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Megachurches and the Living Dead: Intersections of Religion & Politics in Korea

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JOHN A. REES, JUN 18 2018

The Korean Peninsula, a modern day retrovision of 20th century Cold War tension, has long shaped international relations in East Asia and beyond. Supercharged by Kim Jong-un's nuclear capability, the recent US-North Korea Agreement has returned the geopolitics of the region to the international spotlight.

The study of IR offers multiple ways to analyse the complexities of Korean politics, from state diplomacy to social movements, from geopolitics to gender justice, from economic stability to environmental sustainability. Can the study of religion in Korea provide similar value?

Drawing on Pollack and Rosta's 2017 global study of religion and modernity, Fox's 2008 world survey of religion and the state, Suh's influential 1991 account of Korean popular theology, among other sources, I suggest five dynamics of religion that might enhance our understanding of the rich and complex Korean political context.

1. Religion under occupation

Colonialism brought with it the tide of religious change in Korea, notably the rise of Christianity, but with a twist. Japan exercised brutal colonial rule in Korea in the period 1910-1945, a period which also reinforced the power of majority traditions of Shintoism and Buddhism. The monumental rise of Christianity – now Korea's most prominent religion – is partly attributed not to colonial compliance but to Protestant involvement in the anti-colonial independence movement and the social recognition that came with it among the Korean population.

2. Religion and the influence of new urban community

The dynamic of religion under occupation helps explain why Christianity experienced growth in Korea but not Japan. Even though both countries underwent rapid modernization in the 20th century, Christianity was popularly understood to stand 'for the self-assertion of Korea against colonial influence'. This detail would be an artefact of history if it were not also for the influence of Christian networks to create new communities in burgeoning cities created by modernization such as Seoul. Iconic South Korean megachurches, like the Yoido Full Gospel with a membership in excess of 800 000, are founded on small groups scattered throughout the vast urban landscape. The potential for social, commercial and political influence in such circumstances is enormous.

3. Religion and regime

Autocracies are not without an historical appreciation of both the value and challenge of religion, a factor commonly underappreciated when analysing issues like religious freedom in East Asia. Authoritarian regimes, even those based on atheistic materialist ideology, have a complex relationship with religious sensibility. Those founded on the cult of personality, as North Korea was under Kim Il-sung in 1948, are infused with the practice of veneration upheld by hagiographies (sacred histories) of its leaders. Such regimes also come to understand the value of fostering state-sponsored religion to promote social stability and international respectability, as the North did in the 1980s by purportedly filling churches with disinterested Communist Party loyalists (some of whom subsequently becoming too

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interested and sought religious conversion). One wonders to what degree North Korean authorities will seek to enhance religious capacity at one level, and resist it at another level, in any looming political transition.

4. Religion in context

Although churches like Yoido Full Gospel preach a message of material prosperity, and whilst the Cold War division of the Korean Peninsula reinforces muscular Christian calls to oppose the atheist Communists in the north, it would be reductionist to see Christianity simply as an import from the West.

On the day I visited Yoido Full Gospel as part of an international delegation in the 1990s, our group also attended an urban gathering grounded in ideas of contextual justice called 'Woman's Church'. In the ensuing days we also joined with Christian urban workers and pastors motivated by international labour rights, and attended an interfaith meeting where Christians and Buddhists engaged common concerns of justice. These were all manifestations of Minjung theology, part of a larger social and political movement committed to the popular cause of the poor and oppressed in Korea. Weeks later, in the city of Pusan, my Christian hosts even took me to a séance where several hundred people communicated with a 16th century military general via the frenetic ritual dance of a Shaman. As unconventional as this might seem, Suh proposes that 'Korean Christianity, although so Western in its liturgy and appearances, is obviously quite Shamanistic in its belief and behaviour'. In this context, even Yoido Full Gospel with its emphasis on healing and the claimed authority of its leader to have a hotline to the prophets of the past, can be comprehended through a shamanistic lens.

The interweaving of these contextual threads creates a complex cultural tapestry where religion, popular practice and cultural politics intersect – and in ways that shallower critiques of religion as mere Western imperialism fail to comprehend.

5. Religion and Change

The prospect of political change in the North coincides with the potential for significant religious change in the South, producing a complex and fascinating set of scenarios for the intersections of religion and politics in Korea. For instance, scholars suggest there is evidence of a 'mass abandonment of Protestantism' now underway. If so, might this reshape the religious alignment of political and military elites away from Protestant toward Catholic, Buddhist and atheistic networks? Will religious groups that emphasise political unification fair better than those that don't? Will new elements of popular religious practice from the North take root in the South and will this be opposed by domestic and international sponsors of existing traditions and their interests? As the news of Korea presently unfolds on the grand political stage, religion and politics might well be one of the more fascinating sub-themes to keep an eye on.

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.