Western tourists who visit South Korea are often surprised by the Christian crosses that are to be found in every street of Seoul and in every town of Korea. The fact that Christianity has become so popular in this country is surprising, especially as the two superpowers surrounding it, China and Japan, have remained rather indifferent to this religion. The success of Christianity was initially linked to the need to rebuild a national identity widely challenged by forty years of Japanese colonialism, immediately followed by a war that divided the country. It was then necessary to make sense of this rift. South Korean churches, like the American ones, did so by creating a founding myth. According to this myth, South Korea was the chosen land, where the ultimate battle against Satan – represented by communism and North Korea – was taking place. God’s victory would be achieved through the fall of North Korean leaders and through the subsequent reunification of the two Koreas into one capitalist country. There was this national need to prove that South Korea was indeed the chosen land. This evidence would ease the pain endured by the families divided both by a war to which they did not subscribe and by international political and economic interests that were far beyond them. Hard work provided sought-after evidence. To economically surpass North Korea, to become recognized as an Asian Tiger, to overcome poverty: all this proved that God was at work in this part of Korea. In this context, Protestantism offered South Koreans a way of making sense of the situation and being reassured, which helped them come together around new national borders. South Korea emerged as a US-inspired Christian state. The founding myth of the United States and their fight against communism permeated the republican values and practices that developed in those days in South Korea. Ultimately, the churches were able to convince South Koreans to accept the sacrifices entailed by the recovery process. Undoubtedly, this contributed to its spectacular rise: its economy grew by more than 8% per year from 1960 to 1980.

What was most remarkable was the zeal of one particular Pentecostal church, one of the largest in the world. It motivated Koreans to overcome poverty and enthusiastically supported the government’s capitalist and anticommunist values. It also championed pro-Americanism. According to this church, the promise of success applied as much to the country as to the individual. Those who eagerly went to church were supposed to become rich quickly. There was prosperity theology, which more or less pervaded South Korean Protestant churches, most fervently preached. This church turned out to be a major support to the South Korean State and to its political and economic dynamics, enabling it to strategically take up residence in the political and financial district of Seoul. It was in this church that MLM was most successful, although MLM companies are ubiquitous in Christian networks. Since women had little access to the professional world, they became heavily involved in MLM, which they discovered through their Christian networks and which was primarily aimed at them. In addition, the methods of proselytizing used by Pentecostal churches were very similar to the business methods suggested to these women: handing out fliers and magazines, talking about it on every occasion and everywhere, on subways, going from door to door, being close to one’s neighbors. Thus, people could engage simultaneously in proselytizing and MLM. Koreans are all aware of this kind of company. Each of them bought some products and associated at some point with a Protestant distributor. MLM networks were widely based on
preexisting Christian networks. They could spread quickly within the Full Gospel Church owing to the variety of weekly activities where the believers met and, above all, owing to “home cells:” female members gathered at a member’s home in a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Owing to these home cells, network meetings (as well as sales) could easily be carried out. Thus, the organization of the Full Gospel Church greatly contributed to the growth of MLM.

Yet a particular event would deeply change the situation: the Asian financial crisis of 1997. This had an enormous impact on South Korea; everything in which many had believed for nearly 50 years suddenly fell apart. It fueled the challenge to the American capitalist model and questioned the rightfulness of the US involvement in Korean domestic affairs, whether military or economic. Anti-American demonstrations became quite widespread – and even more so when South Korea got involved in the Iraq War, to which South Koreans were generally opposed. This was harmful to the image of Christianity insofar as it was then viewed as a burdensome legacy of US involvement.

Furthermore, this crisis posed a challenge to the North/South duality postulate. Insofar as the proof of God’s election of the South was entirely based on financial success, this crisis suddenly shattered the ability of prosperity theology to make sense of the situation. Korea suddenly lost the beliefs that had contributed to its self-confidence and to its people’s motivation to strive for its economic success. Due to the crisis, South Korea could no longer claim to be the chosen land. Consequently, proselytizing has become so discreet that Protestants, until recently so ubiquitous, deserted the streets.

This is not unrelated to what would occur to the first MLM companies so closely linked to Pentecostalism and to prosperity theology. They fell apart along with the Christian networks on which their businesses were based. Even worse, like prosperity theology, they were rejected. From then on, MLM was regarded as a sect insofar as it was accused of promising easy money. Unable to start over elsewhere, uplines were ruined; they were shut out. This chapter of History was closed.