White America’s Self-help Tradition as A Master Narrative

Abstract

In this RIG paper, I primarily employ Kate McLean and Moin Syed’s (2015) idea of master narrative to explore how Korean American Christians conform to white normativity in their ecclesial settings. The concept of master narrative is a useful approach for understanding how Korean American parents not only follow the white American self-help tradition, but also share this tradition with their children. Particularly, the self-help narrative motivates Korean American Christians to draw upon Christianity as a source for their success stories. Against this dominant discourse, I argue that Korean American Christians should construct an alternative story to critically evaluate their marginal experiences in the United States.

1. The Link Between Culture’s Master Narratives and Personal Stories

In every human life, people cannot dismiss the unique cultural contexts as important factors that influence their personal lives. In this regard, McLean and Syed’s (2015) master narrative framework can provide insights into the dynamic processes of negotiation between a person and his or her culture. According to McLean and Syed, every culture has its own master narratives that include values, beliefs, and social norms (p. 323). To participate in a certain culture means, therefore, that a person first knows a master narrative - the group’s ubiquitous, dominant discourse - and then composes his or her personal story based on the master narrative. McLean and Syed argue that master narratives are useful frameworks that guide personal story construction (p. 320). Because master narratives involve culturally shared stories, members of the culture author their personal stories by selectively choosing themes from master narratives. But master narratives can also constrain group members when these narratives do not provide resources that align with their own experiences (p. 330). The members then resist these master narratives and construct an alternative narrative to realize who they are and how to live in their culture.

However, creating an alternative narrative is not easy because it may risk losing social acceptance and social status. McLean and Syed write that one of the key features of master narratives is that they are compulsory. Master narratives of culture inherently constrain individual agency, for individuals who do not adhere to master narratives are likely to be in the “subordinated, oppressed, less powerful positions in society” (p. 328). Master narratives carry a value-laden framework about what is a good life story, and, as a consequence, the members of a culture are likely to construct their life stories that align with these master narratives. That is, master narratives function as a cultural standard of what is acceptable; thus, people adopt these master narratives
consciously. However, McLean and Syed point out that the level at which these master narratives influence individuals is below the threshold of conscious awareness: the majority of people internalize and promote master narratives unconsciously and are even “unaware of how much they rely on master narratives” to make sense of their lives (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 325).

2. The Master Narrative of Asian American Identity

In today’s ethnically diverse American society, what is America’s master narrative for Asian Americans and how do Asian Americans engage with this master narrative? Some people think America is a multi-ethnic nation, for they consider America as quintessentially a country of immigrants. Others say that, in reality, American equals White (Devos & Banaji, 2005). In their minds, other ethnicities are considered secondary in America. Regarding the case of Asian Americans, personality and social psychological research shows that Asian Americans were perceived as being less American than both White and African Americans (2005). Moreover, they were often excluded from the concept “American” (2005). In American history, the Asian American experience of being foreigners is ubiquitous, for American society often considers Asian Americans to be sojourners who could never be assimilated into mainstream American society.

It is no longer controversial to claim that the master narrative of Asian American identity significantly influences Asian Americans’ personal stories. Moreover, it sometimes motivates Asian Americans to adopt white American culture in order to feel like they fit into American society. Nguyen and Hoskins argue that Asian Americans reify their American identity as a reaction to the American perception of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” (Hoskins & Nguyen, 2014, p. 19). In line with this proposition, Devos and Banaji report that Asian and White Americans “displayed equally strong American identity” even though Asian Americans, at the same time, acknowledged that they do not fully belong to the norm of being American, i.e. White (Devos & Banaji, 2005, p. 463). Maintaining a strong yearning for inclusion, Asian Americans emphasize the Americanness of their experiences and naturally downplay their Asian ties. In an endless effort to integrate themselves into mainstream American society, Asian American Christians often embrace white Christianity and unquestionably accept the narratives of white Christians as their own.

3. White America’s Self-help Tradition as A Master Narrative

Throughout history, one master narrative structure that has been powerful in the United States is self-help structure – focusing on the power of the inner self. This story is framed within white culture and provides Americans with guidance about how to live appropriately in American society. Many Americans value self-help stories and internalize them as part of their personal stories. In this master narrative, the inner self is considered as something good and even sacred, as opposed to “the outer world [that] cannot be trusted” (McAdams, 2013, p. 109). When having a family dinner, white parents are thus likely to say to their children, “Think of the starving kids in Ethiopia, and appreciate how lucky you are to be different from them” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the hope of raising successful children in American society, many white parents tend to believe that children should find their own uniqueness and develop it to their fullest potentials. Children
from an early age, therefore, are more likely to believe they have unique attributes that distinguish them from others, and children's own recognition of self-uniqueness becomes the resource for their personal stories. This positive emphasis upon the inner self presents a viewpoint about self-development as a normative value and highlights upward and onward progression of life for the better. In this story, it becomes a sacred obligation to "feel good, happy, secure, and at peace" about the self (Smith & Denton, 2005).

In a church setting, the actualization of the inner self is closely linked with material blessings from God, which in turn is understood as a spiritual growth. Many American Christians view material success as an external manifestation of God’s blessings. McAdams explains this is how Americans learned to be “crassly materialistic and deeply spiritual at the same time” (McAdams, 2013, p. 130). Against this backdrop, it comes natural that an image of a good Christian in popular imagination contains the picture of hard-working and successful self-made individuals. Smith and Denton maintain, “Faith and spirituality become centered less around a God believed in and God's claims on lives, and more around the believing self and its personal realization” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 175). In the self-help narrative that focuses on the power of the inner self, many American Christians have replaced God with self-reliance, and Christian faith has been reduced to a personal, private and individual faith.

American self-help narratives also pervade throughout Korean American churches and set standards for the behaviors and thinking of Korean American Christians. Soong-Chan Rah asserts that Korean immigrant Christians embrace elements of white American culture, such as individualism and materialism, and these elements have considerably affected their faith system (Rah, 2009, p. 22). Religious activities in Korean American churches are increasingly personalized, diverging from the original purpose of communion and fellowship. To wit, worship becomes an exercise of personal self-fulfillment, and church life becomes a fulfillment of individual desires. Korean American youth and parents especially uphold hard work and success as godly thing, and their worship serves the purpose of advocating individual academic efforts and achievement. Even though Asian cultures pursue the values of the family and community over against individualism, Korean American Christians are less likely to consider homeland culture regarding their own faith development because they do not want to be perceived as foreigners in American society. This shed light on why Korean American Christians struggle to find their own language for translating faith into their marginal experiences. In other words, white images of God and the narratives of self-help ultimately precipitate the disconnection between their religious identity and their experiences of marginality in the States.

4. Conclusion

In American society, the narrative of self-help is a traditional master narrative that functions as a driving force behind human development. The one thing needful for North American Christians is to ask themselves whose stories are included or excluded in the self-help story. For example, the self-help story does not provide Korean Americans with a framework for making sense of their marginal experiences; rather, it only offers guidance about how to be happy and successful. In this self-help master narrative, Korean Americans become manageable beings who are subjected to those in power. Against this oppressive force, Korean American Christians should formulate an alternative story to remind themselves and teach their children that Christian faith is
not about getting what they want. Rather, the true meaning of Christian faith is radically oriented to the service for others. In this respect, Jesus’ story in the New Testament can be a great resource for the alternative story because his hospitality not only gives hope to the oppressed, but also empowers them to seek their own liberation. Through deeply understanding the person of Jesus as the most hospitable person, Korean American Christians can realize that they are oppressed and can also become responsible members of American society who critically perceive the master narrative which oppresses them. In fact, Jesus’ story is the representation of the true Christian culture, the purpose of which is to encourage people to develop a critical consciousness about their larger cultural stories.

Bibliography