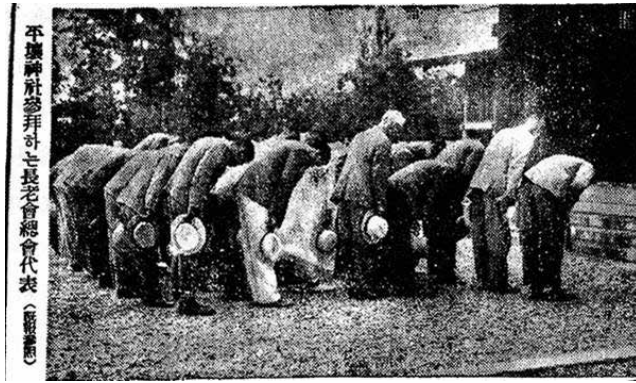


# Korea, a Country without Religion?

Hongkoo Han

If foreigners visiting Korea go around Seoul streets by bus or taxi instead of by subway at night, they will be amazed by red crosses constantly appearing on churches. Over the past few months, two series of pro and con rallies have been held over the weekends in Seoul for the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. As is well known, many of the attendees at the anti-impeachment rallies, waving *Taegeukgi* (the Korean flag) and the Stars and Stripes, were Christians. This points at an established phenomenon, which continued in the twenty-first century when democratic forces took power. In the general election in 2016, progressive parties won disappointing results: the largest Justice Party won 7.23 percent, but three other parties won respectively 0.76 percent (the Green Party), 0.61 percent (the People's Union), and 0.38 percent (the Labor Party) in spite of their relatively long history and ardent activities. However, the Christian Liberal Party, which was organized just before the general election, won 2.63 percent of the vote. Unlike other religions, Korean Christianity has successfully secured a position in the political arena.

At the end of the nineteenth century, some Western observers (typically Louise Jordan Miln in *Quaint Korea*) even voiced the belief that there was no religion in Korea. When Westerners first came to Korea, Buddhism, which had been the country's most influential religion for a thousand years, was driven into the mountains, after Confucian scholars founded the Chosón dynasty. However, Confucianism did not mention the afterlife. Probably, the absence of an almighty God as in the Christian or Islamic belief systems brought Westerners to a misunderstanding of Korean religion. Now Korean religion is somewhat weakened, though Koreans have a long custom of *gosa* (the worship of spirits in one's house). This mixture of shamanism and animism was quite different from *chesa* (Confucian worship of the ancestors). When a *gosa* ceremony takes place the women usually bow and offer food to the major spirits in the house. They prepare dishes for maybe about thirty or forty guests, and offer food to all—the big and small, strong and weak—spirits in the house. Actually every corner of the house, not just one room or the kitchen, but every individual space of the room, including closet or cupboard, where there may have existed a spirit who was in charge of his/her small separate jurisdiction. Contrary to the first impressions of Westerners, religious propensity was deeply and widely rooted in the mind of Koreans in the late Chosón dynasty. There was another important thing that Western observers like Miln failed to appreciate about the Korean attitude to religion. Korea witnessed the emergence of Catholic believers before the arrival of European missionaries. Furthermore, thousands of Korea's early Catholics became martyrs when the government persecuted them for their Western religion.



Courtesy of Chosun Ilbo

The religious potential that hid in the hearts of Koreans started to explode in the 1860s. In this decade, the Chosón dynasty which lasted for almost five centuries was faced with the internal threat of the peasant rebellions and the external threat of the Western powers that defeated China. Koreans at that time were caught in a bottomless pit of anxiety. From then on, a series of new religions, which successfully developed into high religion, emerged. The first to appear was Tonghak (Eastern Studies), which was created by Ch'oe Che-u in response to the spread of Sónhak (Western studies). Tonghak led the large-scale peasant rebellion of 1894, and exerted a strong influence on Korean society during the colonial period under the new name of Ch'ondo-gyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way). In 1902, Kang Chóng-san, an ex-follower of Tonghak opened Chóngsan-gyo; and in 1909, one year before the country was annexed to Japan, Na Ch'ól, an elite Confucian scholar-bureaucrat, created Tajong-gyo, which worshipped Tan'gun, the national founder. In 1916, Park Chung-bin opened One Buddhism and in 1921, Cha Kyóng-sók, who was a leader of Chóngsan-gyo, created Poch'ón-gyo. These new religions gathered respectively at the least hundreds of thousands of followers over a short span of time. The early twentieth century was the age of the "blooming of one hundred flowers" with the creation of new domestic religions, importation of new Western religions, and the revival of the old religion, Buddhism. An uneasy political situation and a fluctuating socioeconomic environment brought about a religious explosion.

### **The Politicization of Religion in Korea—the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the religions of Korea made their voices heard in the political arena. Ch'oe Che-u, the master of Tonghak, made desperate efforts to preserve Eastern values against the threat of the West by taking a conservative stance, but the regime, caught in a state of high anxiety, saw the Tonghak master as the frontrunner of the Western powers and executed him. Within a generation after he died, peasant uprisings led by Tonghak leaders shook the Chosón dynasty. The banners of the Tonghak peasant army that screamed out for the killing of both the rich and the powerful and for driving out the Japanese and Western invaders, clearly illustrates the political role of Korean religion in the late nineteenth century.

Another typical case of politicized religion was Tajong-gyo, which served as the center of militant nationalism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this religion, which emerged on the eve of the fall of the longest lasting

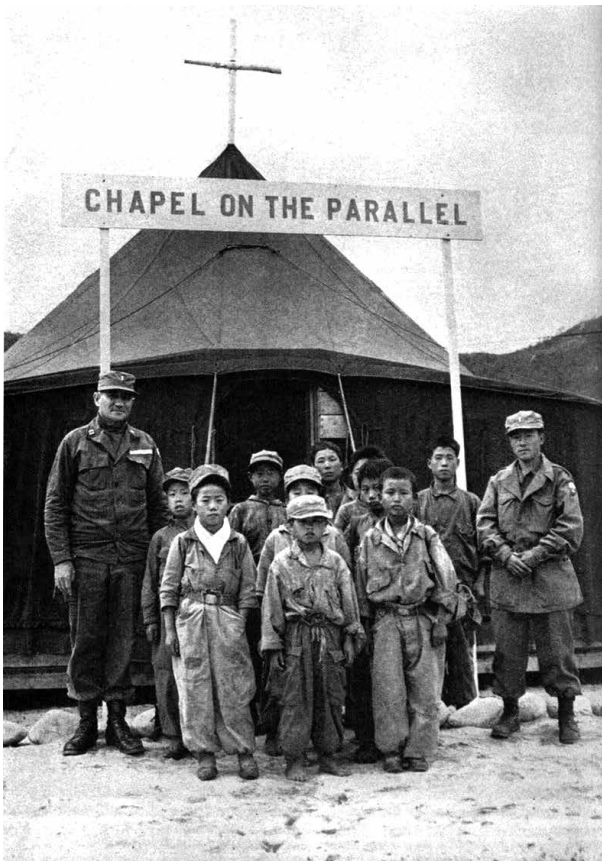
dynasty, was itself a means of running the independence movement by serving as the supply base for independence-movement leaders and activists.

The supreme role of religion in Korean politics reached its peak at the March First Movement of 1919, the largest resistance in colonial Korea. The demonstration was organized by thirty-three leaders of the three major religions of the time: Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, and Ch'ondo-gyo. Since the Japanese colonial authorities forbade any political organization and activity after annexation, it was natural that the religious leaders, who had relative freedom, played an important role in the preparation of the March First Movement. With the death of King Kojong, the Chosón dynasty was completely destroyed in the minds of the masses, but the masses did not abandon the monarchy and jump to the democratic republic automatically with the passing of the last emperor. The masses thought that another dynasty would replace the Japanese Government-General after Korea gained independence. Cha Kyóng-sók, the Poch'ón-gyo master, captured the mind of the masses, and preached that he would be the first emperor of the coming dynasty Si (Timing) and the masses called him Cha Ch'ónnja (Emperor Cha). Within ten years, the followers of Poch'ón-gyo reached millions. The Poch'ón-gyo administration asserted that the number was over 6 million, while the population of colonial Korea at that time was about 20 million. The Japanese police estimated the number of Poch'ón-gyo believers to be 2 million, while it estimated the total number of followers of the three major religions at that time—Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, and Ch'ondo-gyo—was only about 1 million. Like a bubble, however, Poch'ón-gyo disappeared after Cha Ch'ónnja died. The Japanese covered his tomb with a thick slab of concrete to prevent his resurrection. The new town that Cha Ch'ónnja had built was dismantled and the main temple of Poch'ón-gyo was moved and rebuilt as the center of Korean Buddhism.

Among the new Korean religions, Chúngsan-gyo and One Buddhism kept a distance from politics and the independence movement. However, the astounding growth of Protestant Christianity in Korea cannot be considered without mentioning its close relationship with politics. In Korea, Protestant Christianity was imported from North America. Historians of Korean Christianity do not deny that early Korean Christians accepted the foreign religion with an expectation of the favor of God and the help of the Americans in preserving the independence of Korea. The Koreans at the time, including King Kojong, practiced wishful thinking that the United States would support Korea's independence. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria and China-proper in the 1930s was an ordeal for Korean Christians. In the mid-1930s, Japan adopted a policy that Koreans should attend Shinto ceremonies. To sincere Christians, for whom the creed forbade idolatry, the forced attendance policy was problematic. At first, Korean Christians resisted the policy, but soon they accepted their status as Japanese imperial subjects and attended the Shinto ceremony. Except for the very few who chose to go to jail, Korean Christian leaders suffered the humiliation of visiting Shinto shrines. With the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, the United States became the enemy of colonial Korea. Many nationalists, including prominent Protestant ministers, surrendered to the mighty power of Japan, and came to insist that collaboration with Japan was the only way for the Korean people to live peaceably. Shouting slogans about slaughtering the Yankee Beast and the British ghost, they cooperated with Japan in the Pacific War.

## Division, Cold War, and Protestantism in Korea

On August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered, but instead of being liberated, Korea was divided and in the southern half of Korea under the 38th parallel, the U.S. Military Government was established. Was the liberation a blessing from God for Korean Christians in the South? When the pro-Japanese career became a controversial issue after democratization, some pro-Japanese survivors confessed that they had never thought Japan would be defeated so suddenly. Japan's rapid fall was a shock to the pro-Japanese, but the pro-Japanese Koreans who had already converted once from Korean nationalists were very quick to prepare to adapt to another new situation and transformed themselves into pro-Americans. Instead of punishing Japanese collaborators who had shouted the slogans about slaughtering the Yankee Beast, the US embraced them, surprisingly. The reason why these collaborators served Japan was because Japan was strong. However, the US were much stronger than Japan. To govern a strange country called Chosón the US needed a junior partner. It was the beginning of the Cold War, yet the right-wing nationalists were not considered as candidates. For example, Kim Ku, a leading and genuine nationalist, was rejected by the US even though his Provisional Government had prepared a secret operation against Japan with the OSS (the former body of the CIA). This was only because Kim Ku was a genuine nationalist who would have put the interests of the Korean people first and never sacrificed Korean interests to assure those of the US. However, the pro-Japanese were those who would serve a foreign power if it would guarantee their personal interests. Among them, the pro-Japanese people who could speak English were in a favorable position. Early Christians



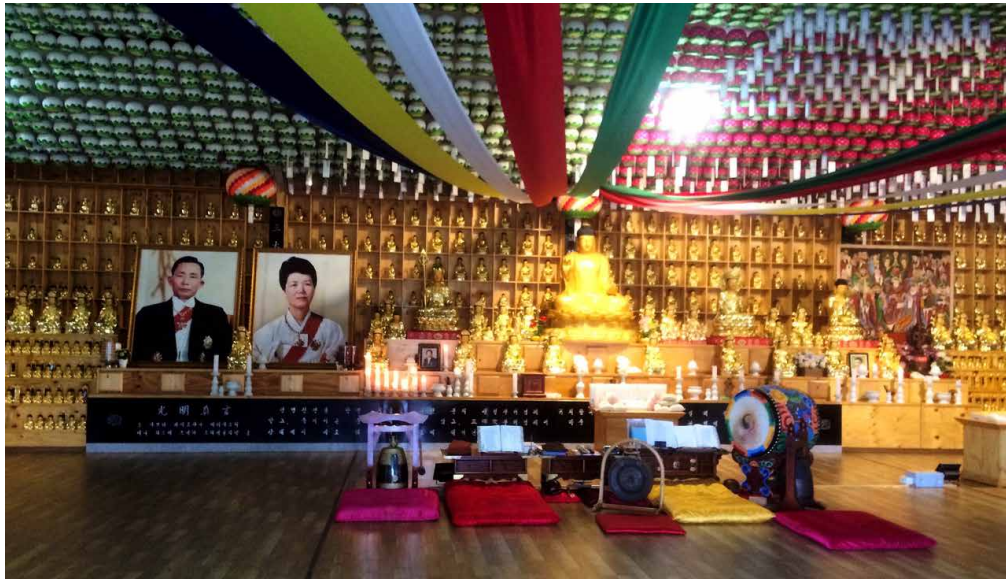
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who had come into contact with missionaries or studied in the United States quickly abandoned their Japanese name and became John or Mary. Some leading South Korean churches and ministers were privileged to inherit the Shinto shrines and Japanese Buddhist temples.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union established a military government in North Korea, and soon the Provisional People's Committee led by Kim Il-Sung was inaugurated. It is true that the new, leftist government in North Korea suppressed some Christians. However, they were persecuted not because of their religious beliefs, but because of their collaboration with the Japanese. Many ministers and leading Christians moved to the South to escape the persecution of communists. In the South, they dreamed that they would drive out the communists and return to their hometowns. Korean Christians, especially those from North Korea, suffered two historical traumas: one lay in the fact that they had bowed at the Japanese Shinto shrine abandoning the rule to reject idolatry; and the other was that this had made them "the evil shepherd who fled the flock and ran away."<sup>1</sup> In the history of the Cold War, the Korean War holds a special place: before the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, the UN occupation of North Korea was the only example where territory of a communist regime had fallen under the control of a Western power. All wars are terrible, indeed. Yet North Koreans' memory of the UN occupation was extremely terrible.<sup>2</sup> Unlike North Korean propaganda that blames the "US wolves" as the main slaughterers who committed widespread civilian massacres during the occupation, it was returned North Korean youths, especially young Christians with an anti-communist stance, who actually committed atrocities. The distorted memory of massacres on the offensive side, together with the complexity of the self-image of "the evil shepherd who fled the flock and ran away," made South Korean Christians the most militant anti-communist warriors, even after the end of the Cold War, on the global level. In the Korean Peninsula, South Korean Christians now play a key role, not only in the North-South conflict, but also in the South-South conflict.

The Korean War was an immense tragedy for the absolute majority of Koreans, but paradoxically it was a decisive moment for the expansion of Korean Christianity. After the Korean War, the United States had a great influence on Korean society and Christianity was seen as a magic door for Koreans to build a connection with the Americans. The first president of the Republic of Korea, Syngman Rhee, was a Christian elder, and the first American Ph.D. in Korea.

After the Korean War, American aid was distributed through the church in many cases, and mission schools and churches provided opportunities to learn English and to study in the United States. It was a mad time of massacres: if you were pointed out as a Red, you might lose your life. If a pastor would stand as a guarantee that you were a member of his church, however, then that could save you from the Red witch hunt. In the city, the church was almost the only social organization that provided welfare and social services on behalf of the incompetent state or divided society, to war refugees who had fled rural communities. Moreover, for women, going to church provided a special attraction. Being a Christian meant that she held a certificate that liberated her from the annoying burdens of Confucian ancestor worship. Korea is a society in which *bback*<sup>3</sup> is extremely important. When you go to church, you get two reliable *bback* simultaneously, the US *bback* and God's *bback*.



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In 1950, the number of Christian believers in Korea was half a million. It exceeded 8 million in 1991. This means that the number of Korean Christians doubled every ten years during the Cold War period. Although Korean Christianity expanded rapidly to unprecedented levels in the world, quantitative growth did not mean qualitative maturity. Korean Christianity, which rushed toward growth, had no time or desire for religious internalization. The expansion of Korean Christianity was centered on megachurches. In 1993, twenty-three of the fifty largest churches in the world were in Korea, and Seoul could boast that it was the world's number one in terms of the number of Christians who belonged to megachurches. Despite all of this astonishing growth, Korean Christianity is still strongly tied to shamanism. In pursuit of rapid modernization, the military dictatorship harshly suppressed superstition, which the church welcomed enthusiastically. However, Korean Christianity did not expand itself by eliminating shamanism in Korean society. Instead, Korean Christianity built up a solid conjunction with shamanism and expanded its power by providing a substitute of shamanistic psychological healing for the masses who had become very anxious and disturbed due to the rapid social change. Sometimes, the church inactively tolerated or actively embraced the shamanistic elements of believers, but sometimes shamans also vigorously borrowed Christian liturgical costumes.

Ch'oe T'ae-min, the father of Ch'oe Sun-sil, was the protagonist of a recent political scandal that shook Korea and is a representative example of a shaman's active borrowing of Christian costume. He served as a Japanese policeman during the colonial period. After 1945, he worked as a police officer, teacher, and businessman, but in the early 1970s, he appeared as a shaman under the name Wón Cha-gyóng. The city in which he practiced shamanism was Taejón, located not very far from Park Chan-kyong's *Sindoan*. As his spiritual power was so formidable, other shamans in nearby areas were very much afraid of him. From a powerful shaman, he upgraded himself by creating a new religion called Yóngsaeng-gyo. When he first met the *de facto* First Lady Park Geun-hye in February 1975, he was the master of Yóngsaeng-gyo, but after only three months he appeared in front of the public as a Protestant pastor. Even though he could control Park Geun-hye completely, it was

impossible for him to stand up in public and face the crowd as a shaman or a master of a newly emerging small-scale religion. Ch'oe T'ae-min's metamorphosis was desirable for Park Geun-hye, too. At a time of the emergence of an anti-government movement among Korean Christianity, Park Geun-hye was relieved to have the support of pro-government Christian forces. In 1975, Ch'oe held a large-scale prayer meeting of national salvation near P'anmunjóm. Immediately after this successful rally, he organized the Crusade of National Salvation that aimed to provide military training for Christian ministers. At that time, the title of pastor was to be sold and bought, and Ch'oe bought it with 100,000 Wón (about 1,000 Euro at the current value). Even though Ch'oe was a pseudo-pastor and had not had a career in the Christian community, well-known pastors of established denominations and churches enthusiastically joined the Crusade of National Salvation and received military training. My colleague Kwon Jin Kwan said; "When Ch'oe T'ae-min remained as a shaman or the master of a small-scale religion, he did not rely on the Cold War ideology or anti-communism. It is noteworthy that only after he started pretending to be a Christian pastor, he began to produce the anti-communist discourse."

One interesting fact is that it was South Korea's military dictator Park Chung-hee, not Ch'oe T'ae-min, who first used the term Crusade during the Cold War. When he dispatched Korean troops to Vietnam in the mid-1960s, Park emphasized that the Korean army was on a crusade of freedom. When South Korean troops withdrew from Vietnam, Park Chung-hee called it "yesterday's Crusade of Peace," and then called for "today's Crusade of Yusin and Crusade of National Salvation." Ch'oe T'ae-min, in the midst of a serious security crisis for South Korea due to the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime, promptly came out with the idea of the Crusade as spoken by Park Chung-hee. It was a process whereby Ch'oe T'ae-min transformed himself from a pro-Japanese policeman to a shaman and then entered the core of power by mobilizing Christianity and anti-communism.

### **Park Geun-hye, Ch'oe Sun-sil, and Cold War Protestantism**

After the democratic uprising of June 1987, Korean society began to take the path of democratization. In 1998, finally, a democratic government emerged and ruled Korea for ten years. Despite the democratization of Korean society and the end of the Cold War in the global scope, the Cold War continues in Korea and the ideological confrontation in South Korean society is further intensified. Christianity is still anti-communist and mixed with shamanism, but with the end of the Cold War, its explosive growth slowed considerably. Nonetheless, Protestant churches are still the main source of the conservative camps.

Recent political scandals in Korea, candlelight protests, and the impeachment and imprisonment of the former President Park Geun-hye all clearly signal that there are very backward elements as well as potentially very advanced elements in twenty-first-century Korean society. In the 2012 presidential election, the only card that Korea's conservative faction would offer was Park Geun-hye. At that time, nobody knew that Park had been so heavily dominated by the superstitious fatalistic thinking system of Ch'oe T'ae-min / Ch'oe Sun-sil. The case of Park Geun-hye would be the worst example, but unfortunately the conservative elites have a lot in common with Park Geun-hye and Ch'oe Sun-sil: pro-Japanese origins and pro-American



Courtesy of Sisa IN

attitudes, Cold War-style ultra-right-wing anti-communism, Christianity in harmony with shamanism, and a privileged consciousness, and so on.

When the shamanistic scandal first broke, the Koreans were captivated by shock and shame. However, democratic citizens of Korea started nonviolent, peaceful candlelight demonstrations whose participants soon flourished into the millions. As a result, Park Geun-hye was kicked out of office without bloodshed and sent to jail and to trial. Korea's candlelight protests, although it is still too early to evaluate their influence, are an experiment to revise representative democracy—which is showing various problems all over the world. South Korea always envied America's democracy, but when Park Geun-hye stepped down, the US, then already governed by President Donald Trump, was overflowing with envy at Korea. On the other hand, pro-Park Geun-hye protests against her impeachment are still ongoing, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of conservatives and megachurch believers.

Korea is now at the crossroads. Religion in Korea, which has experienced turbulence since the end of the nineteenth century, is also at the crossroads. The end of the twentieth century, when the financial crisis hit, was truly depressing, and the public was overwhelmed with anxiety about the future. At this time, not only did the number of people visiting fortune-tellers increase sharply but the number of fortune-tellers increased as well. It would be misleading to equate a fortune-teller with a shaman, but it is surprising that the number of shamans in the nineteenth century was 2,000 nationwide, while the number of modern Korean fortune-tellers in the early twenty-first century exceeds 200,000. The problem is that the practice of shamanism is limited to fortune-telling. Korean religions, especially Protestantism, have failed to overcome the culture of shamanistic praying for personal fortune and wealth. In Korea, the megachurch is another *Sindoan*, which was westernized in appearance only with Christian liturgical costumes. The *Sindoan* that Park Chan-kyong showed is not located in the remote countryside far from Seoul. Whether Korean Christianity can overcome Cold War shamanism and find a place as a modern religion is of pivotal importance to whether Korean conservatism will regain health and regenerate Korean society entirely.



1. "Oh, my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be completely withered, his right eye utterly blinded!" Zechariah 11:17.
2. Callum MacDonald, "'So Terrible a Liberation,– the UN Occupation of North Korea,'" *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 23, no. 2 (April–June 1991), pp. 3–19.
3. The Korean slang *bback* comes from the English word "background." It means the force or connections on which one can rely to mobilize or to solve a problem.

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