

The Sacred and the Secular: Protestant Christianity as Lived Experience in Modern Korea: An Introduction

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According to Statistics Korea, in 2015 the number of South Koreans identifying as Protestant Christians was 9,675,761 (19.7 percent of the population), making Protestantism the most popular religion in the country. Buddhism ranked second, with 7,619,332 (15.5 percent).¹ These results are particularly eye-opening when one considers that Buddhism was introduced into Korea in the fourth century and has been a significant religious tradition in Korea for centuries, while Protestant Christianity was introduced only in the late nineteenth century.² One may note other signs of the dramatic success of Protestant Christianity in South Korea. A series of gargantuan evangelistic campaigns—most representatively “Thirty Million to Christ” (1953–69), “Korea ’73 Billy Graham Crusade,” “Expo ’74,” “’77 Holy Assembly for the Evangelization of the Nation,” and “World Evangelization Crusades” in the 1980s—mobilized millions of Christian adherents.³ Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is the site of eighteen megachurches, including the world’s largest megachurch, Yoido Full Gospel Church, with a membership of approximately 800,000.⁴ Further, in 1999 “Korean Protestant churches commissioned more missionaries than did any other national church except the United States,” and thus South Korea took a prominent role in global Christianity.⁵ In fact, some Korean Christian missionaries, represented by the University Bible Fellowship, target white Americans for conversion, reversing the conventional direction of evangelical activities, which had been dominated by white Western missionaries targeting nonwhite, colonized subjects.⁶

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The embrace of Protestant Christianity in Korea has been remarkable. Beyond the overwhelming numerical surge of Korean Christians, growing from a handful of converts in the late nineteenth century to nearly 10 million adherents today, Protestant Christianity has been a critical force in shaping virtually every aspect of modern Korea. It has been intertwined with shifting political conditions since the late nineteenth century, such as Western imperial expansion, Japanese colonialism, Korean nationalism, the building of the modern nation-state, the division of the nation into North and South Korea, the Cold War, and democracy movements and neoliberalism in South Korea.⁷ It has also had a significant impact on class formation, gender relations, and everyday life practices.⁸ This special issue was born out of consideration of this essential question: How should we understand the phenomenal growth and ubiquitous presence of Protestant Christianity in secular modern Korea?

Religion was supposed to be cast off in favor of secularization in the age of modernity. Under the banner of the separation of church and state, the modern nation-state was understood as a secular entity in which religion was assigned to the private, individual domain, away from the public and the political.⁹ With urbanization, industrialization, and the advancement of science and technology, human life and society were expected to be governed by rationality. However, history amply demonstrates that the modern development was far from a full embrace of the secular and a rejection of religion. Religion has been a powerful sociopolitical and cultural force and a significant aspect of public life. The boundary between sacred/religious and secular/material has always been fluid and constitutive. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini put it, “The religious and the secular have been constituted in relation to each other in modernity and, indeed, *as* modernity.”¹⁰

It is important to note that secularism is central to the European Enlightenment narrative. In that narrative, religion is a regressive force that oppresses humanity, while reason and science free people from “the bonds of religion” and eventually lead to the liberation of humanity.¹¹ The problem with most representative debates on the topic of secularism lies in the fact that those debates are largely based on Euro-American histories and societies centered on religious traditions, especially Catholicism and Protestantism. With a few exceptions, there has been a pronounced lack of analysis focusing on non-Western societies for historical and sociological comparison.¹² Analyzing Charles Taylor’s influential book *A Secular Age* (2007), the historian Don Baker questions whether it is “even reasonable to apply the same term *secular*” to Korea, because “Korea does not have the premodern Christian tradition like that which shaped the Western shift from a sacred age to a secular age.”¹³ Multiple religious traditions coexisted in premodern Korea. Furthermore, a rather rigid concept of religion was introduced via Japan only in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴

More important, in contrast to Europe, where the European Enlightenment narrative often functioned as the philosophical basis of secular liberalism, the idea of

“enlightenment” (*kaehwa*) in modern Korea was introduced and distributed in part through Protestant Christianity. At a time when Korea was struggling to cope with imminent threats from imperial forces and find ways to build a modern nation-state, Protestant Christianity offered an alternative belief system and worldview that were clearly distinguished from those of Confucianism, the system of ethics and governing rules that dominated during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910).¹⁵ Koreans viewed this new religion as the embodiment of an advanced civilization (*munmyŏng*) and even the proper foundation of modern development. Some Korean intellectuals went so far as to hail Christianity as the modern force that would “uplift” and “civilize” a backward Korea.¹⁶ In other words, in the discourse of “civilization and enlightenment” (*munmyŏng kaehwa*), Christianity—the religion of Western imperial powers—was closely associated with the idea of enlightenment and modernity and brought with it modern institutional reforms and material cultures.¹⁷ The abstractions of Christianity, modernity, and the West (especially the United States) have coalesced to become one of the most powerful frames of reference in modern Korea. The association of Christianity with progress, prosperity, and national development continues in contemporary South Korea.

South Korea’s Protestant Christianity has often been associated with the prosperity gospel in the rapidly neoliberalizing South Korean society.¹⁸ Furthermore, to actualize their conservative social agenda, including opposition to gay rights, since 2004 Protestant Christian groups have been organizing political parties to enter national electoral politics, although none of them has yet succeeded in securing a seat in the National Assembly.¹⁹ In the most recent political developments in South Korea, Protestant Christians have become sharply divided along ideological lines, exemplified by the division between those who were active in the 2016–17 candlelight protests that brought about the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and those who protested against Park’s impeachment.²⁰ In addition, some Protestant Christian leaders and churches have been embroiled in scandals involving embezzlement, nepotism, moral failure, and excessive materialism, and thus critical insiders within the religious community have been demanding fundamental reform or transformation of Christian churches.²¹ In a significant way, Protestant Christianity in contemporary South Korea is at a critical juncture.

The articles in this special issue offer a multifaceted and nuanced analysis of the pervasiveness of Protestant Christianity, with a central focus on the fluid and shifting boundary between the sacred and the secular in Korea. In one way or another, the articles in the special issue address a central question: In what specific ways has Protestantism intervened in, transformed, or rearticulated the lifeworld, material cultures, rituals, and aesthetics, as well as the political economy? The special issue is by no means intended to be comprehensive in terms of the coverage of topics, themes, and historical periods. Its main purpose is to introduce some cutting-edge research studies that probe underexplored areas of inquiry and illuminate the tensions and interplay between the sacred and the secular.

The articles collected herein build on earlier scholarship on the history of Protestantism but advance it in three distinctive ways. First, the study of Protestant history and culture has long been dominated by theologians and church historians. This special issue is a productive intervention into that trend. Contributors bring in perspectives and methodologies from a diverse set of disciplines, including history, geography, literature, anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, and musicology, focusing on underexplored questions related to rituals, racial politics, global capitalism, Cold War politics, sexuality, and aesthetics. Second, the history of Protestantism in Korea is essentially a transpacific history, because the vast majority of foreign missionaries came from North America and the transpacific network was fostered by missionary organizations, Christian educational institutions, and local churches on both sides of the Pacific.²² The articles in this special issue take on this transpacific history and culture by probing the role of Protestantism in forging, stratifying, and remapping political dynamics, material (capitalist) attitudes, racial and gender relations, and religious aesthetics in modern Korea. Third, while a great deal of the previous research has relied on mission archives and the perspectives and experiences of Western missionaries, the contributors of the present collection bring out the Korean experience more fully by excavating alternative archives and conducting ethnographic fieldwork. In doing so, their research studies shed new light on Koreans' agency in shaping their belief system, national identity, and interior experiences.

One of the underexplored areas is the role of music in the growth of Protestantism in modern Korea.²³ Music is often understood as "the most directly emotional of the arts and the art most intimately involved with religious and spiritual life."²⁴ At the same time, music can also be a political and socioeconomic vehicle. Hyun Kyong Hannah Chang's article in this special issue traces the early history of Western-style music in Korea, largely introduced by foreign missionaries, especially those from the United States. Examining the origin of secular folk songs in Korean Protestant Christian communities, Chang details the transpacific network via American Protestant missionaries and Korean converts and how it created a dynamic and fluid site in which identity, aesthetics, the politics of everyday life, and vernacular moderns were constructed under Japanese rule. As she puts it, "The worldly music that thrived in an ostensibly religious space provides a glimpse into the formation and experience of modern Korean subjectivity." Examples of such worldly music performed and experienced in Protestant religious spaces illustrate "the meshing of the secular and the sacred in colonial Korea, particularly around the issue of modernity." In exploring the dynamics between religion, music, and politics, Chang uses the concept of the "fugitive Christian public" in which Korean converts proactively utilized their Christian connections in the construction of Koreanness, ethnonational consciousness, and secular modern life and relations. The Koreans' adoption of Western musical practice was embodied in the appropriation of Western melodies for songs with nationalist lyrics. Chang argues that sentimental secular songs that thrived in the religious

community “embodied the fugitive orientation of this [Christian] public: they were evocative and affirmative yet ambiguous and oblique, especially with regard to the issue of Korean independence.” The concept of the fugitive Christian public helps us understand not only the religious origin of secular musical experiences but also the “micropolitics of everyday life” among the colonized, to whom engaging and performing sentimental, nostalgic secular songs in the religious community provided a fugitive—not always resistant—space to foster Korean national identity and modern subjectivity.

Hajin Jun’s article examines the location of religion in nationalist politics under Japanese colonial rule.²⁵ Within the context of the cultural rule of the colonial government after the March First independence movement of 1919, elite Korean nationalists actively engaged in the “cultural movement” (*munhwa undong*) to restore and revitalize Korean national identity and culture. In that movement, rituals figured prominently as a crucial site for advancing nationalist and modernist causes. As Jun demonstrates, a major problem arose when Protestant beliefs and practices were perceived to prioritize religious belonging over national belonging and thus threatened to split rather than unite Koreans. Jun presents case studies to illustrate how Korean intellectuals attributed Korea’s misfortunes to Confucianism and at the same time expressed alarm at the growing influence of Protestantism, whose exclusive, uncompromising demand for orthodox liturgical rituals tended to create a “dangerous form of religious tribalism.” When “renouncing Confucian rites—and their attending values—became important expressions of Protestant identity,” cultural nationalists were troubled by the separation of a distinctive Protestant group from the vast majority of Koreans, who continued to adhere to Confucian ethics and practices. At the heart of that concern was the idea that the principle of church supremacy would turn Koreans away from the nation. The debate over the ancestral worship ritual (*chesa*) in the 1920s, for example, reflects how nationalists confronted religion and idolatry and navigated competing demands for the preservation and renovation of traditional customs, such as *chesa*. Although it was ultimately the colonial authorities who had the power to define, manage, and control religious realms, Jun’s case studies illuminate how Korean cultural nationalists complicated the boundary between the religious and the secular in their pursuit of national solidarity.

If Protestantism was instrumental in rethinking rituals, it also played a significant role in shaping the idea (and value) of manual labor through discourse and educational training programs. What is less known is the extent to which the discourse on manual labor was deeply racialized within the context of global capitalist development. Elaborating the notion of “racial capitalism,” Jang Wook Huh’s article brings in the perspective of critical racial studies and examines the triangular relationships between white missionaries, American blacks, and Korean Christians in promoting manual labor and industrial education within the context of transpacific encounters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Huh illustrates how American missionaries and Korean Christian reformers

who internalized missionary racial discourse introduced and promoted stories of some of the leading black reformers, such as Booker T. Washington and his institution, Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, as the model to emulate in the discourse on modern economy and culture. In the Euro-American-centric discourse on race, “American Negroes” and Koreans were lumped together as being in need of civilizing in order to take part in the modern world. With an in-depth analysis of Songdo Higher Common School’s Textile Department and its production of *songgojik* (cloth made at Songdo High, also known as “Korea mission cloth”), Huh demonstrates a striking parallel between the “benighted” conditions blacks had in the South of the United States and the “degenerate” state of Koreans in colonial Korea, which justified American missionaries’ and Korean Christian reformers’ role in “uplifting” both races to civilization and modernity. As Huh points out, it is important to recognize some level of agency on the part of Korean laborers and students engaging in textile production, as they considered their training and labor to be beneficial for their future careers and social advancement. In accepting the value of this training, those student laborers unwittingly contributed to the institutionalization of manual labor under the religious banner of Protestant character and the value of self-discipline, humility, and diligence. Ultimately, Huh elucidates how the boundary between the material/economic and the spiritual/moral was blurred, and manual labor was promoted as an integral part of morality, spirituality, and progress.

After Korea’s independence from Japan in 1945 and the subsequent division of the nation into North and South Korea in the Cold War era, Protestant Christians faced starkly different realities in the political and economic systems of socialist North Korea and capitalist South Korea.²⁶ As Heonik Kwon and Seong Nae Kim aptly point out in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Korean Religions*, unlike the conventional understanding of the Cold War as “a global conflict that was principally about secular ideologies,” it is crucial to recognize how “religious ideas and forces played formative roles in the making (and unmaking) of the bipolarized world of the Cold War era.”²⁷ Sandra H. Park’s article in this special issue focuses on the early North Korean state (1945–50), tracing its secularization project and adding a new insight into the location of religion in the socialist state building. She specifically examines the legal case of a Christian pastor, Cho Ponghwan, to demonstrate how the state taught the North Korean public what religion should look like in the socialist state. Using rare archival sources, Park shows how the state made use of multilevel legal procedures to manage, regulate, and subsume the sacred under the state. As exemplified in Park’s article, a series of socialist policies suppressed and persecuted Protestant Christians in North Korea, which ultimately led to a massive exodus of Christians to South Korea, especially those of the landlord class. Many of those *wõllam* Christians (i.e., those who relocated to South Korea) played a major role in anticommunism movements in South Korea. Indeed, anticommunism has been a significant aspect of the identity of Protestant Christians, who constitute conservative political forces as the “Protestant/Christian Right” in South Korea.²⁸

Two articles in this issue focus on contemporary South Korea with extensive ethnographic fieldwork. Ju Hui Judy Han's article deals with queer religious politics, and Heather Mellquist Lehto's article focuses on megachurches. While they center on distinctive features of current Protestant Christianity in South Korea, they share a great deal regarding the struggle between dominant church powers and forces of resistance in sustaining or transforming broader political, economic, and cultural domains.

Using the lens of queer religious politics, Han's article offers a rare insight into the heated controversy over gender and sexual nonconformity within the Protestant Christian community in contemporary South Korea.²⁹ Her article details the politics of the concept of heresy (*idan*) and a specific case study involving an LGBTI-affirming minister, Reverend Lim Borah, whose advocacy provoked and mobilized established denominational authorities. Significantly, Han writes, "the heresy here lies not in being an LGBTI person; the problem apparently lies in speaking positively about individuals who are, in holding events and creating spaces to support and worship with LGBTI-identified Christians, and in espousing the message of acceptance and antidiscrimination." Han probes the political implications of the heresy controversy, which she describes as both comprising a disciplinary process to reinforce heteronormativity and, perhaps more important, revealing of the limitations of those dominant heteronormative Christian groups. It is through those limitations that one can see signs and patterns of resistance, which Han calls "new queer vitalities." Han aligns queer theologies with liberation and *minjung* (grassroots) theology, whose advocacy for minorities encompasses a wide range of sociopolitical, economic, ethical, and affective issues. Indeed, under the military dictatorship in the 1960s through the 1980s, the liberal or progressive wing of Protestant Christians was actively involved in *minjung* movements for democracy and social justice, mobilizing and advocating for factory workers and peasants.³⁰ In this shared history of activism, as Han elaborates, queer theologians make a distinction between recuperative strategies that "affirm LGBTI-identified individuals within the faith" and radical strategies that heed to "transgressive reinscriptions that seek to transform society and achieve political liberation."

Lehto's article uses megachurch architecture as a lens for understanding a shifting of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane within the context of consumer capitalism in South Korea. She probes the dynamic interplay between Christian spirituality and capitalist ambition and desire. This interplay is embodied in the hypermodern architectural features of the Sarang Global Ministry Center in Seoul, which exhibits the architectural traits of a luxury department store or business office. Critics of the Sarang Church would call it "just a business," but as Lehto illustrates, the new (capitalist) aesthetics of the church building engender awe and wonder, attracting new churchgoers who find it impressive and comfortable. Clearly, religious aesthetics is changing. What constitutes the sacred and the profane undergoes changes, reflecting the desires of the larger society. As Lehto

details, leaders of the Sarang Church, who actively participated in the design of the new building, have incorporated the public sense that the corporate sphere can be sacred, and thus the church building that resembles secular structures is “simultaneously sacred, religious, and businesslike, without contradiction.” Yet some Christian adherents criticize the highly commercialized, materialistic, and prosperity-centered outlook and programs of megachurches. The future of churches as “just a business” remains to be seen, but Lehto’s article reveals the dynamic place of the Protestant church in secular Korea at the nexus of religion, economy, politics (city planning), and the changing aesthetics of the sacred and the profane.

NOTES

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1. Data from kostat.go.kr/. The number of Catholics was 3,890,311 for the same year. Together with Protestants, the Christian population was 29.65 percent of the population of South Korea. This special issue concerns Protestant Christianity for focused analysis.

2. In this article, *Korea* refers to the country pre-1945, before it was divided into North and South Korea.

3. Lee T., *Born Again*, 84–114.

4. Bell, “Biggest Megachurch on Earth.” See also Lee Easley, “Taking Jesus Public.”

5. Buswell and Lee, “Introduction,” 2.

6. Kim R., *Spirit Moves West*.

7. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*; Wells, *New God, New Nation*; Park C., *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*; Jung, “Religious-Political Aspirations of North Korean Migrants.”

8. Kim S., *Imperatives of Care*; Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*; Chong, *Deliverance and Submission*; Ok, “Ch’ogi Han’guk kyohoe üi ilbudach’öje non-jaeng.”

9. Baker, “Korea’s Path of Secularisation”; Hwang, *Rationalizing Korea*, 146–67; Masuzawa, “University and the Advent of the Academic Secular.”

10. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Introduction,” 1. See also Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.”

11. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Introduction,” 2.

12. For important works that focus on non-European societies, see Ghosh, *Making Sense of the Secular*; and Van der Veer, *Modern Spirit of Asia*.

13. Baker, “Korea’s Path of Secularisation,” 188.

14. Josephson, *Invention of Religion in Japan*; Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*.
15. Kim and Kim, *History of Korean Christianity*, 79–88.
16. The new generation of educated Koreans were often trained and worked at mission-related organizations, becoming dominant modernizing elite groups in early twentieth-century Korea. Baker, “Creating the Sacred and the Secular in Colonial Korea,” 6; Talley, “Yun Ch’i-ho at Vanderbilt.”
17. Buswell and Lee, “Introduction,” 1; Park and Yoo, “Introduction”; Chang, “Christianity and Civil Society in Colonial Korea”; Kim M., “Politics of Officially Recognizing Religions”; Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*, 48–79.
18. Suh, “Two Sacred Tales in the Seoul Metropolis”; Kim A. E., “Korean Religious Culture and Its Affinity to Christianity.”
19. Han, “Politics of Homophobia in South Korea”; Kim N., *Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right*.
20. The conservative Christians who protested Park’s impeachment are often characterized in association with the Army of the Korean National Flag (T’aegükki pudae), referring to protest groups whose political and sociocultural agendas are conservative right-wing. See *Christian Today*, “‘T’aegükki’ wa ‘ch’otpul’ ro kallajin kü kot üi Kidokkyoindül.”
21. Hong, “Exegetical Resistance.”
22. Park and Yoo, “Introduction.”
23. Nicholas Harkness’s book *Songs of Seoul* is a pioneering work on Korean Christian music, especially vocal music.
24. Brown, “Music,” 1.
25. For the complex relationship between religion and nationalism from a comparative perspective, see Van der Veer, *Modern Spirit of Asia*.
26. Ryu, “Fresh Wineskins for New Wine.”
27. Kwon and Kim, “Religions in Cold War Korea and Peacemaking,” 5.
28. Kim H. J., “Campus Crusade ‘Explosions,’” 13; Yun, *Han’guk chönjaeng kwa Kidokkyo*.
29. Centering on the concept of kyriarchy, Nami Kim analyzes how hegemonic masculinity works in South Korea by focusing on “father school,” anti-LGBT movements, and Islamophobic/anti-Muslim racism. See Kim N., *Gendered Politics*.
30. Lee N., *Making of Minjung*, 213–39; Kim and Kim, *History of Korean Christianity*, 234–55.

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