

**THE IMPACT OF KOREAN PROTESTANT
CHRISTIANITY ON BUDDHISM AND THE
NEW RELIGIONS**

JAMES HUNTLEY GRAYSON

Introduction

The rapid development of Protestant Christianity and its subsequent impact on Korean society and culture following its introduction into Korea is one of the most significant historical facts of the past hundred years. It is my contention that the Protestant form of Christianity has not only played an important role in modern Korean history, but that it has also had a significant impact on the culture of contemporary Korea. This point of view is not uniquely mine. However, in this essay, I wish to discuss one aspect of cultural influence which has not received the attention which I think it deserves, namely the impact which Protestantism has had on the other religious traditions of Korea. Korean Protestant churches in one way or another have had an impact on Roman Catholicism and Buddhism, and their influence may be seen even in the *sinhŭng chonggyo* or the so-called new religions. Because of the degree of influence which Korean Protestantism has exercised on all of the other religious traditions, it is my further contention that the Protestant tradition may be said to have been the most

dynamic religious force in Korea over the past hundred years. Here I will use selected historical facts and a few personal observations to illustrate this latter contention. These illustrations should be understood as being only suggestive of the nature of the historical process. Further and far more specific research must be carried out to more fully demonstrate my contention.

The Advent of Protestant Christianity

Since its introduction into Korea in the mid-1880s, Protestant Christianity, predominantly Presbyterianism and Methodism, has come to constitute conservatively 18% of the total population of the Republic of Korea.¹ Seen from a world perspective, such rapid growth is virtually unique amongst Asian and other Third World churches established within the past century and a half. How are we to account for this rapid growth? There are two primary factors: the appropriateness of the time and the appropriateness of the missionary method.

i. The appropriateness of the time

The nineteenth century was a period of social and economic decay in Korea. Agricultural production declined; epidemics swept the nation on several occasions; the reins of government were held by and fought over by various great clans; the nation became prey to Western imperialist powers—powers who sought to bring Korea out of its hermit-like exclusion from the world scene.² Because of the visible sense of national decline and weakness, many young, progressive-thinking members of the intelligentsia came to reject the Confucian social structure and to look beyond the confines of traditional culture for new ideas and beliefs which could reinvigorate and renew the nation politically, economically, and spiritually. The expression of concern for national survival would seem to have come to a head during the last quarter of

the nineteenth century.³ It was a critical period in the history of Korean culture, when people were unusually open to foreign concepts and beliefs.

ii. The appropriateness of the missionary method

It was precisely at the time when Korean intellectuals and others were most receptive to non-traditional concepts that Protestant missions became established in Korea. This was not, of course, the first contact of Christianity with Korea. The Roman Catholic Church had been established in Korea since the end of the eighteenth century, but conditions for the widespread and unhampered reception of Christianity did not then exist.

The first generation of Protestant missionaries who arrived in Korea during the final two decades of the nineteenth century were generally theologically conservative, filled with evangelical fervour for the spread of Christianity, and possessed with a deep concern for the social and economic situation of the Korean people. Thus, from the very beginning of missionary work, schools and hospitals were established both as symbols of social concern and as a means of evangelistic outreach. Another important aspect of the method which the first missionaries adopted was an agreement that the goal of mission work was the rapid creation in Korea of a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-evangelizing church. This latter decision, perhaps more than any other, has had a profound effect on the way in which Korean Protestant churches have developed.⁴

iii. Other factors

Other factors which are related to the rapid development of the Protestant churches would include the use of the Korean alphabet, *han'gŭl*, in the translation of the Bible and the rigid ethical code taught by the missionaries. The use of the Korean alphabet meant that the message of the Bible could be read by

virtually anyone. This was in contrast to the situation in China where only the highly literate could be reached easily by the written word. Consequently, the diffusion of basic Christian knowledge in Korea was facilitated by the presence of an indigenous alphabet.⁵ The moral code taught by missionaries, while different in content from the traditional Confucian code, was a set of rigid ethical values and precepts which in many ways resonated with the traditional moral system. This code, firmly believed in by its expounders, would have had some considerable appeal to scholars brought up with the moral certainties of Confucianism.⁶

iv. *The effect of Protestant missions*

By 1910, roughly 1% of the Korean population adhered to Protestant Christianity. Due to its appearance at an unusually critical point in Korean history and to the emphasis which the early missionaries placed on evangelism by the Koreans themselves, Protestant Christianity had become a very visible aspect of Korean society by the second decade of the twentieth century. Following the example of the early missionaries, Korean Protestants created schools, developed programmes of evangelism and foreign mission, and were responsible for the creation of forms of higher education.⁷

Following the annexation of Korea by Japan, Korean Protestant Christians became involved with the movement for the restoration of Korean sovereignty, a political movement for which they suffered at the hands of the Japanese authorities, but which created a tradition within Korean Protestantism of Christian concern for patriotic and political issues which has never since died out. The following examples illustrate this point:

a) Some 124 persons, of whom 98 were Christians, were arrested by the Japanese authorities in 1911 on the spurious charge of attempting to assassinate the Japanese Governor-General, Terauchi Masatake.⁸

b) In 1919, nearly one-half of the signatories to the March First Declaration of Independence from Japan were Protestants. It was their insistence on non-violence which gave the March First Movement its peculiar character.⁹

c) During the 1930s when the right-wing military had control of Japan and *Shinto* nationalism had come to the fore, many Korean Protestants were prominent in the movement to refuse to worship at *Shinto* shrines.¹⁰

d) In 1945, during the twilight period of Japanese rule in Korea, and before the establishment of a Communist government in the north, Protestants in the northern part of Korea created political parties. These eventually clashed with the new Stalinist regime which had been established there and were suppressed as a threat to the state.¹¹

e) In south Korea during the 1970s and 1980s the movement to re-establish democracy and to create a more equitable society was led by politicians and non-political figures who were not only Christian but who were predominantly Protestant. Korean Protestantism in its first century may be said to have always been in the midst of turbulence.¹²

Finally, Korean Protestants have evinced a strong concern for the condition of the less fortunate members of modern society. This trend has been especially true since the 1960s. Concern for the workers of the new industrial estate, the place of women, prostitution, child welfare and other social matters have been attacked by Protestant Christians who saw this work as an extension of their religious beliefs.¹³

v. *The dominant religious force*

The character of Protestant Christianity which has emerged over the past century has been of a vigorous religious movement that is patriotic, nationalistic, and very socially and politically aware. This religious movement has grown so rapidly that by the mid-1980s Protestantism accounted for approximately 18% of the population of the Republic of Korea.

It has grown more rapidly and dramatically than any other religious group in Korea during the same period of time. It has become, in my opinion, the dominant religious force of Korea, if not yet the dominant religion numerically. And this vigorous religion has had a considerable impact on the other religious traditions of Korea.

There are three ways in which I believe that Protestant Christianity has influenced other religious traditions. The first way is the re-invigoration of other traditions by competitive stimulation. The second way is on a formal level, by an accommodation to the Protestant ethos through the adoption of Protestant forms of worship, ecclesiastical structure, or methods of work. The third way is Protestant influence on the concepts or categories of religious belief. The adoption of Christian, in particular Protestant, religious concepts may be taken to indicate an influence of Protestantism on the structure of religious belief, if not on the actual content.

The Impact of Protestantism on the Roman Catholic Church

Although I want to discuss primarily the effect of Protestantism on the non-Christian religions of Korea, it is important to say a few words about the effect which the development of Protestantism has had on the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the long history of the Catholic Church in Korea, it did not experience the degree of rapid development which has characterized the first phase of Protestant history. The first hundred years of Korean Catholic history were dominated by a series of vicious persecutions which created a ghetto mentality within the minds of many, if not most, Korean Catholics. Following the diplomatic opening of Korea to the outside world, those laws or regulations which restricted the propagation of religion were lifted. From the 1890s, the Catholic church experienced modest but steady increases in the numbers of its adherents. However, whereas in 1914 the Protestant churches' adherents numbered well over 1% of the

population, the Roman Catholic Church's adherents numbered less than half that figure. In fact, it was not until the mid-1950s that membership in the Catholic Church measured more than 1% of the population.¹⁴

It is from the 1960s onward that we can note a dramatic growth of Catholicism. Whereas before this time there had only been increases in the number of adherents, from then on there were dramatic increases in the percentage representation of Catholicism within the national population.¹⁵ There are two reasons for this. The first explanation is the influence of the Second Vatican Council, which generally opened up the Catholic Church worldwide. One effect of the liberal trends of the Council on the Korean church was the re-discovery of the necessity for evangelism. The evangelistic vigour which presently characterizes Korean Catholicism is a post-Conciliar phenomenon, taking effect from some time in the late 1960s.¹⁶

A major influence on Korean Catholicism prior to the Second Council may be found in the effect of the rapid development of Korean Protestantism. This is the second reason. Some time during the 1940s, adherents to Protestantism came to number more than 3% of the population. From this point onward, the numbers of Protestant adherents began to increase in geometric proportions. This gave the Protestant form of Christianity a high degree of visibility within Korean society. The aura of acceptability which now came to surround Protestantism—a result of its increased visibility, and its prestige derived from the perceived image of its patriotic and progressive character—helped to break down the ghetto mentality of Catholicism in Korea, and to restore the evangelistic fervour of the church.¹⁷ This trend toward evangelism was reinforced by the liberal developments of the Second Vatican Council. Thus the influence which Protestantism exercised on the Roman Catholic Church was a stimulus to growth, perhaps even a competitive stimulus.

The Impact of Protestantism on Buddhism

At the end of the last century and for the first three decades of this century, most Western observers of Buddhism in Korea felt that it was in a severe state of degeneration, and a few even thought that it might soon disappear altogether. In fact this has not happened. Buddhism has revived and now claims a vigorous 30% or more of the Republic of Korea's present population.

One may point to three sources for the revival of Buddhism's fortunes. The first factor is political. Because of the sudden growth of Protestant Christianity and because of its associations with patriotic agitation for independence from Japan, the Japanese authorities made a significant attempt to improve the state of Korean Buddhism. To this end, the Japanese administration made several attempts to unify Korean Buddhism into a single ecclesiastical body under the control of the Government-General.¹⁸ These moves for the re-organization of Korean Buddhism were also made to ensure that Buddhism proved to be no threat to Japanese colonial rule. Support was also given to various Buddhist projects and programmes, such as support for Buddhist publications. More importantly, the colonial government ensured that Buddhist temples obtained large tracts of land surrounding their precincts. This acquisition formed a capital base which has guaranteed the subsequent financial stability of Buddhism.

The second factor in the revival of Korean Buddhism was the purification of monastic practices. The revival of Buddhism cannot be wholly or even largely attributed to the efforts of the Japanese colonial authorities. It is to a large measure the result of internal developments, the revival of the purity of traditional monastic practices sought by Korean Buddhists themselves. The movement was an outgrowth of the work of Kyōngho (1849-1912). After his enlightenment in 1879, Kyōngho turned his attention to the question of the decayed state of monastic discipline and life in the majority of Korean temples. His persistence eventually led to the creation of a movement which substantially restored the position of Buddhism.¹⁹

The third factor in Buddhism's revival was the growth of the lay movement. Restoration and revival was not primarily a matter of the purification of monastic practice, however important that is. The primary source was the development of a vigorous lay movement. As significant as monasticism is within the Buddhism schema of things, Korean Buddhism has become a religion of the laity. It was the growth of lay associations, youth groups and publications for the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge which led to Buddhism becoming the significant force which it is today within modern south Korean society.

During the second, third and fourth decades of this century, a variety of lay movements were established which had among their purposes the evangelization of the populace, the education of the laity, and communal fellowship. These groups are in name and practice patterned after such groups as the YMCA and Protestant denominational youth and lay societies. Groups such as the Chosŏn Buddhist Youth Association (*Chosŏn pulgyo ch'ōngnyōnhoe*) and Chosŏn Buddhist Young People's Association (*Chosŏn pulgyo sonyōnhoe*) are indicative of this trend.²⁰

One can argue that this phenomenon is an example of competitive stimulation. That is, the adherents of Buddhism became aware of the decline in both their vigour and numbers while simultaneously noting the rapid success of another religious group, Protestant Christianity. Lay Buddhists then decided consciously to emulate the formal practices of Protestantism, viz, lay societies, social work, and religious publication in order to stimulate and revive Korean Buddhism. The sense of decline and the need to equal or better the recently arrived foreign religion played an important role in the consciousness of early twentieth century lay Buddhists. The revival of Buddhism may be said to have been more than a matter of the stimulus of ideas. It was a competitive movement for survival. The very fact of the rapid growth of Protestant Christianity created within Buddhism a movement to restore its own health. The means to accomplish this revival were patterned after the practices of its rival, Protestantism.

To illustrate the way in which Buddhism has utilized formal Protestant practices to spread Buddhist knowledge and belief, the following observations may be useful.

a) Buddhist high schools and colleges were founded during the Japanese period after the pattern of Protestant mission schools. The general secular curriculum in these schools was similar to mission—and state-sponsored schools, but the religious element was Buddhist.

b) Youth groups, particularly associations of high school students, were created. These groups still meet in temples under the direction of a monk with special responsibility for youth work at times similar to Protestant group meetings. These groups are in organization similar to Christian associations.

c) Some of the activities pursued within these associations are similar to Protestant practice. Music, and especially hymn signing, has formed a significant part of Protestant piety over the past century. The adoption of this practice of group singing and the appropriation of certain familiar Protestant tunes is a sure indication of the degree of influence which Protestant Christianity has had. However, for all of the formal influence which Protestantism has exercised, it should be noted that there has been very little if any influence at the level of the content of Buddhist belief.²¹

The influence of Protestantism on the New Religions

In the past century and a half there has arisen a whole new class of religions termed by Korean scholars *sinhŭng chonggyo*, literally, newly emerged religions. These religions are, without exception, a syncretism of several already existing religious traditions in Korea, and virtually all have as their substratum a reworked form of indigenous shamanism. I will discuss briefly three of these new religions, Ch'öndogyo (The Religion of the Heavenly Way), Chŭngsan'gyo (The Teaching of Chŭngsan), and

Tongilgyo (The Unification Church). All of these show the influence of Christian religious practice and belief. In fact, the last mentioned shows such a high degree of admixture with Protestant Christianity that it must be termed theologically a Christian heresy.

i Ch'öndogyo

The *Tonghak* or Eastern Learning movement which became known as Ch'öndogyo was founded in 1860 by Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864) following a vision of the Taoist supreme deity Shangti which he had had during the course of a severe illness. Shangti gave to Ch'oe a magic formula written on a piece of paper which when reduced to ashes and swallowed in a liquid mixture would become potent medicine. Ch'oe was told to go out and spread a doctrine appropriate to East Asia, unlike the 'Western Learning' (*Söhak*) being taught by Catholic missionaries then in the country. All experience characterized by a calling by a great spirit whilst ill, and the gift of a secret curative formula, is wholly shamanistic in nature. Many of the teachings of Ch'oe however, reflect not only Far Eastern philosophy but Catholicism as well. Ch'oe and his immediate followers sometimes referred to the great being of his vision as *Ch'önju*, the Lord of Heaven, which is the Roman Catholic term for God. This influence is on a formal level and does not effect the core character and teaching of Ch'öndogyo.²²

The greatest amount of Christian influence on Ch'öndogyo is from Protestantism and it comes at a later stage in the sect's evolution. Catholic influence is slighter and occurs at an early period in the development of the group. Protestant influence made itself manifest during the first three decades this century. Again, this influence is more at the formal level rather than at the level of the content of belief. The houses of worship of Ch'öndogyo and their internal arrangements, the order and content of the services of worship, and the musical practices all reflect Protestant ways of worship. Furthermore, the centrepiece of Ch'öndogyo worship is the reading from the Ch'öndogyo scripture *Tonggyöng taejon* and the exposition of a

particular passage drawn from it. This practice clearly reflects an essential aspect of the Protestant approach to worship, the proclamation of the Word of God through its public reading and the exposition of its content.²³

Thus, in a key element, the Ch'öndogyo movement, which saw itself as preserving Korean virtues and East Asian philosophical concepts against the onslaught of Western religion and philosophy, came to adopt a prime practice of its rival Protestantism. The reason why this happened must be the same reason why the Buddhist lay movement adopted many Protestant practices: competitive stimulation. Protestant influence on Ch'öndogyo is one major piece of evidence which indicates that, by the third decade of this century, Korean Protestantism was the fastest growing, most dynamic religious force within Korean culture.

ii. *Chüngsan'gyo*

Chüngsan'gyo was founded by Kang Ilsun (pen name Chüngsan, 1871-1910) following an experience he had of five grand dragons who gave him great spiritual power. His vision took place in 1900 and followed Kang's experience of the Tonghak Rebellion's failure in 1894/5. The failure of this populist movement to usher in a new era caused Kang to wander extensively in an attempt to find a way to order the social and political circumstances of Korea according to the Divine Plan. In his vision, Kang felt that he had been given an ability to communicate with the spirit world, to predict the future, and to understand the divine movements and processes of the universe. In 1902, Kang further revealed that he was not a simple messenger of the supreme deity, but that he was in fact the Lord of the Nine Heavens. Kang claimed that he had come to earth to accomplish three things: the re-ordering of the affairs of the universe, the restoration of the fortunes of the Korean state and the curing of disease.²⁴

The description which Kang gave of his vision, the revelation that he was the Lord of the Nine Heavens, and his

teachings all show a strong shamanistic cast. Nonetheless, certain key elements reveal a strong Christian influence. The fact that Kang latterly revealed that he was an incarnate deity is a reflection of a central teaching of the Christian Church, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this incarnation was given a particularly Christian interpretation when Kang went on to emphasise he had come to earth to re-organise the affairs of the world. This claim is more than that of a manifest deity; it is a messianic claim. In effect, Kang claimed he was the Messiah who had come to restore his nation to its rightful condition.

There is no evidence to indicate that Kang's appropriation of key Christian teachings was done consciously. If there was Christian influence it must have been at the sub-conscious level. If this is in fact the case, it actually strengthens my argument that Protestant Christianity was then and remains a most potent and dynamic religious force in Korean culture. At the time Kang became religiously active, Christianity, and in particular Protestant Christianity, had become part of the accepted spiritual ethos of Korea. Consequently, certain elements of Christian faith and teaching became available to be picked up by a charismatic religious figure. I believe further that the Christian influence exercised upon Kang must be Protestant rather than Catholic because of the comparatively higher visibility of Protestantism at that time.

iii. *The Unification Church*

The Unification Church or T'ongilgyo was formally established by Sun Myung Moon (Mun Sönmyöng, b.1920) in 1954. It is claimed, however, that the Church grew out of a movement which began with a vision Mun had had in 1936. In his vision, it is said that Mun saw the Supreme Being who gave him the authority to reform the Christian Church. The Unification Church teaches that sin has been sexually transmitted to modern man from Eve: Eve had sexual intercourse with Satan in his guise as a snake. The Church further teaches that Jesus, who had been sent to redeem mankind, failed in his ultimate task because he died on the

cross before he married. If he had married a perfect woman, human sin transmitted through blood would have been washed away and the state which had existed at the time of the Garden of Eden would have been restored. As Jesus did not marry, only spiritual and not physical salvation resulted from his work on earth. Consequently, followers of the Unification Church believe that it became necessary for a second figure to come to earth who would complete the work of Jesus by obtaining physical salvation for mankind. This expected figure is the Lord of the Second Advent.

Much of the teaching of the Church focuses on this mysterious figure. Although Mun has never claimed to be the Lord of the Second Advent, all of his actions and the attitudes of his followers towards him would indicate that he is widely held to be this mighty figure.²⁵

The basic elements of Mun's teaching and experience are shamanistic in character. Especially important is the vision which Mun had of a great spirit who gave him a special teaching to convey to mankind and who instructed Mun to restore the purity of the Christian Church and its teaching. This core element is unquestionably shamanistic. However, all the other elements in the teaching of Mun and his followers are Christian in form, if not in content. Thus, this type of new religion must be called a kind of Christian shamanism where the Lord of the Second Advent intercedes on behalf of his followers. The outward appearance of this group is Christian but the content of belief and the function of rituals is entirely shamanistic.

iv. *Christian shamanism*

Mun's group is not the only example of Christian shamanism. The so-called Olive Tree Church or Chōndogwan movement of Pak Taesōn is another example among many. It is interesting to note that several of the founders of such groups come from Protestant backgrounds or have been influenced at some point in their early years by Protestantism.

It is also important to note that the majority of new religions in which the use of Christian elements predominate in the formal aspect of the group's structure or teaching have arisen since the liberation from Japan in 1945. Comparing the occurrence of Christian elements in the new religions which have arisen since the end of the last century, we can note that such elements are less common in groups which arose around the turn of the century and increasingly common in groups which arose during the first half of this century. Most new religions which emerge now tend to be predominantly Christian in formal character. This increase in the appropriation of Christian elements is in direct relation to the increasing size of the Protestant churches in Korean society. I would argue that the dramatic growth of Protestant churches has not only made the appropriation of Christian—particularly Protestant—elements likely, but inevitable.

Concluding Remarks

The rapid growth of Protestantism during the past century has had an effect on all the other religions in Korea. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church and Buddhism, the effect was on the level of competitive stimulation. Specifically, Korean Protestant growth helped the Roman Catholic Church to break out of its ghetto mentality which had resulted from a century of severe persecution. In the case of Buddhism, the rapid development of Protestant churches not only helped create an atmosphere conducive to growth, but provided adherents with a particular method with which to revive Buddhism.

In the case of the new religions, the effect of Protestant church growth was to provide a wider range of symbols and concepts to draw upon in the creation of a new tradition. However influential Protestantism has been on other religions, its influence has never been at the level of content. Neither Buddhism nor the new religions have appropriated in a

coherent way the core complex of Christian, especially Protestant, faith. Thus, the influence of Protestantism on the other religious traditions in Korea has been superficial rather than substantive. The core elements of each non-Christian tradition have remained intact.

I hope that researchers interested in examining the religious scene in Korea—those scholars who are considering Buddhism, Korean folk religion, or the new religions—will consider the issue of the impact of the dramatic growth of Protestantism on the other religious traditions. The significant place of Christianity in modern Korea is virtually unique amongst Asian societies. Unfortunately, it is true that scholars of religion often overlook the study of Christianity in non-Western societies. This is certainly the case for Korean Christianity. The effect of Protestantism deserves to be examined more closely both from an anthropological perspective and an historical perspective.

NOTES

1. Grayson, James Huntley, *Early Buddhism and Christianity in Korea: A Study in the Emplantation of Religion* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1985), p.261.
2. A good general description of this period may be found in Lee Kibak [Yi Kibaek], *A New History of Korea* (Seoul, Ilchogak, 1984), pp.245-266.
3. Paik, L. George, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea: 1832 - 1910* (1929, rep. Seoul, Yonsei University Press, 1970), pp.260-262. Another source of information on this period is D. N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (London, University Press of America, 1986).
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 220-245.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-60, 162. Also, Ross, John, "Corean New Testament", *China Recorder and Missionary Journal*, vol.14 (November-December, 1883), pp.491-497.
6. Paik, op. cit. pp.153-156.
7. Grayson, op. cit. pp.112-113.

8. *Ibid.*, p.115.
9. *Ibid.*, p.116.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.118-120.
11. *Ibid.*, pp.120-122.
12. *Ibid.*, p.125.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p.126.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Grayson, James Huntley, *Korea: A Religious History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.210-212.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Kang Söksu and Pak Kyönghun, *Pulgyo kunse paengnyön* [The Recent Century of Korean Buddhism] (Seoul, Chungang sinso, 1980), pp.203-226.
19. Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*, op. cit. pp.203-226.
20. *Ibid.*
21. These remarks are based upon personal experiences and observations.
22. Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History*, pp.237-239.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, pp.241-245.
25. *Ibid.*, pp.247-250.