

# The History of Protestantism and the Emerging Nationalism in South Korea

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## Abstrak

Artikel ini mengulas kebangkitan Kristen Protestan di Korea untuk mengukur sejauh mana hubungan antara agama dan nasionalisme di Korea, serta mencoba untuk mengkaji hubungan kuat antara agama dan nasionalisme. Untuk mengulas hal tersebut, artikel ini memfokuskan diri pada telaah historis masa pendudukan Jepang, yakni pada rentang waktu antara tahun 1910 hingga 1945. Artikel ini berusaha untuk menjawab pertanyaan sederhana: mengapa Kristen Protestan berhasil menjadi agama yang kuat dan penting di Korea? Jawaban atas pertanyaan tersebut juga akan mengantarkan kita untuk bisa memahami nasionalisme Korea. Dengan kata lain, jelas bahwa perkembangan Protestan di Korea adalah sangat terkait dengan ketidakpuasan yang mendalam dan keputusasaan yang dirasakan oleh orang-orang Korea diakibatkan oleh masa pendudukan Jepang. Selain dikarenakan faktor nasionalisme, berkembangnya agama Protestan di Korea juga sangat terkait dengan pendidikan. Para misionaris bertindak cepat untuk melibatkan diri dalam pendidikan. Hal tersebut dikarenakan mereka memahami tentang semangat Korea dalam hal pendidikan dan juga keterbukaan mereka terhadap ide-ide Barat. Selain itu, artikel ini juga mengkaji mengenai dampak dari adanya para misionaris untuk menyebarkan agama Protestan.

**Kata kunci:** Agama, Nasionalisme, Protestan, Korea Selatan.

## **Introduction**

In this article I examine the rise of Protestantism in Korea to find out the relation between religion and Nationalism in Korea. my focus is on one critical moment in Korea history in Japanese Colonial rule during 1910-1945. The main problem in this article is why Protestant has become an important and strong religion in Korea? In my opinion, understanding the role of Protestantism in Korea is really important to understand the Nationalism in Korea. There was strong relationship between Protestantism and Nationalism in Korea. Actually, the Japanese colonial rule in 1910-1945 and their oppression, dire poverty and social marginalization in Korea gave Protestantism a unique opportunity to offer a compelling salvation and promise national empowerment. This religion harmonized with the nationalism because the Old Testament seemed to reflect the Korean people condition. Korean converts found a close affinity between their miserable experiences 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 aspiration for liberation and national independence.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Protestantism positively asserted the necessity of education, technical and vocational training in particular. Protestantism was also faced with the task of eliminating illiteracy among its believers because of the urgent necessity of helping them read and understand the Bible and other mission literature.

## **The Beginning of the Protestantism, 1884-1890**

Protestantism in Korea is coming from the United States. In the last eighteenth century, in Korea, there were many missionaries came

from the United States.<sup>1</sup> In Asia, in the late nineteenth century, Korea was a fertile ground for missionary effort. It was an extension of China and Japan mission fields. The first evangelistic agencies to begin missionary work in Korea were the Board of Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church and the Foreign Mission Society of Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. These organizations started their work simultaneously in Korea. They operated their missions side by side and cooperating to some degree. In 1884, the Presbyterian Church appointed Dr. Horace N. Allen as the first missionary to Korea, while the Methodist Church appointed Dr. and Mrs. W.B. Scranton and the Rev. and Mrs. Appenzeller as the first missionaries to Korea in the same year.<sup>2</sup>

In September of 1884, Dr. Allen arrived in the Korean capital. He was the first Western missionary to enter Korea.<sup>3</sup> After Dr. Allen arrived in Korea, a significant event took place which would have a deep impact on the missionary work in Korea. The *Kapsin Chōngbyōn* (Coup d'Etat of 1884) caused Prince Min near death when he was brutally slashed.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Allen was called when Min was near death. His meticulous care over three month saved the prince's life. This incident gave the royal court great confidence in Western medicine. This incident also prompted the court's hospitality towards the missionaries. As a consequence, Dr. Allen's request for the establishment of a hospital with using Western medicine was granted by the Korean government. The first general hospital was opened April 10, 1885 and the name of that Hospital was *Kwanghyewōn*.<sup>5</sup> Then, the missionaries focused on providing many vital medical services particularly for poor and women.

The first Protestant missionaries in Korea adopted the Nevius Method. Named after Dr. John L. Nevius (1829-1893) of Shan Tung

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim, A History of Christianity in Korea: From Its Troubled Beginning to Its Contemporary Success, *Korea Journal*, Summer 1995, 39, <http://www.ekoreajournal.net/>, diakses pada 2 Februari 2014

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

China, this method emphasized self-support, self-propagation, self-government and independent of the church. Actually, this method was not popular in China and in Japan but this method was widely accepted in Korea after Dr. Nevius visited Seoul in 1890. It laid great stress on the church's self-determination and on the need for natives to carry on the evangelical work. This was obviously in stark contrast to the method of the Catholic Church in Korea, which relied almost on the leadership of Rome. Therefore, the missionaries established new mission stations, new schools and small hospitals in woman's care, in many parts of Korea. They actively pursued the translation of the Bible and other literary works into Korean language. Hospital and schools thus became invaluable evangelistic tools for the missionaries during the first two decades of their arrival.

According to Yun-Söng Böm, when Protestantism was introduced to Korea by American Presbyterian Church and the American Methodist Church in 1885, even though no missionary belonging to the Lutheran church was active at the time it consisted of Lutheranism and Calvinism.<sup>6</sup> *Sola fide*, the basic spirit of Lutheranism, was accepted as the dominant truth.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, Korean church held fast to uniformity based on faith...and the Lutheran creed of doing right faith won so dominant a place that its practice.<sup>8</sup> It can be said that its ethical aspects were almost neglected. Yun cites the following as factors conducive to the rapid propagation of Protestantism in Korea:

The first, in Korea, Protestantism acted as a popular religion from the start. It was in sharp contrast to Catholicism which was first received by the *Yangban* (noblemen) belonging to the *Namin* (Southern Faction). Second, the Bible and other missionary literatures of Protestant church were written in Han'gul (Korean alphabet). This proved most conducive to the rapid propagation of the religion. Third, the Christian concept of paradise and hell has similar to the Buddhist notion *Shubkavati*. Therefore, Christian religion attracted a large number people.

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<sup>6</sup> Hwang Söng-mö, "Protestantism and Korea", dalam *Korea Journal*, February 1, 1967. <http://www.ekorejournel.net/>, diakses 2 Februari 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 5.

Fourth, the political situation prevalent at the time converted churches into basis for the nation's independence movement which assumed the aspect of a long-range struggle. Fifth, the good results were obtained from mission work on an individual basis rather than on an organized group basis. Sixth, Protestantism, by taking the forerunner in Korea's enlightenment movement, started modern education in this country.<sup>9</sup>

### **Protestantism and Education Role**

The missionaries were quick to get involved in education. It is because in one hand, they really know about the Koreans' zeal for education and their openness to Western ideas. In the other hand, they hoped to enable illiterate Koreans to read scriptures and religious tracts. Therefore, the missionaries begin the establishment of schools. Even the King approved their plan of education. It made them the more eager. They found the first boy school in 1896. They also found also the *Paejae Hakjang*, a school for young girl. Then, they found more schools in many parts of Korea. The Methodist undertaking at first, Presbyterian soon established schools of their own, adding much needed resources and helping to keep up with the demand.<sup>10</sup> It can be said that the characteristics of Protestantism are not purely missionary work. It pushed religion into social activities

By 1920, Protestant missionaries attained remarkable growth. There are 315 foreign missionaries of whom 280 were Presbyterian and Methodist, 354 Korean ministers, including 264 Presbyterian and Methodist, 823 Korean Evangelist, including 667 Presbyterian and Methodist, 213,051 believers, including 204,651 Presbyterian and Methodist, 41 schools operated by the Protestant Church of which belonged to the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. In addition, there were three leprosaria, all Presbyterian. By the time the March 1, 1919, independence movement was launched, the Protestant Church operated three colleges and more than 600 elementary schools.<sup>11</sup> Missionary

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hwang, "Protestantism and Korea", 6.

schools continued to perform strongly, attracting more and more students and gaining recognition. The demand for education was so overwhelming that schools had to be established all over Korea. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the church was in the charge of the only complete educational system in Korea at the time. Only the church provided education from primary to college level.

Actually, some people in Korea assert that conversion into Protestantism lead to economic improvement. They believe that the improvement is due to their renunciation of smoking and drinking, gambling, luxurious clothing, makeup, movies, etc. This in turn acts as a strong impetus to labor, thrift and saving. The subjective improvement of the economic life of Protestant is understood as a reward (God's favor) for their observation of Puritan ethics. The most important is the fact that this attitude bears great significance in the nation's life. There was the fact that Protestant families who are adhere to Puritan ethics, live in better house, are clothed better, have a large number of household utensils such as sewing machine, bicycles and radios. They are more enthusiastic about education of their children than non-Protestant families.<sup>12</sup> In short, the phenomenon that the condition of economic despair which affected the lower classes in the traditional social structure is being eliminated in the process of industrialization is more conspicuous among Protestant than among non-Protestants.<sup>13</sup>

Economic and technical changes have close relation with the propagation of Protestantism. These changes were made possible due to the intentional initiative taken by the church. As pointed out by Emile Leonard, the pragmatism embodied in American mission work was aimed at the installation of facilities for indirect propaganda conducive to the creation of a Christian civilization and the realization of a paradise on earth.<sup>14</sup> These facilities can be considered the same as those existing in the American economic system.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

In fact, in the beginning from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestantism positively asserted the necessity of education, technical and vocational training in particular. The Protestant church was also faced with the task of eliminating illiteracy among its believers because of the urgent necessity of helping them read and understand the Bible and other mission literature. Efforts made in this line constituted a substantial contribution to reducing the illiteracy rate in the Protestant church.<sup>15</sup>

### **Protestantism and Nationalism during Japanese Colonial Rule**

Actually, Japanese Colonial Rule (1910-1945) is the darkest periods in the history of Korea. This period served as the basis for the spread of Protestantism in Korea. Under the Japanese Colonial regime, the Korean people suffered the deprivations, injustices, and psychological injuries. This condition created a fertile political environment for Protestantism became a rallying point for national salvation. For a large number of the Korean, Protestantism became identified as the ethos they hoped to liberate themselves from national suffering. 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 experiences 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 aspiration for liberation and national independence (Wasson 1934, 78-102; Weems 1964, 67-74).<sup>16</sup>

For Koreans deprived of any traditional means to resist Japanese colonial power, the church and Christianity/Protestantism became means for voicing their collective aspirations for independence. The

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim, "Protestantism in Korea and Japan from the 1880s to the 1940s: A Comparative Study of Differential Cultural Reception and Social Impact", dalam *Korea Journal*, Winter 2005, 267. <http://www.ckoreajournal.net/>, diakses 2 Februari 2013

church became the center of the nationalist movement. It is because the church apart from the Japanese colonial bureaucracy. The church is the strongest, most influential single organization in Korea at the time. During Japanese 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 processes.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, many Koreans, particularly intellectuals adopted Christianity/Protestantism as a political means of mobilizing Korean nationalism and the independent movement. The salience of Christians in the independence movement throughout 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.

Actually, the Protestant schools provided the most effective means of intellectual resistance to Japanese rule. The Protestant schools also served as a link between Korean nationalism and Christianity. The Protestant schools were the only modern alternative to educate Korean people. These schools numbered over 700 by the 1910. These schools informed Koreans of the outside world, allowing them 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 and establish a tradition of political movement. As student learned and debated the geography of their country, language, and history, they came to realize the importance of self-determination. The significance of missionary schools during the Japanese is echoed by Palk: "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."<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the missionaries were most often vocal in defense of Korean concerns also helped place Christianity/Protestantism at the forefront of Korean nationalism. While they had first welcomed Japan's annexation as a stabilizing force, the missionaries were unequivocal in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 267-268.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 268.

condemning Japan's brutal reaction to the independence movement of March 1, 1919 and other violence. Also, the missionaries often publicized the brutality 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-Christianity communities.<sup>19</sup>

During Japanese colonial rule Koreans in general were attracted to Christianity not only because their marginal existence and socio-political deprivation but also because of their wish to find nationalist expression in religious terms. Indeed, people's political and social hope for liberation was virtually inseparable from their warm response to Christian messages. Christianity/Protestantism become fully identified with the Korean national struggle and the concomitant Japanese suppression of Korean Christian made the religion and 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 deeply involved in the struggle for national independence. While colonialism was experienced in other Asian countries, such as French Indochina and British rule India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar and Dutch rule in Indonesia, the long period of Western rule over these nations made Christianity an attachment of Western colonial power, a force against which they were struggling for national independence. But the opposite was true in Korea.<sup>20</sup>

As Protestantism had no reason to feud with the traditional government system, it was not a significant existent politically.<sup>21</sup> The protestant did not express their political views at the time of the great political turmoil caused by Japan's annexation of Korea. It was at the time of the March 1, 1919, independent movement that they showed an organized anti- Japanese attitude on a nationwide scale. According to statistics compiled by the churches, Protestant numbered 300,000 at the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hwang Söng-mö, "Protestantism and Korea", *Korea Journal*, February 1, 1967. <http://www.ekoreajournal.net/>, diakses 2 Febuari 2013

time while there were 2,441 clergyman and missionaries. These figures indicated Korea's superiority to Japan's Christian force, and especially it is recorded that the foreign missionaries operating in Korea at the time numbered 400. As most of them were American, it is not to say that American missionaries exerted a profound influence on the formation of the attitude taken by Korean Protestants. The political attitudes of the American missionaries were not a reflection of the formal American government's policy toward Korea but an expression of their philanthropic feeling toward the Korean people who were suffering under the iron grip of Japanese colonial rule.

Classification of the religious leaders imprisoned by the Japanese Colonial during 40 days from March 1 to April 30, by religion, will help in understanding political attitudes they took at the time of the independent movement. The table below classifies only six religion or denominations—ch'ondo-gyo (a native Korean religion), Confucian, Buddhist, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist, and the figure include those imprisoned and indicated later.

The statistic show that the Presbyterian and Methodist are almost on a par and that the Protestant, when added to the 334 whose denomination is classified as not clear, correspond, to more than half of the imprisoned religious leader, excluding the Catholics. This is clear testimony the fact that Protestantism lived with common people. It was at no time other than at the time of the independence movement that Protestantism displayed its spirit most clearly, and the period witnessed Protestantism reach its apex as a spiritual movement.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

In this conclusion I want to repeat my opinion that Protestantism in Korea strongly related with education and then with Nationalism. The background of this situation is the backwardness and poorness of the country. In other words, it is clear that the first rise of Protestantism in Korea is strongly related to the deep discontent and despair felt by the Korean people. For centuries, Korea people

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<sup>22</sup> Hwang, "Protestantism and Korea", 10.

experienced dire poverty, social marginalization and oppression. The second, people's identification of Protestantism with the independence movement during the Japanese colonial period fostered the public's favorable view of new religion.

So, it is clear that certain peculiar circumstances of Korean History particularly Korea's vulnerability to Chinese and Japanese control, colonialism the Korean War, encouraged Protestantism to strike deep roots in the spiritual sphere of the South Korean society.

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