

The Social and Intellectual Origins of Christianity in South Korea as a Means to Understanding Pope Francis' 2014 Visit

Introduction

Shortly before his historic visit to South Korea on August 5, 2014, Pope Francis issued a video message to the South Korean people: “Dear Korean brothers and sisters, faith in Christ has taken root deep in this land and borne abundant fruit... In a few days’ time, I will be with you in Korean, God willing. I thank you in advance for your hospitality and ask you to pray with me, that this upcoming visit will bear fruit for the Church and for Korean society in general.”ⁱ

Translated from Italian to Korean, his message was widely-broadcasted to masses of enthusiastic South Koreans. The Holy Father’s 2014 visit signaled the first leg of a broader papal tour of Asia (Pope Francis’ first), including the holder of the region’s largest Catholic population, the Philippines. Banners emblazoned with Pope Francis’ friendly face and the words, “Seoul Welcomes Pope Francis,” adorned buildings and street lamps all across the city. Soon after, his actual visit to Seoul elicited the sort of pomp and circumstance unseen since Pope John Paul II’s last visit more than a quarter century ago in 1989. Throngs of cheering onlookers, including tens of thousands of youth, surrounded all sides of central Seoul’s Gwanghwamun Square where the Pope was expected to arrive. Finally, his five-day visit culminated in an enormous open-air mass over a stretch of more than a mile and one of the largest religious events in South Korea’s history. In all, figures estimated an attendance of 800,000 South Koreans of all ages, worshippers and non-worshippers alike, including 170,000 invited Catholics invited from churches across the country.

So why the “sudden” interest? After all, nearly two decades had passed since the last papal trip to the region—to India—in 1999. Officially, Pope Francis’ visit was to beautify 124 martyrs of South Korea during the sixth Asian Youth Day. But for much of the popular press, the pontiff’s visit to South Korea still seemed atypical. Numerically, in South Korea Catholicism represents only the third largest religion/denomination (behind Protestantism and Buddhism, respectively)—this in a country where religiosity reigns but no religious group may proclaim absolute religious dominance. Many South Koreans were equally surprised by the visit, including the man instrumental in first inviting the Pope to the country, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Daejeon Nazarius Yoo-Heung-sik. “I really didn't expect the Pope to visit Korea and told him it [was] a miracle,” he confessed.ⁱⁱ Although not regarded as a Catholic country, South Korea increasingly considers Catholicism its religion of choice. As a result, the country now boasts one of the fastest-growing Catholic community’s in the world. In the past ten years, the country’s Catholic population has increased its membership by 70 percent, a feat unrivaled in other Asian countries. Additionally, within a religious climate where more South Koreans are disillusioned with accusations of greed, corruption, and hypocrisy among Protestant leaders, Catholicism is experiencing renewed popularity. In stark contrast to the West, at the time of the Pope’s arrival, the Catholic Church was considered “the most reliable religion” in South Korea.

In this article I argue that considering the different social and historical origins of Christianity in South Korea is necessary to help explain the significance of the Pope’s 2014 Seoul visit. Building on scholarship that discusses the contested nature of Christianity’s first arrival in South Korea (Kim 2000), as well as their current implications (Harkness 2013), I consider the visit of the 266th pope to South Korea less an arbitrary event than one that organically emerges from South Korea’s earlier, rich history of Christian engagement.

Specifically, I cite Christianity's significant role in shaping South Korea's modernization project, as well as internal divisions between Protestantism and Catholicism in the wake of the country's unprecedented economic growth that have spurred the growth of the latter. Finally, as religious scholars (Jenkins 2006; Sohn 2010; Grayson 2012) have noted, developments of the Christian faith in South Korea can be understood within the larger context of Christianity making significant inroads into the "Global South."

A Brief History of Christianity in South Korea

Christianity has had a long and complex history in South Korea, a country Andrew Eungi Kim deems "one of the most religiously pluralistic" in the world" (2000:112). When exactly Christianity entered the Korean peninsula is not clear, although Koreans came under some influence of the religion (through China) as early as the 13th century. During the 17th century a Choson dynasty emissary to Peking (Peking, or Yenching) brought to Korea a world atlas by Matteo Ricci, ironically, a catholic missionary, Kim further explains. Within this atlas were teachings of the Gospel, many of which had a significant impact on its initial Korean readers. By the 18th century, Christianity, considered "Western learning," was a subject of great interest among Confucian intellectuals of 18th century Korea. In particular, intellectuals of the Choson dynasty took great interest in the religion not only for its spiritual elements, but equally as important, its insights on Western science, technology and socio-political systems—many of which slowly disrupted early views on humanity and nature based on Neo-Confucianism.

The 19th century ushered in Christianity's further growth in numbers despite this "clash" between Confucian and Catholic thought and ethics. Debates persisted, namely those around Confucianism's adherence to social hierarchy (e.g., class distinctions and discrimination based

on birth) versus Christianity's preoccupation with egalitarianism. The Bible's translation from English into Korean in 1887 by Manchuria-based Scottish Presbyterian missionary John Ross greatly facilitated the spread of Christianity in the region. Also instrumental were Protestant missionary efforts channeled through formal education during the latter part of the 19th century. The establishment of South Korea's first "modern" educational institutions, such as four-year universities, junior colleges, and secondary schools, paved the way for proselytizing on behalf of the Christian faith while also introducing basic infrastructural components of Western higher education in the country. Catholicism was introduced in South Korea earlier than Protestantism. However, it was the latter's aggressive evangelism, particularly in the late 20th century, that helped South Korea become the most Christian country in Asia by percentage of the population who subscribe to it.

By the mid to late 20th century the earlier arrival of American and European missionaries paved the way for the greatest inroads in establishing Christianity as a major religion in the region. Today, Christianity is the nation's largest religion with recent figures citing 15 million followers, or roughly three out of ten South Koreans. What is more, South Korea is "the only nation in Asia where Christianity has established itself during the past two hundred years as a significant component of the national culture" (Grayson 2002:2).

The Rise and Popularity of Christianity (namely Catholicism) in South Korea: Diverse Viewpoints

Pope Francis' 2014 historic visit to South Korea rests on the banks of this earlier sedimented history. However, other factors are at play. For instance, scholars have noted how the broader rise of Christianity has occurred throughout the Global South, of which South Korea

may be considered (Sohn 2010). Religious expert Lionel Jensen continues, “From the vantage of the global demographics of Roman Catholicism, the Pope’s presence is a powerful symbol of the Vatican’s recognition that it is in Asia... that the church is growing most prominently.”ⁱⁱⁱ South Korea’s Catholic population has increased its membership by 70 percent in the past ten years. In 2005, almost 30 percent of South Koreans identified themselves as Christian. Most are Protestants, but Catholics are the fastest growing group with around 5.3 million followers, or 10.3 percent of the population. Some were blunter about their national ambitions. “It is not just about Korea, but Korea growing into the spiritual leader of Asia,” remarked bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Daejeon Nazarius Yoo Heung-sik.^{iv} To be fair, the Vatican appeared to do little in countering such an instrumental perception, one that implied that the Pope’s sudden interest in Asia was as much about wooing new religious markets as it was about him sincerely spreading the gospel abroad. “Asia was the frontier of evangelization,” a Vatican news office director declared with similar candor.^v

Undoubtedly, as Philip Jenkins phrases it, “the center of gravity of the Christian world [is moving] southward” (2006). Forwarding a claim by other scholars of religion (Robbins and Engelke 2010; Sohn 2010), Jenkin’s asserts the need to approach Global South theologies and interpretations as part of a larger spectrum of Christianity rather than “inferior” variations or imitations. Consequently, manifestations of Christian faith in this region should be understood as those adapted to local circumstances and conditions. Likewise, Christianity’s unprecedented rise and influence in South Korea must be understood within its local context. Specifically, the emergence of Japanese imperialism and colonial rule helped eliminate Korean hostility toward Western countries, a factor that helped to facilitate the importation of Western Christianity. In turn, the arrival of Protestantism during the early twentieth century accommodated itself to the

existing Confucian values of family and family structure of the time, one that offered both new freedoms and constraint, particularly for women (Grayson 2012).

Another important local factor in explaining the particular flavor of South Korean Christianity is South Korea's "compressed modernity" or its rapid rise as an economic "tiger." This helped to spark Christianity's broader role in transforming the country from "a suffering, war-torn nation to [a modern] one that ha[d] received 'God's grace'" (Harkness 2010:3). In recent years, Protestantism's dominance has been challenged by accusations of greed, corruption, and "moral decay" among its leaders. This, as a consequence, has stagnated Protestantism's membership. In contrast, Catholicism as a viable alternative (embodied by Pope Francis' message of humility and approachability) was highlighted by the South Korean press. During his sermon, the pope also spoke of the "spiritual cancer" of materialism, underlining that "labor markets think youths are disposal." In a country with record-high youth unemployment, this message resonated deeply.

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, although proportionately small in numbers, South Korea's Catholic population has a rich and extensive history of localized Christianity from which to rely on. Since the arrival of Matteo Ricci's first atlas during the Chosun dynasty, Christianity (and particularly Catholicism) has had a steady and sustained presence in South Korean society. With the arrival of Western missionaries and the spread of South Korean evangelism around the world, Christianity squarely established itself as the nation's dominant religion. This rise also has occurred parallel with the ongoing expansion of Christianity in the Global South, one that South Korea is not shy in hoping to lead. At the same time, Catholicism,

in particular, has found renewed popularity among South Koreans hungry for an alternative to better established but “corrupt” Protestantism.

Finally, less mentioned in the popular press was the fact that Pope Francis already was well-acquainted with the South Korean Catholic community—albeit the Argentinian diasporic one. Back in the early 1990s when he was known simply as Father Jorge in Flores, Buenos Aires, the Pope established ties with the Korean immigrant Catholic population. After the elevation of South Korean Andrew Yeom to the position of Cardinal, Pope Francis told him, “I love Korea.”^{vi} Based on the breathtaking display of support exhibited in Gwanghwamun Square on August 16, South Koreans appeared emphatically to have returned the sentiment.

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ⁱ Vatican Insider Website. “Christianity has deep roots in Korea Francis says in video message.” 8 Nov. 2014. Accessed 1 June 2016.

ⁱⁱ The Korea Times. “Korea’s Catholic expansion inspires Asian neighbors.” 11 Aug. 2014. Accessed 1 June 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} The Korea Times. “Korea’s Catholic expansion inspires Asian neighbors.” 11 Aug. 2014. Accessed 1 June 2016.

^v New York Times. “In Pope’s Trip to South Korea, Church Envisions Growth.” 12 Aug. 2014. Accessed 1 June 2016.

^{vi} Catholic News Agency. “Pope Francis to new cardinal: ‘I love Korea.’” 26 Feb. 2014. Accessed 20 June 2016.