The Religious Revolution in Modern Korean History: From ethics to theology and from ritual hegemony to religious freedom[1]

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In pre-modern Korea, religion was not a separate and distinct realm in society. The government did not grant religious activities any more freedom from government interference than any other public activity enjoyed. In fact, the government exercised ritual hegemony, claiming control over religious rituals. Moreover, the average Korean did not profess a specific religious orientation. Though many Koreans frequented Buddhist temples and patronized shamans, only a few Koreans, those who were religious professionals, wore religious labels.

That began to change in the late 18th century, when Christianity entered Korea and introduced a new paradigm of religion, and of church-state relations. By the second half of the 20th century, Koreans in the Republic of Korea enjoyed religious freedom, and that accelerated the rate at which Korea's religious culture changed. One way Koreans exercised that new freedom was to identify with specific religious organizations. By the beginning of the 21st century, over half of them did so. Moreover, most of the organizations they identified with are unlike traditional religious communities in that they are confessional and congregational. This has dramatically transformed the religious culture of Korea.

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Introduction

The term "religious revolution" in the title to this paper might surprise some readers. The term "revolution" has political overtones that may seem out of place in a discussion of religion in Korea in modern times (except, of course, in a discussion of the Donghak Uprising of the 1890s). However, this paper is not about any attempts by religious groups in Korea to overthrow a government or bring about radical political, economic, or social change. Instead, this paper argues that the transformation in Korea's religious culture which began approximately two and a half centuries ago has been so rapid, dramatic, and far-reaching in the last few decades that to call it anything other than a revolution is to understate how much religion in Korea has changed. Moreover, if I described this transformation as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, I would downplay how much resistance there was in the early stages to this change in the Korean understanding of what religion is, and in Korean expectations of the role religion should play in society.

In order to support this claim that religion in Korea today is radically different, and plays a radically different role, than religion played three centuries ago, I will lay out my argument in three parts.

First, I will briefly describe the religious culture of Korea today, how religion is defined, which religious communities exist and what their relative strength is, and what their relationship is with the government and society of the Republic of Korea (for the modern period, I will focus on South Korea, since North Korea has not undergone as far-reaching a religious transformation as South Korea has). It is necessary to show what Korea looks like today in order to support my argument that Korea's religious culture had undergone a dramatic change.

Then I will step back in time to the first four centuries of the Joseon kingdom. I will present a sketch of which religions were significant in traditional Korea, how religion was conceived back then, and what the relationship of those religious communities was to the state.

Finally, I will get to the primary subject of this article, religious change in early modern Korea. Historians of Korea do not agree on where to draw the bor-

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Religiosity." The author would like to thank the KRF and also thank the three other members of that team, Chung Soon-woo from The Academy of Korean Studies, Choi Jong Seong from Seoul National University, and Ahn Young-sang from Andong University, for their advice and encouragement for this project.

ders of the early modern period in Korean history. A widely used two-volume collection of translated primary documents, *Sources of Korean Tradition,* begins volume two in 1600 (Yongho Ch'oe 2000). Most historians would consider that far too early. Others, particularly those who focus most of their attention on the 20th century, don't see Korea entering into its early modern age until the middle of the 19th century. The proposed *Cambridge History of Korea* will start the modern Korean history volume in 1860. For the purposes of this talk on religious change, I will draw the line somewhere in between. I'll locate the beginnings of early modern religious history in the last quarter of the 18th century, since that is when Catholicism entered Korea and instigated the religious revolution I will describe.

Religion in Korea at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Before I do that, however, let me show what Korea looks like today so you can see how much it has changed.

The first things an observant visitor will notice in the contemporary religious landscape in the southern half of the Korean peninsula are: 1) the dominance of Christianity, obvious in the many churches, both large and small, which are visible in Korea's streets and alleys; 2) the resurgence of Buddhism, obvious in the large number of temples either being built or rebuilt in Korea's cities and towns ; and 3) the continued vitality of shamanism, obvious in the many reverse swastikas on building walls and the many signs on office buildings and apartment blocks proclaiming that there is a philosophy research centre (i.e., a fortune—teller) inside. Less difficult to spot, but obvious to a careful observer nonetheless, would be the multiplicity of new indigenous religions.

Korea did not look like that three hundred, one hundred, or even half-a—century ago. We have no figures for the religious orientation, or even for the religious practices, of the Korean population in the Joseon kingdom. The only religious groups for which we can find even rough estimates of the size of their membership before the 20th century are Catholics, Protestants, and Donghak (all relatively recent additions to Korea's religious landscape). However, when Japan took over the Korean peninsula in 1910 and turned it into a colonial appendage of its growing empire, one of the first things the Japanese did was to begin surveying their subjects, asking questions about age, family size, occupation, and religious orientation.

Early in the colonial period, in 1916, Japanese authorities counted approximately 500,000 Koreans, out of a population of between 15 to 17 million, who were enrolled in various Christian, Buddhist, sectarian Shinto, or Korean indigenous new religious organizations.[2] That was at most 3% of the Korean population at that time. By 1940, out of a population grown to 23.5 million, the size of the self-consciously religious community had almost doubled.[3] However, the number of Koreans willing to tell their Japanese surveyors that they had any specific religious preference was still only around one million. Despite more than two decades of proselytizing by Christians and by representatives of new religions from Korea and both new religions and Buddhist organizations from Japan, the percentage of the Korean population willing to confess a specific religious orientation had risen only to slightly more than 4%.

That lack of interest in religious labels began to change after the Korean War. In 1964, the government of South Korea calculated that 3.5 million out of its 28.2 million citizens (12%) had a specific religious affiliation (Gwon 1993: 41). That was well over three times the number the Japanese had found in all of Korea in 1940, though the population of South Korea in 1964 was only 20% larger than that of the entire peninsula under the Japanese. However, this tripling of the percentage of the South Korean population that wore a religious label was only the beginning of a rush into organized religion. South Korea rapidly moved from a society with only 12% of its people proclaiming a religious identification in 1964 to over 42% declaring themselves either Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, or a follower of one of Korea's many other organized religions in 1985. The 17.2 million Koreans who told government census takers in 1985 that they identified with a specific religious orientation were joined by another 5.3 million in the 1995 census, giving South Korea 22.5 million religious followers out of a population grown to 44.5 million. By the mid-1990s, for the first time in Korea's

2. Takahashi (1929: 959) gives a figure of 63,571 Korean Budddhists in 1916. murayama (1991: 413), suggests that there were around 150,000 Korean followers of new religions at that time. According to the *Hanguk jonggyo yeongam* (p. 131), there were a total of 283,022 Christians in Korea in 1916.

3. The Government General of Chōsen (Joseon) reported that there were around 237,000 Korean Buddhists in Korea in 1940 and around 570,000 Christians. We can estimate, based on a Japanese figure of 170,000 in 1934 (*Joseonui yusa jonggyo,* p. 419) that there were less than 200,000 followers of new Korean religions in 1940. According to *Hanguk jonggyo yeongam* (p. 155), there were also 20,429 Korean followers of Japanese new religions in Korea in 1940.

history, a slight majority of those living under a Korean government had come to consider themselves to be members of a specific religious community (Yun 1998: 198).

That trend has continued. Early in the 21st century, Gallup Korea as well as another government census confirmed that more Koreans identify with a specific religious community than have no specific religious orientation. In a 2004 survey, Gallup found that only 46.5% of those surveyed said they did not believe in any religion, the first time Gallup had found the non-religious outnumbered by the religious (Gallup 2004: 17). The 2005 government census confirmed the accuracy of the Gallup survey. In that census, 53.1% of the citizens of South Korea confessed a specific religious affiliation, while only 46.9% said they were not Buddhists, Christians, or members of any other religious community (Tonggyecheong 2006: 32). By the end of the 20th century, religious organizations and religious activities had become important features of the Korean cultural landscape. Such population statistics are supported by architectural evidence. The government of the Republic of Korea identified only 10,357 buildings regularly used for religious rituals in 1962, excluding shaman shrines (Hanguk Jonggyo Sahoe Yeonguso 1993: 16). By 1997, the number of worship halls in the southern half of the peninsula had risen to 74,607, a seven-fold increase (Yun 1998: 198). Though different religious communities added new worship halls at different rates, by the beginning of the 21st century all of the major religious organizations, with the exception of Confucianism, provided substantially more places for their followers to gather than they ever had before in Korean history.

For example, figures collected by the South Korean government indicate that the number of Buddhist temples in South Korea rose from 2,306 in 1962 to 11,561 in 1997, a five-fold increase over a little more than three decades. The figures are even more remarkable for Protestant churches. There were at least 58,046 Protestant churches in South Korea in 1997, more than eight times as many as the 6,785 that they had reported in 1962. Catholics are not able to establish new churches as quickly, primarily because of a shortage of priests. Nevertheless, there were 1,366 Catholic parish churches in Korea in 2005 compared to only 313 in 1965, a respectable four-fold increase over 40 years. Even the relatively small indigenous religion of Won Buddhism (which, despite its name, considers itself a new religion rather than a branch of Korean Buddhism) expanded from 131 worship halls in 1969 to 418 in 1997, indicating that the boom in organized religion has not been confined to those religious organiza-

tions with a long history and international connections.[4]

This explosion in the number of halls of worship, as well as in the percentage of the Korean population that confesses a religious affiliation, is not the religious revolution I am talking about but only overt evidence that such a revolution has taken place. The revolution goes much deeper than these numbers. Explicit religious affiliation has grown so rapidly not because a much larger percentage of the Korean population engages in ritual interaction with spiritual beings today than ever did in the past but because many more Koreans today see themselves as belonging to a specific religious community than did so in the past.

What are those religious communities? The dominant communities are Buddhism and Christianity. According to the 2005 census, 22.8% of Koreans are Buddhists, 18.3% are Protestants, 10.9% are Catholics, 0.2% call themselves Confucians, 0.3% call themselves Won Buddhists, and 0.5% had another religious affiliation. Gallup found somewhat different figures. Based on their 2004 survey, they found the South Korean population to be 24.6% Buddhist, 21.4% Protestant, 6.7% Catholic, and only 0.9% members of other religious organizations. Despite differences in the relative sizes of the various religion communities, both Gallup and the National Statistical Office agree that around 25 million South Koreans, out of a population of some 47 million, now claim a specific religious affiliation.

Moreover, both Gallup and the National Statistical Office agree that the overwhelming majority of self-identified religious Koreans are either Christian or Buddhist. The 2005 census found 10.7 million Buddhists and 13.8 million Christians (8.6 million Protestants and 5.2 million Catholics). That is a very rapid increase in the numbers of self-proclaimed Korean Buddhists and Christians over the second half of the 20th century. However, less than 500,000 Koreans said they were a member of a religious community other than mainstream Buddhism or Christianity. Are indigenous religions such as Cheondogyo, Won Buddhism, Daejonggyo, and Daesun Jinrihoe really as small and unpopular as that number would suggest? And what about the remaining 46% of South Koreans who say they have no particular religious affiliation? Many of those who do not affirm a religious affiliation when talking with a surveyor may actu-

4. Catholic figures for 1965 are taken from *Hanguk jonggyo yeongam* (p. 164). The 2005 Catholic figures were found at http://www.catholichierarchy.org/country/sc1.html, accessed August 5, 2006. Won Buddhist figures for 1969 come from *Hanguk jonggyo yeongam* (p. 169). The other figures are taken from No Chijun (1993: 168).

ally be religious (i.e., may believe in supernatural beings) and engage in behavior others would consider religious even though they don't identify with a specific religious community.

For example, the clients of shamans don't necessarily say that they have a religious affiliation (although many of them identify their religion as Buddhism). And powerful new religions such as Daesun Jinrihoe, which claims to have 6 million members, do not even appear as a distinct category alongside Buddhism and Christianity in either government or Gallup surveys. Yet Daesun Jinrihoe has collected contributions from enough followers to build a university north of Seoul and also to build a couple of modern general hospitals in the Seoul area. This apparent gap between the invisibility of Daesun Jinrihoe in religious surveys and its success in fund-raising may be because its members have not adopted modern concepts of religion and religious affiliation. They may still hold on to the traditional assumption that only religious professionals have religious labels and therefore don't give themselves religious labels when answering questions from surveyors.

The leaders of religious organizations have been faster than some of their followers to adopt the new concept of what a religious organization should look like and what it should do. Most religious organizations in Korea today, both Christian and non-Christian alike (with the conspicuous exception of shaman organizations), increasingly model themselves at least partially on Christian models of church organization and forms of worship. For example, religion in Korea today is increasingly confessional and congregational.

By congregational, I mean that Korea's religious communities, even those without Christian roots, have adopted the Christian practice of meeting regularly for worship in buildings set aside for such worship. Usually those worship services are held on Sunday mornings, even if the services are Buddhist or otherwise non-Christian rather than Christian. Moreover, the same people, give or take a few, usually come to those services, forming congregations, or subsets of much larger religious denominations. These congregations create a sense of community among their members, since they get to know one another when they join together in worship as well as in social activities centered on their place of worship. Modern Koreans identify strongly with their particular congregations, often placing stickers on their apartment doors to proclaim which specific church (or, in some cases, temple) they go to.

Another manifestation of the congregational nature of contemporary Korean religiosity can be seen at various pilgrimage sites throughout the peninsula.

Catholics pioneered the practice of filling highway buses with believers and sending them out to various sacred sites (in the Catholic instance, these are usually sites associated with the martyrs of their early history). Now other religious communities as well are organizing group pilgrimages to their sacred sites. Protestants sent pilgrims to the Holy Land. The new religions send pilgrims to the places on the peninsula where their religions were founded. And Buddhist monks now advertise guided tours to temples regarded as particularly sacred or as particularly efficacious for those who pray there. What is important to note here, and we will get back to this later, is that these tours are primarily for lay people. Both the creation of congregations of lay believers and the growth in pilgrimage tours for lay people are evidence that religious affiliation in Korea is not just for religious professionals anymore. More and more ordinary Koreans are identifying with not only specific religious traditions but with particular communities within those traditions.

Korean religiosity today is also increasingly confessional. By confessional, I mean faith-based. Most religious organizations now require their members to affirm certain doctrinal principles (traditional Buddhists are a conspicuous exception) if they want to be full-fledged members. Moreover, most religious organizations in Korea imitate the Christian practice of having a one-volume sacred text that contains their defining principles. Even Buddhists and Confucians in Korea produce their own kind of "Bible," so powerful has become the assumption that a religion is defined by its doctrines.

If we examine the doctrines taught by Korea's various religions, both Christian and non-Christian, we might notice a growing tendency toward theology, and mono-devotionalism. I don't want to say monotheism, because both Buddhists and some of the large new religions reject the notion that there is one god and only one god. However, when I notice that some newer Buddhist temples are replacing the usual trinity of Buddhas in the main worship hall with a statue of the historic Buddha only, when I visit a church for those who worship Korea's legendary ancestor Dangun and am told that he is the only God Koreans should worship, and when I study the Jeungsan family of religions and find that, though they recognize the existence of many supernatural beings, they focus their attention on Kang Jeungsan, whom they call *Sangjenim* and the supreme leader of the Federation of Spirits, I can't help but conclude that Korea is moving away from the polytheism of its past closer to both monotheism and to the emphasis on theology and doctrine (on belief in the one true God and his revelations) which is characteristic of confessional religions.

One consequence of the strength of confessional and congregational religion in Korea today is Korea's rampant denominationalism. Korea's religious communities are fragmented into competing organizations that differentiate themselves from their competitors with minute differences in doctrine. For example, there are over 70 Presbyterian sub-denominations in South Korea today (Hanguk Jonggyo Sahoe Yeonguso 1993: 528-9). Other Protestant denominations are similarly divided, thought not quite to that extent. Many of the new religions also have split into rival factions. Even Buddhism, which presents itself to the outside world as united under the umbrella of the Jogyejong, has several separate and distinct denominations.

Though such splintering of religious communities is often decried by religious leaders, it has at least one positive consequence. Because no one religious community is large or strong enough to impose its will on others, Korea (at least that part of Korea south of the DMZ) enjoys an atmosphere of religious tolerance, and believers in Korea enjoy religious freedom. The religious affairs bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism keeps track of which religions are active in Korea, how many members and houses of worship they have, and what public activities those religious organizations engage in, but it does not favor any one of those communities over any other. The government of the Republic of Korea does not license clergy, nor does it declare that one religion, one god, or one set of doctrines is more in line with Korean values than any other. The official attitude of the Korean government toward religious organizations is neutrality.

Religion in Korea before 1775

This is all very different from the relationship between the state and religion three centuries ago. Moreover, the concept of religion, the relationship of laity to clergy, and of laity to religious communities, as well as the way religious communities define themselves and differentiate themselves from other religious communities have changed dramatically. Up until about two and a half centuries ago, religion in Korea was neither confessional nor congregational. Nor was there any concept of religious freedom.

In fact, two and a half centuries ago, Korea did not even have the concept of religion. What we now label religions were called by a variety of different terms, such as *gyo* (teachings), *do* (Way), *beop* (methods), *hak* (scholarly orientation),

and *sul* (practices) (Jang Sukman 1992). Of course Buddhist, Confucian, and folk beliefs and practices were prevalent in Korea long before the 20th century, but they were not brought together under one umbrella or seen as so different from other forms of community activity that they needed a distinctive appellation of their own. Nor were sectarian labels used to separate lay people who engaged in one sort of religious activity from groups that performed different rituals or interacted with different gods. Monks proudly wore the label Buddhist, but those who visited their temples and prayed before the statues enshrined within were not considered Buddhists, nor were peasants who patronized shamans considered shamanists. Similarly, the wives who helped their husbands prepare for a Confucian ritual honoring ancestors were not considered Confucians. What we treat today as religious labels were actually professional titles.

In pre-modern Korea, the term "Buddhist" applied primarily to monks. When King Sejo promoted the publication of vernacular translations of Buddhist *sutras*, he was not labeled a Buddhist. Nor were the various queens who sponsored Buddhist rituals called Buddhists in contemporary records. Moreover, in the Joseon dynasty materials I have reviewed, I have not seen the term "Buddhist" applied to peasants who bowed and prayed before Buddhist statues. The same restriction of a religious label to professional practitioners applies to Confucianism as well. Confucians were scholars and officials who studied, taught, and debated Confucian texts, not those who merely listened to them or read what they wrote. Similarly, shamans were individuals who possessed a special ability to communicate with supernatural beings through ritual, not the people who attended those rituals. In contrast to what we see today, those who availed themselves of the services of professional ritual specialists were not necessarily considered members of the same religious community as those specialists. Nor were there hard and fast lines dividing what we now see as separate religious orientations. Peasants could, and did, perform Confucian rituals, patronize shamans, and pray at Buddhist temples without any feeling of disloyalty or inconsistency. There was little sense among the laity of exclusive religious affiliation.

In fact, for the vast majority of the population of Korea in the Joseon kingdom, there were no Korean religions to identify with. There was instead only one inclusive Korean religion, with Confucian, Buddhist, shamanistic, and even Daoist elements intermingling to form various configurations. Even the Neo-Confucian *yangban* ruling elite, though they distinguished the various strands in Korea's religious fabric in theory, in practice treated them as intermingled for

most practical purposes. *Yangban* would denounce Korea's various religious traditions under the same rubric of dangerous delusions with depraved rituals (*eumsa*), but, when epidemics or crop failure threatened, would avail themselves of shaman, Buddhist, and Taoist rituals as equally potentially efficacious. Similarly, a housewife might offer prayers at a shrine to a village guardian spirit on her way to worship at a Buddhist temple, a regular client of a shaman might climb a mountain to pray before a rock carving of a Bodhisattva, and a Confucian official might sponsor Buddhist, Taoist, or even shaman rituals without any of them feeling that they were crossing religious boundaries or confusing religious traditions.

With such porous boundaries between religious traditions, and with such transitory ties between religious professionals and their lay clients, traditional Korea cannot be said to have had congregational religion. There were no stable congregations. Small groups might gather together to perform or witness rituals for specific purposes, but then they would disperse again. Three centuries ago lay Koreans did not meet weekly for worship services in buildings set aside for such meetings. Nor did Koreans form the sort of lay sectarian organizations we see in pre-modern China's secret societies. They did not even develop the denominational allegiances we see in pre-modern Japanese Buddhism.

It is common in the modern age to describe religious communities as faith-based communities. In pre-modern Korea, a more appropriate description would be "ritual-based communities." People would come to a sacred site such as a Buddhist temple or a shaman shrine, or visit a religious professional, in order to have a ritual performed which they hoped would grant them health, wealth, or longevity, but that was the extent of their commitment. They were not expected to profess faith in the gods or spirits approached in those rituals, or even in the power of the rituals themselves to give them what they asked for. Nor were they expected to become regular worshippers of the gods whose help they wanted. Instead they met in *ad hoc* gatherings when there was something they needed from a god or spirit.

Traditional Korean religious organizations did not require regular worship or doctrinal commitment from those who availed themselves of their services because religion in pre-modern Korea was not theologically oriented. Koreans back then believed in the existence of supernatural beings and invisible personalities who could intervene in human affairs for good or ill. But they did not spend much time trying to define who exactly those gods were and what the precise nature of their powers was.

Neo-Confucianism, the functional equivalent of religion for the ruling *yangban* elite, argued that how we interacted with our fellow human beings was much more important than how we interacted with spiritual beings (with the conspicuous exception of our ancestors, who still maintained ties to human society after they died). Neo-Confucians recognized a supreme moral power, but *li* (patterning principle) was not conceived anthropomorphically and was not worshipped by Koreans. Buddhism, at least as conceived by lay visitors to temples, allowed for the existence of supernatural beings, both Buddhas and *boddhisatvas*. Buddhists prayed to those gods and monks honored them with ritual. However, Buddhists did not spend much time in theological discussions of how human beings should relate to those gods. Monastic Buddhism was more interested in how we human beings acted among ourselves than in how we interacted with divine beings. We were supposed to cultivate an attitude of selfless detachment from our own problems and compassion for the problems of other sentient beings rather than focus on showing our devotion to a particular deity as a way of establishing a special relationship between ourselves as individuals and that god. Pure Land Buddhism emphasizing individual salvation through faith in the Amitabha Buddha never gained the institutional visibility it enjoyed in Japan or even the prominence it enjoyed in China.

Koreans who were not Neo-Confucian scholars or Buddhist monks frequently interacted with supernatural beings, but that interaction was more contractual than the term worship usually implies. Popular religion in the Joseon kingdom was based on the assumption that you can approach one or more powerful supernatural personalities with a specific request and that, if you offer the god or spirit something he (or she) wants, he (or she) will respond by trying to give you what you want. There was usually no obligation to return regularly to worship that god when there was nothing you needed that god to do for you.

This is quite different from the way religious worship is conceived today. One reason the pre-modern attitude toward the gods was different from what it is today is that pre-modern Koreans were not monotheistic. There were many gods and spirits, and if one god or spirit didn't give you what you wanted, you could look for one who would. There is a widespread assumption in South Korea today that Koreans have a long monotheistic tradition of worship of a Supreme Deity called either *Hananim* or *Haneunim*. However, there is no documentary evidence to back up such an assumption, and plenty of evidence to contradict it.[5] Koreans were generally polytheists, not monotheists, and as such, they were more concerned about what gods could do for them then for what an all-

powerful God wanted them to do.

There are two implications of polytheism that makes traditional Korean religiosity different from the religiosity of today. First of all, if you believe in one God and one God only, and you believe that God is extremely powerful, you are also likely to believe that it is important for you to understand what sort of God he (or she) is and what he (or she) wants from you. Thus monotheism encourages both theological thinking and concern for doctrinal consistency. It also leads to a belief that the One God has provided guidance to humanity in the form of divine revelations, and that all human beings must study those revelations and believe what is in them.

Polytheists, on the other hand, don't believe that any one god is all-powerful. Therefore they don't have to worry too much about what sort of god their gods are, since there is such a wide variety of them. You don't normally find polytheistic theological seminaries. Nor do polytheists have to worry too much about what a particular god wants them to do, since other gods might have contradictory or alternative expectations. They also don't care very much about any broad "revelations" from any one god, since with so many gods they have a wide variety of sources to turn to for advice and insight from the supernatural realm. There are not real polytheistic "Bibles."

A second implication of polytheism that makes traditional Korean religiosity different from the religiosity of today has to do with the relationship between religion and morality. Since polytheists don't live in fear of and tremble at offending the one all-powerful deity, they are also less likely to assume a close connection between morality and religion. If the gods are responsible for moral rules, and there are competing gods, then there could be competing moral rules. In order for society to be consistent in what it judged right and wrong, morality should be grounded somewhere other than religion.

At least, that was the case in Korea. Confucian moral principles defined morality in the Joseon kingdom. Those moral principles were not handed down by any God or set of gods but rather, they were believed to be inherent in the nature of both human beings and the universe as a whole. Moreover, they were discovered by the sages of old, rather than being inscribed by a Supreme Being

5. I elaborate on this argument in Baker, 2000. Few scholars in Korea have been convinced by the evidence I present in that article supporting my claim that Koreans had no indigenous term for a monotheistic deity until Protestant missionaries coined a term for them.

on stone tablets and revealed to humanity. Religions were supposed to support those moral principles, not generate opposing moral principles of their own. Ethical demands generated by specific religious traditions were not allowed to override the behavioral demands of the state. Rather than serving as a primary, or even an alternative, source of moral guidance, as it had in the West, religion in traditional East Asia had to accept the subordinate role of reinforcing the state's moral code.

By definition, any religion that contradicted such Confucian values as loyalty to the king or filial respect and support for parents was immoral and therefore both unacceptable and illegal. This became clear in the late 18th century when a few Koreans were converted to Roman Catholicism and began claiming that their obligation to obey what they perceived as God's laws superseded the Confucian injunction to show proper ritual respect for deceased parents. They were executed as criminals for violating the government's demand that religious beliefs support rather than determine moral obligations (Baker 1979 and 1979-80).

The assumption of the Joseon government that individual religious preferences could not overrule the demands of the state was not confined to morality. The Joseon kingdom also exercised what I call ritual hegemony. That means that the state, not individuals or religious authorities, determined which gods could be worshipped, as well as how, when, where, and by whom they could be worshipped. Under the ritual hegemony of the state, there was no religious freedom. Nor was there complete suppression of religious activity. Individuals were allowed to engage in religious activity as long as they did so with the permission of the state, and did not claim that their gods were more powerful, or had a greater claim on their obedience, than the government did. However, individuals did not have the freedom to ignore the ritual demands of the state. The first Catholic martyrs were executed because they refused to honor their ancestors in the prescribed manner.

A glance through government records from the Joseon court will reveal many other examples of ritual hegemony in operation. For example, in the middle of the 15th century the state declared that heads of households hosting shamanic rituals would suffer legal consequences (Yi Neunghwa 1977: 37; Han Ugeun 1976: 189). Yet the same government which declared private shamanic ritual illegal appointed shamans to official posts in public health clinics outside the gates of the capital city. Shamans were also assigned to the official palace shaman shrine and to local government offices. Spirit halls were established

within the grounds of those offices for use by those shamans. Moreover, shamans were occasionally mobilized by government officials, both in the capital region and in the provinces, to participate in a number of state-sanctioned rituals, such as rituals for rain in times of drought, rituals for the recovery of the health of an ill member of the royal family, or rituals in honor of local guardian deities (Walraven: 160-98; Choe Jongseong 2002).

We see the same government use of, and control over, Buddhism. Buddhism theoretically should have been able to more effectively resist the ritual hegemony of the state, since it had a much stronger institutional presence than did the folk religion of the shamans. However, Buddhism had already given up any claim to autonomy when it accepted the status of the official state religion under preceding dynasties and even allowed the government to certify clerical status on the basis of government-run examinations. An early Joseon king, Taejong, reduced the number of officially recognized Buddhist denominations from eleven to seven. This was done by royal fiat, not through consultation with the Buddhist community. King Taejong's successor, King Sejong, reduced that number further to only two denominations, one emphasizing meditation and the other emphasizing the study of *sutras*. He also further reduced the number of temples, and of the monks allowed to dwell in those temples, until only 36 temples, with a total population of less than 4,000 monks and approximately the same number of temple slaves, were granted official sanction. Buddhism was not persecuted but it was placed under strict state control (Buswell 1999: 134-40; Yi Jaechang 1993).

Despite its official Confucian disdain for Buddhism, the Joseon court availed itself of the manpower and expertise the few remaining monks represented. Monk-healers were sometimes dispatched when an outbreak of disease threatened the population of a local area, and monks were attached, along with shamans, to some official public health clinics (Han Ugeun 1993: 135-8). Monk-artisans were required to manufacture paper and other products for the use of government officials (Kim Gapju 1994: 330-1). When the Japanese invaded Korea in 1592, King Seonjo asked the monk Hyujeong to organize all of Korea's monks into a fighting force to defend Korean soil against Hideyoshi's forces. Hyujeong did as his king asked him to do, creating an army 5,000 monks strong. Impressed by how well those monks fought, for much of the rest of the dynasty Korea's kings relied heavily on monk-soldiers. Under royal orders, monks built and defended the fortresses on both Mt. Namhan and Mt. Bukhan. A nation-wide network of monastery-military outposts was established and there

were even monks serving as a naval fighting force (Yeo Eun-gyeong 1992).

Clearly, the staunchly Confucian Joseon government did not outlaw religious activity or persecute religious believers per se. However, it also clearly did not allow religious freedom. Instead, it looked upon religious activity as no different from any other activity taking place within the territory under its control, granting religious organizations no more autonomy than it granted merchants, scholars, or slaves and availing itself of their services whenever and wherever it saw fit.

The Revolution Begins

All this began to change in the last quarter of the 18th century when first Roman Catholicism, then the indigenous new religion of Donghak, and finally Protestant missionaries began to challenge not only the state's claim to ritual hegemony but also the traditional understanding of what religion was, and what the relationship between religion and society, as well as between religious organizations and individuals, was. Before Catholicism instigated these changes, religion in Korea (at least for lay people) was more community and family oriented than a matter of individual faith or the pursuit of individual salvation. The boundaries between various religious traditions were porous, at least in practice if not in theory. Those religious communities that existed were defined more by shared participation in ritual than by common doctrinal beliefs. And ethics and moral principles were given authority over theology and doctrine. In addition, religion, as we have just seen, was under government authority, not alongside it.

Catholicism appeared in 1784 in the form of a Korean converted while on a visit to Beijing. Soon a small community of converts appeared. Those early Catholics not only defied the ritual hegemony of the state, they also introduced the notion of religious communities composed of both clergy and laity (congregations) and defined by shared doctrinal beliefs, and they insisted that, contrary to previous assumptions, beliefs about God should determine how they should behave instead of the other way around. Donghak came along almost 80 years later when a frustrated Confucian scholar had a personal encounter with God. Like Catholicism, Donghak also created congregations bringing laity and clergy together into one religious community defined by shared beliefs. Donghak was also just as bold as Catholicism was in rejecting the state's claim to authority over the religious beliefs and practices of those within its jurisdiction. A couple

of decades later, in 1884, the first Protestant missionaries arrived on the Korean peninsula and accelerated the trend toward congregational confessional religion while stepping up pressure for religious freedom.

There are two features of Christianity and Donghak that made them different from Buddhism and shamanism, and undermined traditional Korean concepts of religion and of the traditional relationship between religious organizations and the state.

First of all, both Catholicism and Donghak are monotheistic. Monotheistic religions usually pose a greater threat to a government than a polytheistic religion does. If there are many gods, no single god is granted enough power to pose a threat to a government. However, believers in one Supreme Deity may draw enough strength from that belief to challenge their government and insist that they have to put the demands of their god above the demands of any mere mortal, even if that mortal happens to be their king.

Another subversive feature of monotheism is that it tends to give priority to theology over ethics. When there are many gods, no one god can dictate human behavior. But when there is one all-knowing and all-powerful God, that God can tell human beings what to do, and can punish those who act otherwise. Therefore it is important to ask theological questions first, since it is essential to know who God is before we know which allegedly divine commands have to be obeyed.

Moreover, a belief in one and only one god is usually accompanied by a belief that interaction with other alleged gods is spiritually deadly. Monotheists draw sharper borders between their religious communities and those which worship other gods. That creates a much stronger sense of community, bringing clergy and laity together to form congregations. This was a challenge to governments, like that of Joseon Korea, which did not want religion to be used as a basis for carving out separate and distinct spheres of society.

The second feature shared by Christianity and Donghak which made them both dangerous to the government is that followers of those religions believed that their God had directed them to perform certain rituals, and therefore they had to perform those rituals whether they had government permission to do so or not. To make matters worse, the rituals of both Christianity and Donghak are group rituals, which require people to gather together to perform them. To support such group ritual activities, both Christians and Donghak followers formed networks of small groups of believers who would meet regularly to study their respective sacred writings and perform the rituals those writings told them to

perform. Until foreign military pressure in the 1880s forced a change in Korea's laws, such group rituals constituted an illegal activity. The networks organized to support such ritual gatherings resembled the communities of faith formed by secret societies in China that had been outlawed by the Ming dynasty and therefore were denied legitimacy or legality by the Joseon dynasty, which had adopted many of the laws of the Ming.

The response of the Joseon government to both Catholic and Donghak claims that there was a God with much greater authority than any king, and that the king had no authority to determine when, how, and by whom that God would be honored through ritual, was bloody persecution. Persecution of Catholics started in 1791 and lasted into the 1870s. The Catholic response to that persecution was to ask the government of Catholic France to send military force to Korea to force the Joseon government to grant Catholics the freedom to worship their god and perform their rituals as they best saw fit (Yeo Jincheon 2003). The Donghak response was to publicly demand that the government admit it made a mistake when it executed their founder Choe Jeu in 1864, and to stop persecuting those who continued to follow Choe's teachings. When their peaceful demands for toleration were denied, some Donghak then took up arms in 1894 to force the government to grant them religious freedom (Yu 1993: 573-616).

Neither the Catholics nor the Donghak in the 19th century used the term "religious freedom" since that term was unknown in Korea at that time. However, when they asked that their government leave them alone to worship their god, perform their religious rituals, and read their sacred writings, they were actually asking for religious freedom even though they didn't use that term. Moreover, it was the struggles of the Catholics and the Donghak that first introduced Korea to the concept that there are limits on the power of the state, and that the state should not interfere in peaceful, non-political religious activities. In other words, the Catholics and the Donghak introduced to Korea the revolutionary concept that religion is a separate sphere of human society, existing alongside rather than under the state. The Catholics and the Donghak challenged the ritual hegemony of the state and in so doing laid the groundwork that eventually led to religious freedom in South Korea in the second half of the 20th century.

In the case of the first Catholics in Korea, the challenge to the ritual hegemony of the state was explicit. The persecution of Catholics began in 1791 when Yun Jichung and his cousin Gwon Sangyeon held a funeral service for Yun's mother without the spirit tablet orthodox Confucian mourning ritual required.

Yun and Gwon were both *yangban*. Buddhist monks and even commoners might be able to honor a deceased ancestor without a spirit tablet, but a *yangban* could not. The Confucian government of Joseon Korea required that *yangban* set an example of proper filial piety for the rest of the population. When Yun and Gwon failed to do so, they were arrested, interrogated, and then executed (Baker 1979).

Because of their rejection of the ritual hegemony of the state, Yun and the many Catholics who followed him were regularly accused of threatening to turn Korea into a land of wild beasts and barbarians. For example, an official 1839 condemnation of Catholicism, the *cheoksa yuneum* (a royal edict condemning evil), warned that "Catholics are ensnaring ever increasing numbers of our subjects and now threaten to turn our kingdom into a land, not of men, but of wild beasts and barbarians." That same statement goes on to condemn Catholics by asking rhetorically, "Weren't Catholics born in this land? Don't they sleep and eat on Korean soil?...Why do they abandon the ways of their ancestors, teachers and friends to adopt instead these evil practices which come from tens of thousands of *li* away?" (Yi Manchae 1984: 359). Notice the emphasis on "practices," on what the Catholics did more than on what they believed. Clearly, it was the Catholic challenge to the traditional Korean focus on ritual that aroused such violent opposition.

In 1801, ten years after Yun and Gwon were executed, a full-scale anti-Catholic persecution broke out that raged off and on for another 70 years. At first, the government began arresting Catholics because they had violated national sovereignty by smuggling a Chinese Catholic priest into Korea. The Catholics had smuggled Fr. Zhou Wenmo into Korea in 1794 because they believed that rituals only a priest could perform were essential to their salvation. However, the Joseon government would not have allowed him to enter Korea legally because the rituals he performed were not authorized by the government. The Catholic pursuit of salvation led them to reject the ritual hegemony of the state, which in turn led them to reject the territorial sovereignty of the state. Some of them went so far as to invite foreign military intervention in Korea to stop the government from persecuting them.[6]

6. Hwang Sayeong wrote a letter to the French bishop in Beijing asking for the French fleet to threaten to fire its cannons at Korea unless Catholics were allowed to practice their religion freely. See Yeo Jincheon, trans. *Hwang Sayeong baekseowa ibon.*

The government was not able to catch and kill all the Catholics in Korea in 1801. One young Catholic who escaped the persecution that year was Jeong Hasang. Before he was finally captured and executed in 1839, Jeong prepared a written argument against the persecution of Catholics. In part of his "Letter to the Prime Minister," Jeong asked rhetorically:

> " Why are we Catholics denied the tolerance granted to Buddhists and shamans?
>
> Does Catholicism harm the family? Does it harm the state? Look at what we Catholics do, study our behavior, and you will see what kind of people we are and what kind of teachings we follow. Catholics are not rebels. Catholics are not thieves. Catholics do not engage in lewd activities or murder." (Jeong Hasang 1976: 24-5)

Jeong Hasang missed a key point in his attempt to win for Catholics the same tolerance that had been granted Buddhists and shamans. He was right that both Buddhism and shamanism were considered unacceptable to the Neo-Confucians who ruled Korea. He was also right that, nonetheless, Buddhists were allowed to read their *sutras* and pray in their temples, and shamans were allowed to hold their rituals, despite the fact that such activities were heterodox. What he did not realize is that the Buddhists and the shamans were able to pursue their heterodox practices because they accepted the ultimate authority of the state over their actions. They did not challenge the authority of the government to determine which rituals could be performed, who could perform them, and where and when they could be performed. Nor did Buddhist monks or shamans form secret organizations or maintain contact with foreigners beyond Korea's borders.

Catholics, unfortunately, did all those things which Buddhists and shamans did not do. They refused to perform rituals such as *jesa* (the ancestor memorial ritual) in the manner the government told them to perform them. Moreover, they performed their own rituals, such as baptism and the mass, which the government had not given them permission to perform. And, worst of all, they looked to the pope in Rome and his representatives in Beijing rather than to the king of Korea for advice on their moral and ritual obligations. This was a departure from the traditional relationship between the state and religious communities which the Korean government could not tolerate until it was forced by foreign military pressure to do so. In 1886 France forced the Korean government to stop the persecution of French missionaries who had smuggled themselves into Korea since

the 1830s. However, Korean Catholics did not gain clear legal protection of their right to believe as they saw fit, or act in accordance with those beliefs, until 1899 (Choi Jonggo: 160-3; Yi Wonsun: 63-96).

As already noted, Catholics were not the only religious group that faced persecution during the Joseon dynasty. The Donghak religion was also persecuted. Choe Jeu, who founded this earliest of Korea's indigenous organized religions, was arrested and, on March 10, 1864, hanged for acting more like a Catholic than like a traditional Korean by preaching subversive doctrines that undermined the all-inclusive authority of the state (Susan Shin 1978-79; Yu Byeongdeok 1993).

Much of what he taught his followers was not new. Most of his moral principles were Confucian, as was much of his terminology (Yu Byeongdeok 1993: 43-50). Moreover, the symbols on his sacred talisman had been used many times before in popular religion without being treated as subversive. When he told his followers that talisman would protect them from disease, particularly if they took the piece of paper on which those characters were written, burnt it, mixed the ashes in water that they then drank, he was advising them to imitate a ritual performed by shamans (Paul Beirne 1993: 61-73; Yu Byeongdeok 1993: 20-31).

Most of the Donghak religion was thus traditional Korean religion merely rearranged into a new configuration. What made Donghak different from traditional Korean religion, and made it appear so dangerous to the government, were the same elements that made Catholicism so dangerous to the Joseon government: A focus on one God, the notion that belief in that God made Donghak followers a group apart from the rest of society, and, most important, a rejection of the ritual hegemony of the state.

The religious movement Choe Jeu started in 1860 did not die with him in 1864. Choe Sihyeong took over the reins of that movement and put it on a stronger theological and organizational footing. One important step Choe Sihyeong took was to begin illegally printing Donghak materials (using woodblocks for printing) in large quantities in 1880. The most important publication was, of course, the Donghak scriptures, since without those sacred texts Donghak followers could not pray together properly nor perform rituals together correctly.[7]

7. For the contributions of Choe Sihyeong to the transformation of Donghak into an organized religion, see Yu Byeongdeok (1993: 211-25).

Choe Sihyeong was not interested in direct confrontation with the government. Nevertheless, he and his congregations were forced underground since the government had declared Donghak an illegal organization. By the 1890s, this persecution must have seemed particularly unfair. By that time Catholic priests were allowed to move freely around the peninsula and Protestant missionaries were allowed to open churches. Donghak followers wondered why they still had to practice their faith in secret. Followers of the foreign religion of Christianity enjoyed more freedom to gather together to pray and perform rituals to their God than followers of the Korean religion of Donghak had to gather together to pray and perform rituals to their God.

In 1892, a group of Donghak followers gathered in Gongju to peacefully present a petition demanding that the persecution of Donghak followers stop and that Choe Jeu have his conviction erased and his good name restored to him. When their request was not granted, they demonstrated again a couple of months later. Finally, in February 1893, Donghak followers gathered in Seoul to petition the king directly to lift the ban on the Donghak religion, reverse the verdict on Choe Jeu, and order local officials to stop seizing the property of Donghak followers. That petition to the king was no more successful than the previous petitions to local government officials (Yu Byeongdeok 1993: 248-69).

The Donghak demand that the verdict that condemned Choe be erased at first appeared no different from similar demands by Confucian political factions that verdicts condemning their revered predecessors be reversed. Gradually, however, Donghak protests took on a broader significance. The Donghak were not asking for what Confucian factions asked for, for a restoration of access to government posts and a return the political respectability. They were asking simply to be left alone. In other words, they were asking to be ignored by government officials, not to join them. In asking for the freedom to follow their beliefs without government interference, they were calling for religious freedom, though they did not use that modern term.

Frustrated by the failure of the government to heed their plea to be left alone, a large group of Donghak followers and other sympathetic peasants gathered in Boeun in March 1893. That group added one more slogan to the previous calls for religious freedom: They also demanded the expulsion of foreigners from Korea. That last demand changed the character of those protests and led to the peasant rebellion of 1894 which had little to do with Donghak *per se,* except that it tarnished the name of Donghak and made it even more difficult for Donghak followers to gain religious freedom.[8]

The defeat of the peasant rebellion of 1894 forced Donghak followers deeper underground and their leader Choe Sihyeong into hiding. However, he was eventually captured by government forces and was executed in July 1898. The official charge against him was that he had led an unauthorized, and therefore illegal, organization (Yu Byeongdeok 1993: 211).

The execution of the Donghak leader was the last grasp of the traditional Korea policy of state control over religion. Only seven years later, in 1905, Donghak resurfaced as the legally tolerated religion of Cheondogyo and joined Christians in enjoying freedom of worship and freedom of belief. There were a few more rough spots on the road to full religious freedom, particularly during the years from 1910 to 1945 when Korea was under the colonial rule of Japan but by the second half of the 20th century, religious freedom had been recognized, in South Korea anyway, as an essential element of any modern polity. There is so much religious tolerance in South Korea today that both Christmas and Buddha's birthday are national holidays, as is the day the legendary Dangun, worshipped by some as a god-king, is said to have established the first Korean kingdom 4,339 years ago. The old ritual hegemony of the traditional Korean state is a distant memory. It has been replaced by religious freedom and mutual tolerance.

Conclusion

The old priority given to ethics over theology is also rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Most religious organizations in Korea, though not all, define themselves according to the God they worship and the doctrines they preach. There is too much overlap in the ethical principles they espouse for morality to be very useful in distinguishing one religious organization from another. Moreover, both religious organizations and government census takers count both clergy and laity when they calculate the membership of specific religious organizations. Religious organizations in South Korea today are both confessional and congregational, whether they are Christian, Buddhist, or fall under another category all together. And over half of the people of South Korea now confess to a specific

8. On the conservative ideological roots of the Donghak Rebellion, see Lew. For a different view of the Donghak Uprising, see Shin Yong-ha.

religious affiliation, which means they see themselves as members of a specific religious community which is defined by doctrines and both objects and modes of worship that distinguish it from other religious communities.

It would be hard to say whether or not Koreans are more "religious" today than they were in the past, if by religious we mean only belief in and interaction with supernatural beings. What is clear, however, is that more and more Koreans are expressing their religiosity through self-conscious affiliation with specific religious communities. This tendency toward adopting religious labels is a product of the growth of congregational and confessional modes of organizing religious communities. Faith-based congregations are more likely to apply identifying labels to their members than are ritual-based communities that tend to be more *ad hoc* and to have porous boundaries. Moreover, the growth of religious freedom in Korea has made it easier for Koreans to proclaim a religious orientation that is different from the orientations of those around them. The result is a sharp rise in the percentage of the Korean population that not only proudly wears badges proclaiming individual religious orientations but also displays more interest in doctrinal and theological differences that distinguish one religious community from another.

When you compare religiosity in South Korea today, as well as contemporary church-state relations, with the situation on the peninsula up until about two and a half centuries ago, you will probably agree that to call this transformation "revolutionary" is not an exaggeration. We do not hesitate to talk of an industrial revolution when we look at how much economic landscapes around the world have changed over the last couple of centuries. Nor do we hesitate to talk of revolutionary change when we note the replacement of dictatorial regimes with democracy. Likewise, we should not shirk from applying the label "revolutionary" to the change from ritual communities to faith-based congregations, from polytheism to monotheism, from a focus on ethics to an emphasis on theology, and from ritual hegemony to religious freedom.

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