

Protestantism in Korea and Japan from the 1880s to the 1940s: A Comparative Study of Differential Cultural Reception and Social Impact

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ABSTRACT

One of the most remarkable facts about religion in South Korea is that Protestantism, which was introduced in 1884, is the second largest religion with nearly nine million adherents and that it has been the fastest growing religion for the last four decades. This is all the more astonishing given the fact that Christianity has failed to strike roots in Japan—a neighbouring country with strikingly similar social organizational arrangements and shared cultural traditions and practices—where less than one percent of the population has converted to the new religion. The key historical-sociological problematic raised by this phenomenal development is obvious: what confluence of historical, religio-cultural, and social conditions and factors account for the Christian “success story” in South Korea and the corresponding “failure” of this imported Western religion to make similar progress in Japan?

This study argues that the main reasons for the different response lie in the political and religious context between the late nineteenth century and the mid 1940s. The factors that set the stage for the different fate of Protestant Christianity in Korea and Japan are many, but the following three have been most important: 1) the difference in socio-political contexts (political instability and defeat versus relatively greater stability and triumph); 2) contrasts in the missionaries’ efforts and their impact (appreciation versus indifference and contempt); and 3) dissimilarity in the religio-cultural milieu (lack of religious opposition versus concerted opposition by traditional religions and Shinto-centered unity).

Keywords:

Introduction

One of the most outstanding features of religion in South Korea has been the phenomenal growth of Protestantism. Since the early 1960s, when Korean Protestants barely topped the one million mark, the number of Protestant Christians in South Korea increased faster than in any other country, more than doubling every decade. As of 1995, there were nearly nine million Protestants or about one-fifth of the population in the country (Korea National Statistical Office 1995). Moreover, by 1997, there were approximately 100,000 pastors attending to nearly 60,000 churches, making the Protestant Church in South Korea one of the most vital and dynamic in the world. The remarkable growth of Protestant Christianity is further demonstrated by the fact that five of the ten largest churches in the world, including the world's largest Yoido Full Gospel Church (with nearly 800,000 followers as of 2004), are reportedly found in Seoul, a "city of churches" (Draper et al. 1994).

Such vibrancy of Protestantism in South Korea stands in stark contrast to the virtual oblivion of the religion in Japan, where Protestants number little over a half million or 0.4 percent of the total population as of 1995 (Japanese Ministry of Education 1995, 30-31). While there are nearly 8,000 churches in Japan, 1,380 or 18 percent of them get by with less than ten worshippers on typical Sundays (Church Information Service 1997). Moreover, Protestantism in Japan is an urban phenomenon: with the exception of the Nagasaki region, it has yet to make any substantial impact on rural communities. All of this is quite remarkable in light of the fact that Christianity was introduced to Japan earlier than in Korea, that a substantially larger number of missionaries were sent to Japan, and that the missionaries in both countries engaged extensively in such social services as medical care and education.

Given the similarities in the cultural makeup of and the missionaries' work in the two countries, what factors galvanized the people of one country to convert to Protestantism en masse while making the people of the other largely disregard it? Despite the importance of this issue, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the comparison of the "fate" of Christianity in the two countries. This study attempts to redress this

imbalance by comparing their cultural and religious characteristics as well as historical and socio-political circumstances in regard to the reception of Christianity. It is argued here that the main difference lies in situations and events of the period between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1940s.¹ Of all the factors that set the stage for the different fate of Protestantism in South Korea and Japan, the contrasts in the socio-historical contexts, differences in the missionaries' efforts and their impact, and dissimilarities in the religio-cultural milieu have been most significant. Indeed, certain key historical and social circumstances of Korean history seem to have encouraged Koreans to seek refuge or answers in the new religion. These include the political and social instability of the late Joseon dynasty, dire poverty, and the cruelty of Japanese colonial rule. In Japan, on the other hand, its imperialist endeavors and subsequent involvement in World War II as well as its devastating defeat galvanized the people to become guarded against Western culture, especially in terms of religion. These events also stimulated the Japanese to become ever more absorbed in Japanese culture, in which traditional religions, particularly the quasi-state religion, Shinto, played a central role. Under these circumstances, missionaries in both countries had engaged in such social services as education and medical care, but they differed in one significant way: missionaries in Korea implemented the Nevius Method, which emphasizes self-reliance and self-government, while their counterparts in Japan made converts rely on the missionaries' support by doing too much for them. Also, the impact of the missionaries' work was felt differently: while their services were appreciated by Koreans who had no other recourse, they were largely disregarded by the Japanese who found equal or better services provided by the government.

The religious milieu also could not have been more different between the two countries. For all their trials and tribulations, the Japanese tried to find an answer in the wellspring of their own traditional religions. They reaffirmed their sense of unity and

¹ This paper focuses on the period between the 1880s and 1940s in the belief that the political, social, and cultural contexts of the period set the stage for the remarkable growth of Christianity later in one country (Korea) while making little impact in the other (Japan). The factors that account for the different fate of Christianity since the 1950s are largely different from those of the earlier period and are beyond the scope of this paper.

national purpose in their state religion, Shinto, as well as in the traditionally revered Buddhism. The reaffirmation of traditional religions in Japan throughout its modern history, however, stands in stark contrast to the situation in Korea. Although the Korean people generally hold their traditional religions, including Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, in high esteem today, many Koreans at the turn of the twentieth century were frustrated with what they saw as fruitless and backward religions. They blamed traditional religions for the political and economic woes of their country and adopted Christianity in the hope of finding a more satisfying response to their spiritual as well as material needs. The fact that the imported faith was reshaped according to the traditional religious inclination of Koreans helped amplify its appeal.

As we shall see, a full explication and proper understanding of these differences will necessarily draw upon James Grayson's (1985) theory of emplantation. The theory asserts that growth and development of a missionary religion in a host society is contingent upon five sets of related factors, most of which are pertinent to this study: 1) the resolution of contradictions between the new doctrine and the core values of the receiving society; 2) tolerance or acceptance of the imported faith by the ruling elite of the host society; 3) the overcoming of linguistic and conceptual obstacles; 4) the resolution of conflict between the new doctrine and the existing religions of the host society; and 5) the missionary's comprehension of political circumstances conditioning members of the host culture toward the doctrine of the new religion (Grayson 1985, 130).

Differences in the Reception of Protestantism in Korea and Japan

Receptivity of the Joseon Government to Protestantism

The arrival of the Christian missionaries in Korea in 1884 was an event in itself for a country that had remained a "hermit kingdom" for centuries. Even more remarkable, however, was the warm receptivity accorded to the missionaries by the host society. The missionaries' writings—as well as those of diplomats and visitors—from that period indicate that their work in Korea was facilitated by not only the court's favorable

disposition toward them but also by the people's respect for them. This is all the more extraordinary in light of the fact that Roman Catholicism, which was introduced a century earlier, had been subjected to severe persecutions for decades, during which nearly 10,000 Christians were martyred (Kim 1995, 35-38).

Many factors account for such amiable receptivity shown by the host society to Protestantism, but the court's sense of urgency to ally itself with Western powers to preserve its sovereignty played the most important role. Indeed, the government of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) simply could no longer afford to continue its isolationist ways. Sensing the hostile manoeuvres of its neighboring countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the government signed a series of treaty with Western powers, starting with the United States in 1882 (see Kim E. and Kim 1967). At the time, China, Japan, and Russia each manoeuvred to play a decisive role in Korea's emergence onto the international scene, since Korea's foreign relations would affect the balance of power in East Asia. For example, China wanted Korea to continue its acceptance of a vassal relationship and wished to have this arrangement acknowledged by any country seeking relations with Korea. Japan, on the other hand, which had already adopted Western science and technology, began to consolidate its imperialist vision. This was particularly true after Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, fought, of all places, on the Korean peninsula.

The Korean government naturally feared that the nation's sovereignty was in jeopardy and thought that national salvation lay in courting the favour of strong Western powers, such as the United States, from which most of the missionaries came (Ryu 2000). In particular, the government concluded that it was desirable to welcome the missionaries and their religion, which were an integral part of the American presence in Korea at the time, in order to build a stronger relationship with the powerful United States. The government was also anxious to provide Western medical relief for people suffering from repeated epidemics and other physical ills. The provision of Western education, which was to inspire technological and economic progress, was likewise high on the government's agenda. The fact that the Americans were not connected with Western

imperialism in the region at the time further contributed to the good will of the Korean government. As Lak Geon George Paik (1971, 162), a noted historian of missionary efforts in Korea, wrote: “the employment of American advisers to the chief departments of the government, the request for American teachers for government schools, repeated declarations of friendship and confidence by the Korean legation at Washington, and the employment of American engineers to open mines, gave proof of the amicable feeling of the peninsular kingdom toward the American nation.”

People’s attitudes toward the missionaries and their religion were not far from the court’s disposition. The victory of Japan, which had absorbed science and technology as well as the arts of war and government from the West, made many Koreans “believe that everything of the West was superior and best, and they were ready to accept the religion of the Westerners” (Paik 1971, 261). Moreover, Koreans hoped that the Church, as an agent of tremendously powerful Western countries, could help save the nation against looming external threats. C. E. Sharp (1906, 182), one of the earliest missionaries in Korea, noted that due to the uncertainty of the times, many Koreans perceived the Church to be “the only society that amounted to anything” and understood that “the nations styled Christian are the ones that possess the highest civilization and culture.”

Link Between Protestantism and Nationalism during Japanese Colonial Rule

Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), which marked one of the darkest periods in the history of Korea, served as the cornerstone for the eventual spread of Christianity in South Korea. Under the colonial regime, the deprivations, injustices, and psychological injuries endured by the people created a fertile political environment in which Christianity became a rallying point for national salvation. Indeed, for a large number of the Korean population, Christianity became identified as the ethos with which they hoped to liberate themselves from national suffering and humiliation (see Wells 1990). What facilitated this hope was that the political events of the period made the Bible radiate with contemporary relevance. In particular, the Old Testament seemed to reflect their own situation. Korean

converts found a close affinity between their miserable experience under foreign domination and the biblical depictions of the ordeals of the Israelites under Egyptian tyranny; they thus found in the Bible spiritual support in their aspirations for liberation and national independence (Wasson 1934, 78-102; Weems 1964, 67-74).

For Koreans deprived of any traditional means to effectively resist Japanese colonial power, the Church and Christianity naturally became outlets for voicing their collective aspirations for independence. The Church became the center of the nationalist movement, because it was, apart from the Japanese colonial bureaucracy, “the strongest, most influential single organization in Korea” at the time (Wasson 1934, 70).² During Japanese colonial rule, indeed, the Church developed into a leading intellectual, political, and social force, providing the nation with its most effective leadership, while gaining credibility and the admiration of the masses in the process.³ Accordingly, many Koreans, particularly intellectuals, adopted Christianity as a political means of mobilizing Korean nationalism and the independence movement. The salience of Christians in the independence movement throughout the colonial period further confirmed the people’s positive perception of Christianity. As the leaders of resistance against Japanese rule and as active members of the independence movement, the presence of Christians was pronounced at every level of anti-Japanese organizations.

Of all the church-related institutions, it was the missionary schools which, besides providing the most effective means of intellectual resistance to Japanese rule, served as a link between Korean nationalism and Christianity. As the only modern alternative to education offered by the Japanese, Christian schools, which numbered over 700 by 1910, informed Koreans of the outside world, allowing them to become aware of new ideas pertaining to civil, political, and social rights in the modern world. These schools also provided outlets where progressive young intellectuals could exchange ideas

² It is interesting to note that as a measure of counterbalance to Christianity, the Japanese government provided generous official support to Confucian learning and Buddhism. This support for Buddhism subsequently rejuvenated the religion in Korea.

³ It is not suggested here that all Protestant churches formed a united front or were actively involved in standing up for Korea’s independence. Many churches remained passive or stayed aloof from political matters. The Church as a whole, however, did serve as the most important organization that voiced the concerns and aspirations of Koreans.

and establish a tradition of political movement. As students learned and debated their country's geography, language, and history, they came to realize the importance of self-determination. The significance of missionary schools during the Japanese rule is echoed by Paik (1971, 393): "The missionaries virtually controlled the intellectual life of the Christians and these in turn were the most influential and progressive members of the village communities."

The fact that the missionaries were most often vocal in defense of Korean concerns also helped place Christianity at the forefront of Korean nationalism. While they had first welcomed Japan's annexation as a stabilizing force, the missionaries were unequivocal in condemning Japan's brutal reaction to the independence movement of March 1, 1919, and other atrocities. Also, the missionaries often publicized the ruthlessness of the Japanese authorities through the Western media. Their conspicuous presence in the Koreans' struggle for national independence not only added credibility to the Church but also increased support for Christianity in non-Christian communities.

During Japanese colonial rule, therefore, Koreans in general were attracted to Christianity not only because of their marginal existence and socio-political deprivations but also because of their wish to find nationalist expressions in religious terms. Indeed, people's political and social hope for liberation was virtually inseparable from their warm response to Christian messages. Christianity had hence become fully identified with the Korean national struggle and aspiration: the prominence of Christians in the independence movement and the concomitant Japanese suppression of Korean Christians made the religion and the Church towering symbols of the protest against foreign domination and injustice. Like many other Asian countries, Korea was troubled by a series of national tragedies in the twentieth century. Yet it is almost certain that in none of the other Asian societies was Christianity so profoundly involved in the struggle for national independence. While colonialism was experienced in other Asian countries, such as French Indochina and British-ruled India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the long period of Western rule over these nations largely made Christianity an appendage of Western colonial power, a force against which they were struggling for national

independence. But the opposite was true in Korea.

The Meiji Restoration and Hostility toward Christianity in Japan

The Protestant missionaries first arrived in Japan in 1859, but the socio-political climate as well as the religious milieu was generally inhospitable for the propagation of their religion (see Iglehart 1959; Cary 1976; Breen and Williams 1995). It was a time of great political and economic upheaval, as the two hundred year reign of the Tokugawa rulers was coming to an end and as the declining economy brought widespread suffering. The political instability ended with the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), which marks the departure of Japan from the feudal period to a modern one. One of the most distinguishing features of the Meiji era is the restoration of the emperor (Meiji) as head of state, hence the eponymous period name. Other changes brought on by the Meiji Restoration fundamentally transformed Japanese society: the government was reorganized along the lines of a nation-state; a centralized government with a constitution and elected lawmakers was in place; the feudal domains were replaced by prefectures, which administered local governments that acted as branches of the central authority; a modern system of education was established; and feudal armies were replaced with a national army (Earhart 1982, 151; Beasley 1972; Jansen 1995; Jansen and Rozman 1988).

The Meiji Restoration also brought about significant changes in religion. First, state patronage of Buddhism, which was implemented during Tokugawa times (1600-1867), was terminated. The Meiji architects wanted to curb the power of Buddhism, not only because it had been an ideological force of the Tokugawa feudal government but also because it had been tied to various types of corruption (Ketelaar 1993). Second, Shinto was patronized as the new state religion. The rationale was that the rightful restoration of the emperor as head of the state should be consummated with the restoration of Shinto as state religion. Until the end of World War II, nonetheless, the government provided financial support to Shinto shrines—which numbered over 100,000—and granted official statuses to their priests. In addition, people were encouraged to install private Shinto shrines at their homes and perform obeisance. During times of war, in particular, the

masses were expected to display their patriotism by attending shrine ceremonies. Third, the ban against Christianity was lifted in 1873. Until that time, the Tokugawa prohibition against Christianity was still in place, but the government, wishing to establish relations with Western nations to emulate their knowledge and practice, had to comply with Western diplomats' pleas for the reintroduction of Christianity into Japan.

The Meiji government and later governments granted religious freedom, but their intent was far from allowing Christianity to take root in Japan. For example, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century slogan, "Chinese knowledge, Japanese spirit," the Meiji era followed the formula of "Eastern ethics, Western science," reflecting the overall attitude of a nation that wanted to import and adapt Western knowledge and technology while hoping to keep its religio-cultural influence in abeyance. Accordingly, the government implemented a policy in 1871 which required the people to register at a local Shinto shrine for birth and change of residence, both of which seriously challenged the faith of Christians and undermined the autonomy of the Christian community. Furthermore, religious practices were suppressed or restricted in favor of Shinto. For example, by implementing a policy against "religious" teachings at school, the government succeeded in weakening the potential impact of Christianity. The government allowed Shinto to circumvent such policy by declaring it to be nonreligious—a 1882 law divided Shinto into shrine Shinto, the so-called state Shinto, and sect Shinto⁴—which cleared the way for the nationalistic and patriotic tenets of the former to be taught at every school every day. In this way, Shinto principles—which will be discussed later—and to a lesser extent, Confucian ethics, were used in Japanese schools to inculcate veneration for the emperor and absolute loyalty to the state.

In contrast to the auspicious climate for Christian expansion in Korea, therefore, the socio-political climate and the religious policy of Meiji Japan and succeeding governments left little room for the foreign religion to make an appreciable impact. From

⁴ Except for only those that had acquired special sect forms, most of the existing Shinto shrines fell under the category of shrine Shinto. From 1882, only the place of shrine Shinto was called *jinja* or shrine, while the buildings of sect Shinto were called *kyokai*, which can be translated as "church." Moreover, sect Shinto shared an identical religious status with Buddhism and Christianity.

1868 to 1945, Japan's energies were focused on nation-building and on strengthening nationalism and militarism. At the center of this process was Shinto. While paying lip service to religious freedom and by giving the impression of separating religion and state, the Japanese government's true intention was to mobilize the supposedly nonreligious shrine Shinto to reinforce the people's patriotic fervor. Such efforts, first intended for nation-building and later for imperialist endeavors, was to have a lasting, negative impact on the spread of Christianity.

Missionaries' Efforts and Their Impact: Similarities and Differences

Unparalleled Impact of the Missionaries' Work in Korea

The initial acceptance of Protestantism in Korea is closely related to the policies, attitudes and actions of the early missionaries. From the beginning, missionaries consciously made the socially deprived segment of the population, particularly commoners and women, their targets for evangelization. The missionaries' genuine concern for the underprivileged naturally resulted in their involvement with various philanthropic activities: they founded Korea's first modern school for girls and for boys; started the first school for the blind; established orphanages for abandoned children; founded the first modern hospital; and made modern medicine available to the poor. By offering concrete and practical benefits, missionaries were able to win the approval and confidence of suspicious Koreans.

Among their many social services, the missionaries' involvement in education was most welcomed by the masses. The missionaries' enthusiasm for education, which was largely inspired by their desire to enable illiterate Koreans to read the Scriptures and religious tracts, resulted in the provision of education for common people and women who had previously never been able to acquire it. As the only link to the West and as the only institution which provided a complete educational system at the turn of the twentieth century, mission schools introduced a modern curriculum including Western philosophy, inculcating in the students the ideas of democracy, equality, human rights, and freedom.

By the end of the nineteenth century, schools established by the missionaries were found practically all over the country and numbered over 400.

The missionaries' provision of Western medical care further won the confidence of the court and the admiration of the people. The arrival of medically trained missionaries, including the first Protestant missionary to Korea, Dr. Allen, facilitated the establishment of not only a modern hospital in Seoul but dispensaries all over the country, ensuring that people in the countryside were not left out of the missionaries' outreach. Hospital records show that smallpox and malaria were the leading diseases against which Korean people were defenceless and from which they suffered the most. Vaccine administrations in hospitals and villages thus easily earned missionaries the highest respect and admiration.

Missionaries' active involvement in education and medical care as well as in other services thus served as an effective and indirect means of evangelization. The provision of such services was perceived positively because there were no alternatives, governmental or otherwise. As Samuel Moffett (1962, 122-123), a noted historian of Korean Christianity, wrote: "It was medicine, not preaching, that opened Korea to the Protestant church," and it was "education, not evangelism, that first commended it to the authorities." Moreover, Koreans in general were "drawn to the church by its emphasis upon education, its character-building power, its stable organization, its worldwide connections, its democratic fellowship, and its suggestion of supernatural help" (Wasson 1934, 75). And as Christianity became more institutionally established and as it expanded the operation of schools and medical treatments, a growing number of Koreans became affected by the Christian presence.

It is also worth noting that the early success of Protestantism in Korea was helped considerably by the missionaries' adoption of the so-called Nevius Method (Clark 1930, 1937). Named after Dr. John L. Nevius (1829-1893) of the China mission field, the Nevius Method was aimed at establishing a native church through self-support, self-

propagation, self-government, and independence.⁵ Since foreign funds were severely limited at the time, the expansion of missionary work in Korea would have been seriously constrained without the application of the Nevius Method. Entrusted with the responsibility of spreading the gospel, Korean Christians themselves were financially responsible for building their own churches and for supporting their ministers and missionaries. Accordingly, early Korean Protestants themselves built and maintained their churches, formed Bible study classes, pioneered new regions for evangelism, instructed new converts, preached to the sick, and ministered to the needy. The practice of extensive itineration is another Nevian principle that was integral to the propagation of Christianity (Rhodes 1935, 82-86; Clark 1971, 104-109). Within two years of their arrival, missionaries began long itinerating trips all over Korea, offering spiritual guidance and instruction to Christians and preaching to potential converts, as well as training Korean leaders to spread the gospel to others. These long itinerating trips by the first missionaries subsequently developed into a permanent policy for succeeding missions and indigenous evangelists, encouraging them to visit the remotest areas and allowing them to successfully draw new converts from a wide geographical area.⁶

The Missionaries' Efforts in Vain in Japan

The Protestant missionaries' efforts in Japan were similar to those of their counterparts in Korea, but the results could not have been any more different. They too engaged in such social services as education and medical care, but their endeavors were mostly ineffective for several reasons. In education, the Christian missions' contribution in late nineteenth

⁵ The Nevius Method stood in stark contrast to the operation of the Catholic Church in Korea, which kept its foreign missions under strict control and command from Rome.

⁶ The Joseon government's friendly attitude toward Protestantism and the missionaries' humanitarian social services as well as their tireless efforts in evangelism—all of this in the absence of a strong organizational presence of Korean traditional religions—largely explain the warm receptivity accorded to the imported faith. Their response was phenomenal, marked as one of the most successful cases in missionary history. For example, the Church already had more than 20,000 converts by the end of the nineteenth century. The figure doubled just five years later and by 1907, the Protestant Church gained nearly 80,000 converts (Underwood, H. 1908, 146-148), more than the total number of Protestants in Japan after fifty years of missionary work.

Japan was not insignificant, particularly in regard to two specifics: the missionaries introduced the pattern of modern Western college education; and the missionaries introduced coeducation and took the lead in providing education for women (Takenaka 1957, 30). Despite these significant contributions, Christian schools faced many difficulties (Takenaka 1957, 32-33). First, the strong upsurge of nationalism following the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) reinforced Japan's hostility toward Western culture, especially religion. As a result, many Christian schools in many parts of the country had to close due to drops in enrollment. Second, a government decree in 1897 prohibited all types of religious instruction, including those at Christian schools. In fact, the edict was specifically directed against Christian teachings. The decree also stipulated that students in Christian schools were not exempt from military duty, though this privilege was granted to students in government schools. A third factor which undermined the impact of Christian schools was the rapid advance in academic standards of government schools. While Christian schools had pioneered higher education in Japan, government schools rapidly adopted Western curriculums and were able keep abreast of the level of education offered by Christian schools, thereby negating that reason for attending the latter. The fact that graduates of Christian schools were discriminated against in hiring and promotion, especially in civil services, further undermined the merit of attending schools founded by missionaries. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for Christian schools to be targeted for vandalism and attacks by ultranationalists, especially during the 1930s and 1940s.

Just as in education, missionaries' efforts in medical care as an indirect evangelical means became ineffective, because Japan was quick to adopt Western medical practice. The Japanese government at first relied on missionaries for their medical expertise, but soon obtained enough knowledge and technology to establish its own Western-styled hospitals to treat the sick. The founding of medical schools quickly followed, leading to further proliferation of hospitals run by the Japanese. All of this, of course, did not allow missionaries in Japan to make any kind of impact on the Japanese populace.

In addition, the missionary method utilized in Japan further undermined the propagation of Christianity. Instead of stressing independence and self-sufficiency, as was done in Korea, the missionaries in Japan “spoil” the converts by doing too much for them, e.g., provision of well-furnished chapels and churches and reimbursement of high salaries to the native clergy, thereby making them dependent on foreign funds for virtually all of their operations. Moreover, unlike the missionary efforts in Korea that were informed by the Nevan principle of extensive itineration into remote villages, missionaries in Japan largely focused their endeavors in large cities while the Japanese clergy were inclined toward established work in urban centers, thereby fashioning Christianity as a scattered urban phenomenon. In the first five decades of Protestantism in Japan, for example, the number of converts from the farming, fishing, and laboring classes was negligible (Kerr 1949, 46). Indeed, Protestantism in Japan failed to make an impact among the common people; instead the uprooted samurai, the townspeople, merchants, and other professional men largely comprised early Protestants in Japan (Iglehart 1959, 345). Even today, churches are found predominantly in urban centers among professionals.

Religious Factors in Conversion

Absence of Religious Opposition to Protestantism in Korea

Another factor that contributed significantly to the acceptance of Protestantism in Korea was the absence of antagonism between the new religion and the traditional religions of the host society. Although Shamanism represented the most pervasive belief system among the masses, its lack of any unifying institutional expression as well as its tolerance and syncretic tendencies toward other religions presented no difficulty for the spread of the imported faith in Korea. Confucianism manifested a strong social presence, but its exclusive prominence as a set of social ethics, rather than as a conventional religious practice of the masses, did not fulfil the people’s religious longing. Furthermore, many of its practices, such as ancestor worship and filial piety, were more of a tribute to traditional customs than activities of an organized religion. Buddhism, which had been largely

banished to the countryside since the beginning of the Joseon dynasty in 1392, posed even less of a threat to Protestantism, at least during the initial stage of the latter's introduction in 1884: its organization was divested of any structural and financial means; its priesthood was weak; and its temples were found only in remote areas. Buddhism's weakness at the time was induced by centuries of various anti-Buddhist measures. The decree of "respect Confucianism and oppose Buddhism" proscribed visits to Buddhist temples and participation in any form of Buddhist activity. It also banned Buddhist monks from entering the capital and other cities, effectively driving Buddhism into the mountains and segregating monks from city life. Moreover, the confiscation of temple lands and the government's supervision of existing monasteries seriously undermined the financial and organizational bases of Buddhism. All of this forced Buddhism to lose its social and spiritual significance throughout the Joseon dynasty.

These circumstances understandably prompted early missionaries and visitors to Korea to remark that the peninsula was a land without an organized religion (Griffis 1885, 161; Lowell 1886, 182; Miln 1895, 226). Henry Appenzeller, one of the pioneering Protestant missionaries to Korea, observed upon his arrival in August of 1885 that "people within the walls of this city [Seoul] are practically without a religion" and that "there is not a temple of any kind and Buddhist and Roman Catholic priests go about like thieves in the night" (quoted in Hunt 1980, 81). William Elliot Griffis (1888, 371) also noted that the "Koreans offer the spectacle of a nation without a religion and waiting for one." Isabella Bird (1897, 63), in an account of her journeys to Korea in 1897, made a similar observation, saying that "when Buddhist priests and temples were prohibited in the walled towns three centuries ago, anything like a national faith disappeared from Korea, and it is only through ancestral worship and a form of "Shamanism" practiced by the lower and middle classes that any recognition of the unseen survives."

At the time of the introduction of Protestantism, therefore, the weakened Buddhism and disaffected Confucianism engendered a fertile ground from which an imported faith could take firm root. The main reason a considerable number of Koreans turned to the new religion at the time was the perceived irrelevance of traditional religions.

Unable to make sense of the harsh realities they were facing within their traditional worldview and values, Koreans enthusiastically embraced the imported faith, which provided new norms and values and a sense of purpose in a rapidly changing and troubled world. This seems to lend support to the theory that argues that new faiths prosper only from the weakness of old faiths. As Stark and Bainbridge (1985) point out, new religions appear constantly in all societies, but their successes are contingent upon *opportunity*, which usually involves social crises. Accordingly, new religions make their way against long-established counterparts only when the latter fail to serve the needs of a significant number of people. In other words, people typically do not surrender a faith that gratifies them to espouse a new faith. The Korean case is a good example of this.

Japanese Traditional Religions, Shinto Nationalism and Anti-Christian Sentiments

In contrast to the absence of religious opposition in Korea, which allowed Protestantism to fill a certain religious void, the strength and pervasiveness of Japanese traditional religions, i.e., Buddhism, Confucianism, and especially the state-sponsored Shinto, left little opportunity for Christianity to grow. The fact that these three religions still exerted tremendous influence on the Japanese simply made Christianity incompatible with their spiritual tradition (see Koyama 1984). Furthermore, proponents of the three religions actively engaged in anti-Christian campaigns that became popularly known. Buddhists in Japan, for example, including prominent Buddhist intellectuals such as Sessō and Shōsan Suzuki, carried out a concerted anti-Christian movement, brandishing the “foreign” religion as a corrupted offshoot of Buddhism. Buddhist factions also determinedly warned of the dangers of Christianity by reviving anti-Christian literature from the Tokugawa period and printing a large number of books that denounced Christianity (Murakami 1980, 37). Although Japanese Buddhism was suffering from state opposition and declining influence, it rallied to make its own mark in the movement against the “foreign religion.” In fact, Buddhism of the Meiji era became more forceful than Shinto in staging a systematic and extensive critique against Christianity. Shinto protagonists and the imperial court were also generally antagonistic toward Christianity. They felt threatened

by this imported faith that stipulated the absolute authority of God over any other sovereignties, including that of the Emperor. Similarly, renowned Confucian scholars like Razan Hayashi and Hakuseki Atai advanced Christian doctrines as inferior equivalents of Buddhist teachings (Fujita 1991, 260). What is noteworthy here is that such denunciation of Christianity was expressed in support of Shinto.

More than any other Japanese traditional religions, it was Shinto that hindered, both directly and indirectly, the propagation of Christianity in Japan. As mentioned above, a nation-centered, patriotic Shinto movement, which started in the nineteenth century, gained momentum, especially following the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and during World War II (Holtom 1947; Creemers 1968; Hardacre et al. 1991; Breen and Teeuwen 2000). By patronizing Shinto as state religion, the new Meiji rulers succeeded in establishing Shinto as the religious and symbolic foundation with which to unite people and provide a sense of national identity.

Central to nationalistic Shinto⁷ is the belief in the myth of the divine origin of not only the Imperial family but also the Japanese people and even the islands themselves. The notion of the Emperor being sacred is particularly strong. In fact, the Emperor is considered not only an absolute ruler but a divine authority, a sort of living demigod. Shinto ideology went to the extreme of stipulating that morality was founded on loyalty to the Emperor. As insinuated above, one of the most important concepts tied to Shinto is the notion of *shinkoku* (“the land of the gods”), which was central to a kind of nationalism first fostered by Hideyoshi that had strongly influenced the shaping of modern Japanese nationalism. This “*shinkoku* ideology,” which endowed national identity and citizenship with religious qualities, is intimately linked to what can be called “Japanism” (Fujita 1991, 259). Japanism is “nationalistic’ in the sense that it ascribes a supreme value to the deeply felt sentiment which arises out of the shared human relationships one holds as a

⁷ Without its political garb, Shinto, “the Way of the Gods,” has no developed theology; has its roots in the animistic beliefs of the antiquity; has developed into a community religion, complete with local shrines and local guardian gods; deifies and worships local and national heroes; worships the souls of family ancestors; and is intimately tied to Japanese lives, as life cycle events such as the birth of a baby and the third, fifth and seventh birthdays as well as the official beginning of adulthood at age twenty are often marked by visits to a Shinto shrine (Herbert 1967; Sokyō 1994; Littleton 2002; Picken 1994).

Japanese” (Fujita 1991, 267). As the national cult of Japan, Shinto has been an integral part of Japanism. Buddhism and Confucianism, albeit of foreign origin, also came to be incorporated into “Japanism.” The preeminent Confucian scholar Razan Hayashi, for example, succeeded in making neo-Confucianism a component of the ruling ideology of Tokugawa reign by identifying the Confucian concept of *taikyoku*, Lord of Heaven or the Great Ultimate, with the Shinto deity.

Similar to Japanism is a Japanese “national entity” called *kokutai*, which expresses the uniqueness and superiority of Japan as a political and religious unity (see Hall 1949). Defined as Japan’s emperor- or state-centered cult of ultra-nationalism and, to a lesser extent, militarism, the *kokutai* cult consisted of the following essentials required of all Japanese: 1) acceptance of the doctrine of the sacredness of the Emperor; 2) worship of spirits of the imperial ancestors and unquestioned acceptance of imperial decrees; 3) unconditional acceptance of ancient myths; 4) the observance of culturally significant national holidays, especially those focusing on the exaltation of the imperial line; 5) worship of *kami* or Shinto deities at shrines and in the home; and 6) provision of monetary support for local shrines and festivals (Woodard 1972, 11).

Enveloped in this kind of mindset, the encounter with Western culture, especially its religions, seems to have actually heightened these insular tendencies and made them become preoccupied with the preservation of its cultural identity. It goes without saying that such an inward-looking nationalistic mentality was unreceptive, if not hostile, to Christianity. Because of its powerful presence in the Japanese mentality, Shinto has been the force that has debilitated the spread of imported doctrines. Indeed, the reverential, virtually religious character of the people’s attitude toward their nation hindered the spread of Christianity in Japan (Takenaka 1957, 25). Since 1895, Japan had gone to war about every ten years until the end of World War II, and, during this period, ultraconservative nationalist sentiments permeated every sphere of society, causing the Japanese to become even more hostile to Western culture, particularly its religion. For the Japanese, there was no real escape from embracing nationalistic values and duties; they were never really free to pursue ideologies or religions which differed from the officially

sanctioned line of thought. So strong was the attachment to these beliefs that Christianity was not able to penetrate the religious fabric of Japanese society. In this religio-cultural and political milieu, moreover, Shinto-sponsored nationalism encouraged xenophobic hostility toward Christianity. Christianity and Christians were seen by many Japanese as a potential threat to national unity. Christians were “accused of being antinational because they claimed in the Christian God an authority superior to the Emperor” (Takenaka 1957, 74). No wonder then that “throughout the Tokugawa era and even the period from the Meiji government until the end of World War II, Christians were often suspected and accused of a questionable loyalty to their country” (Fujita 1991, 259). Such antagonism toward Christians was particularly strong during World War II, as the Japanese linked Christians with the nations at war with Japan. In addition, the missionaries’ religious cause was misperceived to be part of a Western colonial scheme. As a result, churches in Japan were suppressed by the authorities, especially during war times: the government pressured various denominations to amalgamate into a united church; missionaries were compelled to leave or were deported; Christian institutions and individuals were subject to frequent questioning; and sermon topics were subject to review by the authorities. Long misunderstood and persecuted, Christianity never really had a chance to establish a rapport with the Japanese. And a deep-rooted opposition to Christianity has persisted generally in Japanese society ever since its introduction.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study attempted to show that the situations and events of the period between the late eighteenth century and the mid-1940s in Korea and Japan set the stage for the different reception accorded to Protestantism in the two countries. In Korea, the late Joseon government’s favourable disposition towards the new religion and its missionaries—the good will borne by the need to solicit Western help in preserving sovereignty—and the missionaries’ provision of various social services, most of which were the only ones available to the masses, contributed significantly to the people’s positive perception of Protestantism. The absence of conflict between traditional religions and Christianity

further added to the appeal of the latter.

In Japan, on the other hand, the possibility of Christianity making a strong impression was severely limited by the succession of governments that had been openly hostile to the imported faith in their promotion of insular nationalism. From the time of nation-building during the Meiji era to the end of World War II, the Japanese government had been bent on unifying Japan with their national religion, Shinto. So strong was the Japanese attachment to this national ideology that Christianity was not able to penetrate their religious sensibility. With the spiritual security offered by Shinto, the Japanese felt no need for a non-Japanese religion. Faced with the all-embracing, nationalistic Shinto combined with the anti-Christian stance of other traditional religions in Japan, Christianity was unable to find points of contact with the religious inclination of the Japanese. Japan's involvement in World War II made the Japanese even more antagonistic to Western culture, especially its religion: religion of the West was perceived simply as a religion of the enemies. Church membership and attendance had never been impressive to begin with, but they dropped significantly during the war. In addition, whereas nationalism in Korea was linked, however remotely, with the growth of Christianity, the opposite was true for Japan, where growing nationalism prompted the Japanese to become even more absorbed in things their own. In Korea, many elites perceived the church as a whole to be the only organization capable of resisting Japanese rule and coordinating an independence movement. Furthermore, the prominence of Christians in the Conspiracy Trial of 1911⁸ and the March First Independence Movement of 1919⁹ forged a strong link between Christianity and nascent Korean nationalism in the wake of the Japanese

⁸ The Conspiracy Trial involved the outlandish claim by the new government that it had uncovered a plot to assassinate the Japanese Governor-General in Korea at the time. In early 1911, 124 Koreans were arrested—all of whom were suspected of involvement in the independence movement—and 123 were brought to trial. Although most of them were acquitted, the fact that ninety-eight of the men were Christians left a strong impression in the minds of the Korean people, establishing the Christians and churches as defenders of Koreans' national aspirations.

⁹ The Independence Movement of 1919 was also noted for the prominent role of Christians, especially Protestants, as its organizers and leaders: nearly half of those who signed the Declaration of Independence—15 of 33 signers—were Christian. The salience of Christianity in the movement was further noted in the figure of those imprisoned for participating in the demonstration: over 22 percent of the total or 2,087 out of 9,458 were Christian (Yi, 1991, 349).

annexation.¹⁰

The Korean and Japanese cases are thus congruent with Grayson's theory of emplantation, for the fate of Christianity in the two countries rested heavily on whether the imported faith was tolerated by the ruling elite of the host society and on the resolution of conflict between the new doctrine and the existing religions of the host society. A comparative analysis of Christianity in Korea and Japan reveals other insights. First, the significance of non-religious factors in conversion is demonstrated. In Korea, such national traumas as colonization seriously undermined the influence of traditional belief systems, engendering a fertile situation in which a new religion could grow. In Japan, in contrast, the state-sponsored promotion of nationalism and militarism, both of which were intimately tied to the state-patronized Shinto, left no room for Christianity to make a lasting impact. Japan's involvement in World War II also reinforced the identification of Christianity as the religion of the enemies.

Second, the Korea-Japan comparison refutes the argument which attributes the failure of Christianity in Japan to the following: that Christian teachings differ fundamentally from the traditional patterns of Japanese thought and worldview, e.g., monotheism versus traditional polytheism, a transcendent God versus the immanent Japanese deities, and an individual ethic versus a group-oriented ethic. However, the success of Christianity in Korea summarily dismisses this argument, for the country's traditional religions and thought patterns also have been imbued with polytheistic, this-worldly and group-oriented outlooks. What this shows is that religious incompatibility between the imported faith and traditional religions does not sufficiently account for the low receptivity to Christianity in Japan. Rather, the confluence of circumstantial and social factors that reinforced the Japanese' attachment to their own tradition, including

¹⁰ This does not mean that that the link between Christianity and Korean nationalism was unequivocal. There were conservative factions within the church which attempted to keep politically-charged secular sentiments, such as nationalism, out of the church, insisting instead on church non-involvement in the nation's political affairs. In fact, there was even a pro-Japanese faction within the church, e.g., the Northern Methodist Bishop Merriman C. Harris was notoriously pro-Japanese.

that of religious kind, was more important in dissuading the Japanese from accepting the new religion.

Another argument explaining the failure of Christianity in Japan has it that the syncretic tendencies of Japanese traditional religions are incompatible with the exclusivistic Christianity. In other words, Christianity's exclusive claims to an absolute truth or its inability to blend together with other religions is said to have caused its "failure" in Japan. The Korean case also challenges this argument, for syncretism is a main characteristic of Korean religious tradition as well. For centuries, Korean Shamanism and Buddhism have mutually adopted each other's deities into its own pantheon: Shamanism adopted various Buddhist deities as their own, while Buddhism deified *sansin* (mountain god) and *chilseong* (Spirit of the Seven Stars or the Big Dipper) of Shamanism by building their shrines at temple complexes. In spite of such syncretic inclinations of Korean traditional religions, Christianity was able to take root in the country. In fact, Korean Christianity manifests many Buddhist influences. For example, the daily dawn prayer—usually held at five in the morning—has been a unique and a widely popular practice among Korean Christians since the early 1900s. In Buddhism, the dawn meditation and prayers were always valued for their invocation of the purity and clarity of mind, and Korean Christianity likewise accepted this custom as a ritual of its own. The popularity of the practice of fasting while praying, although the practice itself is accounted for in the Bible, was also derived largely from Buddhism. For the adherents of Buddhism, the first and fifteenth days of the first, fifth and ninth lunar months are observed for a fast. On those days and others, meditation and prayer while fasting are always accorded a strict obeisance by the followers of Buddhism. There are other features of prayers unique to Korea that manifest a Buddhist influence. For example, the all-night prayer was another instance of a Buddhist element extant in Christianity. At revival meetings and for special events (e.g., a locally organized prayer for a gravely ill church member), all-night prayers were commonplace. Also revealing Buddhist components are the practice of *baegil gido* ("a hundred-day prayer") and *cheonil gido* ("a thousand-day prayer"), throughout which Korean Christians make extended entreaties to God. What is

evident here again is that the alleged doctrinal incompatibility between Christianity and traditional religions is not a main reason for the Japanese indifference to the imported faith. As the Korean case amply demonstrates, it was the social factors and the acculturation of Christianity into a meaning system mirroring the Korean religious outlook that facilitated the rise of Christianity in the country (see Kim 2000).

In short, a receptive climate toward Christianity was present in both countries during the initial state of missionary efforts. However, such receptivity persisted in one country while fading in the other. Relatively greater unstable social conditions in one country, particularly in regard to the question of sovereignty, made the people more receptive to a new value system, while the people in the other became more insular, more convinced of the superiority of their cultural and religious traditions in the face of looming Western influences. In fact, Christian expansion in Japan was expected after World War II, as their defeat would make the Japanese lose faith in their old religions and accept a new religion, i.e., Christianity (Iglehart 1959, 343). This never happened, because even in defeat the national faith in Shinto was still intact: “Though most Japanese would have been unable precisely to say who or what the gods were, the shrine system was their own, Japanese and precious, and participation in its ceremonies were an essential element of community living” (Iglehart 1959, 344). In Korea, on the other hand, traditional religions were in disarray, unable to provide a strong sense of identity and provide for emotional and spiritual security. Christianity offered a religious alternative to Confucianism and Buddhism, an alternative not too radically different from the Koreans’ own religious inclination. Also, a considerable number of Korean Christians seemed to have acquired their faith as a means of psychological relief from despair over national tragedies and social crises. Unable to make sense of their harsh realities within the traditional worldview and value system, large numbers of Koreans found in Christianity not only a new spiritual means to shed their sense of stagnation and defeat but also a dynamic and energetic spiritual foundation of life which could inspire a new beginning. The imported Christian alternative, with its promise of eternal life and worldly success, thus became the salvation ethos for personal and national empowerment for growing

numbers of Koreans burdened by a troubled past and uncertainty in a world of rapid change.

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