

Roots of Individualism

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One of the dominant characteristics of modern culture is individualism. This individualism prevails not only in the United States but else where, including Korea. In view of such a long human history, it is not easy to define individualism because as a phenomenon it is complex and varied. According to Elwood Johnson, individualism can be defined as “any mode of thought based on the faith that person may become in himself a prime cause; he may in fact, act his way out of his own history.” [1] Similarly, Emil Brunner sees individualism as a “Robinson Crusoe affair” in which the individual is solely important considering his own personality. [2] In this view, society is a coalescence of individuals.

In this paper, individualism is defined in a way that an individual is capable of anything apart from community, and precedes community or society as a whole. What I am thinking about individualism is well expressed by Bellah: “Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands.” [3] The aspects of individualism are so varied and the reasons for this individualism are also so complex that we cannot deal here with the whole spectrum of individualism. Here in this small paper, I will try to trace the roots of religious individualism from a Christian perspective.

Throughout the history of Christianity, where can we find the most significant moments or elements to cause individualism to arise and flourish? I find those roots in multiple places such as in philosophical and doctrinal views, in the Reformation, in the Enlightenment, and in modern culture’s new way of living: communication and information.

The root of individualism can be traced back to Plato, about 2,500 years ago. His main idea lies in dualism and intellectual positivism. Especially, dualism was a crucial element that affected Christianity. Under the influence of this philosophy, this world of reality is just a shadow of real being – the pure ideal world. As a result, human existence in earthly life is ignored. That is, “living together” in this world was somehow less important because people were more concerned to get to the other world or utopia. In this way, people are more concerned with spiritual or reasonable matters rather than practical ordinary daily life. John Bunyun’s great work, *Pilgrim’s progress*, might be an example of this influence in the sense that “my” spirit’s journey is an individualistic quest for heaven, which does not need help from others. In this way, personal journey is overemphasized over community life.

Gnosticism was another Platonic development whose root was dualism. Gnosticism’s impact on Christianity cannot be underestimated because still today its influence recurs in mysticism and various cultic groups. They believe that the only

meaningful life is in the spirit, because spirit is immortal and is going to the perfect world – the world of spirits. But flesh is just a shadow and a failure of God’s creation.

Another element can be found in one of the most important doctrines of the Reformation: justification by faith. When Luther emphasized faith in opposition to the work of the law (when he interpreted Romans), he thought that only faith, not the work, sufficed for humans to be justified by God through grace. In Luther’s mind, there was no room to see work as necessary for justification. This thinking represented Luther’s psychological, existential struggle with the sinfulness of himself. In this way, he seemed to overlook the context of Paul and the Old Testament when he interpreted Romans 1:17: “The righteous shall live by faith.” Most scholars suggest that “faith,” in Romans 1:17 and Hab. 2:4, can be better understood as “being faithful” to God’s covenant. God’s people should live faithfully to the covenant and promise. In other words, the real context of these verses is in the people’s faith that has to do with justice: living together, loving together. Faith is not just a quality but a dynamic action word that cannot be done individually. Rather, it is a progressive, relational word. So, in its character, faith cannot be separated from action that is involved in community. In this sense, whether Luther intended it or not, his doctrine contributed to Christian individualism.

In the “Predestination” doctrine which Calvinists formed, some additional roots of individualism can be found. The notion of predestination grace was, in an essential way, a phenomenon of personal religious experience. [4] This is not a general phenomenon. The sixteenth and seventeenth century’s people seem to have been very worried by the problem of “assurance and certainty.” [5] This notion of self-confidence about personal predestination underlies a deep conviction that “I” am saved but “you” are not. In other words, implicitly or explicitly, it is easy to judge people according to expressed personal faith without seeing lifelong endurance toward salvation. Predestination is a surprisingly ‘inward and spiritual’ doctrine, in which persons are judged based on their belief and destined to good or bad place: heaven or hell.[6] Also, it is hard to conceive of any community focus in this doctrine because predestination is done at an individual level, not at a community level. As a result, for these people who believe in predestination, the only important thing in one’s personal life is “my” salvation rather than the “community’s” salvation.

The Reformation as an historical movement also influenced individualism. Through and after the Reformation, reformers emphasized only the Bible as an authority rather than the Bible and the tradition. After Reformation, the Bible was distributed to many people, and individuals were free to interpret scriptures, not necessarily filtering faith through the community. Likewise, “the priesthood of all believers” can be problematic because, in this way, faith can be privatized, and consciousness of community can be weakened. [7] In contrast, the medieval church’s focus was on community, for example, her emphasis on sacraments as a community event and on church as an institution. I do not mean that the medieval church functioned well, because, certainly, there were problems like hierarchical rule over believers. But, a good part of Christian tradition, such as this community focus, was overlooked by this Reformation movement. I think this is also one of the distortions of Christian faith.

The Renaissance in the sixteenth and seventeenth century has also affected individualism because ‘humanism’ played a key role in uplifting a human being to a sacred position, contrasting with the church’s role as God’s institution for all people. In medieval society, the individual was a component part with set functions and the social whole was central.[8] The Renaissance movement arose to recover human dignity, opposing the hierarchical control of the church. But the result was such a noticeable thing that a shift was made from a community focus to individuals. This was a seed of the Enlightenment that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Enlightenment thinkers viewed reality atomistically and heralded values of freedom, privacy, self-sufficiency, dignity, and self-determination. [9] The atomistic view was influenced by the contemporary physics that developed atomistic physics. According to this view, the most important foundation is an individual, who has an intrinsic capability and freedom to “dare to know” as a responsible being. [10] Similarly, Andre Vachet stated that, in this movement, “autosuficiencia humana” and “los derechos naturales del individuo significan que cada hombre representa un valor absoluto frente a la sociedad y la vida política” and “igualdad y libertad” were key values in this time. [11]

As we see above, individuals have an ultimate authority and value for human existence. Thus, society as a whole is just a composite of such individuals. This is another big shift from the community focus to the individual focus. This root of individualism is the deepest one because it is still affecting our thought and behavior.

Individual self-interest was validated in such a way that Adam Smith wrote a book called “The Wealth of Nations”, in which he beautified self-interest as a driving force to an ideal society and emphasized an invisible hand (price’s role in supply and demand) in a free economy. In this connection with the Enlightenment, capitalism is the epitome of individualism. The result is, not surprisingly, that the total wealth of nations increased together with special classes’ wealth (for instance, capital owners) but most individuals sacrificed themselves for their wealth. This was not even the result that Enlightenment thinkers expected because they strongly believed that individual freedom and free economy would lead to the most idealistic society.

Since the Enlightenment, we have lived under its influence. For example, the main idea of the Declaration of Independence in the United States was borrowed from the Enlightenment: Personal rights and freedom were keys in it. Yes, we need personal freedom and rights with human dignity. But the problem is the imbalance between private and public life. To put it another way, frequently, the responsibilities of freedom with in a wider community such as a local community, nation and so forth, were simply forgotten.

One of the effects of the Enlightenment can be found in Puritanism in America. Part of Puritanism’s focus was in individual discipline, thrift, hard work, and personal success. As seen from the previous section, the Enlightenment’s locus lies in human positivism in a sense that “I” can do anything based on philosophy of self-reliance and personal freedom. Likewise, from the Frontier mentality in the time of “Westward expansion” we can find a clue that they had to live in such a way in order to survive.

What would they have seen in the wilderness on the way to the West? Probably, they might have thought about their destinies, facing opportunities and obstacles before them. Opportunities maybe were seen in building a new kingdom of their race by driving out Indians. Obstacles were more inward matters, facing physical and mental loneliness plus the risk of life in the midst of Frontier wars. The possible option they could take was to have a belief that "I" can do anything in the name of God. Again, their minds were half filled with a spirit of Enlightenment and the others half filled with a Christian theology of providence (America).

During the second half of the twentieth century, we are experiencing a new way of life, that is, a highly information-based society with the increasing use of the Internet. Modern complex culture, characterized by consumerism and dreadful capitalism, is one of the places where we can find the root of individualism. In this highly efficient capitalistic society, self-interest is the basis of economy. [12] The modern individual is moved by self-interest, as are communities and nations. Self is a real criterion in deciding an important policy in internal and foreign affairs. As I mentioned previously about Adam Smith's book, self-interest is treated as valid and sacred in every place. Why is self-interest popular in this society? Maybe a clue can be found in the idea of "liberty," which was one of the important values in Enlightenment. Today liberty means the spirit of enterprise and the right to multiply wealth and power for oneself. [13] Rational individuals are concerned about their own welfare which characterizes Enlightenment thought. [14]

In a commercial culture, religion is like a product in the market. [15] People are as free to choose a religion as any product on the market. Like commercial business, the marketing strategy is used by some churches, for example, by using mass media, advertising church programs and sermons, researching "customers'" needs, and solving "customers'" claims. Some approach a niche market, targeting a specific customer group to secure profit and maintain business. Their marketing strategy focuses on customers' needs, rather than asking whether the needs are really good for customers or not. For example, a certain church is marketing a health product (focusing on and developing a program about mental and physical health because modern men and women are very concerned about their health), while another church is marketing a new project of building a huge hospital. [16]

I live in this culture and I am rooted in individualism. I ask myself, "What is church?" Now it is self-evident where to go to correct the direction or distortion of individualism. The church is an institution to foster community life in the body of Christ. It is urgent to recover our memory of community. [17] A community is a whole, more than the sum of individuals. A community has its own story and tradition which cannot suddenly be replaced by any logical doctrine. "A community and a tradition are capable of sustaining genuine individuality and nurturing both public and private lives." [18]

When God created man and woman, what was God's will? God wanted humans to live in a community, respecting each other and helping one another. God made human beings in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). What is the image of God with humanity? Or

what is the essence of the image of God? It is relational love, which is expressed in intra-divine relationship. The image of God is love in which the Triune God is relationally bound together. This is the divine mystery of love. This divine love is the cause of human existence. So, we are asked to live in a community, loving one another without claiming our individual rights all the time. To build up a community in the love of Jesus Christ, Christians need to suspend their freedom for the weak, as we read in Rom. 14:1-12 (the story about the weak and strong in the Jewish & Hellenistic church in Rome).

Finally, I reflect on our country, Korea, comparing with American culture. One thing that I was struck by in American culture was the habit of language, actually more than language. In America, I am forced to use “my” word: my country, my school, my house, my church, my car, my wife and so forth. But in Korea, “our” word is customarily used in those places: our country, our house ... our wife -- though this does not have anything to do with polyandry. Furthermore, the Korean word for human being means “human-relations,” literally “between human beings” (In-gan). “In” requires two persons; Gan means “between”. This word (In-gan) represents our view of human beings as relational. While this “my” culture has made a great contribution to the increase of human dignity as individuals in a giant economic kingdom, this culture of self-centeredness has failed to foster the movement of community-centered life. I am not saying that Korea is less self-oriented or less individualistic. But my intention is to show that a human being can never be a human without others in a community. Actually, we are born into living in a community.

Often we say “woori,” which means “us.” I think this is a good tradition and a good memory about our community life. We have to foster this tradition and convey it to future generations. I regret that sometimes Korean Christians are confused between the Christian way and the Korean culture way. That is, they think of them as antithetical. But this relationship between the Christian way and the Korean way is not antithetical because Christian life is a whole way of being. We need to contextualize Christianity in Korea, strengthening good traditions, while rooting out individualistic elements in our thought and our behavior. Now is the time to go back to the community life of working and living together. We, Christians, are called to build up this body of Christ in one God and one Spirit.

[1] Dennis P. Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics* (Boston: University Press of America, 1983), 15.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 37.

[4] Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *Puritans and Predestination* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), 193.

[5] *Ibid.*, 195.

[6] *Ibid.*, 193.

[7] *Ibid.*, 21.

[8] *Ibid.*, 20.

[9] *Ibid.*, 22.

[10] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 3.

[11] Andre Vachet, “La Ideologia Liberal 2.” Translated by Pablo Fernandez Albaladejo, Valentine and Manuel, (Madrid, Spain: Editorial Fundamentos, 1973), 111, 131, 132.

[12] Robert N. Bellah, 35.

[13] *Ibid.*, 28.

[14] *Ibid.*, 35.

[15] R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6, 136.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Robert Bellah, 153.

[18] *Ibid.*