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# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

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A stylized graphic of a suspension bridge, likely the Golden Gate Bridge, is positioned behind the text 'Pacific Rim'. The bridge's towers and cables are rendered in a dark, solid color, creating a silhouette effect against the white background.

# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

Volume 10, Number 1 ♦ May 2011

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## Globalization, Nationalism, and Korean Religion in the 21st Century

Don Baker, Ph.D., *University of British Columbia*

Korea is an ancient civilization. There were independent states on the Korean peninsula at least 1,700 years ago. Moreover, for much of its history Korea has been caught up in globalization, if by globalization we mean significantly influencing and being influenced by other countries. It has also been religious for millennia, in that Koreans have interacted with spiritual entities with the help of shamans for at least a couple of millennia and of Buddhist temples for almost that long. However, both globalization and religion have taken on different meanings in modern Korea. Whereas in past centuries globalization for Korea usually meant interaction only with immediate neighbors such as China and Korea, starting in the late 18th century Korea has found itself a member of a much larger international community. Suddenly politics and cultures as far away as North America and Europe are able to influence events on the Korean peninsula and the beliefs and values of the Korean people themselves. Moreover, thanks to the intrusion of Western civilization, religion has emerged as a separate and distinct category of social and cultural life in Korea, making Koreans much more self-conscious about their religious identity.

Nationalism, on the other hand, has appeared in Korea fairly recently. Though Koreans have been aware for millennia that they are a distinct people with their own language, food, clothing, history, and government, before the last quarter of the 19th century they did not express that distinctiveness in the language of the nation-state. It was only when Japanese imperialism threatened the political entity we today call Korea that Koreans began to define Korea as a nation rather than as a dynasty or a cultural sphere.

The emergence of nationalism at the same time that Korea was encountering a new form of globalization and was becoming more self-conscious about its religious identity has led to the birth of religious nationalism in Korea. Korea's religious nationalism appeared in two stages. At first, it was defensive religious nationalism. Korea resisted modern religious proselytizing from abroad by clinging more firmly to what it saw as distinctively Korean religious beliefs and values. However, in the second half of the 20th century, some Koreans went on the offensive and began claiming that Korea not only did not have to look to others for religious guidance, it could teach the rest of the world about true religion. In recent decades, various religious organizations in Korea have proclaimed that Korea is now the spiritual capital of the earth. Whether Buddhist, Christian, or affiliated with one of Korea's many new religions, these Korean religious nationalists agree that, just as Korean automobiles and consumer electronics are winning over consumers in markets around the globe and Korean singers and actors are gaining adoring fans in various non-Korean communities, so too will Korean religious leaders soon be recognized as among the world's leading spiritual figures. These nationalistic Koreans believe that non-Koreans will soon be as comfortable listening to the sermons of a Korean missionary, becoming a disciple of a Korean meditation master, or even affirming that a Korean is the messiah as non-Koreans today are buying a Hyundai sedan or a Samsung cellphone.



When Korea first became active on the global religious stage, Koreans were not so determined to establish the Korean approach to things supernatural as the best approach. The first organized religion in Korea was Buddhism, brought from China and central Asia by missionary monks around 1600 or 1700 years ago. Not long after Buddhism established itself on the Korean peninsula, Korean monks crossed the Japan straits to share their new religion with the Japanese. However, they were not trying to establish Korea as the world center for Buddhism. In fact, they probably did not see themselves as Korean missionaries as much as they saw themselves as Buddhist missionaries. As Robert Buswell pointed out in his introduction to *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on East Asia Buddhist Traditions*, “such monks saw themselves not so much as “Korean”...but instead as joint collaborators in a religious tradition that transcended contemporary notions of nation and time.”<sup>1</sup>

For several centuries during this formative period of Korean civilization, Korean monks moved freely between Korea and Japan and between Korea and China, contributing significantly to developments within the pan-East Asian Mahayana Buddhist cultural sphere. Though of course they were aware that they spoke different languages than the Chinese and Japanese monks they interacted with did, and came from kingdoms on the Korean peninsula rather than from kingdoms in what is now China or Japan, their primary self-identification was religious rather than ethnic or nationalistic. They were Buddhists, first of all, and “Koreans” second.

In fact, during the first centuries of Buddhism on the Korean peninsula, there was no “Korea” per se. Until the second half of the seventh century, three different kingdoms fought for control of the Korean peninsula and there was no single country called “Korea.” Rather than seeing themselves as Koreans, at that time the peoples of the peninsula saw themselves as subjects of Koguryō, Paekche, or Silla. However, even those pre-Korean identities were less important to them when they were discussing Buddhism with their neighbors than was their broader religious orientation. They were interested in promoting Buddhism in general, not a specific Koguryō, Paekche, or Silla approach to Buddhism.

Some of the early kings in those kingdoms on the Korean peninsula used Buddhism to strengthen their own claims to legitimacy and in some cases even claimed that their throne would soon be occupied by a *chakravartin*, a Buddhist term for a universal ruler whose superior virtue and power would be recognized by the entire world. However, they made such grandiose claims only when dealing with their own subjects or with rivals for control of the Korean peninsula. They did not try to convince their neighbors in China, Japan or elsewhere that their kingdom or their peninsula would soon assume a position of leadership in the Buddhist world. Even after most of the peninsula was under the control of one kingdom, Later Silla (668-935), that kingdom made no claims that Buddhism in Later Silla was superior to, or even significantly different from, the Buddhism of neighboring countries. Instead, it was simply Buddhism, free of an particular political identity.

For most of the long Koryō dynasty (918-1392) that followed Later Silla, Korea was not as active on the international religious stage as it had been in preceded centuries. Korean monks no longer traveled to Japan, and travel to China was often hindered by non-Chinese dynasties that seized control over the land route

from Korea to China proper. However, when Korea was conquered by the Mongols in the 13th century, it became part of the great Pan-Asian Mongol empire and, as such, could have participated in the trans-regional religious interactions that Mongol rule allowed. There is no evidence that Korea did so. Though there were Christian missionaries in Mongol China in the 13th and 14th centuries, none of them appear to have traveled on to Korea, nor do any Koreans appear to have had any significant contact with Christians or the Muslims when they visited China. There is evidence that some Central Asian Muslims settled in Korea during the century Korea was part of the Mongol empire, but there is no evidence that those Muslims had any impact of the religious culture of Korea.<sup>2</sup>

Korea was even less involved with the wider world in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), which followed the Koryŏ dynasty. In fact, the Chosŏn dynasty came to be known as the “hermit kingdom” for its self-imposed isolation, though that term is a misnomer since Korea continued regular tributary relations with the governments in Beijing for most of the five centuries that dynasty governed the peninsula and it also maintained some limited trade relations with the Japanese. However, for almost four centuries there was little religious interaction with the outside world, apart from the Chosŏn dynasty’s acceptance of Neo-Confucianism from China at the beginning of the dynasty and its export of Neo-Confucianism to Japan at the end of the 16th century.

That changed dramatically in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when Korea encountered a new foreign religion for the first time since Buddhism had entered Korea 1,500 years earlier. A few Koreans visiting Beijing had picked up some books on Christianity written in Classical Chinese by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and other Jesuit missionaries to China and had brought them back to Korea. Some of those who read those books found their religious message intriguing. In 1784 one curious young Korean man in Beijing on a diplomatic mission visited a Catholic church there and, after a couple of months, convinced the resident missionary to baptize him. Now known as Peter Lee, he returned to Korea and began baptizing many of his fellow Confucian-scholar friends. Thus the Korean Catholic Church was born even before there were any Catholic missionaries proselytizing to Koreans on Korean soil.

The reaction of the “hermit kingdom” was not positive. In 1791, when two of those Catholics, in obedience to directives from Rome, refused to perform ancestral memorial rituals in the manner prescribed by Korea’s Confucian government, they were executed. In 1795, when Korean Catholics smuggled in a Chinese priest to minister to their small community, a few more of them were executed. Then, in 1801, when one young Korean Catholic tried to send a letter to the French bishop of Beijing requesting that the French government dispatch a fleet to Korea to force Korea to allow religious freedom, persecution exploded in a scale never before seen in Korean history. Thousands of Korean Catholics were killed by the Korean government in intermittent persecutions over the next 70 years.<sup>3</sup>

This was not an auspicious beginning to Korea’s re-entry into religious globalization. However, it would be anachronistic to portray the Chosŏn dynasty’s bloody persecution of Roman Catholicism as an early example of religious nationalism. The initial violent rejection of Catholicism was more on cultural and religious grounds than for nationalist reasons. The first Catholics were killed, not for

following a non-Korean religion but violating the ritual requirements of Korea's Confucian culture and state.<sup>4</sup> The persecution of Catholics intensified in the 19th century because Catholics attempted to bring French military pressure to bear on the Korean government, but that violent reaction by the government was a defensive measure to protect the dynasty, not a nationalist measure to protect the Korean nation. As such, it resembles the persecution of Catholics by Japan's Tokugawa Shogunate in the 17th century more than it does modern manifestations of religious nationalism such as Japan's promotion of State Shinto after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 or China's insistence after 1949 that Catholics allow Beijing rather than Rome to select their bishops.

Confirmation that nationalism was not the driving force behind the anti-Catholic persecutions, can be found in the Chosŏn government's persecution of Korea's first indigenous organized religion, Tonghak, which emerged in 1860. Though Tonghak gave itself that name (which means "Eastern Learning,") as a way to distinguish itself from the foreign religion of Catholicism, it was persecuted just as savagely as Catholicism was because it, too, was seen as a threat to the dynasty. Dynastic survival, not nationalism, lay behind the Chosŏn dynasty's resistance to religious change in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

It was more than a century after Catholicism first arrived in Korea before we see the first signs of modern Korean nationalism. Moreover, that nationalism did not emerge from the Catholic community. Most of Korea's Catholics were so scarred by the century of persecution that they avoided the political arena until the second half of the 20th century. Instead, nationalism sprouted soon after Protestant Christianity arrived in Korea.<sup>6</sup>

In 1884 the first Protestant missionaries landed in Korea. They were fortunate in that the Korean government had come to the realization by then that persecution of followers of the Western religion of Christianity would bring more trouble than it was worth. Moreover, those missionaries, primarily Presbyterians and Methodists from the US, brought with them some of the benefits of modern civilization, such as modern medicine and education, so they were not entirely unwelcome. Of course, they did not come to Korea to teach Koreans about nationalism. Nor can they be said to be the primary force stimulating nationalism in the Korean people. It was a combination of Protestant Christian missionaries and Japanese political, economic, and cultural intrusion into the former "hermit kingdom" that started some Koreans thinking about Korea as a nation rather than as a dynasty or as primarily a cultural community.

However, because it was Buddhist Japan rather than a Christian nation that robbed Korea of its independence in 1910 and kept it under harsh colonial rule until 1945, early Korean nationalism was directed primarily at Japanese colonizers rather than Christian missionaries. Though the Japanese tried to modernize Korea, many Koreans in first half of the twentieth-century resented the Japanese imposition of modernity on Japanese terms. They began to look to the West for an alternative to the Japanese approach to modernization. And the West they knew best, thanks to the presence of Christian missionaries in Korea, was the West of Christianity. As a result, Korean Christians were disproportionately represented among the first nationalists.<sup>7</sup>

Christians were not the only nationalists. When Koreans rose up in nation-wide non-violent protests against Japanese rule in the spring of 1919, there were almost as many protestors from the Ch'öndogyo religion (a successor to Tonghak) as there were Protestant Christians. However, few Buddhists, Catholics, or Confucians took an active part in those protests, creating a split among the Korean people with nationalists concentrated in just a couple of religious communities and largely absent in others.<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean that Korea's first Christian nationalists were religious nationalists. Though Ch'öndogyo might arguably be described as a religious assertion of the vitality of traditional Korean beliefs and values, those Koreans who became Christians did not do so out of a desire to defend Korean domestic religious traditions against foreign threats. Not did they become Christians to help Korea spread its religious beliefs and values around the world. In fact, by becoming Christians, they signaled their rejection of Korea's ancient traditions of shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Their nationalism was political nationalism, a desire for Korea to regain its political autonomy, not for Korea to assume a leadership role in the global Christian community. Nevertheless, the early association of Christians with nationalism in Korea can be seen as the first stage of what evolved into true Korean Christian religious nationalism.

The association of Christianity with nationalism was reinforced in South Korea after 1945. Liberation from Japan left Korea a divided country, since the United States and the Soviet Union had decided to share in the administration of that former Japanese colony. When both the US and the USSR granted Koreans self-rule in 1948, they left in their wake two hostile states, a communist state in the north and an anti-Communist state in the south. Unfortunately for the Christian community, before 1945 over 60% of all Korean Protestants lived in what became North Korea. So did 30% of Korean Catholics.<sup>9</sup> Most of them fled south to escape "Godless Communism." Moreover, they found South Korea, under the presidency of the Methodist Syngman Rhee, a safe haven. They therefore became the most ardent supporters of Rhee's Republic of Korea.<sup>10</sup> While we can not call their South Korea nationalism "religious nationalism," it definitely was a nationalism with religious overtones. Moreover, when the separation of the Korean peninsula into two hostile regimes left most of the followers of Ch'öndogyo in the north, Christians became the only major religious community in the south strongly identified with nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

The close relationship between Christianity in Korea and Western missionaries could have proved a obstacle to the association of Christianity with nationalism after the Japanese were forced out in 1945. However, Korean Christianity, particularly in its Protestant form, began to become more independent of foreign missionaries by the middle of the 20th century. Foreign missionaries, with the exception of French and German Catholic missionaries, were forced out of Korea by the Japanese after Japan went on a war-footing in the late 1930s, allowing Koreans a larger role in shaping the way they expressed their religious beliefs.

The local Catholic church remained under largely non-Korean control until the 1960s, when the number of Korean priests finally began to greatly outnumber the number of Catholic missionary priests. In addition, the 1969 naming of Kim Suhwan as Korea's first cardinal, and therefore the head of the Korean branch of the Roman Catholic Church, was a clear sign that Catholicism in Korea had been Koreanized.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the Catholic Church, operating as it does within an



hierarchical transnational institution with headquarters in Rome, has never been able to express a nationalistic orientation to the same degree Protestants, who were not under the same sort of centralized direction, could.

Protestants began breaking free of foreign missionary control much earlier than Catholics did. An early sign was the replacement, on orders of the Japanese, of the American head of a Christian university, Ewha Womans University, by a Korean Christian in 1939.<sup>13</sup> A year earlier Japanese authorities had already begun forcing various local Christian organizations, including the YMCA and the YWCA, to break their ties with their counterparts in the US and also began forcing various Christian governing bodies, such as the Korean National Christian Council, to bar foreigners from membership. In addition, colleges and universities founded and funded by Westerners were taken out of missionary hands and placed under the control of Koreans.<sup>14</sup> Though those decisions were forced on Korean Christians rather than taking place at Korean initiative, Koreans discovered they liked being in charge. When missionaries returned after 1945, they found that their converts were not as willing to take direction from them, or to give them leading roles in Korean Christian organizations, as they once had been.<sup>15</sup> In another sign that Koreans were becoming more confident of their credentials as Christian leaders, in the late 1930s they had already established a Korean-run seminary to replace seminaries run by missionaries and, after 1945, opened many more such seminaries, ending missionary control over the education of future leaders of Christianity in Korea.<sup>16</sup>

Local Christians seizing control of their own church institutions can be seen as a manifestation of religious nationalism, since it resembles political nationalism in its demand that local decision-making bodies be led by local people. However, that beginning of localized control is more important for what it made possible later: the creation and promotion of distinctive Korean theologies and the emergence of a Korean conviction that Korea has become the center of world Christianity. Korea also changed from being the object of missionary endeavors to being the world's second largest supplier of missionaries to other countries.

Full-scale Korean Christian nationalism, the conviction that God has chosen the Korean people to show the rest of the world what true Christianity is, arose in Korea as a result of the dramatic expansion in the size of Korea's own Protestant community between 1960 and the 1990s. In 1960, Korea's various Protestant churches reported a total membership of 623,072. Only ten years later, they reported their numbers had gone up over five times. There were, they claimed, now almost 3.2 million Protestants in Korea. A decade later, that impressive figure had more than doubled, to almost 7.2 million. These are self-reported figures, so we would be justified in being somewhat skeptical of such claims to incredibly rapid growth. However, we shouldn't be too skeptical because, when the Korean government began asking about religious affiliation for its census, it found almost 6.5 million Koreans in 1985, 16% of a total population of almost 40.5 million, who wrote on their census questionnaire that they were Protestants. In the next census, in 1995, that figure had risen to over 8.8 million, almost 20% of the 44.6 million living in South Korea that year. Gallup Korea confirmed such rapid growth by identifying over 20% of Koreans as Protestants when they conducted their own survey of religious affiliation in 1997.<sup>17</sup>

This rapid growth, and the conviction (dampened by the latest census figures which show Korea's Protestant community in 2005 to be slightly smaller than it was in 1995) that South Korea would soon be a majority Christian nation, convinced Koreans that not only was their particular form of Christianity the most dynamic in the world in the second half of the twentieth century, that rapid growth and that dynamism was a sign that God had passed the torch of evangelization from Western nations to Korea. In other words, Korea had become a second Israel, and Koreans were the new chosen people. Many Korean Christians believe that they have been given the task of leading the rest of the world to salvation.

It is not difficult to find evidence for such Christian nationalism in Korea. One particularly fruitful place to look is the 1995 publication *Korean Church Growth Explosion*.<sup>18</sup> The opening chapter in that volume is Bong Rin Ro's "The Korean Church: God's Chosen People for evangelism."<sup>19</sup> The title says it all. In the second chapter in that volume, Ki Joon-Gon writes, "God has chosen the nation of Korea to be a holy nation to serve other nations and to evangelize them with the love and gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup> Han Chul-Ha, in the third chapter, writes, "Korean people are often called a "Second Israel" or a "Chosen people of God."<sup>21</sup> In 1975, Korean Christians were already acting on the assumption that Koreans had a special responsibility toward the rest of the world. They established in Seoul a training center called the "Asian Center for Theological Studies and Mission" and proudly proclaim that ACTS "has opened a new chapter in Christian mission history by building a foundation for sending missionaries from Asia to the rest of the world."<sup>22</sup>

This assumption that Korean Christians are superior Christians is not limited to Christian leaders in Seoul. Two recent studies of Korean Americans have shown that such religious nationalism is shared on this side of the Pacific Ocean. Soo-Young Lee, in her recent doctoral dissertation, wrote that, "From Korean American Christians' point of view, God chose America in the seventeenth century and enormously blessed it as His second Chosen People after the Jews. However, they [the Americans] lost their favor because of their increasing atheistic attitudes. Then Korean Christians are here to help America to regain God's favor."<sup>23</sup> Kelly Chong, another Korean-American scholar, recently cited a pastor of a Korean Church in the United States saying, "The responsibility of Koreans Americans is to renew the Kingdom of God in America, to help better its morality and value system." Chong adds, "a sense of strong ethnic group unity and exclusivity is achieved by portraying Koreans as a 'special' group of Christians, in particular as a 'better' and more 'true' type of Christian than those found in society at large."<sup>24</sup>

Korean Christians have also begun to display religious nationalism with attempts to claim that Christian theology has Korean roots, and to export Korean Christian theology to the rest of the world. Two examples of the first tendency can be found in the writings of two Korean Methodist theologians, Sung Bum Yun and Dong Shik Yu. Yun claimed that an ancient Korean foundation myth, in which the lord of heaven above dispatched his son to earth and that son, in turn, sired Tan'gun, the legendary first king of the Korean people over 4,300 years ago, is actually evidence that early Koreans recognized the existence of a Supreme Being (the Lord of Heaven) and that that Supreme Being was actually three persons in one God. In other words, those three divine beings mentioned in this ancient

Korean tale are actually a reference to the Trinity of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Dong Shik Yu, though he doesn't go as far as Yun in claiming that Koreans were aware from the beginning of their history of the trinitarian nature of God, writes that Koreans in ancient times believed in the incarnation, that the Supreme God above had sent his divine Son to dwell among men, and ever since Koreans have worshipped that Son of God as the mountain god.<sup>26</sup> Though few Koreans go as far as Yun and Yu, almost all Korean Christians today, and many non-Christians as well, have come to believe that Korea had an ancient monotheistic tradition in which the One God above was worshipped under the name Korean Christians use for God today, Hanūnim, even though that name was actually coined by a Canadian missionary in the late 19th century and there is no documentary evidence for an indigenous Korean monotheism.<sup>27</sup>

These attempts by Korean theologians to find Korean counterparts for Christian concepts are directed at Koreans, not outsiders. They represent a desire to overcome the implied rejection of Korean cultural identity and of the beliefs of ancestors that becoming a Christian in a non-Christian society entails by arguing that adopting the religion from the West is not really the adoption of foreign values but is rather the rediscovery of the true meaning of core Korean religious beliefs. As such, they may be described as manifestations of "inward-directed nationalism," an effort to resolve the cognitive dissonance that can arise when a firm belief in a religion that is both new and foreign to one's native culture is combined with a pride in one's traditions and in the accomplishments of one's ancestors.

Other Korean theologians have adopted a posture that can be labeled "outward-directed nationalism," in that they drew on Korean tradition to create a theology they strive to convince non-Koreans to accept. The best example of such an attempt to create a Korean theology for the world outside Korea is *minjung* theology.<sup>28</sup> *Minjung* is a Korean term that is difficult to translate, since it means different things to different people. It can simply mean "the masses" or the general public. However, in *minjung* theology, it is used to refer to those people who have been oppressed by the political, economic, and social elite. It usually refers to farmers, factory workers, women and the like, including underpaid professors!

It is a core assumption of *minjung* theology that the suffering of the *minjung* somehow has ennobled them. This is a Korean concept that pre-dates the emergence of *minjung* theology. A clear statement of that concept can be found in Ham Sok Hon's *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*. Ham, a leading Christian thinker in Korea in the the 20th century, states that "suffering makes life greater," because it turns us toward God. Since Korea, in his view, has suffered at the hands of others more than any other nation, Koreans have to take that history of suffering as an indication that they have been given a global mission: "to bear our load of iniquity without grumbling, without evading and with determination and in seriousness. By bearing the load we can deliver ourselves and the world as well."<sup>29</sup> In other words, as the "queen of suffering," Korea can serve as the messiah for the entire world.

Ham, however, did not promote an explicit *minjung* theology. That was for a younger generation of Korean theologians, among them David Kwang-sun Suh and Changwon Suh. Both theologians wrote theology in an historical vein. As a vocal advocate of democracy at a time Korea was under dictatorial rule, David Suh

suffered at the hands of the state. He draws on that personal experience to narrate a history of political oppression in Korea, and resistance to it, which he then interprets theologically. As he writes, "the theology of the minjung was therefore born out of active participation in the struggle of the Korean people for a more humane and just society. But it is more than a political theology. It is rooted deeply in the consciousness of Korean history, its religion and its culture."<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that David Suh often wrote in English. He was preaching minjung theology to both Koreans and non-Koreans, believing that non-Koreans would recognize that the suffering of the Korean people for a just cause had made them spiritually qualified to lead the world toward a better understanding of God.

David Suh's minjung theology can be said to represent religious nationalism in that he claims for the Korean nation and the Korean people a special role in both the struggle for political liberation and the struggle for religious salvation. The religious nationalism of minjung theology is even more apparent in the writings of his fellow Minjung theologian Changwon Suh. Changwon Suh writes as an Asian historian, not a Korean historian, when he claims that "Asian theologians emphasized the religio-cultural dimension in order to fight against domination by Western metaphysical-oriented theological imperialism."<sup>31</sup> However, he privileges Korean theologians because of what he considers their special experience with the struggle of the minjung for justice. He describes minjung theology as "Korean theologians' efforts to provide an interpretative frame of Third World Liberation from their socio-political and religio-cultural history, that is, from the socio-historical biography of the minjung koinonia in Korea."<sup>32</sup> In other words, Koreans, because of their ennobling experience of suffering for a righteous cause, are more qualified than others, in Asia or elsewhere, to interpret the Bible for the modern age.

The most dramatic evidence of the rise of religious nationalism among Korea's Protestant community is not minjung theology (which has faded into irrelevance in democratized Korea) or the attempts to create an indigenous foundation for Christian beliefs, which had little impact outside of more liberal seminaries in Korea. Rather, it is the sharp rise over the last couple of decades in the number of missionaries Korea had been dispatching overseas. Since so many Koreans have come to believe that they are a chosen people, that God has selected them to revive the sagging fortunes of global Christianity, they have decided that they should engage in active proselytizing all over the world.

There is also another explanation for the upsurge in the number of Korean overseas missionaries: there are more Koreans available for the missionary enterprise. As the Korean economy grew wealthier, starting in the 1970s, more funds became available for the construction of seminaries. More seminaries means more preachers, but not necessarily an equal increase in the number of churches. Those new preachers had to find someplace to preach. Fortunately for them, at the same time those seminaries began producing a surplus of graduates, economic globalization led to a relaxation of government regulations governing travel overseas (Korean businessmen had to be able to travel abroad to compete in the international marketplace). Since the 1980s, Koreans have found it easier to travel abroad.<sup>33</sup> That relaxation of travel restrictions was not limited to businessmen. It included religious entrepreneurs as well. Preachers in search of a place to preach could now seek a pulpit overseas.



Before the missionary upsurge began, there were few Koreans preaching overseas. In 1979, there were only 93 Korean Protestant missionaries reaching out to non-Koreans outside of Korea. They were greatly outnumbered by Korean pastors ministering to Korean expatriate communities.<sup>34</sup> (Korean Christian religious nationalism first manifest itself overseas in the drive by Korean churches to ensure that Koreans outside of Korea attended Korean churches rather than the non-Korean churches in their communities.) A decade later, that number had increased over 12 times, to 1,178. Then the real surge began. By 2000, there were 8,103 Korean missionaries abroad. By 2006, that number had almost doubled, reaching 14,905.<sup>35</sup> The latest report I have seen counts almost 18,000 Korean missionaries in the field in 2008.<sup>36</sup> That is an increase of around 190x in less than three decades. Korea can now claim to have more missionaries overseas than any other nation except the United States.

Those Korean missionaries are spread out all over the world, including the Islamic world. In fact, almost a quarter of them are trawling for conversion in Muslim countries.<sup>37</sup> Including those Muslim countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Koreans are now preaching Korean Christianity in 169 countries.<sup>38</sup> And the number of missionaries is expected to increase. Almost half of those running missionary organizations in Korea today expect the number of Korean missionaries to expand to at least 50,000 or so by 2030. Many predict that in a few decades there will be 100,000 Korean missionaries.<sup>39</sup>

The more Koreans leave Korea to preach Korean Christianity abroad, the more chances there are for inter-religious and cross-cultural conflicts. Most Korean Christians are strong believers in the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the church, and they define that church quite narrowly. For example, there is an active Korean missionary presence in the Philippines, since many Korean Christians don't consider Catholics to be real Christians and therefore want to save the Filipinos from the eternity in hell that awaits those who die outside the true church.<sup>40</sup> Also, conflicts with Muslim communities are inevitable, giving the fundamentalism and the religious fervor of both sides. Evidence for how dangerous such proselytizing can be came in the summer of 2007, when 22 young Korean missionaries along with their pastor were kidnapped in Iraq by Muslim extremists. Two of those missionaries were murdered before the rest were freed. That tragic incident does not seem to have dampened the determination of Korean Christians to convert the entire world to Christianity and, especially, to the Korean brand of Christianity, though it has made some of them reconsider where they engage in proselytizing.<sup>41</sup> That incident also provoked some of the harshest criticism Christianity has faced in Korea in decades, with even many Christians questioning why young people were sent by their church to such a dangerous country and some non-Christians voicing loud criticism of what they labeled "Christian arrogance."<sup>42</sup>

Korean Protestants may be the most visible, or at least the most numerous, examples of Korean religious nationalism on the world stage, but they are not the only ones. Korea's Buddhists, as well, have begun to promote the notion that their approach to their world religion is superior, though they have not been as strident in that claim as Korean Christians have been. I don't know of any Korean Buddhists who claim that Koreans are Buddha's chosen people, or that Korea has become the global center for Buddhist proselytizing! Nevertheless, Korean Buddhists

have been quite active in recent decades in trying to attract non-Koreans to not just Buddhism in general but to the Korean approach to Buddhism in particular.

However, Korean Buddhist nationalism, if we may call it that, emerged later than Korean Christian nationalism did. First of all, Buddhists in general (there were a few conspicuous exceptions) were not as anti-Japanese as the Christians were. The Japanese were much more pro-Buddhist than the Confucian government that had ruled Korea for five centuries previously and many Buddhists appreciated the greater respect Japanese showed them. That Buddhist comfort with Japanese rule dampened the identification of Buddhism with nationalism in Korea. Secondly, Buddhists didn't tend to be as involved with the world beyond Asia as Christians were (Korean students in North America, for example, were more likely to be Christians than Buddhists), so they were not exposed to the modern ideology of nationalism as early. Also, after 1945, Korean Buddhists were caught up in an internal squabble between married and celibate monks that kept them from focusing much attention on the world beyond the peninsula. They also had to focus on gaining respect at home.<sup>43</sup> (Christmas was a national holiday long before Buddha's birthday was, and there were Christian chaplains in the Korean military long before there were Buddhist chaplains.)<sup>44</sup>

That began to change in the 1960s. As Korea began to gain more respect on the world stage for its economic accomplishments, Koreans began to recover pride in their cultural heritage. Buddhism was an important part of that heritage. Slowly, Korean monks began to feel that not only was their Buddhism distinctively Korean, because of its distinctiveness it had much to offer the outside world. Soon Korean Buddhists began to move toward globalization in two ways: trying to attract non-Koreans to Korea to learn Buddhism and establishing temples overseas to convert non-Koreans to Korean Buddhism.

Like the Christians, Korea's Buddhists have also dispatched clerics overseas to minister to expatriate communities to ensure that the religion they practice is Korean. In other words, they want to ensure that Korean Buddhists practice Korean, not Chinese, Japanese, or Tibetan, Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the main denomination in Korea, the Jogye Order, says that it has 174 temples overseas, including 128 in North America, five in South America, seven in Europe, seven in Oceania, and 27 throughout Asia.<sup>46</sup> However, the most dynamic expression of Korean Buddhist nationalism is found in the drive to attract non-Koreans to the Korean Buddhist fold.

The monk Kusan was the first in modern Korea to reach out to foreigners and encourage them to be ordained in his Korean order. Kusan already held an important position in the Jogye Order when he visited California in 1973 and brought a Westerner back with him to Songgwangsa Temple, where he was in charge of the monastic compound. Soon, under his leadership, Songgwangsa became the Korean center for foreigners wanting to become part of the Korean Buddhist community. Over the decade he had left in this world (he passed away in 1983), Kusan trained a number of foreign monks. He, and the rest of the Korean Buddhist community, is particularly proud that they recruited into their community non-Koreans who had tried other approaches to Buddhism first but decided that Korean Buddhism was the approach they felt most comfortable with.

Among those success stories is Robert E. Buswell, Jr., currently the director of the Center for Buddhist Studies at UCLA. Buswell had spent some time in a Thai

monastery and a hermitage in Hong Kong before he finally arrived at Songgwangsa, where he spent 1974 to 1979 under Kusan's guidance.<sup>47</sup> Another success story is Martine Batchelor, who, as Martine Fages, traveled from France through Bangkok before she ended up in Korea in 1975, where she also studied under Kusan for ten years.<sup>48</sup> In Korea, she met another European Buddhist, Stephen Batchelor, who had been ordained in the Tibetan tradition in India but then came to Korea to practice Korean-style Buddhism and learn from Kusan for three years. The Batchelors married in 1985 and returned to Europe, where they played important roles in promoting Buddhism in Europe.<sup>49</sup> As for their teacher Kusan, he later went on to found a temple in Los Angeles, one in Geneva, as well as one near Carmel, California, but his primary interaction with foreigners was with foreigners who had come to his temple in Korea.<sup>50</sup>

After Kusan's death, the primary center for training foreign monks in Korea moved from Songgwansa to Hwagyesa Temple, which is closer to the cosmopolitan city of Seoul. Hwagye-sa hosts the Seoul International Zen Center (notice that, when Koreans want to reach out to non-Koreans, they use the better-known Japanese pronunciation of what in Korea is pronounced "sŏn.")<sup>51</sup> As of 2006, the last year for which I could find data, there were 28 foreign monks at Hwagye. That is the largest concentration in Korea, but there were another 59 scattered around at various sites, including the Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center on Kanghwa Island, to the west of Seoul.<sup>52</sup> The foreign monks in Korea come from all over the world. In 2006, there were 13 from Sri Lanka, 11 from Bangladesh, 10 each from Nepal and the United States, four each from Poland, Israel and Taiwan, three from Russia and India, two each from Cambodia, China, Hungary, Lithuania, Malaysia and Canada, and one each from Argentina, Austria, Mongolia, France, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Switzerland, Australia, Serbia, Singapore, the Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom.<sup>53</sup> Korean Buddhism has truly become globalized in Korea.

The most famous Western monk in Korea today is an American who, unlike Buswell and the Batchelors, has stayed in Korea and continues to wear his clerical robes. As Paul Muenzen, he was a American Catholic who earned an undergraduate degree at Yale and then went on to earn a degree at Harvard Divinity School. While he was at Harvard, he heard a lecture by the Korean monk Seung Sahn and that convinced him to continue his religious education in Korea. He was ordained as Hyun Gak in 1992 and for a while was the head monk at the the Seoul International Zen Center.<sup>54</sup> Hyun Gak Sunim (sunim is the Korean title for a monk) became famous in Korean when he published a two-volume work in Korean called *Manhaeng : Habödū esŏ Hwagyesa kkaji* [From Harvard to Hwagyesa].<sup>55</sup> Many Korean Buddhists swelled with nationalist pride when they learned that an American from Harvard who had no Korean ancestry has decided that he wanted to be a Buddhist, and the type of Buddhist he wanted to be was a Korean Buddhist.

The monk who introduced Paul Muenzen to Korean Buddhism, Seung Sahn, is the monk who can claim most of the credit for establishing a Korean Buddhist presence among non-Koreans in Korea and around the world, for that matter. When Seung Sahn first left Korea, in 1962, he first went to Japan and established a Korean temple there for Japanese-Koreans. He also established a temple in Hong Kong. Then, in 1972, he moved to the United States and began teaching the Ko-

rean approach to Zen. Soon he had enough disciples to open the Providence Zen Center in Rhode Island, and to form an organization for Western Buddhists he called the Kwan Um Zen School. By the time Seung Sahn passed away in 2004, that center in Rhode Island had become a full-fledged Buddhist monastery for Westerners, and it had Zen centers affiliated with it in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Cambridge, and New Haven. In addition, there were groups Seung Sahn had a role in organizing in 32 countries. All told, he is credited with opening over 120 Buddhist meditation centers outside of Korea.<sup>56</sup> It is therefore no exaggeration when one of his Western disciples wrote that Seung Sahn, "has always seen his role as an evangelist in the service of Korean Buddhism, and of his own interpretation of it."<sup>57</sup>

So far, the Korean Buddhist drive to recruit Western converts has not stirred up the type of controversies Korean Protestant missions have. That may be because there are not nearly as many Korean Buddhist missionaries yet, so they can't get in as much trouble. Or it may be because the Buddhist approach is different. Korea's monks are more interested in teaching about their beliefs and practices than they are in criticizing the beliefs and practices of others. The nationalism of Korean Buddhism is a self-affirming nationalism, not an aggressive nationalism.

Buddhists and Protestant Christians are Korea's two largest religious communities. According to the 2005 census, 22.8% of South Koreans are Buddhists, and 18.3% are Protestant Christians. (Another 10.9% are Roman Catholics.) Less than 1% said they are a believer in one of Korea's many new religions.<sup>58</sup> Yet no study of religious nationalism and globalization in Korea should ignore new religions, since they are manifestations of one important Korean response to the intrusion of the modern world: the construction of modern religious organizations designed to provide shelter for traditional beliefs and values while nonetheless allowing their adherents to claim to be modern.

The best-known Korean new religious organization outside of Korea, and the most controversial, is Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Now known primarily as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unity, its original name was The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity. The Unification Church aspires to be a universal church, but, even though Moon moved to the United States in 1972, Korea is still considered the sacred homeland of the Unification Church. The Divine Principle, the fundamental scripture of the Unification Church, declares the King of Righteousness would appear in Korea, the Third Israel, and would "receive tribute from all the countries in the world."<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the founder of the Unification Church, the Korean-born Rev. Moon himself, has been proclaimed by its members as "True Father, ...the savior, messiah, and Lord of the Second Coming."<sup>60</sup> Sun Myung Moon is a personal embodiment of Korean religious nationalism, of the claim that Korea is the spiritual leader of the world today. Korea's claim to a special place in the religious history of the modern world is reinforced in the autobiography of Pak Bo Hi, one of Moon's top lieutenants. That autobiography, entitled "Messiah: My Testimony to Rev. Sun Myung Moon," has an entire chapter called "Korea as the Chosen Nation."<sup>61</sup>

The Unification Church has garnered much negative publicity over the last few decades not so much because of its promotion of Korea as the new Israel but because Moon and many of the organizations he has founded have become



involved in a number of controversial political issues, beginning with a campaign to support Richard Nixon when President Nixon was facing impeachment because of the Watergate scandal.<sup>62</sup> However, there is another Korean new religion with a global presence that has not attracted nearly as much attention as the Unification Church has. Won Buddhism, despite its name, is a new religious organization that has its origins in the enlightenment of its founder, Pak Chung-bin, in 1916.<sup>63</sup> Won Buddhism does not claim that Korea is the homeland of Buddhism. It does claim, however, that it provides a Buddhism more appropriate for the modern world than traditional Buddhism. Moreover, Won Buddhists believe that eventually the rest of the world will recognize that not only does Won Buddhist offer a more up-to-date version of Buddhism, but it offers a religious philosophy that is second to none. As the Scriptures of Won Buddhism say, "From a spiritual perspective, our nation will become the leader of the many nations of this world."<sup>64</sup> In another sign of Won Buddhist nationalism, those scriptures quote the founder bragging about Korea's Diamond Mountains, saying "they are peerless under heaven so, in the near future, they will be designated as an international park and be tended resplendently by various nations. Subsequently, people in the world will vie with each other to find the host of this mountain.... With inseparable affinities connecting this nation, the Diamond Mountains, and its hosts, we will together be the light of the world."<sup>65</sup>

Despite their conviction that non-Koreans will eventually turn to Korea, and to Won Buddhism, for spiritual guidance, Won Buddhists are not aggressive religious nationalists. Rather than criticizing other religions, they have taken the lead in Korea in ecumenical projects. Moreover, though they have dispatched missionaries overseas, those missionaries try to convert by example rather than argumentation. They provide medical care and other forms for aid for the needy around the globe in the belief that such selfless action will eventually convince others that Won Buddhism is the religion the world needs today. As part of their long-range plan to become a major world religion, they established a graduate school of Won Buddhist studies near Philadelphia in 2001 and also have some 37 temples overseas, including in New York, Los Angeles, and ten other places in North America. There is also a Won Buddhist presence in various countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, so far the Won Buddhist presence has been rather low-key. They have not attracted nearly the attention the Unification Church has.

The somewhat muted religious nationalism of Won Buddhism is not matched by a couple of other Korean new religions that are trying to reach beyond Korea. Dahn World is a group that emerged out of Taejonggyo, a new religion founded in the first decade of the 20th century that teaches that Koreans don't need to worship a foreign god like Jesus or Buddha since they have a god of their own, Tan'gun. Dahn World claims it is not a religion, but it proclaims that the longevity exercises it promotes (breathing exercises and physical movements similar to those of the inner alchemy practices of Chinese Daoism) originated with Tan'gun. Moreover, it cites as a basis for that claim three texts that comprise the scriptures of Taejonggyo. Dahn World has also erected an outdoor statue of Tan'gun at its US headquarters in Sedona, Arizona.<sup>66</sup> As further evidence that Dahn World, if it is not a religious organization, closely resembles one is the claim that its founder, Seung Heun Lee has been recognized as "one of the fifty preeminent spiritual leaders of the

world."<sup>67</sup> According to Dahn World, two Koreans, one legendary (Tan'gun) and one alive today (Seung Heun Lee), are leading the world into a new era of peace, health, and happiness.

Though Dahn World has been quite vigorous in its promotion of its Korea-centric philosophy, it differs from the Unification Church in that it has not become involved in politics. Also, unlike Korean Christian missionaries, Dahn World advocates do not tell their followers to abandon their original religious orientation. Although there are now Dahn World centers all over the globe, Dahn World has avoided religious or political controversy. The only controversy involving Dahn World has come from complaints by disgruntled former members who claim that they did not receive all the health benefits Dahn World promised.

There is one more Korean new religion with global pretensions that should be mentioned in any discussion of modern Korean religious nationalism. Jeung San Do teaches that the Supreme Lord of Heaven descended to earth near the end of the 19th-century and lived as a Korean among Koreans as Kang Chŭng-san (They prefer to romanize his name as "Jeung San"). In other words, God is a Korean. (That is one step up from the Unification Church claim that the messiah is Korean. Unificationists do not view Moon as God.) Jeung San Do also teaches that soon there will be a great cosmic transformation and, afterwards, Korea will be the center of the world, since Korea is where the earthly paradise will emerge from that cataclysm. Moreover, in this coming age, everyone in the world will speak the same language, which believers assume will be Korean.<sup>68</sup> Despite the extremely Korea-centric nature of Jeung San Do teachings, and the Jeung San Do assertion that those who do not become members of Jeung San Do will all suffer horribly and then perish in the coming Great Transformation, Jeung San Do has begun to establish a global presence. It has worship halls in 10 foreign countries, including 7 in the US. Among the countries in which it has a presence, besides the US, the UK, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and Japan are Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>69</sup>

Religious nationalism in Korea, whether Christian, Buddhist, or manifest in one of Korea's new religions, is different from religious nationalism as it appears in many other countries. Korea's religious nationalism is a nationalism that has taken on religious overtones more than it is an expression of religious identity in nationalistic terms. In other words, Korean religious nationalism originated from pride in the Korean nation. Religion simply became a vehicle for expressing that pride in the nation. That may be because, since no one religion can claim a majority of the population of South Korea, Koreans don't identify any one religion with their national, ethnic, or cultural identity.

There is one significant exception to that statement. Shamanism is considered by Koreans to be their one major indigenous religious tradition, since shamanism apparently predates Buddhism and Confucianism on the peninsula and, moreover, Korean shamanism is quite different from the shamanism of neighboring countries. However, shamanism is not officially considered a religion—the government leaves shamanism off the census questionnaires when it asks Koreans about their religious affiliation. The government sometimes dispatches shamans overseas (something it does not do with Christian pastors, Buddhist monks, or other religious ritual specialists) but as dancers, not as religious figures. The shaman ritual

is presented on stages overseas as a secular form of entertainment, stripped of the gods that are normally an essential part of a shaman ritual.

Korean religious nationalism is more often than not (with the exception of the relatively small new religions) a nationalism expressed through the Koreanization of world religions, in which Koreans claim to have developed a superior version of a religious tradition they share with peoples in many other countries. Such a link with a broader world religion can mute the danger that Korean religious nationalism will lead to religious clashes with other peoples, since many of the debates Koreans hold with other peoples are debates within rather than between religious traditions. However, that danger is not completely eliminated. When Koreans engage in too enthusiastic proselytizing, when they try to tell other peoples that, unless they accept their Korean approach to religion, they are condemned to damnation, they risk provoking anger in those they are trying to convert. That is especially a high risk when Korean missionaries try to convert people away from a religion that has become part of the national and cultural identity of the people they are trying to convert. (Korean missions to Muslim countries and to the Philippines are examples of such risky proselytizing.)

Religion should draw people together and encourage people to live and work together harmoniously. Similarly, globalization should also draw us closer together, since it shrinks the communication and transportation networks that cover the globe. However, as we can see in the Korean case, both religion and globalization can also stimulate further fragmentation of the human community. Globalization, by threatening homogenization of culture, stimulates some to try to cling much more tightly to those cultural elements which distinguish them as a people. Religion is very often one of those cultural elements wielded as an assertion of ethnic and national distinctiveness. As we've seen in the case of Korean Buddhism and Korean Christianity, that can even be the case with local versions of world religions.

I live in a country, Canada, which prides itself on its respect for cultural diversity. The city I teach in, Vancouver, is a particularly striking example of such diversity. We have both Chinese, Japanese, and Korean churches and temples. We have Sikh temples, Hindu temples, and mosques. Usually, we all get along. That is because there is a mutual respect for our religious differences. However, we are also aware in Canada that mutual recognition of differences can easily move beyond mutual respect to competing claims of superiority. And therein lies the danger of nationalism arising from the globalization of religion. As globalization has opened the eyes of Koreans to religious differences around the world, and as that same globalization has stimulated nationalism in the Korean people, some Koreans have responded to this changed world by asserting not just Korean distinctiveness but Korean superiority.

Both religion and nationalism can serve as forces for good and for evil in this world. They both stimulate the formation of communities in which people are inspired to help each other overcome the difficulties life brings. They both help us overcome the innate human tendency to think of ourselves first and encourage us to work with others to achieve common goals. However, both religion and nationalism can also lead to the erection of barriers separating one community from another.

Religion can define and reinforce differences between people. Therein lies the potential for problems. Pride in one's heritage and culture is a good thing, since it can enhance self-esteem. But such pride can slide into arrogance or even contempt for those who don't share our religious beliefs. Nationalism also contains the potential to cause trouble. Nationalism can easily slide into racism. When religion and nationalism are combined, as they increasingly are in Korea today, the good they each can bring is multiplied, but so is their potential for evil. Religious nationalists can become arrogant and rigid out of a conviction that they embody both truth (the assumption that their country is right) and righteousness (they are moral but those who don't share their views are not.) Praying to God to take your nation's side in a military, political, or even sport competition is relatively innocuous. Attacking others because God has chosen your nation to lead the world is not. Fortunately, Korea, despite the growing use of the rhetoric of religious nationalism by non-governmental organizations, has not yet crossed over from a relatively mild chauvinism into dangerous jingoism. Let us hope it stays that way and Korea remains on the safe side of the line dividing national and religious pride from militancy.

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