

A Review of Political Factors Behind the Rise of Protestantism in Korea

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In Korea, Protestantism saw a sharp rise and acceptance during the colonial era, whereas in other countries in the region such as China and Japan, it could not gain ground. East Asian regions had a history profoundly shaped by Buddhism, Confucianism, and traditions of ancestor worship. Researching the reason for the sharp acceptance in Korea, one comes across some explanations from different segments. (Lee)

The missionaries consider it an act of Providence, whereas others think government backing and support are a driving factor. Some find similarities in the Korean social and family structure and Christian values. Missionary relief and aid activities, urbanization, and globalization are cited as important factors. However, one compelling argument that has been presented in studies exploring the dynamics of the colonial era in Korea was the political factor that allowed Protestantism to lay its foundation in Korean society and the most credible explanation of why it could not gain acceptance in the surrounding regions.

Protestantism is an idea-driven belief system. In Korean society, a religion of this nature only succeeds if it aligns with the interests of the people who carry it. Otherwise, it may just survive as an insignificant minority. Korea had been colonized by Japan from 1920 to 1945. In a proud nation with a rich history, sentiments against Japanese rule ran deep. In the 1800s Catholic missionary movements had already become active in Korean society. Still, at that time the Choson regime that was founded upon a rigid Confucian ideology began to see Catholicism as an instrument of Western Colonial powers trying to penetrate Korea in order to increase their influence, and subsequently challenge the socio-political order of the Choson Korean state. Catholic Christianity began to be seen as heresy and treason. Some political events that furthered tension with the “seditious” Catholics ended in mass persecution that lasted for decades, leading to a stigma that came to be associated with it.

In China and Japan, Protestant missionary movements received a crushing blow from their states despite their undeniable appeal. Both countries associated it with [Western imperialism](#) that sought to economically subjugate their nations, as anti-Christian movements in public rose against [missionary activities](#). The political situation in Korea differed when Protestant missionaries expanded their operations. The Choson state had relaxed its antagonism to Christianity and saw adopting some aspects of Western Culture, like sciences and technology, as vital for the survival of their nation, with major treaties signed with Western powers of the time. During this time, Protestant missionaries like Horace Underwood and Henry Appenzeller began their work freely in Korea, taking advantage of the permission granted to establish Western Hospitals. The official ban on proselytization and evangelization was loosened, and massive missionary efforts launched by the Protestant church led to

explosive growth periods. In one year alone from 1909 to 1910, 20,000 Koreans had accepted Protestantism.

Internal economic and political crises coupled with the imperialistic ambitions of the Chinese and Japanese and mutual wars resulted in a full annexation of Korea into Japan in 1910. During this rule, the distressed and disoriented Korean society turned to nontraditional options for salvation. Koreans found increasing refuge in the Church, which slowly became a point of nationalist incitement against the Colonial occupiers. The sense of unity and hope the Church provided started growingly associated with nationalistic sentiments, with an increasing trend to adopt Western practices and values that were deemed essential to change Korean society to ensure their survival. A hope for independence that resonated well with the community. However, the Church officially adopted a strict politically neutral stance. The Church's subsequent policy of accepting Japanese rule allowed it to gain favor with the Japanese rulers. This disappointed many Korean nationalist politically motivated protestant members of the Church and saw that as acceptance of an inevitable reality of colonization. It was not until the March First movement of 1919, and the events that led to it, that nationalist independence was revitalized.

Pro-independence protests that erupted inside Korea and in some other parts of the world evoked a harsh reaction from the Japanese colonizers. The initially violent protests and the response by the Japanese led to massacres. The Japanese saw the protest outbreaks where the [Declaration of Independence](#) and statements of American ideals were read, as a conspiracy by Western powers that used protestant missionaries to stir up the people's sentiments. The missionaries denied the charges but could not remain uninfluenced by the protests public pressure and emotions. Missionaries enjoyed a vast, influential network across the world, and news of Japanese atrocities had reached many countries, leading to International pressure on the regime. A significant majority of the protestors were Protestants, and a majority of the victims of Japanese atrocities and imprisonment were Protestants. These movement symbols began to be increasingly associated with Protestantism, with the missionaries now taking a pro-independence stance.

As Korea became liberated from Japanese rule due to the movement, the Church was highly credited for its efforts in shaping the movement; it earned the right to be deemed a genuine Korean religion, for having contributed to the struggle for political freedom. These nationalistic credentials would help it stand out as a positive force in Korean society. With rapid globalization and industrialization in the later years, Protestant missionaries proselytized freely in the Korean nation.

Works Cited

Lee, Timothy S. "A Political Factor in the Rise of Protestantism in Korea: Protestantism and the 1919 March First Movement." **Church History** 69.1 (2000): 116-142. .