

Nation-Building in Korea: Role of Christianity During Japanese Colonization

* Dr. Nawnit Kumar¹, and Neelu Kumari²

¹ Post-Doctoral Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, India

² PhD. Candidate, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

* Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Nawnit Kumar; nawnit.korean@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT-Religion plays a valuable role as an essential institution in Nation-Building. Studies of Nation-Building movements throughout the world recognize religion as a major driving force of Nation-Building. In the history of Korea, the colonial period of Japan (1910-1945) has been marked as one of the darkest periods, and this disaster has become a backbone to growing-up Christianity in Korea. Different people and groups approached nation-building in distinct ways resulting in a variety of nationalistic moments. Christianity as a Korean institution played an integral role in shaping the view of Christians and the church and their actions toward nationalism. Under the Japanese colonial era, the people of Korea had to face psychological injuries, injustices, inequalities, and impoverishment, and it has also flourished the existence of Christianity and its political environment in Korea. Christianity started to gain popularity and became identified as a reliance with which the people of Korea hoped to liberate themselves from the dark period of Japanese Colonial rule. The presence of Christianity was pronounced at every level of anti-Japanese organizations, and they started to participate actively in the independence movement against Japanese rule. On the way to nation-building, Korea needed to adopt elements of Western culture to strengthen the nation. This article provides insights into the nation-building carried out by Christianity in Korea during the colonization period of Japan. Although it is not a depth study of Christianity in Korea, its role in nation-building. It will also try to find the links between Christianity and nation-building in Korea.

KEYWORDS- Religion, Christianity in Korea, Japanese Colonization, Nation-Building, Missionaries in Korea

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a valuable role as an essential institution in any place for Nation-Building. Different people and groups approached nation-building in distinct ways resulting in a variety of nationalistic moments [1]. Christianity, as a Korean institution, played an integral role in shaping the view of Christians and the church and their actions toward nationalism [2]. During the colonial government, the deprivations, injustices, and

psychological injuries suffered by people resulted in building a fertile political environment in which Christianity became a reassembling point for national salvation. Christianity was identified as ethos by a huge population of Korea and through which they believed in liberating themselves from national sufferings and humiliation. The presence of Christianity remained at every level of anti-Japanese organizations, whether its unwillingness to accept Japanese rule or as an active member of the independence movement. On the way to nation-building, Korea needed to adopt elements of Western culture to strengthen the nation. Catholic mission gets down to Korea in 1784, where the Koreans started to read the translated version of the Bible. Although, in the late 19th Century, the first protestant missionary arrived in Korea. With permission from the Korean government, the first group of missionaries (Catholics the first) arrived in Korea in September 1884. Christianity contributed a big role in transforming Korea. Protestants expressed a sensible religious faith which assured economic prosperity and social relevance in a progressively secular modern world. Western-style higher education and health care to Korea were brought firstly to Korea by the Christian missionaries, and Christianity became changeable with progress and modernity. Korean Christian leaders were also the front leaders of the independence movement against Japanese colonial occupation and still are vocal and articulated proponents against democratization. Under contemporary Korean philosophical, social, and religious thought, Minjung¹ Theology, or theology for the masses is very prominent, in creating similar movements even in rival religions. The Theology of Minjung started off and grown by and pioneering and progressive protestant theologians in Korea. During the colonization period of Japan, Korean institutions and individuals are overwhelmed with interest in nation-building. The nation-building movements Studies recognize religion as an essential part of nation-building throughout the world.

¹ Minjung (민중) means people.

II. CHRISTIANITY IN KOREA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

After the end of the Choson Dynasty, Korea has occupied by Japan. This period is also marked as the “Dark Age” of Korea. The treaty of Portsmouth on 5th September 1905 was signed between Japan and Russia, which allowed Japan to annex and have Korea without any intervention. Annexation is a term used to describe Japan’s actions in Korea. Koreans were subjugated under Japan; neither did they become a citizen of Japan nor have any representation in the government. With the support of a large civilian police force and military, Japan ruled Korea through the Governor General’s appointed by Japan, who retained control of Korea. During this period,

Korean individuals and institutions were overwhelmed with interest in nation-building. Japan’s victory over Russia transformed the Korean national spirit into anti-Japanese. This transformation allowed Christians to establish a good rapport with Koreans. In the late 19th century, the elite class of Korea was the most powerful in society. Elite forces mobilized anti-Foreignism among Koreans, and the missionary’s activities were hindered under their atmosphere. However, the political context of Christianity in Korea started to change after the Sino-Japan War and the Russo-Japan War. China was defeated by Japan, and the Korean national spirit has transformed by Russia from anti-foreigner to anti-Japanese [3]. This act allowed Christianity to establish a good image in Korean society.

Table 1: Data on Korean conversion

<u>Year</u>	<u>Christians in Korea</u>
1895	590
1896	2,817
1905	46,411
1906	72,068

Source: Kim (1995) [4]

The above table shows the data on Korean conversion in different years. The number of Korean who converted to Christianity increased from 590 (1895) to 2,817 (1896) and from 46,411 (1905) to 72,068 (1906). The main reason for this mass conversion to Christianity was Western civilization at that time, and also, in order to strengthen the nation, Korea needed to adopt elements of Western culture. These notable increases in Christian converts occurred because Christianity was perceived to be the core of Western culture in order to strengthen the nation². Christianity in Korea improved its relationship with Korean society due to its institutional expansion. The nature of Christianity shifted from patriotic to nationalistic as anti-Japanese sentiment increased in Korean Society after the wars [5]. In the colonial period of Korea, the March 1st Movement (1919) was the most essential independence movement, and this nationalism was apparent in the heavy involvement of Christians. The percentage of the Christian population to the total Korean population in 1919 was 1.3%, while the percentage of

Christians’ collective action to complete collective work for the March 1st Movement was around 20%. These figures prove that Christianity was integral to the independence movement [6]. Until the late 1930s, the Christian church institutions never endured the interference of the colonial government to the degree that other religions like Buddhism and Confucianism did [7]. Christianity was introduced and operated solely under foreign missionaries in Korea. Most missionaries were from powerful Western countries whose political and military positions dominated the contemporary international order. The missionary group emerged as the most important diplomatic channel for the colonial government because all foreign legations were withdrawn from Korea when the Japanese Residency-General³ was established, an outcome of Korea and Japan’s Treaty of Protection on November 17, 1905 [8]. The Japanese government never attempted to challenge the foreign missionaries’ control of the Christian community. The administration of Christian organizations such as churches, publishing companies, and para-church activities (e.g. YMCA⁴) remained under the power of the Christian community. The Main purpose of the YMCA was to establish an outlet that would arrange “entertainment, instruction and a meeting place” for missionaries in Korea.

² These figures compiled for this study are based on total membership of two major protestant denominations: the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches. Hanguk Khidokhyosa Younguwhe (1989) provided the membership figures for each denomination which came from the United States ‘Methodist and Presbyterian foreign missions’ reports. Between 1895 and 1896, the Methodist Episcopal Church increased its members from 410 to 817, and the Presbyterian Church from 180 to 2,000. And, between 1905 and 1906, the Methodist Episcopal Church combined with the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church increased its membership from 9,004 to 15,124 and the Presbyterian Church increased from 37,407 to 56,943.

³ From 1905 to 1910, Korea was under protectorate of Japan and the position which was represented by Japan in Korea was called “Resident-General”. The native Koreans were hate this post.

⁴ Young Men’s Christian Association

The Christian community's administrative independence from the government resulted in their having a relative degree of autonomy. The relative autonomy of Christianity enables it to become a viable institutional arena for nationalistic mobilization in colonial Korea. Christianity could then potentially provide Korean society with the organizational resources necessary for a nationalistic movement [9].

The Identification between Christianity and the Nation under the conditions of the organizational vacuum and the relative autonomy of Christianity, reliable identification of the Korean community with Christianity, served to link Christianity to nation-building. This identification emerged and was reinforced by two factors: the cultural vacuum of Korean society and the separation of Christianity from colonial power

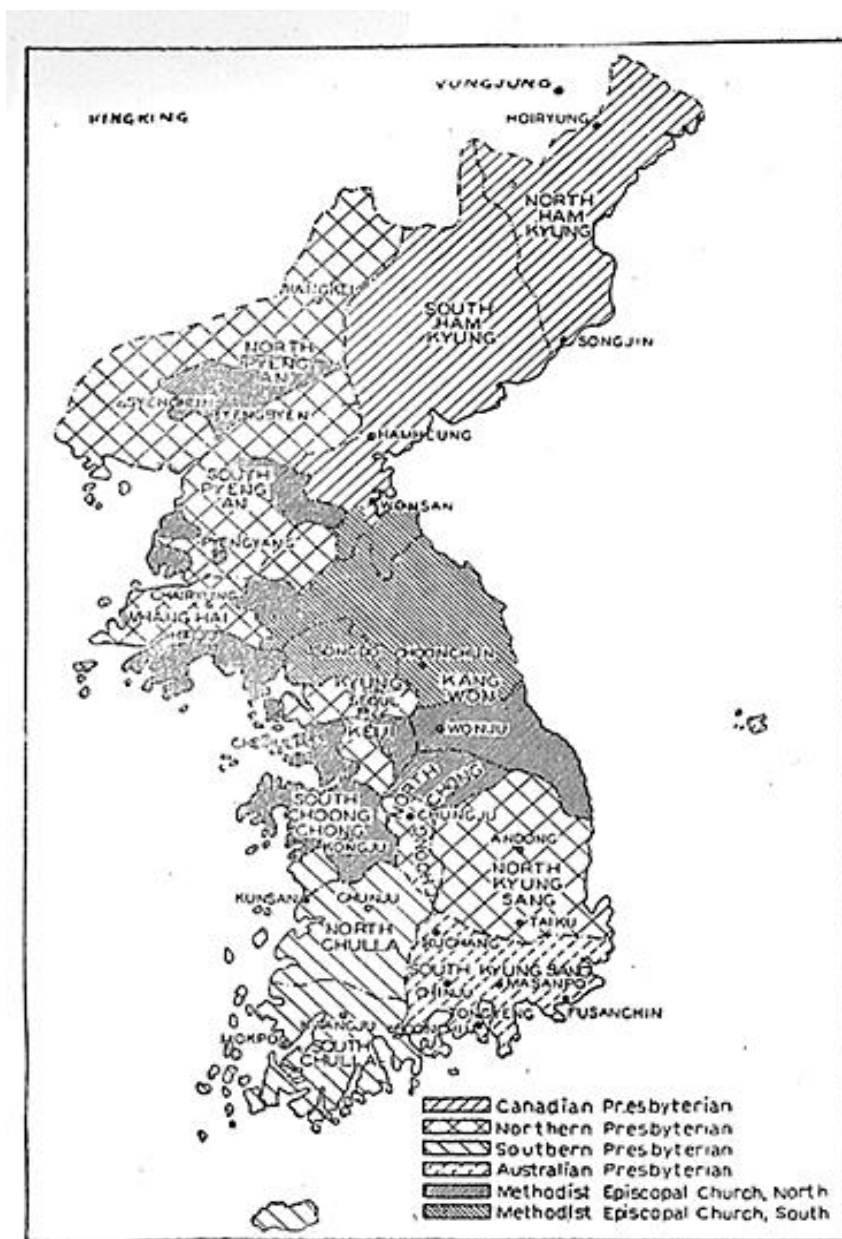


Figure 1: Territory among Missions during Colonial Korea [10]

III. ROLE OF THE CHURCH DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

The religious movements in 1907 and 1909 to 1910 further facilitated the institutionalisation of the Korean church. In 1912, in the General Assembly of the Korean Church, especially, Koreans gradually took over the dominant position. In 1913 and 1916, the General Assembly voted down the council's overture towards the

missionaries' attendance in the General Assembly. This series of actions in the central organ precipitated a historic shift in the church from missionary domination to Korean domination. As Christians became a well-organised group, the colonial government became increasingly suspicious of Christianity because it was perceived as a potential threat to their total domination of Korea [11]. This Japanese attitude toward Christianity resulted in the attack of Shinminho, the major activist group, which was composed mostly of Christians. This

attack became known as the conspiracy trial of 1910 to 1912. In the subsequent trial, 124 persons were accused of attempting to assassinate the Governor-General [12]. From 1910 to 1919, the Korean church went through most of its institutional development. This institutional development of the church and the continuing underground activities enabled Christians to contribute significantly to the emergence of the March 1st movement in 1919 [13]. Collective actions under the March 1st movement comprised a total of 1,214 at 311 different locations in Korea from March through April 1919. Among the 311 locations, Christianity played the leading role in 78 locations. Because the Christian population was just 1.3% of the total population in Korea, Christians also played a significant participation role in the March 1st Movement. This involvement has resulted in some devastating conflicts endured by the church. Conflicts in the Korean church occurred in the two dimensions. First, the church suffered from internal conflicts between the Koreans and the missionary and between the liberals and the conservative. Second, the church also conflicted with external groups, especially socialists. The March 1st Movement started when leaders of all the religious groups with young nationalist Koreans, who were inspired by the declaration, came out for demonstrations on the day of the funeral of the last chosen king. The fire of the Demonstration quickly spread in the country [14]. Since the March 1st Movement, the conflict between missionaries and Koreans within the Korean church was intensified. The official concern of missionaries was the deprivation of the human rights of Koreans by the Japanese, not Korea's independence from Japan [15]. The missionaries' indifference to independence became a main cause of division. Missionaries even formed a cooperative relationship with the Japanese colonial government which exacerbated the Koreans' negative attitude towards the missionaries. Among the Korean Christian leaders, the main concern was about the missionaries' attitude of cultural and racial superiority. This concern was expressed in the official address of Korean leaders to the missionaries. At this time, there was a great effort toward reconciliation with Koreans by some missionaries. But there was also a strong confrontation by other missionaries towards the Korean's position [16]. The Korean church became dominated by the Koreans due to the limited rights of missionaries; the departure of the radical Koreans resulted in the church leadership of moderate Koreans. Thus, many Korean leaders trained by the early missionaries continued to carry on the tradition of conservative policy in the period of the Korean-dominated church. Socialists began threatening the Christian community when the *Dong'a Ilbo* (Daily Newspaper) and the *Kaebok* (Magazine) report of the Anti-Christian Movement held in Beijing, China, appeared in March 1922. The socialist's struggle against Christianity peaked in October 1925, organizing a large gathering for a public lecture in Seoul. The gathering was to occur around the time when the Korean Sunday school planned to hold a rally, which indirectly proved their international plan of struggle [17]. The rural movement was initiated by the YMCA in 1923 (Chun, 1979). This Christian group held many training camps for men and women leaders in rural areas. The church established a

Rural Department in the General Assembly. There were two YMCAs emerged in Seoul by 1930⁵. The Imperial Capital (Hwangsong) YMCA was the first association, also known as Seoul YMCA, organized on 28th October 1903. The second was also established in October, and it was an association of students with total of 36 members at Paekche School [18]. It was evident that some Koreans continued that the YMCA would not only teach them about Western civilization and Christianity but also provide the necessary knowledge and inspirational stories to overcome foreign oppression⁶. According to the minutes of the Korean Church (1928, 1929), the department founded the Higher Agricultural Institute, which offered a two-month program in 1933 and published the magazine *Nongmin Sainghwal* (Farmer's Life) in 1929, which became a very popular printed media for the development of the rural community. This event implies that the social activities organized by the Christian community in the late 1920s and 1930s were characterized by a nationalistic motive [19]. As the government began to implement the policy of the "Japanisation of Korea", beginning with Japan's Manchurian invasion in 1931, Christianity's influence on Korean society became interpreted as a major challenge to the official effort for cultural assimilation attitude towards the Christian community was finally realised in the repressive attacks on Korean Christianity. The Church showed itself as a main religion, inciting people to be encouraged by a consciousness of its meaning and to acquire a sense of social justice in Korean Society.

IV. POLITICAL ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

Politically, Churches have faced an unpleasant phase of political suffering and oppression under the Japanese colonization. During the period of 1910 to 1919, Japan's annexation of Korea launched a harsh military-backed Government-General with an official "Military Policy". This policy focused on administrative control over all aspects of Korean society. The government officially practiced freedom of religion, but it was suspicious of the nationalistic tone of Christian action. Its manipulation of the Korean conspiracy case from 1910 to 1912 weakened Christians' political actions while the churches' religious actions continued. However, explicitly political actions resurged with the March 1st Movement in 1919.

As a result of this Movement, the government shifted its policy to a "Cultural Policy". This policy permitted Koreans some content of freedom in socio-cultural activities, yet with increased repression. Within this political context, the church and Christians increasingly organized social, economic, or cultural activities while they organized few political activities. At that time, the government utilized the Church for the promotion of pro-

⁵ In Korean, the official name of the Seoul YMCA was the Imperial Capital (Hwangsong) YMCA. At that time many Korean organisations, clubs, newspapers, and banks used Imperial Capital in their names.

⁶ In addition, it was at this time a "new interpretation" of the Bible was introduced. The missionaries managed to equate the Korea condition vis-a-vis Biblical stories.

state spirit among Koreans, and the church organized many socio-cultural activities [20]. The increase in non-religious actions of the church can be explained by the following factors:

- State policy toward the culture and economy
- Increased repression
- Changes in Church leadership towards Korea
- Criticism by Socialists.

The political context of colonial Korea was largely shaped by legislative action and repression. Christian activities were increasingly directed to the issue factor, which was politicized by legislative action. Variation in the frequency of Christian activity is not only affected by political variables but also by the institutional development of Christianity. There was also a big change in the relative dominance of missionaries and Koreans within the community. The dominance in the church transferred from the missionaries to the Koreans. Thus, the dominant native organization with increasing organizational resources was more likely to organize nationalistic actions.

V. CONCLUSION

In the early period, Christianity in Korea was controlled by missionaries. It is posited that the missionaries discouraged Korean Christians from involvement in anti-Japanese activities. The leadership composition is usually achieved through a power distribution or relative autonomy between groups of different social origins. Historical Studies of Christianity in Korea during the colonial period show that within the church, the Koreans and the missionaries experienced considerable conflict over the issue of nationalism. Korean nationalists organized a variety of anti-Japanese movements, such as the Chundokyo's activities. Missionaries initiated a variety of patriotic events and made a great effort to install an identification with Christianity among the Korean people. The lack of Japan's identification with Christianity facilitated its relationship with the Korean nation. The participation of Koreans in activities surrounding this issue conflicted with the apolitical stance of missionaries. The increasing economic and cultural goals of church action, a time of relatively high repression, was thought to be caused by a shift from missionary to Korean leadership of the church. Therefore, it is argued that the native autonomous structure of Christianity in Korea is to articulate a more nationalistic interest and to mobilize people for actions directed even at non-religious sectors. The non-religious goals of church action do not include political goals, while the non-religious goals of Christian support are predominantly political.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest in the realization of this work.

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