

Influence of christianity in south korean politics - essay



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Introduction

South Korea as a country has a large number of Christian denominations unlike Japan or China where the dominant religion is Buddhism, Confucianism, or other traditional religions. The roles that the Christians played in Korea extends to social, economic and political field. This paper concerns with how Christian as a religion had an unprecedented influence in the political spheres in South Korea politics. South Korea apparently has more than 60, 000 churches and is considered the most Christianized non western country.* Christianity was said to have entered Korea in the 18th and 19th century through China by the Roman Catholics. However it was met with a harsh treatment meted out towards these foreigners and even persecuted the converts. However, despite the persecutions the number of converts later increased more than before and for these missionaries they found a fertile land for the Christian as a religion to grow manifold and till today it remains so.

The opening of the port in Korea led to the inflow of merchants who along with the trade came the influence of western ideologies, cultures and many

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others. It also lessened the oppressions against these Christians which created, in part, a condition that enabled the Christians to have more of a receptive welcome. Not only did they bring doctors, medicines from outside but also schools which would in the later stages play an important role for the Koreans in every aspect of their life-be it in economic, social, education, political and the likes. The political influence that came from outside of Korea further intensified for other foreigners to have a say in the political matters. And of course the degradation of the social order created a breeding ground for the rise of voices that were subdued before with the aid of foreign influence. The disadvantaged lots were more perceptive of these new changes and they knew that they were able to have a say in an otherwise country which was materially and ideologically held by the ruling classes-the Yangban class. It gave the lower discontented sections of the society freedom from the bondage of the Confucian social order.

Education by the Christians and its introduction to democracy

One of the major contributions that the Christian missionaries brought along in Korea was education and through this tool people were made to realize the importance of equality through education and the opposition of the elites. Education in olden days was available only to the rich and the elites of the Korean society with the usage of the Chinese scripts. With the mission to make the Koreans learn how to read bible the missionaries took efforts in making the hangul script available to all the common people. Through education the notions of human rights, liberty, equality, democracy and other western concepts came into force. It was involved in the propagation

of activities such as the founding of politically independent newspapers which would serve an important means to either support the government or to criticize the wrongdoings of the government. Even the missionaries helped form unions for the workers for fair treatment and the rights of the workers.

In education it provided the individuals with a cause for national independence with the protection of American missionaries. The large Christian presence in Pyongando province in part accounts for its prominence in the Independence movement during the early phases of Japanese rule. The Koreans had to undergo a lot of hardships during the Japanese rule and their economic and social was in a mess. . The independence club founded by the Christian missionaries was active in the remedying of corruption and compromised political order; this club had many Christians as its leaders. Although it was known that Catholics came first to Korea it was the Protestants that had a large growing number of converts who introduced the concepts of ideas concerned with national independence and other new liberal thoughts. In a way one can say that the role played by these missionaries were more of political than that of spirituality. One must however note that some of the Protestant Christian church leaders at the later stage declared that any those Christians who were involved in activities other than spirituality should be banned from the churches as the church was supposed to be a place of worship and not a place for talks regarding issues that are related to labor, peace or international affairs.

Christianity and Politics

Even before the appearance of the two super powers in Korea, the political activity was very active even in North Korea. The church leaders were active <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-christianity-in-south-korean-politics-essay/>

in the participation of political activities that offered them quite a huge opportunity. The Soviet Union viewed Christian Church suspiciously because it wanted to establish a friendly relationship with Korea but the fact that Cho Mansik the then leader of CPKI (this CPKI was sponsored by church leaders) was a Christian and has a Christian background of his organization it was going to be a problematic situation for the Soviet Union as they viewed Christianity as something that was sympathetic towards the United States. The Soviets knew that the United States had introduced Protestantism to late Choson Korea and promoted it until the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. In addition to that there were factors such as the growing influence of Christian leaders like Syngman Rhee and Yo Unhyong in the south as well. In this factor too, it became a necessary for the Soviets to not ignore the influence that Christianity as a religion was having over both North as well as South Korea.

Syngman Rhee, the first president of South Korea was himself active in both the Independence club and the Youth Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and was educated in a school founded and run by U. S. Methodist missionaries. During the time of the Japanese rule the March First Independence movement of 1919 where the Christian churches played an important role posed a direct threat to the Japanese rule. Not only did it provided shelter to the intellectuals following their suppression by the Japanese but it also exercised an appeal to the people of Pyongando province who were very alienated from the mainstream of political or social life. During the early years of liberation the Christians had more support from the masses and had more potential in terms of political activities because of

better education, experience in politics and administration which wasn't so for the other groups like the businessman, bureaucrats and policemen who were known to have collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial era.

After the liberation of Korea from Japan and the outbreak of the civil war between the North Koreans and the South Koreans there was a huge displacement of the people from the north to the south because of the anti drive towards Christianity in north with its ideologies based on communism and these north Koreans had been the stronghold of Korean Christianity who formed the core of the church in the south. In fact Pyongyang was once the center of Christianity on the peninsula known as the Jerusalem of the East.

These North Koreans supported Rhee's efforts to establish an anti communist ideology. In his speech before a conference of Presbyterian churches he said that the most urgent problem that the South Koreans faced was that of the Soviet trained Red army which aspired to wipe out Christianity. He appealed to the church members for support of his government and to fight against communism. Rhee's drive toward anti communism helped minimize the opposition to his government by the churches as they shared the similar ideologies. perhaps this explains a cordial relation between the government and the church during that time.

During the reign of Park Chung Hee, the establishment of the Yushin system was criticized on the grounds that the system was corrupted and it violated human rights which involved kidnapping and torturing. In opposition to the government few incidents broke out in October which was to later have a major influence on other movements as such. The arrests of the church

leader Rev. Pak Hyong gyu, Rev. Kwon Ho Gyong on 6th July 1973 on the charge of leading a rebellion against the government led many Christians to provide as many as 400 anti-Yushin leaflets causing the government to distort the actual incident through the usage of torture.

Overtime the incident became very big that international body of church came in August 1st 1973 to investigate the matter. The government, due to pressures both from outside and inside the country, finally yielded to the demands and released the prisoners. This incident shows the crucial bitter battle between the Christian organizations and Park regime and the incident further promoted the churches dedication towards democracy and human rights. The opposition movement was indeed hugely responsible for the demand of the establishment of democratic institutions and that of the political and civil rights.

Catholic politician Kim Dae Jung raised his voice against Park Chung Hee for intimidating the South Koreans through the Yushin system and he became famous for his campaign against President Park and his strength at withstanding periods of imprisonment, exile, attempts to assassinate him and even death sentence. In 1997 Kim Dae Jung was elected and he was the first catholic to be elected as a president in South Korea. Even though he lost to his opponent the country would still have a catholic as its president for the opposition was also a catholic Lee Hoi Chang who lost to Kim Dae Jung by only 2 points. Kim Dae Jung's predecessor, Kim Young Sam was also a Christian, a Presbyterian leader who was elected as the president of South Korea in 1993 indicating the vitality of Christianity in South Korea.

A liberation theory called 'minjung shinhak' literally meaning 'the theology of people' became a towering symbol of the rally of democracy, equality, social justice and human rights. Christian churches championed the causes for the people of Korea in political, economic and in social spheres. It was a strong supporter of democracy and campaigned against the authoritative, oppressive and military rule of the Korean government. Besides the university students the church as an organization forms the biggest group to oppose and criticize the government openly. It was also to be seen that most of the prisoners who were prisoned for engaging in anti government activities were church leaders, priests, students and journalists.

Conclusion

As we have seen Education was a very important instrument that the Christian Missionaries used to educate and produce intellectuals that would later participate in the political spheres. They would then probably have reflected those ideologies that they have imbibed during their education years in their political decisions as well. Some of the known Universities in South Korea that have Christianity as their background are Yonsei University and Ewha University among others. The alumni of these universities have enjoyed various social as well as political privileges. They have served in national cabinet and South Korea had the first female prime minister in Han Myeong Suk (also an alumnus of Ewha).

The conception of freedom and basic rights as universal is central to Christian doctrine and perhaps it's one of the many reasons as to why the Koreans after years and years of suppression found something in Christianity that they could finally be free from the subjugation and rule from foreign

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powers. Christianity has been used as a political tool by countries not just in Korea but also in other countries and is a powerful one that can be used for the betterment of society or for worse. In the case of South Korea it played a major role in the wake of liberalization from Japanese colonial rule and also in terms of monetary reliefs after the civil war where both the countries plummeted in poverty. The crossing of the South Korean priest and political activist Han Sang Ryol recently into North Korea from Beijing to Pyongyang who was of the view that Lee's government was responsible for anti-reunification and upon which he was arrested for the violation of national security law is still a continuing evidence that Christian as a religion is still a tool that is being used for political purposes. With time one might even hope that Christianity serve a common ground for resolving problems between the two countries.

However, it is of an importance to see that Christianity when used as a means for political reasons when actually it should be more of helping someone grow in faith it becomes a mere tool for other politicians to use for political gains and eventually people's trust in the government would fail (which happened often in South Korea) and keep distance away from religion altogether as it has become something impure and a religion for the elites when it in fact started as an instrument to help the down casted lot. We all know how media especially the newspaper can harm or gain favor for the government in power and this knowledge is used to the maxim by the government to either financially support or threaten the opposing forces and in this case it was mainly directed towards these Christian organizations. South Korea as a country with a large number of Christians can spell trouble

for the government if they go against some principles which would lead to mass protests and if there had been any casualties that government would face dire consequences; thus it became a necessity for the government to not take up policies or engage in activities that would anger these organizations and would even go to the extent of buttering them.

In all one cannot ignore the major influence Christianity had in Korea-both North Korea (because the paper deals with only Christian influence in South Korea context much has not been written for North Korea) as well as South Korea in almost all aspects. Although one criticizes the motive behind the conversion from their tradition to Christianity stating reasons like easy access to monetary, position and other worldly gains (it is certainly true to some extent in that if the Christian missionaries have not made their appearance the history as we know of Korea might totally have been a different one) there have been some genuine reasons like the spread of equality, democracy, human rights and the likes. Despite the many accusations made against the Christianity as an organization in catering to the needs of other motivated politicians one cannot but help to remind that minus the Christians in economics, social, and even political spheres South Korea might not have been able to achieve such success in a matter of a short time which might be boisterous to say at one point but because the contributions it had made towards the development of South Korea had been enormous one cannot dismiss its role that easily. It is thus impossible to paint the whole of South Korea without a Christian element in it and the roles it had played significantly in other aspects besides the role of spiritualism.