way. First, the latest UK National Census (2011) shows that 59.4 percent of the English population identified as Christian.[1] Secondly, it is estimated that less than 5 percent of the population

1. While the 2021 UK National Census is on the way, the National Centre for Social Research (Curtice et al., 2019: 4–5) suggests that 38 percent of the British Public identified as Christian in its survey of 3,879 Britons in 2018.

would attend the church by 2025 (Brierley, 2014). The apparent gap between these two figures captures the number of those who have an unconventional Christian attachment (see Drane, 2008: 75–76). This gap suggests that more than a third of the national population has such a Christian connection in contemporary English society.

In Western society and churches, this Christian adherence is predominantly characterised as "nominalism" (Glock and Wuthnow, 1979). At the heart of nominalism is "lack of a strong belief in a higher power, and indifference towards churches, but an irregular adherence to religion as a significant cultural, familial, and moral marker" (Day, 2012: 440). In other words, nominal Christians engage with Christianity for various reasons other than for faith matter *per se*. Eddie Gibbs (2002: 239) asserts that such a Christian adherence represents a serious "deviation between the identity claimed by persons and the actual commitment to that identity" (see also Dyck et al., 2014). This view of nominalism is also popularised within the Korean churches in their discussion on doing mission in the West (Nam, 2010: 48–52; Han, 2014: 51–53).

Such a view, however, seems to be insufficient to address the empirical findings from my research into Korean missionaries' engagement with the phenomenon in England. They have encountered not only those who show a loose Christian attachment on little or no religious grounds, but also those who do so with some valid elements of faith experience, the nature of which they do not fully understand. The encounter with this latter group has led Korean missionaries to review their understanding of nominalism.

In this article, I will address this review by Korean missionaries from a sociological and missiological perspective. Sociologically, this review draws our attention to nominalism in the context of the ongoing sociological discussion on the religious trend in the contemporary Western culture. Missiologically, Korean missionaries' review involves theological reflection on God's relationship with nominal Christians. This has an impact on both doing mission and being church among them.

I will start with a brief sketch of two sociological approaches that address the religious validity of nominal Christians' attachment to Christianity. This will be followed by my empirical findings that highlight how Korean missionaries understand the nominal Christians they encountered and in what ways they reflect on their view of nominalism in such an encounter. Finally, I will examine their reflection missiologically in the light of the concept of *missio Dei*.

Two sociological approaches to nominalism

A range of sociological discussions is available to highlight how Western society approaches the religious elements of nominal Christians. Among the most relevant approaches are "invisible religion" (Luckmann, 1967), "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994), "vicarious religion" (Davie, 2000), "fuzzy fidelity" (Voas, 2009), and a contemporary account of secularization theories by Charles Taylor (2007) and Steve Bruce (2011). While these approaches adopt a variety of perspectives that overlap or contrast with one another, they are divided into two strands. A leading point of contention is whether Christian nominalism represents a loss of interest in religion itself or a change in religious commitment.

Nominalism as an insignificant and decreasing religiosity

The first sociological strand, which suggests that nominalism represents a loss of people's interest in religion, is based on secularization theories. While discussions on secularization are ongoing and being modified (Dawson, 2011: 57–75), they are all built upon one premise: the decline of religion is inevitable in modern societies (Berger, 1969: 108). Drawing on such a view, Steve Bruce and David Voas argue that nominal Christians' engagement with Christianity reflects an insignificant and disappearing religiosity.

Voas (2009) identifies nominal Christians in his study of religious change in Europe, which draws upon the European Social

Survey (ESS).[2] Voas finds that, while the level of religious measures continues to decline across Europe, still a half of the population in each country shows a level of those measures that is neither as high as that of the patently religious nor as low as that of the patently unreligious. He refers to this intermediate constituency as "fuzzy Christians," given that Christianity has been the dominant religion for centuries in Europe (Voas, 2009: 164). The religious life of this cohort reflects that of nominal Christians.

Voas characterises nominal Christians' attachment to Christianity in two ways: insignificant and decreasing. First, it is insignificant given that their Christian connections only play "a very minor role (if any) in their lives" (Voas, 2009: 164). In his view, their attachment to Christianity can be explained by their Christian upbringing, tradition or ethnicity. While Day (2012: 449–453) considers such a natal or ethnic nominalism as sufficiently "religious" in the sense of the Durkheimian tradition (i.e. religion is a social function to help people form a sense of shared identity and morality), she also points out that this fashion of religion does not necessarily draw people into beliefs in transcendent or sacred canopy. Secondly, Voas argues that nominal Christians' engagement with Christianity represents a decreasing practice. Given that the ESS shows a constant decline in the level of religious measures over time across Europe, Voas (2009: 167) asserts that the numbers of fuzzy Christians will be eventually overtaken by the numbers of the areligious (see also Voas and Chaves, 2016: 1525–1534).

Bruce stands in line with Voas' characterisation of nominalism. First, Bruce suggests that the religious decline in Europe is a process of generational change "from seriously religious to intermediate to secular" (Bruce, 2011: 19). In other words, the manifestation of nominal Christians is only a temporary phenomenon. Secondly, Bruce (2011: 99) compares nominal Christians with football supporters who do not watch games or are not interested

2. The ESS data were collected from 22 European nations in 2002 and 2003. The survey asked people questions about three religious elements: affiliation, practice, and beliefs. Voas combined their responses into a single scale of religiosity and then analysed the average level of religiosity by five-year age cohort for each country. For details, see Voas, 2009: 156–160.

in the game results. Just as we may doubt how significant football is to such supporters, Bruce questions how significant Christianity is for nominal Christians.

Voas and Bruce's accounts, however, offer us only a partial reading of nominal Christians' religious life. Underlying their analysis is a sociological attempt to examine one's religiosity through institutionalized measures of religion. For instance, the key variables for the measure of religiosity in the ESS predominantly reflect institutionalized religious expressions (see Voas, 2009: 156). Voas and Bruce's assessment thus involves little or no investigation of nominal Christians' religiosity beyond their institutionalized expressions. The two following methodological issues are largely responsible for this limited approach.

First, Voas and Bruce's approach involves an analytic assumption that religion is defined in terms of institutionalized forms. Their approach to religiosity is thus limited to "scientific analysis only to the extent that it becomes organized and institutionalized'"(Luckmann, 1967: 22). Secondly, their approach assumes a strong correlation between self and society. This assumption implies that the decline of religiosity at a macro-structural level (e.g. the separation of state and church) and a meso-institutional level (e.g. the decline of religious organisations for education and health) inevitably results in the demise of religiosity at a micro-individual level (e.g. the decline in time and energy that individuals devote to religious activities) (Dawson, 2011: 27–32). However, a simple equation between self and society is highly contested in sociological studies (see Martin, 1990: 295; Davie et al., 2016: 555–557).

Nominalism as an increasingly de-institutionalized religiosity

The second sociological strand in theorising nominalism is built upon the critiques of secularization theories. As those critiques investigate the religious persistence beyond institutionalized manifestations in contemporary culture, they are often labelled as

"de-institutionalization" theories (Harrison, 2007: 32). Drawing on an alternative reading of the self-society linkage, proponents of de-institutionalization theories suggest that religion at a micro-individual level survives in modern societies despite the decline at its macro-structural and meso-institutional levels (Davie et al., 2016: 552–557). While there are a number of scholars who support this view, I will discuss the works of Grace Davie, Thomas Luckmann and Charles Taylor, given their relevance to this article.[3]

Davie takes nominalism as a sign of religiosity in an increasingly de-institutionalized context. Her argument is based on two concepts: "believing without belonging" and "vicarious religion."

Davie suggests that there are people who "want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice" (1994: 107). She interprets this phenomenon as a development of individualised forms of religion, which are shaped by the surrounding culture (1994: 75–84). Given that Christianity has remained the key surrounding culture to such a development in Western society, she asserts that nominal Christians still hold "many of their deep-seated religious aspirations" in their own ways (2000: 8).

In an attempt to probe further the connection between nominal Christians' religiosity and their intermittent institutionalized religious expressions, Davie develops the idea of vicarious religion (2000: 38–81). She construes nominal Christians' institutionalized engagement as an explicit exhibition of their individualised religiosity. She thus asserts that nominal Christians profess "the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing" (Davie, 2007: 22). In other words, under the visual tip of nominal

3. My use of the term "Nominal Christian" may include those who maintain loose Christian connections, while engaging with other religions or spiritualities. However, they are excluded in my discussion. They are in "the interstices of 'blurred' religious affiliations and borderless (spi)ritual practices that are concomitant to multiple religious belonging" (Rajkumar and Dayam, 2016: 1). Their religious life thus deserves separate academic attention. In this respect, the works of sociologists such as Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead and Meredith McGuire go beyond the concerns of this paper.

Christians' institutionalized religious expressions lies hidden the significant mass of their individualised religiosity. The key to the examination of their religious life is therefore to understand such an invisible mass of religiosity, "without which the visible part would not be there at all" (2010: 264).

Davie's attempt to uncover a latent level of religiosity resonates with Luckmann's discussion of "invisible religion" (1967). Luckmann argues that religious engagement in contemporary societies is not necessarily associated with the systems and practices of organised religion and thus is not always visible (Luckmann, 2003: 276–277; see also Knoblauch, 2003: 268). Accordingly, an investigation of such invisible religiosity requires a differentiation between religion and institutionalized religion (Luckmann, 1967: 50).

Luckmann thus offers an important sociological framework: the crisis of institutional religion represents, not its demise, but a shift to a more individualised form of religion (1967: 90–91). Luckmann asserts that this shift implies individuals' reliance on their own personal resources for religion rather than on those provided by religious institutions or authorities (1967: 104–105).

This sociological shift closely relates to Taylor's view of religion in modern society. Having critically examined the existing concept of "secularit" in secularization theories, he suggests that de-institutionalization is an important characteristic of religion in modern society and thus that "the fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful intuitions of individuals" (Taylor, 2007: 531). In other words, secularity has not completely removed the room for religion. Instead, it has created different rooms for our modern religious life. Importantly, these rooms are to be varied, multiple and thus contentious.

Davie, Luckmann and Taylor's approach has methodological significance for the investigation of nominal Christians' religious life. It allows us to avoid limiting our examination to the analysis of their institutionalized religious engagement. Instead, it leads us to focus on what is going on underneath such an engagement and what it means for them to continue to do so.

Davie, Luckmann and Taylor's approach, however, is not without an analytic challenge. According to them, what is to be accessed is a "subtle, many-layered, shifting, and constantly evolving entity, which cannot easily be broken down into straightforward, testable hypotheses" (Davie, 2010: 265). The challenge is thus to consider the extent to which nominal Christians' beliefs and behaviours could be taken as evidence of religiosity. Even their "subjective valorization" of anything that is special to them could be uncritically labelled as religious experience (Dawson, 2011: 93). In short, Davie, Luckmann and Taylor's approach needs further analytic development despite its methodological significance.

Korean missionaries' view of Christian nominalism

The above two sociological views, namely, secularization theories and de-institutionalization theories, show how scholars address nominalism in their discussion of religion in the contemporary Western culture. It is revealed that while the proponents of the first view such as Bruce and Voas fail to delve into nominalism in an increasingly de-institutionalized context, the exponents of the second view such as Davie, Luckmann and Taylor make attempts to do so. This second view thus draws our attention to the religious vitality of nominalism and the need for further exploration.

This sociological review has an implication on our missionary approach to nominal Christians. Underlying their Christian engagement may lie some valid faith elements that are highly heterogeneous and idiosyncratic. In other words, nominal Christians may represent a missionary constituency who engage with Christianity in a way that has been neither fully explored nor appropriately accounted for.

In this respect, my empirical findings are relevant to this current discussion. They uncover Korean missionaries' reflection on nominalism, which emerged out of their long-term and relational interactions with nominal Christians. In other words, my findings involve Korean missionaries' attempt to look into the faith

experience of nominal Christians at a micro-individual level. A qualitative research approach has also enabled my investigation to access Korean missionaries' account from their own perspective (Bryman, 2012: 470).

It is worth reiterating here that these findings are from a study of "non-diasporic" Korean missionaries in England. Although there is a growing academic attention to Korean mission in the West along with other non-Western missionary movements (Kim, 2015: 49–51; Kim, 2019: 2–3), researching into non-diasporic Korean mission is a relatively new area. The Korea World Missions Association (2020) reports that there were 1,228 Korean missionaries officially sent to Western Europe in 2019. However, no statistics are available for how numerous non-diasporic Korean missionaries are in England.[4]

Evidently, my findings bring to the surface the presence and voice of non-diasporic Korean missionaries, particularly concerning their perspective of nominalism in England. While these findings cannot be generalised as the representative view of all non-diasporic Korean missionaries in England, they allow us to see what is meaningful and significant for those who participated in my study (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 4). Here I highlight some of the findings that are related to the purpose of this article.

Observing nominal Christians

Korean missionaries have encountered nominal Christians in various contexts, including parks, supermarkets, universities, local festivals, church services and events. Just as sociologists of religion identify nominal Christians' unconventional Christian connections, Korean missionaries also recognise such connections among the nominal Christians they encountered. Their accounts suggest that nominal Christians tend to show a combination of the two particular patterns of Christian elements: a) familiarity with church or Christianity, and b) some Christian practice.

4. I contacted at least 44 non-diasporic Korean missionaries through a snowball sampling method during my data collection from 2014 to 2016.

The first pattern indicates that despite their low church attendance, nominal Christians are familiar with church or Christianity in various ways. For example, some have had a Christian upbringing or education. They are familiar with biblical stories or Christian principles. Korean missionaries' accounts often show that most nominal Christians do not hesitate to describe themselves as Christian when they are asked about their religion. Some of them also talk about their beliefs in Jesus or God, displaying a stronger attachment to their Christian faith than Korean missionaries expect.

The second pattern is that nominal Christians continue to have some forms of Christian practice albeit intermittently and in varying degrees from person to person. For instance, they occasionally go to church for various reasons (e.g. in the event of rites of passage or Christian festivity). To Korean missionaries' surprise, the majority of the nominal Christians they encountered were also baptised. Some have maintained a positive view of christening or had their children christened.

For Korean missionaries, the combination of these two patterns is an important indicator that distinguishes nominal Christians from other missionary constituencies. For example, Korean missionaries' accounts reveal that they tend to exclude people of other faiths (e.g. Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs) from the category of nominal Christians due to their lack of the second pattern. For the same reason, Korean missionaries exclude those who are not related to church or Christianity in any way as they hardly display any of the two patterns.

Identifying cultural and religious nominals

Korean missionaries' accounts show that they make another important distinction about the individual nominal Christians they encounter. At the heart of this distinction is Korean missionaries' own reflection on the question whether those nominal Christians have any genuine faith commitment to Christianity. According to

their accounts, Korean missionaries display at least three different views of the nominal Christian engagement.

The first view emerges from the Korean missionary interviews which highlight that some of the nominal Christians they encounter have only a cultural familiarity or attachment to Christianity. For example, Philip (pseudonym)[5], a Korean missionary participant, said that some nominal Christians "do not really have any faith commitment . . . I think they just know some verses from the Bible, that's all." The interviews show a second view regarding other nominal Christians whose attachment to Christianity involves some valid elements of Christian faith. For instance, Luke said that some of the nominal Christians he encountered "are born again. I can tell they have definitely established a relationship with God." A third view surfaces when the missionaries spoke of nominal Christians whose Christian connections seem to be more than just cultural expressions while finding it difficult to evaluate those connections in terms of their faithfulness to Christian teachings or beliefs. A good example is found from Chris' account when he said that some nominal Christians seemed to have "fragmentary experience of the gospel and Christ."

These three views suggest that Korean missionaries categorise the nominal Christians they encounter into three groups: a) those who have no faith at all, b) those who have faith and c) those who may have some faith. More importantly, this identification of these three subgroups suggests that Korean missionaries' views involve both of the two aforementioned sociological accounts of nominalism.

For example, those interviewed who spoke of the first subgroup of nominal Christians suggest that their Christian connections involve no religious concerns, motivation or interest in any sense. This suggestion goes to the heart of Voas and Bruce's view. As highlighted, Voas' key argument about fuzzy Christians is that their Christian engagement largely reflects their culture and tradition, but not religion (Voas, 2009: 164). Bruce (2011: 19) also asserts that this Christian engagement lacks serious religious

5. The names of Korean missionaries in this article are pseudonymised.

commitment. In my view, the Korean missionaries' accounts of the first subgroup provide empirical evidence for Voas and Bruce's sociological argument. Hence this subgroup can be called "cultural nominals."

By contrast, Korean missionaries' accounts of the second and third subgroups highlight the perception that these nominal Christians have some religious elements albeit not fully explicable. This perception follows the view of Davie, Luckmann and Taylor, who argue that underneath each nominal Christian connection lies a religiosity which needs a further sociological exploration. Accordingly, Korean missionaries' accounts of the second and third subgroups provide empirical evidence for Davie, Luckmann and Taylor's argument. Hence both these subgroups can be called "religious nominals."

Religious nominals and missionary uncertainty

It is not surprising that the Korean missionaries interviewed for my study have encountered cultural nominals in England. As David Bosch (1991: 476–477) highlights, people of a secular worldview, including atheists and secular humanists, have been a challenge to Western churches in their contemporary culture. Cultural nominals have been part of such a challenge, given that they engage with Christianity on non-religious grounds (Voas, 2009: 164). Moreover, the epithet "nominal Christian" has already shaped the Korean churches' perceptions of cultural nominals in the West (Choi, 2011: 208–210; Han, 2014: 75–79).

An encounter with religious nominals, however, is a relatively new experience to Korean missionaries. My analysis of the Korean missionary movement and its historical development (Kim, 2019: 20–54) shows that the concepts of Korean overseas mission are predominantly church-centric. They stress a Christian journey shaped by the gatherings and activities of the church. Underlying those concepts is what Michael McClymond (2010: 344) calls the "ecclesiological" dimension of mission, according to which the "church is a sign of God's mission in the world and an anticipation

of the fulfilment of God's final purposes" (see also Ahn, 2011: 82). Such a church-centric approach to mission has left Korean churches with an ecclesiological assumption that one's church commitment largely equates with one's faithfulness to God (Han, 2012: 94–95). Hence Korean missionaries are likely to treat religious nominals as cultural nominals because of their insufficient church commitment (Kim, 2019: 181–187).

In this respect, my empirical findings are an indicator that some Korean missionaries in England show a different pattern in their approach to religious nominals. More interestingly, this pattern surfaces out of those missionaries' awareness that there may be a lot more in religious nominals' faith experience than they could see and understand. In other words, this new pattern is grounded upon their uncertainty about religious nominals' Christian connection. In my view, the emergence of this missionary pattern suggests that Korean missionaries pay attention to religious nominals from the perspective of de-institutionalization theories, which involve a methodological uncertainty in the examination of one's religious experience at a micro-individual level.

Beyond the principle of excluded middle

The significance of Korean missionaries' attention to religious nominals from the view of de-institutionalization theories is that it represents a review of the understanding of nominalism that is widespread in the Korean church. More precisely, it challenges the binary classification underlying the idea of nominalism, in which people are considered as either Christian or non-Christian with little attention given to those who do not fall in either of the categories.

This classification deeply relates to "the principle of excluded middle" (*tertium non datur* in Latin). This principle presupposes that every proposition or statement indicates either one thing or its negation (Da Silva, 2011: 333). The key assumption underlying the principle is that the two contradictories (one thing and its negation) are mutually exclusive. Thus there is no middle ground

between the two. Hugh Chandler (1967: 807–809) critiques the legitimacy of this principle with regard to its approach to the negative or contradictory form of a proposition or statement. He argues that it neglects the significant difference between "partial" and "total" negation. Any signs of partial negation, such as deficiency or indeterminateness, are forced to be the condition for total negation.

In this sense, Chandler's criticism reflects the critique of what Edward Dutton (2010: 197) calls "dictionary definition." By dictionary definition, Dutton indicates an attempt to define things by a clear set of essential attributes, by virtue of which, something is regarded as what it is. However, as Dutton points out, this dictionary definition emphasises the hard boundaries of those essential attributes to such a degree that it leads to a dichotomous categorisation. Things are thus categorised only into two great opposite blocs ("what it is" and "what it is not") depending on whether those essential attributes are involved. Inevitably, any deficiency in such essential attributes, whether partially or totally, leads something to be put under the category of "what it is not" as against the category of "what it is." Consequently, other distinctive attributes are given little or no adequate consideration.

It is this dichotomous characteristic that Korean missionaries question with regard to the idea of nominalism. Korean missionaries' accounts suggest that such a dichotomy does little justice to religious nominals' unique faith experience. They show that while this dichotomy leads us to label those religious nominals as "non-Christian," it hinders us from paying proper attention to all the faith attributes that they may hold other than their church commitment. Korean missionaries' accounts thus highlight the need to attend to religious nominals as a constituency that stands in the middle ground between the completely areligious and those Christians with church commitment.

A missiological reflection on Korean missionaries' view of religious nominals

What might the Korean missionaries' accounts of religious nominals mean missiologically? At the heart of their accounts is the suggestion that those religious nominals may have a Christian faith journey in a way that we do not fully understand in an increasingly de-institutionalized context. Such a suggestion raises a theological question about God's relationship with religious nominals. It invites us to consider whether and how God is related to them in their unorthodox Christian engagement.

This theological consideration is missiological in nature. An exploration of God's interaction with religious nominals relates to a faithful participation in the mission of God among them. Korean missionaries' accounts of religious nominal thus stimulates a distinctive missiological reflection in reference to *missio Dei*. More specifically, they raise key theological and ecclesiological questions about a Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to *missio Dei* in the context of religious nominals. In short, Korean missionaries' accounts suggest the need for a critical review of a Christocentric-Trinitarian way of understanding those religious nominals.

Korean missionaries' view of religious nominals from a Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to missio Dei

In an attempt to reflect on the theological meaning of Korean missionaries' accounts of religious nominals, *missio Dei* offers a useful framework. In mission studies, *missio Dei* has contributed to the development of a key characterisation of mission, that mission originates from the triune God (Bosch, 1991: 389–390). This characterisation has invited ongoing theological debate about the kingdom of God into missiology. As mission is conceived in reference to the triune God, how can one speak of mission without considering the existing discussion of God's purpose for establishing the kingdom in the world and thus the role of the Father, Son and Spirit for such a purpose (see Flett, 2010: 53–61)? Consequently,

missio Dei offers a range of understandings of mission drawing upon different theological views of God's kingdom.

A Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to *missio Dei* is developed by mission theologians and practitioners who understand that the kingdom of God is the realm where God reigns over the creation through the salvation offered in Christ (Arthur, 2010: 53). They apply this Christocentric view of the kingdom to the Trinitarian framework of mission and suggest that mission is to establish and expand God's kingdom through the redemptive work of the Son, which is initiated by the Father and empowered by the Spirit (Engelsviken, 2003: 483; Flett, 2010: 53–61). Mission is a continuation of the redemptive act of the triune God.

The proponents of this approach to *missio Dei* suggest a particular ecclesiological interpretation, according to which the church is the indispensable vehicle for God's redemptive work (Arthur, 2010: 54). Newbigin (1953: 147–148), one of the most formative voices for this stance, emphasised that the church is a provisional embodiment of what God is establishing through such work of Christ. God is calling out the church as a community of people who belong to God's kingdom and witness to the redemptive work of the Son in the world (Goheen, 2000: 115–117).

In my view, this approach to *missio Dei* provides two theological affirmations about how God relates to nominal Christians. First, they are either redeemed or unredeemed depending on their engagement with God's redemptive work through Christ. Second, God invites them to this redemption by means of the witnessing activities of the church. These affirmations imply that, without engaging with the church, they cannot be involved in the work of the Son. Given that both cultural and religious nominals hardly relate to God's redemptive work because of their insufficient engagement with the church, they are unredeemed creations.

On the one hand, Korean missionaries' accounts of cultural nominals reflect this theological stance. They perceive that cultural nominals, in their intermittent church commitment, have hardly any valid faith elements. Hence cultural nominals do not engage with the redemptive work of the Son. On the other hand, Korean

missionaries' accounts of religious nominals are not entirely in line with such a theological stance. As highlighted earlier, Korean missionaries acknowledge that religious nominals may have some valid elements of Christian faith. This acknowledgement suggests that those religious nominals may engage with God's redemptive work despite their insufficient church involvement. Those interviewed were uncertain about whether to consider religious nominals' faith engagement as sufficient for their full redemption. Nonetheless, Korean missionaries' attention to such a unique redemptive engagement highlights the need to address another way of understanding a Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to *missio Dei* for religious nominals.

A critical Christocentric-Trinitarian way of understanding religious nominals

Korean missionaries' attention to this redemptive engagement provides a distinctive theological reflection on religious nominals' relation to God. Can religious nominals be related to the redemptive work of God in ways that Korean missionaries do not fully comprehend? Put differently, religious nominals are neither unrelated to God's redemptive work nor fully related to it in the existing ways that Korean missionaries understand. This theological view points to a Christocentric interpretation of God's missionary work among religious nominals, the manner of which is yet to be explored and thus calls for our attention.

What is required is the emergence of a critical Christocentric-Trinitarian way of understanding religious nominals. At its heart remains the Christocentric-Trinitarian assertion that the mission of God is construed in terms of the redemptive work of Christ. At the same time, this assertion accompanies a lack of complete understanding of how God continues such a work among those who engage with Christianity in an increasingly de-institutionalized context.

Unfortunately, Korean missionaries' accounts do not offer insights about this emerging theological view. Their accounts

predominantly show they continue to reflect on God's redemptive work in the lives of religious nominals as they are constantly examining those religious nominals' faith experience. The disclosure of this ongoing reflection, however, is sufficient to draw our attention to a critical need to explore a distinctive theological understanding for those who are in the middle ground in the current dichotomy of Christian and non-Christian.

The significance of this theological exploration is that it reminds us of the fundamental insight that *missio Dei* offers for missionary engagement with religious nominals. The original intention of *missio Dei* was to elevate God to the position of the subject of mission and relegate us to the position of participants (Arthur, 2010: 50). Necessarily, *missio Dei* is designed to conceptualise our missionary engagement as a participation in what God is doing. Such a conceptualisation, however, does not automatically guarantee that our participation is always informed by what God is up to. Quite opposingly, as shown in and after the International Missionary Council Conference in Willingen in 1952, mission theologians and practitioners have often incorporated into *missio Dei* their favourite views on "the nature of God himself and of his act in the world" (Flett, 2010: 43). In other words, the material content of God's missionary activity is susceptible to theological affirmations of those who practice *missio Dei*.

This danger can be particularly the case in our approach to religious nominals when one depends on theological affirmations of a Christocentric-Trinitarian view to the extent of assuming that all of them are universally valid in every context. However, even if these affirmations were insightful and profound in many contexts, whether they would be applicable to other contexts, in this case engagement with religious nominals should be determined by what God was doing in their unorthodox Christian involvement. Otherwise, such affirmations might distract one from what God was up to in that context and thus override God's mission.

In short, a critical Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to *missio Dei* in the context of religious nominals implies an attempt to ground a Christocentric-Trinitarian view of mission in one's

constant search of a relevant theological view for them. With this approach, our participation in God's mission does not represent "our" missionary outreach to those religious nominals but that of God. This approach enables us to reinforce God's agency in our missionary engagement with religious nominals. In other words, it leads us to practice *missio Dei* among them.

An ecclesiological implication of a critical Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to religious nominals

A critical Christocentric-Trinitarian approach to religious nominals also invites us to reflect on the church's nature and shape for her faithful participation in God's redemptive engagement with those religious nominals.

In reference to *missio Dei*, the absence of this reflection seriously jeopardises the meaning of the church in the context of doing mission among religious nominals. More precisely, without such a reflection, an ecclesiological framework of *missio Dei*, namely, the church's ontological position in God's mission (Guder et al., 1998: 11–12; Pugh, 2017: 60) is endangered in relation to religious nominals. In this particular context, such an ecclesiological ontology implies that the church is called out to be a community that attends to those religious nominals for their engagement with the redemptive work of Christ (Goheen, 2000: 115–117).

How then can the church justify her ontological position for religious nominals? This justification requires an innovative imagination of the church that engages with God's redemptive mission in an increasingly de-institutionalized religious context. This imagination invites our current discussion of what is called "missional church" into a particular sociological and theological context where religious nominals are found. This invitation is not based on the intention of "piggybacking" them for their little or no commitment to institutionalized Christian practice. Rather, it is to articulate the church in light of a relevant theological exploration for God's redemptive interaction with religious nominals.

This point needs to be particularly emphasised since no valid missional church can be expressed for religious nominals without a proper theological consideration of *missio Dei* in its given context. Further studies on theological insights for God's redemptive engagement with those religious nominals are required to advance the discourse of missional church for them. In so doing, I would like to make two suggestions in relation to Korean missionaries' accounts of religious nominals.

First, a proper theological reflection on God's relationship with religious nominals needs to start with our attempt to engage with the faith journey of those religious nominals where it takes place. While *missio Dei* clearly reveals that mission starts from God, we can only approach such a mission from where it takes place and thus where we can engage (see Thangaraj, 1999: 58; Sebastian, 2011: 211–213). Religious nominals' increasingly de-institutionalized faith experience is an essential context for a relevant theological reflection.

Second, our uncertainty about how God is active among religious nominals is not unavoidable but is actually desirable. As shown in the Korean missionaries' accounts, religious nominals' faith experience is a ground for Korean missionaries' uncertainty about God's relationship with those religious nominals. This uncertainty leads Korean missionaries to be open to the unknown and unfamiliar ways of God's interaction with religious nominals. This uncertainty is thus a necessary impetus for our attempts to disclose such a work of God (Sivalon, 2012: 17).

Conclusion

With the decline in the significance and presence of Christianity, the concept of nominalism has been used to characterise the religious landscape of England. From the perspective of secularization theories, this concept is useful to highlight that England is full of those who lack any religious concerns or interest in Christianity despite their loose Christian connections. However, my empirical investigation of non-diasporic Korean missionaries in

England suggests the need for a revision of such a view of England. Their understanding of nominalism from the perspective of de-institutionalization theories shows that while some English nominals are undoubtedly atheists or secular humanists, others, namely religious nominals, are in a middle ground between the completely areligious and those Christians with institutionalized commitments.

In reference to the concept of *missio Dei*, such an understanding implies that religious nominals are neither completely unrelated to God's redemptive work nor fully related to it in the way Korean missionaries understand. This view invites a serious theological exploration of the redemptive intervention of God in the lives of religious nominals. From a missiological perspective, this exploration further invites us to reflect on our current discourse of missional church for them. Korean missionaries' accounts remind us that our attempt to look at, understand and engage with religious nominals' increasingly de-institutionalized faith experience is an essential context for this ecclesiological reflection. Their accounts also suggest that our uncertainty about God's redemptive interaction with religious nominals is not avoidable but is desirable as it becomes a great impetus for our contemplation and discernment of such a work of God.

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