

The Dialogic Culturation of Mother Mary in South Korea: Between Universal Aspirations and Local Footprints*

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As a central figure of Catholic devotion, representations of Mary serve as a crucial lens through which to analyze the contemporary formation of Catholicism and its intersections with national identity, modernity, and cultural transformation. In this paper, I examine contemporary representations of Mother Mary in South Korea, highlighting the underlying dynamics of these portrayals and their broader significance for understanding both Korean Catholicism and Global Catholicism more generally. Drawing on ethnographic observations and a comparative approach with Singaporean Catholicism, I identify three prototypes of Marian statues found across Korean parishes. The first consists of representations rooted in Western aesthetics and classical European art. The second incorporates traditional Korean cultural symbols, such as the *hanbok*, Korean hairstyles, and facial features. The third is characterized by minimalist, curved forms—usually stone statues—heavily influenced by indigenous religious art. Each prototype reflects distinct sensibilities surrounding motherhood, gender norms, and emotional expression. Simultaneously, they embody different articulations of national identity and Catholic universalism. By examining the evolving interplay among these three Marian prototypes, I argue that the material objects I examine offer a valuable entry point for analyzing the multipolar and multidimensional process that produces Korean Catholicism. In contrast to the notions of inculturation and interculturality, I define this process as a dialogic culturation—a conceptual tool for rethinking how Catholicism is reproduced and adapted within contemporary South Korea.

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Introduction

While Catholicism has been present on the Korean Peninsula for a considerable period, evolving through a complex and sometimes conflictual history, it continues to attract numerous adherents and actively participate in the cultural, economic, and political life of South Korea through its various institutions (Baker and Rausch 2017). In this regard, Catholicism is a distinctly Korean religion that warrants serious study to understand contemporary Korea.

However, whether in South Korea or elsewhere, the study of Catholicism raises a series of theoretical and methodological challenges. Catholicism is simultaneously a global religion and a localized reality that each national community appropriates and transforms. In this paper, I focus on Catholicism in Korea not only to analyze Korean society but also critically reflect on the methodologies employed in studying the religion's intertwined local and universal dimensions. While the Catholic Church today is the world's largest religious institution, characterized by a relatively formal and homogeneous institutional system across the globe, it is also a Korean religion, claimed as such by millions of Korean citizens. The objective of this study is therefore to hold together these two poles—on the one hand, a highly institutionalized universal religion with strong cross-national similarities; and on the other, a localized religion with its own particular history, unique customs, and distinctive dynamics.

Beyond this question of scale—global and local—my research is also attentive to the types of data mobilized to conceptualize Catholicism. While religious studies have long emphasized narrative accounts—both written and oral—for analyzing religions, their histories, and doctrines, a material turn in religious studies encourages a more systematic focus on objects present within religious practices and realities (Chambon 2025; Hazard 2013). These objects should not be understood merely as products of human action or as items placed to fulfill functions assigned by humans but also entities possessing their own temporality and agency, therefore shaping religion. This material turn represents an effort within the humanities and social sciences to avoid implicitly reducing religious phenomena to what practitioners say or do. Objects also perform actions and communicate something about Catholicism beyond the assertions of human actors. This paper is thus situated within this dual concern: to study Catholicism