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A Comparative Analysis of the Major Religions in Japan and Korea During the Colonial Period

Abstract:

To understand why the Christian gospel has success amid one culture, while seeming to fail in similar, neighboring cultures, one must look to additional factors than those often cited by missionary sources. Some of these factors would include the socio-political and religious context of each of those cultures in question, in addition to the prior encounters with Christianity and the reactions to the gospel by the receiving cultures. To illustrate this need, this paper analyzes the contexts of Japan and Korea during the period of Japanese expansion and wartime (1894 – 1945), and looks specifically at what was happening in the other major religions present at the time (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism), which would include their responses to the Christian missionary presence.

Keywords: Colonial Japan, Korea, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Christian mission

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Introduction

When considering the means used by the Holy Spirit in whether or not an individual, or an entire people group, accept the gospel and make it their own, missiologists often make it their focus to seek explanations that could explain why, historically, one embraces Christ, while another – presented with the same message, and sometimes even having similarities in methods used and situations experienced – rejects Christ. In the case of people groups, these same circumstances and prevailing worldview considerations also impact the shape of that Christianity that develops in the local context, as it becomes embraced and indigenized.

This essay will look specifically at two nations – Japan and Korea – to compare their relative responses to the Christian gospel. These two nations, despite the similarities and connections with one another as fellow East Asian nations, have had radically different reactions to Christianity – Japan predominantly rejecting its claims, and Korea – especially in the South – embracing Christianity and eventually becoming a major player in Christian missions.

While there are significant factors that developed later on historically, in addition to cultural and theological factors that must also be considered, this paper will specifically analyze this question through the lens of the other major religions that surrounded the churches during the period of Japanese expansion and wartime (1894 – 1945), at which time the general trajectory of Christianity in both countries seemed to diverge and move in opposite directions.

Prior to this period, there were several parallel similarities between the two countries regarding their general response to Christianity. Roman Catholic missionaries had been active on Japan's shores in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in Korea, during the eighteenth century. Both nations would initially welcome this new faith with curiosity toward its differences, and yet both would later become scandalized by Catholic Christianity and close their borders to foreigners as a result, expelling all missionaries and persecuting the native Christians, thus causing the fledgling church in each nation to go underground.¹ Both nations later had their borders forcibly opened through gunboat diplomacy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, followed soon after by the arrival of Protestant missionaries and the return of Roman Catholicism. Also, both had an initial period where conversion to the new faith was officially forbidden, which was later removed. Finally, both had been experiencing a period of rapid

church growth immediately preceding this period in question. Yet, beginning in the 1890's, things would change. While Christianity would continue to experience rapid growth in Korea, it would become marginalized in Japan. Why did this change occur?

One possible explanation is to explore what was happening among Christianity's major opponents (namely, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism) during this time period, specifically at their response to the presence and activity of Christianity. For this, I will address each religion in turn, discussing the context of each, as well as how it responded to Christianity, in hope that this could contribute to the discussion on why Christianity seemed to blossom in Korean soil, but wither in Japan.

Buddhism

At the beginning of this period, Buddhism in both Korea and Japan was in a weak and demoralized state. In Japan's case, while it enjoyed a prominent role under the previous government, it was in a state of disfavor with the new Meiji government. In addition to this, it found itself divided into numerous competing sects. In Korea, Buddhism had been marginalized since the fourteenth century. However, this would change in the later nineteenth century, as Buddhists from both Japan and Korea, like other nations across the Buddhist Asian world, would seek to reform their religion.

Global Buddhist Reinvention

On the global level in the nineteenth century, Buddhism was seeking to reinvent itself as an historically and scientifically based religion, in response to the aggressive mission efforts of Christians in many of the Buddhist territories. Thus, there was a desire by Buddhists throughout Asia to prevent themselves from losing too much ground to its very aggressively evangelistic competitor.² The specific developments centred on establishing Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, as the centre of Buddhism. This became a focal point in Buddhist discourse in response to a similar emphasis being proclaimed by Christian missionaries when discussing the historicity of Jesus.³

According to Hwansoo Kim, the efforts to revive Buddhism on a global level were "spearheaded by a range of actors from the West and the East, including Western Orientalists, Buddhist sympathizers, and Asian Buddhist reformers."⁴ Of these, the two with the greatest impact

were Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), one of the founders of the Theosophist Society and the first Western convert to Buddhism, and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), a lay Buddhist reformer from Sri Lanka.⁵ Because of increasing travel and communication between the different Buddhist regions throughout Asia at this time, as well as the sympathetic attitudes of Orientalists and Buddha sympathizers in the West, local practices and responses to Western colonialism and Christianity began to affect other regions, which would also result in adaptations in the self-consciousness of Buddhism itself.⁶

As part of these reclamation efforts, Dharmapala and others, Olcott included, visited Japan, Korea, and other locations within the Asian Buddhist world to unite Buddhists under the banner of the historical Buddha, with the ultimate goal being the expulsion of Christian missionaries from their collective territories.⁷ The Buddha's birthday celebration was one campaign that successfully helped to generate the rise of Buddhism as a revived global religion. According to Hwansoo Kim, Japan would become particularly dedicated to promoting this festival.⁸

Buddhism in Japan

Not only would Japanese Buddhism become passionately devoted to the celebration of Buddha's Birthday (called *Hana Matsuri* in Japan); they would also send individual travellers to other parts of Asia, as explorers, missionaries, and even a delegation to the World Parliament of Religions conference in 1893, and repurpose a document written by a Christian into an apologetic argument about the West's fascination with Buddhism (and, with it, the loss of Western interest in Christianity).

Prior to the renovations in Buddhism happening during this modernization process, the Japanese Buddha's Birthday celebration had occurred inside Buddhist temples, similar to other locations in Asia. The celebration was also generally held according to the older lunar calendar. However, after the renovation, with the encouragement of Olcott and Dharmapala, the festivals began to be held in public streets, university campuses, and private institutes, and the lunar calendar was replaced by the solar Gregorian calendar. Initially, it was run by Buddhist youth groups, with no official backing from the various Buddhist sects. This changed in 1916, however, when the Japanese Buddhists finally united for the celebration.⁹ By 1926, *Hana Matsuri* was embraced by the Japanese government as one

of the symbols indicating Japan as the ideal leader of Asia and a prominent player in the political and religious arena of the world.¹⁰

An additional resource that the Japanese Buddhists used to re-establish themselves within their society was *The Gospel of Buddha*, a publication by a German-American Christian author, Paul Carus. Carus' original intent with this work was to propagate his version of Christianity as being the fulfillment of Buddhism's aspirations, with Jesus being the Maitreya – the final great teacher to fulfil the teachings of Buddhism. Carus described Buddhism as a predecessor to Christianity, as well as a prominent contender for the souls of the world, which should be learned from as a highly philosophical and scientific faith.¹¹ He had, in fact, been highly impressed by the presentation of Eastern Buddhism by the Japanese delegates at the World Parliament of Religions conference a few years before publishing his work. According to Judith Snodgrass, "the Buddhism they presented... was a rationalized, secular, trans-sectarian, lay-oriented Buddhism consciously packaged to emphasize its compatibility with science and philosophy... and the life-affirming and humanitarian aspects of Buddhism."¹² In his work, Carus presented his views of the natural evolution of religion (a popular view of the time), with Buddhism naturally giving way to Christianity, its fulfilment.

However, this was not how it was interpreted nor used by the Japanese Buddhists. Instead, they used it as an apologetic tool to point toward how Westerners (who were viewed by Japanese as being predominantly Christian) were developing a deep interest in Buddhism (thus, losing faith in Christianity), and that Buddhism of the East could pose a threat to Christian (Western) religious hegemony. In other words, it was used to convince those Japanese who had been drawn toward Christianity because of the technological superiority of the West to reconsider their previous decisions to embrace that new faith, and as part of an argument that Japan could be recognized as an equal to the West in science, technology and intellect, but needed to remain strong as a decidedly Eastern culture against Western spiritual dominance.¹³ In other words, despite Carus's original intent for the *Gospel of Buddha*, it was used in Japan, as elsewhere, as an ingredient in the reformulation and rebranding of Buddhism as a modern, scientific, and philosophically sophisticated religion.

Part of the reason for this desire for Buddhism to reinvent itself in Japan was that with the collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the restoration of imperial rule in the new Meiji government, Buddhism as a

faith found itself both deeply divided and radically out of favor. According to Richard Jaffe, “although the Tokugawa regime had regarded the Buddhist clergy as a crucial aide in the maintenance of religious and social order, nativists, Shintoists, and many members of the new Meiji regime demonized them as un-Japanese, parasitic, and corrupt.”¹⁴ It was also viewed by the Meiji government as being a “feudal and superstitious religion antithetical to modernization and Westernization.”¹⁵ As such, the Meiji government sought to eliminate Japanese Buddhism altogether. It was out of this context that Japanese Buddhism now began to look outside of itself – especially since commercial shipping with other nations were opening Japan up to the world – to reimagine a Buddhism that would once again thrive in a rapidly changing Japan.¹⁶ Among many of these travellers from Japan to the rest of Asia, the plight of several of these other nations, especially those under the heels of Western imperialists, caused a realization that unless they learned to successfully compete with the so-called Christian world, they would suffer the same fate of servility to the arrogance and brutality of Western rulers.¹⁷

Buddhism in Korea

Like its Japanese counterpart, Buddhism in Korea was in need of a re-invention of itself. During the Joseon period (1392-1910), it had found itself relegated to isolated mountain monasteries, and was prevented access from the principle avenues of power.¹⁸ Additionally, the tradition of Buddhism within Korea itself was divided between complete detachment from the everyday lives of the people, with an “elitist, clergy-centred institutional tradition” on the one hand, and “diffused, ‘shamanistic’ religious practices” of lay Buddhists on the other.¹⁹ To a degree, the anti-Buddhist sentiments during the Joseon period could be partly to blame for this situation. However, it should also be noted that the impediments that the Buddhist reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to address were actually inherent, structurally, within Buddhism itself – particularly of the Son school, which was the most prominent in Korea at this time.²⁰ As a system, Son Buddhism focusses on meditative practices and the denial of the physical world for the sake of the spiritual, not on the public teaching of doctrine. It was this world-denial and nihilism that resulted in some of Neo-Confucianism’s deepest criticisms of that religion, which then led to its earlier marginalization.²¹

The Buddha's Birthday celebration in Korea first developed during the Koryo period. They were originally state-sponsored events with the intention of national unity and communal prayers for the royal family. The event included a lantern festival, celebrated by lighting lanterns and reading Buddhist sutras. Despite the anti-Buddhist policies of the Joseon period, the festival survived, though stripped of its Buddhist meanings. It became more like a State holiday, where families would gather at the festival, light lanterns and entertain themselves in the commercial districts.²² However, from the later nineteenth century, similar to their Japanese counterparts, Korean Buddhist monks began to study in other parts of Asia, especially China and Japan, and several of these reformers emphasized the centrality of the historical Buddha, which included a resuscitation of the Buddha's Birthday celebration.²³ According to Hwansoo Kim, Korea's native version of this holiday was already undergoing modernization before Japanese Buddhists began introducing their own version to the peninsula.²⁴

Into this situation, during the period of Japanese expansion, various Japanese Buddhist sects sent missionaries to proselytize, each competing with one another for a piece of the Korean Buddhist pie. The relationship between Japanese and Korean Buddhists during this time of Japanese expansionism was anything but one of trust or confidence between the two sides. To the Koreans, Japanese Buddhists were likened to Christian missionary colonialists "who invaded non-Western countries with the objective of furthering their sectarian and nation's imperial ambitions."²⁵ Japanese Buddhists, for their part, viewed their Korean counterparts as "pre-modern, moribund, backward and antisocial," and in serious need of guidance from their more "modern, vibrant, reformed and socially engaged" version of Buddhism that was developing in Japan.²⁶ However, it was not necessarily as clear-cut as a relationship of rivalry or patronizing.

If anything, the relationships between Korean and Japanese Buddhists was more passive – with Japanese Buddhists acting, for the most part, more like colonialists, with little interest in promoting the Buddhism of their neighboring nation. Koreans, for their part, were embittered because of the foreign rule, and did not wish to associate with foreign invaders.²⁷ Additionally, with the introduction of the Temple Ordinance in 1911, the Japanese government effectively put an end to the sectarian competition among Japanese Buddhists over Korean Buddhist territory by bringing the administration of Korean Buddhism directly under the supervision of the colonial government.²⁸

However, there were some exceptions to the policy of disengagement. According to Hwansoo Kim, there were some on both sides who desired to work closer together toward mutual understanding and benefit.²⁹ The Japanese, for their part, assisted Korean monasteries in establishing schools, creating a central office for the monitoring of Korean Buddhism, aiding Korean Buddhism in re-establishing itself into the center of Korean politics, and protecting them from exploitation. Meanwhile, Korean Buddhists were encouraged by their situations and by zealous Japanese Buddhist missionaries (who were themselves inspired by their nation's imperial powers and their opposition to the threat posed by Christianity) to join the Japanese sects that protected them.³⁰ In other words, the relationship between Korean Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism during this period was highly dynamic and nuanced.

Another proof that the relationship between the Buddhist camps was not completely antagonistic would be the March 1 Movement. Unlike Korean Christians and the *Ch'ondogyo* (The Heavenly Way Religion), who were vocal supporters of Korean independence, only two among the leaders of the March 1 Independence Movement were Buddhists.³¹ What could be seen, by contrast, is a relationship of protection and control by the Japanese authorities toward Korean Buddhism, which allowed them greater freedom and public visibility than under the previous dynasty.³² This increased visibility, protection from the Japanese government (as Buddhism was recognized as a legitimate religion – alongside Christianity and Shintoism), and its renewed image as an indigenous/ Eastern religion (as opposed to Christianity, which was still seen as relatively foreign) made it possible for Korean Buddhism to expand its influence.³³

Shintoism

During the later Meiji Restoration in Japan and subsequent period of expansionism, Shintoism, was also in the process of transforming itself. This was due, to some degree, by the anxiety felt in Japan about the growing influence of Christianity and its accompanying Western colonial powers, and the desire to remain strong as a nation against Western dominance. For this paper, I will be specifically analyzing the particular form of Shintoism that was emerging: State Shintoism, its status as a “non-religious” nationalistic religion of the Japanese Empire, and the enforcement of its shrine worship upon the Christian churches in Korea.

State Shintoism in Japan

In one form or another, Shintoism had existed in Japan since ancient times. However, as a religion, it lacked a unifying ideology. Throughout much of its known history, it has existed in syncretism with other, more dominant, faiths – Buddhism during the medieval period, and, from the seventeenth century, Neo-Confucianism. Similar to its relationship with Buddhism, Shintoism altered Neo-Confucianism as it joined itself to its ethical ideology. In addition to this, as Japan expanded its territory, it would combine these elements with a totalitarian governmental policy and dreams of unifying the peoples of Eastern Asia, in direct opposition and competition with the Western Allied Powers, something referred to by scholars as Pan-Asianism.³⁴ This Imperial Confucianism (*Kodo Jugaku*) would be the dominant form of State Shinto religion until the fall of the Japanese Empire in 1945.³⁵ According to Wonsuk Chang, “In the wake of Perry’s expedition to Japan... Japan transformed itself along the Western model of the aggressive nation state” and “defined itself as a paradox, part of a larger community of oppressed Asian nations standing against Western hegemony, while also being the most Westernized, civilized country among the Asian nations.”³⁶

To accomplish this dream of a Pan-Asian empire, the Japanese state sought to unite various elements of Japanese culture, including the semi-autonomous system of Shrine Shintoism, into a newly structured state religion.³⁷ Specifically, it was these three contents of Shrine Shintoism that the State sought to capitalize on: the myth of the eternal reign of the imperial family, the central importance of the *kami* (Divine spirits/ gods), particularly Amaterasu, the sun goddess thought to be the divine ancestor of the emperor, and Japan’s superiority over other nations.³⁸ In fact, the Shintoism of the early 20th Century assumed a world dominated by Japan, and that other lands, including China, (which was previously viewed as the primary center of civilization in the East Asian milieu) would pay tribute to Japan.³⁹

Between 1868 and 1945, Shintoism increasingly became influenced and controlled by the state, as the Japanese government sought to utilize the beliefs already inherent in Shintoism, in addition to the worship at Shinto’s shrines, as one of the principle driving forces behind galvanizing the loyalty of the Japanese populace to the Japanese imperial ambitions.⁴⁰ Wilbur Fridell also mentions certain other elements that existed outside of traditional Shinto discourse that were central elements to the State Shinto

apparatus (such as national holidays, the national Meiji Constitution, and the Imperial Rescript on Education).⁴¹ In other words, the religion known as Shinto (shrine Shinto) was only one of several elements that were being used by the Japanese government to accomplish this development of the Imperial Shinto system.⁴²

With this all being said, it was not simply a top-down campaign propagated by a power-hungry government. On the contrary, the people of Japan in that period seemed to actively embrace this initiative.⁴³ According to Shimazono Susumu, “people at all levels of society can be viewed as active participants in State Shinto, supporting and rallying around it.”⁴⁴ As he continues, however, he points out that the institutional State Shinto, aligned with the militarist, totalitarian ideologues of the Imperial State, and the Shrine Shinto of the common people, which represents the religious side of Shinto, were not always in complete agreement.⁴⁵ Additionally, while the State did have some forms of control and oversight over the shrine system during this period (under a different arm of the government than “religions,” such as Christianity and Buddhism), the shrines under the government during that period remained relatively weak, both economically and politically.⁴⁶ What we can get from this is that the religion of Shintoism and the Shintoism of the State, while related to one another, were not equivalent.

However, because the religious worldview known as Shinto was one aspect of the picture that was being formed by the Japanese government in the development of State Shinto, seeking to define Shintoism as a religion is a murky undertaking at best – especially since the self-identification of Shintoism at that time in question (and also, in some ways, even today) was one more of nationalistic patriotism and expressions of Japanese culture, much like the rituals and holidays that citizens of another country would perform at certain specified occasions.⁴⁷ It was this “non-religious” nationalistic patriotism that would cause problems in Japan’s colonies, including Korea, particularly for the nascent Christian church.

The Shinto Shrine Controversy in Korea

Although it may be true that Christianity was officially protected as a legal religion during the Colonial period, the reality of the relationship between the Japanese Shinto state and the Christian church was somewhat convoluted and opaque. For instance, only native Korean Christians were prominent in the March 1 Independence movement (while the Western missionaries actually discouraged this political activity). However, these

same missionaries, although uninvolved in the movement itself, drew global attention and criticism from their worldwide sources toward the atrocities committed by the Japanese in its aftermath.⁴⁸ Also, because Christianity was already deeply entrenched in Korea by the time Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910, the missionaries were able to attain certain concessions to further expand their presence through education, healthcare, and social work in the peninsula, especially in the major city centers.⁴⁹ For the most part, Western Christian missionaries hoped to maintain good relationships with the Japanese by expressing support for colonial rule – which is part of the reason for why, despite Korean Christians’ prominence in the Independence Movement, the missionaries were, for the most part, silent until the aftermath.⁵⁰ This, alongside other controversial incidents, should illustrate the convoluted history of missionary Christianity in Korea during this period.

This opaque understanding would only become more pronounced in the later years of the Colonial period, and these two forces (Christianity and State Shinto) would come into direct confrontation with one another. The Manchurian Incident, a battle pretexting Japan’s invasion of Northeastern China, produced the need in the Japanese government’s minds for increasing the intensity of the “Japanization” of Korea. Japan needed the material and human resources present in Korea, in addition to the strategic position of the peninsula in their expansionist thrust. For this, they needed to guarantee the loyalty of their Korean subjects.⁵¹ They sought to do this by urging the Korean population, at any cost, to offer worship and reverence at the Shinto shrines. Prior to 1932, these rites were completely optional; however, beginning in 1932, all school personnel – principals, teachers, and students – were now required to attend and participate in ceremonies at Shinto shrines and pay special homage and reverence toward the Japanese emperor.⁵²

Because education was one of the primary ministries of Christian missionaries in Korea, this would become problematic. In fact, one could argue that this was *the* issue among Christians in Korea at the time, and one of the primary reasons for the later factionalization of the church. On the one hand, it was required by the government, who had been insisting since 1900 that the shrine worship “was not a religious act, but a political expression of patriotism,”⁵³ and the American missionaries wished to remain on friendly terms with the Japanese, so that they could continue operating in the peninsula. At the same time, it was also viewed by several Christians

as being a form of religious observance and, thus, idolatry, especially given the difference between the monotheism declared in Christianity and the polytheism inherent in Shintoism. Naturally, this would cause division in the ranks among the Christian denominations – with the Catholics and Methodists, for the most part, cooperating (thus, being allowed to keep their schools operational), while the Presbyterians were divided between a minority who also participated and a majority that refused to cooperate (and closed their schools).⁵⁴ The other Protestant denominations represented in Korea, whose numbers were not as significant as those mentioned, generally went one way or the other.

At least part of the reason for this divide that seemingly split across denominational lines could be attributed to church governance structures of the denominations in question. For the Catholics, because the Pope declared it acceptable, the church followed his lead.⁵⁵ Likewise, because the Methodists also possessed an episcopal governance structure, the denomination generally went in the direction decided by the bishops, despite any misgivings of individuals within the denomination.⁵⁶ Among the Presbyterians, on the other hand, who participated in a more egalitarian, consular form of church government, determined by regions, this gave more independence to each regional body, which allowed for more voices of dissent to be heard.⁵⁷ Additionally, while the Presbyterians were generally more exclusivist in their approach to other religions, the Methodists and Catholics were usually more inclusivist and sympathetic.⁵⁸

Confucianism

During the Joseon Dynasty in what is today Korea, Neo-Confucianism enjoyed both popularity and prestige. In fact, it was the dominant ideology of the time, and the Korean Confucian Scholarly class (the *Yangban*) took great pride in their loyalty to Neo-Confucian doctrines and social ethics. The government examination system had become so perfected that, unlike in the Chinese system, the adoption of Neo-Confucianism and everything accompanying it served to preserve the stability of the Korean society.⁵⁹ In fact, it was even believed by some that Joseon was the only remaining true heir of the Confucian tradition that it had inherited from China.⁶⁰ However, this changed drastically when Japan annexed Korea in 1910. Almost overnight, Confucianism was deprived of its previous monopolizing position in the official courts of the land and had

lost considerable societal power.⁶¹ While its influence on Korean society didn't die out completely (as it continued to live on in the rural centers, and Korean cultural mores, language, and even Korean Christianity, have all retained certain aspects of Confucianism), its official powers as an institution were essentially stripped away. However, the seeds for this dissolution were present before that final point.

Consider, for example, the perspective taken by the Japanese toward Confucianism itself, despite the fact that State Shinto used Confucian ethics as part of its ideological makeup during this time. To the Japanese mind, which at this point was focussed on expansion and advancement to compete effectively with Western powers, pure Confucianism and its focus on the past and contradictory emphases and influences were seen as central to the problem of what Japan perceived as backwardness in its peninsular neighbor.⁶² In fact, there was even a sense of Japanese superiority because of the relative peace enjoyed by her people, politically, especially when comparing itself to that of China, the epicenter of Confucianism. This comparison is especially stark when the central Shinto belief of the unbroken lineage of their emperors is considered, when compared to the changing dynasties of both Korea and China (who were both nations that based their political philosophy on Confucianism).⁶³

As Wonsuk Chang would point out, even among intellectuals in Korea at the time, Confucianism was already beginning to be seen in a less than ideal light. It was viewed as "a shackling ideology of backwardness, oppression, hierarchism, laziness, and hypocrisy, and thereby incompatible with modern values such as individualism, tolerance and freedom."⁶⁴ It was increasingly seen as being powerless and useless.

Additionally, this perception would only be exasperated if one were to reflect upon the events surrounding the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), when Japan defeated the Chinese forces in a series of battles for the control of the peninsula, as well as the series of failed rebellions and coups by those of the more conservative Confucian factions.⁶⁵ When coupling this with the introduction of Christianity and Western culture at around the same time, this would result in a perfect storm against the Confucian ideology. Each of these factors, when combined with the loss of Confucianism's state prominence and the impact of modernism on Korean society, has resulted in Confucianism becoming marginalized, with very few Koreans after that point claiming any religious allegiance toward it.⁶⁶

However, while Confucianism as a specific movement or “religion” may have become marginalized in both countries, its values continue to live on in the South Korean and Japanese cultures of today.

Changes Brought by Christianity

The introduction of Protestant Christianity into both Japan and Korea in the latter half of the nineteenth century brought considerable change to both contexts. Quite significant was the alteration to the religious environment, especially as each of the religions covered above were forced to deal not only with a new contender to the religious scene, accompanying the technologically and militarily superior Western powers, but also a new way to think about religion itself. To a lesser degree, we could see this change already happening with the earlier introduction of Catholicism⁶⁷ It was actually the introduction of Christianity, with its emphasis on denominationalism and religious exclusivism that would result in an alteration in this understanding of religion.

A Changed Perspective on Religion

The traditional belief structure of the East Asian world did not think of religions in the way that we would in the Western world. In fact, the idea of “religion” as a distinct preference and experience of an individual was foreign to Eastern Asia until the advent of Christianity arriving at its shores. In fact, it would not have been unheard of for a person to believe in and practice Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism (Japan)/ Shamanism (Korea) within the same day and not feel the contradiction. Every “religion” had its distinct role to play in the society in both Korea and Japan. In other words, at least as far as Japan and Korea of that time period were concerned, this particular concept of “religion” was a product of modern Western civilization.⁶⁸ Curiously, we can see this even in new religions that developed as blends of Catholicism and local religious beliefs during the period of persecution in each country: the *Kakure Kirishitan* in Japan and the *Ch’ondogyo* in Korea.

One of the surprises that the Christian missionaries found in Japan was that the *Kakure Kirishitan*, the underground church, had survived, despite the persecution, changed through centuries of isolation, and was now re-emerging.⁶⁹ Some of these “hidden Christians” would later join either Catholic or Protestant churches; however, approximately 35,000 of them would refuse to join either church, and instead chose to keep their

own traditions alive.⁷⁰ Currently, there are very few of these individuals left. The majority of these live in poor farming and fishing villages around Kyushu and its offshore islands.⁷¹ Of particular interest to this paper are the reasons why those underground Christians chose to remain separate.

The *Kakure Kirishitan* beliefs are a unique blend of Christianity with Japanese folk Shinto and Buddhism.⁷² That they would blend the Catholic traditions with the indigenous ones is understandable. The official church leadership was expelled relatively early on, and without access to doctrinal resources and fearful of persecution, these Christians needed to hide their faith by changing their symbolism and hiding their beliefs in the cultural forms of their surrounding culture.⁷³ As for why they choose to remain separate today, much of this has to do with honoring the tradition of the past and the veneration of their ancestors, who willingly suffered as Christians during the period of persecution. Additionally, as Kristian Pella points out, they are more a Japanese Shinto-Buddhist tradition that has incorporated Christian symbols than a completely Christian sect – and thus an entity that would differ in teaching and appearance from other Christian denominations, including those that would later attempt to create a fully indigenous form of Christianity in Japan.⁷⁴

Similar to the *Kakure Kirishitan* of Japan, the *Ch'ondogyo* (the Heavenly Way) sect of Korea (also known as *Tonghak*, or Eastern Learning) also developed as a blending of Catholic ideas with the native Confucian, Buddhist, and Shamanist notions. Ch'oe Che-u (1824-1864), the illegitimate son of an aristocrat, developed this faith in response to the corruption of the government, incorporating the Christian concepts of equality, the Kingdom of Heaven and the personality of God into a reformed Confucian-based sect.⁷⁵ It would be a splinter from this group that would incite a general rebellion in Korea in 1894 that triggered the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), which, in turn, would begin the process of Japanese colonization of the peninsula.⁷⁶

This blending with the indigenous tradition is not unique in either Japanese nor Korean histories. In Japan, Buddhism, which was introduced through Korea in the mid sixth century CE, and Confucianism, which also entered Japan through Korea in the third century, were both able to reconcile themselves to the native Japanese Shintoism by adopting specific roles within Japanese society.⁷⁷ The Japanese Emperor Shotoku (574-621) reportedly related the three religions as being the root (Shinto), the trunk (Confucianism) and the branches (Buddhism) of the tree representing

Japanese culture, seeking to bring peace to his divided nation. Likewise, Korea had a similar tradition, but where Confucianism and Buddhism co-existed until the thirteenth century, when Neo-Confucianism became the dominant worldview, and other religions – Buddhism included – were molded to fit the needs and dictates of the Confucian royalty.⁷⁸

This is one element of the general attitude toward religion historically within East Asia, particularly both in Japan and Korea – that different religions do not need to be mutually exclusive from one another.⁷⁹ In fact, one might even say that the folk religion practiced in both Korea and Japan was a blend of Confucian ethics, Buddhist reflection, and local ideologies (whether Shintoism in Japan or Shamanism in Korea).

Conclusion

As I have argued in this paper, the introduction of Protestant Christianity, accompanied by the technologically and militarily superior Western empires, to the East Asian region brought considerable change. In addition to dealing with a new way of understanding religion, there was also the specific threat felt by each of these religions by Christianity itself – a religion that, to their eyes at least, was an aggressively competitive newcomer to the religious scene. In many ways, this is where we can begin to see a difference in the relative response between the dominant religions in both nations that would also determine a difference in the response between Japan and Korea toward Christianity itself. As I have shown above, both Buddhism and Shintoism seemed to expand and revitalize themselves in this period, yet Confucianism seemed to wither into the background.

Regarding Buddhism, its revival in both contexts was, in many ways, part of a global movement, and while it did expand its influence in both Japan and Korea, it was expanding from a place of weakness in both contexts, and so was not able to fully expel Christianity. This perceived failure would prove to be a point of frustration for various Buddhist leaders – most notably in the difference in social engagement and zeal for outside proselytizing (active evangelism of nonbelievers) among their missionaries.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, although not becoming primarily dominant in either of the two contexts, Buddhism would grow in influence as it sought to re-invent itself and become truly competitive in light of the threat that it perceived from Christianity.

However, it is in the difference between Shintoism in Japan and Confucianism in Korea where one can see at least one clue as to the

difference in responses toward Christianity. Between 1873 and the early 1890's, Christianity in Japan became highly popular and influential, with prominent members of the samurai and scholarly classes declaring it the fulfilment of the Japanese *bushido* honor codes and beneficial for Japan to embrace collectively.⁸¹ In the midst of this time of great popularity, Christian missionaries expressed great optimism about the future of Christianity in Japan. However, in the mid 1890's, this would change considerably. Part of this change may have been due to the Buddhist revival, but what would become apparent, especially as Japan began to extend their territory, was that Shintoism, in transforming itself and joining itself to the identity of the Japanese culture and empire, was beginning to reassert itself as the official and dominant faith, and Christianity, which had come to symbolize Western global hegemony, and yet was becoming seen by these same Japanese intellectuals as being rejected in the West as well, was pushed to the side and rejected by the majority of Japanese as utterly foreign, anti-patriotic, and inferior.

Meanwhile, when looking at the Korean scene, the situation developed completely differently. The aggressor was not perceived as the Christian West, but Shinto Japan. When the political power was stripped from the Neo-Confucian scholar class upon Japan's annexation, Confucianism seemed to melt away under Japanese criticism. However, why was there not a similar resurgence of the native religion in Korea, like there had been in Japan? After all, there were other religions to choose from – most notably the *Chon'dogyo*, which had become highly popular among the common classes. At least part of this was the Japanese policy toward religion in its colonies. Unlike Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, and Christianity, *Chon'dogyo* and other native religions of Korea were simply not recognized as legitimate religions, and so became illegal during the Colonial period. In addition, the Koreans believed that the United States (the nation most closely associated with Christian missionaries in the minds of Koreans) lacked colonial intentions toward Korea.⁸² Thus, to belong to a religion that promised a chance to keep their national identity (which was not compromised by collusion with the Japanese Imperialists), and which promised progressive change from a decaying and corrupt system of the past, Christianity became an obvious choice for many.⁸³ We can see this during the Great Revival of 1907, in addition to the March 19 Independence Movement, as well as the rapid growth of numbers during the entire Colonial period – growing from one percent of the total population in 1910

(which had already shown significant growth and popularity prior to this), to just under four percent in 1945, following liberation from Japan.⁸⁴

In other words, these religious movements show us at least one clue as to the difference between these two nations in their response to Christianity. In Japan, the combination of Buddhist revival and the rise of State Shinto as the official faith of nationalistic loyalty would marginalize Christianity as foreign and unpatriotic. In Korea, meanwhile, even with the dominance of Shintoism as the religion of the occupying Japanese Empire, and even with the increased popularity and prominence of Buddhism in this period, many Koreans would ultimately see Christianity as the best alternative that would allow them to keep their national identity as a people.

End Notes

¹ For both nations, one of the reasons for this changed reaction was the Rites Controversy, where the Catholic Church deemed the ancestral funeral rites important to both Shintoism and Confucianism to be idolatry and not to be practiced by Christians. Another reason in both countries was the suspicion of sedition by native Christians and imperial takeover by foreign powers represented by the missionaries. In Japan's case, it was the feuding of Portuguese Jesuit and Spanish Franciscan missionaries, in addition to their powerful fleets that made the Japanese government feel threatened, in addition to a rebellion by Catholic peasants in Shimabara. In the case of Korea, it was a certain "silk letter" that was intercepted, requesting military aid from Catholic missionaries in Beijing for the interests of the fledgling church.

² Richard M. Jaffe. "Seeking Sakyamuni: Travel and the Reconstruction of Japanese Buddhism", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 30:1, 66; Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas: The Buddha's Birthday Festival in Colonial Korea (1928-1945)", *Journal of Korean Religions*, Vol. 2:2 (Oct 2011), 51.

³ Jaffe, 69.

⁴ Jaffe, 67; Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 52.

⁵ Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 52.

⁶ Jaffe, 68.

⁷ Jaffe, 67; Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 53.

⁸ Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 54.

⁹ *Ibid*, 56-57.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 59.

¹¹ Judith Snodgrass, "Buddha no Fukuin': The Deployment of Paul Carus's 'Gospel of Buddha' in Meiji Japan" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 25:3/4 (1998), 321-322.

¹² Ibid, 325.

¹³ Ibid, 326.

¹⁴ Jaffe, 70.

¹⁵ Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 54.

¹⁶ Jaffe, 70.

¹⁷ Ibid, 74. This was felt not only by the Buddhists but by other Japanese as well, which was one of the primary reasons behind the aggressive expansion efforts of their empire during the 20th Century.

¹⁸ Daniel M. Davies, "The Impact of Christianity upon Korea, 1884-1910: Six Key American and Korean Figures", *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 36:4 (Autumn 1994), 797.

¹⁹ Hur Nam-lin. "Han Yong'un (1879 – 1944) and the Buddhist Reform in Colonial Korea" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 37:1 (2010), 77.

²⁰ Ibid, 78.

²¹ A. Charles Muller, "Philosophical Aspects of the Goryeo-Joseon Confucian-Buddhist Confrontation: Focusing on the Works of Jeong Dojeon (Sambong) and Hamheo Deuktong (Gihwa)" *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity*, edited by Anselm K. Min. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 53-85), 57.

²² Hwansoo Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas", 60.

²³ Ibid, 61-62.

²⁴ Ibid, 64.

²⁵ Hwansoo Kim, "The Adventures of a Japanese Monk in Colonial Korea: Soma Shoen's Zen Training with Korean Masters" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 36:1 (2009), 127.

²⁶ Ibid, 128. Cf. Vladimir Tikhonov, "One Religion, Different Readings: (Mis) interpretations of Korean Buddhism in Colonial Korea, Late 1920's – Early 1930's" *Journal of Korean Religions*, Vol. 1:1/2 (2010), 170, 172-173.

²⁷ Hwansoo Kim, "The Adventures of a Japanese Monk in Colonial Korea", 130; Tikhonov, 134.

²⁸ Hwansoo Kim, "The Adventures of a Japanese Monk in Colonial Korea", 131.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ Tikhonov, 165.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*, 166-167. This protected status is agreed upon by most sources utilized in this paper. However, Sung-Gun Kim, while agreeing that Buddhism was protected, insists that Christianity was not, and was instead lumped in with the "illegitimate religions" because of its nationalistic orientation and messianism (Sung-Gun Kim, "The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christianity under Japanese Colonialism" *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 39:3 (1997), 505).

³⁴ Pan-Asianism is the desire for the East Asian nations to be united under a single banner, as opposed to divided nations, for the sake of countering the expansionism of the Western powers (European and American). Cf. Wonsuk Chang, "Euro-Japanese Universalism, Korean Confucianism, and Aesthetic Communities", *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 223.

³⁵ Wonsuk Chang, 225.

³⁶ Wonsuk Chang, 223.

³⁷ Hong-Kyu Park and Nam-Lin Hur, "Choson-Centrism and Japan-Centrism in the Eighteenth Century: Han Won-chin vs. Motoori Norinaga", *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 26:1 (2016), 83.

³⁸ Wilbur M. Fridell, "A Fresh Look at State Shinto" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44:3 (Sept 1976), 548; Park and Hur, 84.

³⁹ Park and Hur, 92.

⁴⁰ Fridell, 548.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 553.

⁴² For a more in-depth treatment of the relationship between Shrine Shinto, State Shinto, and other elements that made up the State Shinto umbrella, cf. Fridell, 552 ff.

⁴³ Shimazono Susumu, "Religion and Secularism in Overseas Shinto Shrines: A Case Study on Hilo Daijingu, 1898-1941" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 46:1 (2019), 94.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 97. Taehoon Kim also discusses the differences between “religions” and the place of the State Shinto apparatus, though he does go on to discuss in the following pages that this distinction was not always clear or emphasized in the actual practice of religious observance. (Taehoon Kim, “The place of ‘Religion’ in Colonial Korea around 1910: The Imperial History of ‘Religion’” *Journal of Korean Religions*, Vol. 2:2 (2011), 32-33).

⁴⁷ Sung-Gun Kim, 508.

⁴⁸ Michael Kim, “The Politics of Officially Recognizing Religions and the Expansion of Urban ‘Social Work’ in Colonial Korea”, *Journal of Korean Religions*, Vol. 7:2 (Oct 2016), 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 70-71.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 74.

⁵¹ Sung Gun Kim, 503.

⁵² Ibid, 504.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Sung Gun Kim mentions that the Presbyterians were against the practice, though the splintering of the Presbyterian church over this issue after the surrender of the Japanese Empire in 1945 indicates that this is not entirely accurate to declare that the division was simply along denominational lines, nor that every missionary in each denomination necessarily agreed with the stance of their given denomination.

⁵⁵ Sung-Gun Kim, 511.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 515-516.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 518.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 509-510. For a more in-depth treatment of the literature from the time, which would indicate a correlation with Kim’s argument, cf. Sung-Deuk Oak, “A Genealogy of Protestant Theologies of Religions in Korea, 1876-1910: Protestantism as a Religion of Civilization and Fulfillment”, *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity*, edited by Anselm K. Min. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016, 155-187.

⁵⁹ James Palais, “Confucianism and the Aristocratic / Bureaucratic Balance in Korea” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 44:2 (1984), 430.

⁶⁰ Park and Hur, 80.

⁶¹ Yi Myonggu and William A. Douglas, "Korean Confucianism Today" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 40:1/2, (Spring-Summer 1967), 44.

⁶² Wonsuk Chang, 222. For examples of Confucian contradictions (present not only during the Joseon period, but seemingly endemic to the philosophy itself), cf. Palais, 432-435.

⁶³ Park and Hur, 83. However, that being said, according to Palais (427), Korea was also enjoying a period of relative peace and stability for much of the Joseon Dynasty, which he suggests is the reason why this Neo-Confucian state dynasty was able to be as long-lasting and stable as it was.

⁶⁴ Wonsuk Chang, 223-224.

⁶⁵ Taehoon Kim, 38.

⁶⁶ Yi & Douglas, 48.

⁶⁷ We can see this clearly by analyzing the testimonies of early Catholic martyrs in Korea. These individuals declared loyalty to the State in every area except for a request for the freedom of belief and religious practice, free of state interference. In the East Asian milieu, this was a radical demand, and it was likely also one of the factors for the official banning of Christianity. Cf. Don Baker, "Catholic God and Confucian Morality: A Look at the Theology and Ethics of Korea's First Catholics", *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity*, edited by Anselm K. Min. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 94.

⁶⁸ Taehoon Kim, 26.

⁶⁹ Michael Hoffman, "Japan's 'Hidden Christians'", *The Japan Times*, Dec. 23, 2007. URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2007/12/23/general/japans-hidden-christians/#.WRuwjusrLIU>, accessed Aug 9, 2020.

⁷⁰ Ann M. Harrington. "The Kakure Kirishitan and their place in Japan's Religious Tradition" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 7:4 (Dec. 1980), 318-336, 318; Christal Whelan, "Religion Concealed: The Kakure Kirishitan on Narushima", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 47:3 (Autumn 1992), 369-387, 369; FRANCE 24 English, "Meeting the Descendants of Japan's 'Hidden Christians'", YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqhOSHKGlN4>, Nov. 26, 2019. Viewed April 14, 2020.

⁷¹ Harrington, 319; Kristian Pella, "Kakure Kirishitan: The End of a Tradition?" *Swedish Missiological Themes*, Vol.100:4 (2012), 391-420, 392.

⁷² Harrington, 319; Pella, 393-394, 398; Whelan, 382.

⁷³ FRANCE 24 English; Harrington, 329; Pella, 395-396.

⁷⁴ Pella, 398-399, 411. For examples of these later groups that attempted to indigenize Christianity to Japanese culture, the most well-

known one would be the Mukyokai (Nonchurch) Movement developed by Uchimura Kanzo in the later Meiji Period. For a more comprehensive list of these groups, cf. Mark Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

⁷⁵ Davies, 801.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Harrington, 330. Confucianism became the background values of the culture itself (which prizes harmony and filial piety above all else), including even the language; Buddhism would become the religion of the afterlife, so would become specifically in charge of funerary rites.

⁷⁸ Jongmyung Kim, "Interactions between Buddhism and Confucianism in Medieval Korea", *Korean Religions in Relation: Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity*, edited by Anselm K. Min. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 20.

⁷⁹ Baker, 91; Harrington, 329.

⁸⁰ Jaffe, 66, 79; Hwansoo Kim, "The Adventures of a Japanese Monk in Colonial Korea", 153, 154.

⁸¹ Samuel Lee, *The Japanese & Christianity: Why is Christianity Not Widely Believed in Japan*. (Amsterdam: Foundation University Press, 2014), 24-25; James M. Philips, "Today's Legacy from Yesterday's Leaders" *The Response of the Church in Changing Japan*, ed. Charles H. Germany. (New York: Friendship Press, 1967), 16, 21-22.

⁸² Davies, 806.

⁸³ Grayson, 169.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

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