

Christianity: Korean-Style

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The Church in Korea, comprising 18 Protestant sects and expressing "the will and concern of four million Christians" in Korea issued a statement recently condemning communism and communist advances in Indochina, and calling for "ideological unity" to achieve "victory over communism."

The statement, which was carried over the Reuters Wire Service, expressed concern for the situation in Indochina, and "the progressively increasing threat of reckless aggression against the South by the North Korean Communists." The statement further declared, "The Church in Korea is opposed to communism, which is based on an atheistic materialistic foundation, and will not be an idle spectator to communist invasion in any form."

The statement also expressed "regret over the passive attitude of The United States... in regards to Indochina," and called for "a more reliable and responsible guarantee from the United States in regard to the security of Asia," especially "for... a specific and positive plan for the sake of Korea's security and protection."

Expressing regret over "the recent series of unfortunate events between the government and the church," the statement called for "cooperation" in maintaining national security. "The Church in Korea is convinced that the road to victory over communism lies not only in direct struggle against Communism, but also in cleaning up the imperfections within..."

The statement concluded by saying that "Communism will go down to defeat in accordance with the truth that, however great the power of evil, it must surrender under the power of God.... The church in Korea is convinced that the road to victory lies in ideological unity, and calling for unity in the spirit of Christ who said to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, is developing for this purpose a nationwide evangelistic movement."

The above declaration reflects a high degree of anti-communist feeling among Korean Christians, an important fact often lost in the reporting in the western press about Christians protesting against the government of South Korean President Park Chung Hee. Whatever differences exist between some Christians and the government no Korean Christian would say that he ~referred the Stalinist dictatorship of Kim Il-sung.

Columnist Jack Anderson quoted Rev. Kim Joan Gon, president of the Korean Campus Crusade for Christ as saying, "In the U.S. you have 100 per cent religious freedom, in South Korea we have 80 percent, in North Korea they have no percentage." The well-known cleric also explained that Christians had been jailed for violating laws regulating political activity, not as a result of -religious persecution.

Christianity in Korea

Rev. Kim added that the activists represented a small percentage of Christians in Korea. In this respect Korean Christians reflect the opinion of the majority of Koreans who voted in support of Pres. Park's government and constitution in the recent referendum. Buddhists, Confucianists, and members of indigenous "new religions" such as Chondogyo make up the vast majority of religious believers in Korea. However, because Christian missionaries brought western education and "modern" ideas of science, democracy, and individualism to Korea, Korean Christians have enjoyed an influence out of proportion to their numbers. Korean leadership, ideals, and concepts of modernization since the turn of the century have come to a great extent from Christian sources.

Around the turn of the century, Christian revival movements sweeping Korea made many western Christians feel that Korea might soon become a Christian nation. These hopes became substantially embodied in the person of Dr. Syngman Rhee, president of Korea from 1948-1960 and a fervent

Christian. At that time Christianity enjoyed official government sanction, and many government ministries were dominated by Christians.

However, rampant corruption and inefficiency in Rhee's regime led to nationwide demonstrating which crippled Rhee in 1960, along with a great deal of Christian prestige. In 1964, statements made by church authorities at a conference in Seoul expressed concern that the church had lost touch with its popular base.

The Rhee government had followed a policy discriminating against traditional Korean religions, and outright intolerance and suppression of new religious movements which sprang up after the Korean War. The Park government, on the other hand, has followed a policy of religious freedom, while officially urging the preservation of the best aspects of traditional Korean culture. Consequently Christianity has been free to carry on evangelical activities without interference from the government, even though some Christians were involved in antigovernment process.

New Religions

At the same time, however, a growing disillusionment with western values has sparked a revival of interest in traditional Oriental thought, and in the rapidly growing new religions, which have begun to challenge the supremacy of western-style Christianity in Korean political and cultural life.

The earliest of these new religions is Chondogyo, originally known as Tonghak (Eastern Learning). Founded in 1860 by Choe-Che-U -- a Korean nobleman -- during a period of social ferment and awakening nationalism, Tonghak borrowed heavily from both Christian and Confucian sources. It stressed the dignity of man, the unity of God and man, and the establishment of the "Kingdom of Heaven on Earth." The Tonghaks were instrumental in many movements for modernization, reform and national independence, undergoing severe repression from conservative Korean regimes, the Japanese, and the North Korean Communists. The division of Korea severely weakened the movement, most of whose members were in the North. Members now number several hundred thousand in the South.

A more recent "new religion" is the Pak Chang No Kyo (literally "Elder Pak's Teaching") founded by Pak Tae Son, a businessman who broke off from the Presbyterian church in 1955 to form his own sect, characterized by fervent Pentecostalism, faith healing, and Pak's own interpretation of Biblical prophecies. Estimates of the number of adherents vary from 800,000 to one million (larger than its parent Presbyterian church). Members founded a communal city of 200,000 near Seoul and its far-flung business activities under the name of Zion Foundation have become a modest economic force in Korea.

Fastest-Rising

Perhaps the fastest-rising of the new religious movements in Korea is the Unification Church founded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon in 1954. Rev. Moon's revelation, called the "Divine Principle," is a systematic, teleological world-view combining the main concepts of Eastern and Western philosophy, as well as scientific and religious thought.

Bringing his teaching to his native North Korea after the liberation from Japan in 1945, Rev. Moon and his followers endured persecution, and he himself was imprisoned for three years in a labor camp at the hands of the North Korean Communists before being liberated by the U. N. forces. Fleeing south with a remnant of followers, Moon founded the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity in 1954 in Pusan.

The movement began to catch hold among college students and professors, despite intense opposition from Christians under the Rhee regime. In 1959, an aggressive international outreach was launched which has now established flourishing movements in Japan, Europe, and the United States.

Over the past few years the Divine Principle movement has made substantial inroads into the Korean intellectual and academic community. A proclamation in support of the Unification Church, signed by over 100 professors which appeared as an advertisement in several newspapers in Korea and abroad, in response to criticism of the church, said of the Divine Principle, "Its scope is of the greatest magnitude in that it comprehensively contains the essence of the world's great religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and certainly Judaism and world Christianity, and also encompasses all non-religious truth."