

Catholic Socio-Political Activism in South Korea

The role of religion in social movements is a key theme in the study of civil rights and social justice activism around the world. This project advances understanding of the intersection between religion and social movements through a case study of a Catholic community in contemporary South Korea. The project expands ethnographic understandings of how prophetic activism—faith-based social justice work rooted in African American theology and Jewish traditions—is practised in everyday life. In this context, prophetic activism provides a framework for rethinking how success and failure are perceived and analysed within social movement studies. The case study shows how this Korean Catholic community has engaged in various protest movements from the 1960s to the present. Over 24 months of fieldwork affiliated with Seoul National University (2013–2015), I conducted participant observation with a Catholic community that is deeply involved in several social movements across South Korea. The community members' activism encompassed environmental justice, economic justice, and peace activism, all interpreted through a faith-based understanding of social justice. By examining the dialectical relationship between Catholic faith and political identity, this study contributes to broader critical conversations on religion and religiously grounded social movements, with particular attention to Asian and Korean Catholicism.

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