

## **Paving the Way For Religion Freedom on the Korean Peninsula: The Catholic And the Tonghak Fight Against Persecution**

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To talk of "religious freedom" in Korea before the twentieth century is an anachronism. The words "religion" and "freedom" did not exist in Korea until they were imported from Japan near the end of the 19th century. That does not mean that pre-modern Korea did not have what we can now label as religions. Instead what we now call religions were called by a variety of different terms, such as gyo (teachings), do (a way), beop (laws, methods), hak (scholarship, ways of thinking), and even sul (techniques, practices). What is important to notice here is that none of these terms refers to beliefs or practices which can claim freedom from interference by the government. In fact, it was assumed in traditional Korea that the government had a moral obligation to interfere in matters we would now call "religious" in order to ensure that its subjects did what they were supposed to do, and did not do what they were not supposed to do.

In other words, not only was there no word for "freedom" in traditional Korea, the very concept was considered immoral and subversive. It was immoral because it implied that the desires of an individual were more important than the needs of the group, that individuals could do whatever they wanted to do. If Koreans during the Joseon dynasty had known the word "freedom" they would have understood it with the negative connotation of "license" [bangja] rather than with the positive connotations it has today. It was subversive because it implied that there were limits to the power of the state, that the individual had certain rights which the state could not infringe upon. That was a challenge to the traditional concept of state authority which no traditional Confucian government could tolerate without undermining its own

legitimacy.

In the modern world, there are two concepts of religious freedom. One is freedom of conscience, the freedom of an individual to decide for himself whether to believe in God or not, and what name to call that God if he does believe in him. Freedom of conscience also means that an individual can worship God in whatever way he or she feels is appropriate. One corollary of freedom of conscience is that an individual can not be forced by his government or any other authority to perform actions his religious beliefs tell him are immoral. Such freedom of conscience is represented, for example, by a system which exempts a pacifist from compulsory military service. Such freedom of conscience was violated during Japanese colonial rule over Korea when the Japanese tried to force Christians to participate in rituals which Christians believed involved worship of the Emperor.

The other form of religious freedom is the freedom for religious organizations to exist free of government interference, what we might call the freedom of religious association. Such religious freedom permits like-minded individuals to join together to study writings they consider sacred, to pray together, and to perform rituals they consider necessary or appropriate, and even erect halls of worship in which they can perform those rituals and discuss those writings. A corollary of this form of religious freedom is that it should be enjoyed by all religious organizations, that no one religious organization should be allowed to infringe on the religious activities of another religious organization.<sup>77)</sup>

It may be argued that men and women in pre-modern Korea enjoyed an informal freedom of conscience in that the government really did not care very much about what they believed. Actions, not thoughts, were the concern of the government of Choseon Korea. People had no legal right to object on religious grounds to any demands the government made of them, but they also were left alone to hold whatever beliefs they held in the privacy of their own minds. However, the people of Choseon definitely did not enjoy freedom of religious association. Government permission, either formal or informal, was required for any public gathering which involved rituals, prayers, or even the study of

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77) On these two concepts of religious freedom, see Lee Jin Gu, "On the Discourse of Religious Freedom in Modern Korea: Freedom of Conscience vs. Freedom of the Church," *Korea Journal*, Spring, 2001, pp. 69-92.

writings which contained material which challenged the government monopoly over morality and ritual.

It was a common assumption during the Choseon dynasty that government was more than just a political institution--it was also a religious and moral institution. In fact, most members of the yangban ruling elite of Choseon Korea would not have distinguished proper political leadership from religious or moral leadership, since in their view it was the role of government to promote a moral society. That meant not only preventing the masses from doing what was wrong, it also meant encouraging them to do what was right.

One way Confucian governments for centuries had promoted morality was through the observance and promotion of proper ritual behavior. Ritual and moral character were, to orthodox Confucians, two sides of the same coin. Just as appropriate attitudes and motives would manifest themselves in appropriate behavior, so would appropriate behavior, such as the actions involved in participating in an appropriate ritual, inculcate appropriate attitudes and intentions. It is this connection between moral character and ritual performance, when combined with the assumption that a government should assume moral leadership, which led to a definition of government in Confucianism which differs sharply from the traditional Western definition in one important feature. In the Western tradition, at least in recent centuries, a government is that institution which maintains a monopoly over the legitimate use of force within a specified territory. In the Confucian tradition of which Korea was a proud member, a government is that institution which maintains a monopoly over the legitimate use of force and ritual within a specified territory.

This ritual hegemony of the state has roots in Confucian tradition more than two millennia deep. In the Spring and Autumn Annals, for example, we can find the sentence "Ritual and Force (sacrifice and war) are the two main responsibilities of the state."<sup>78</sup> In an equally revered ancient Classic, the Book of Rites, we find a passage which declares, "There should be no presuming to resume any sacrifice which has been abolished (by proper authority), nor to abolish any which has been so established. A sacrifice which it is not proper to

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78) Legge, James. *The Chinese Classics, The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen.* vol. 5, p. 379. (Duke Ch'ing, year 13. (成公))

offer, and yet which is offered is called a licentious sacrifice."<sup>79)</sup>

This ancient principle was given a more concrete formulation in the law codes of China's Ming dynasty, law codes which also provided the basic law codes of Choseon dynasty Korea. In vol. XI of the *Ta Ming lü*, there is a clause calling for the death penalty for those who conferred on themselves exalted religious titles, participated in the activities of popular sects, or otherwise joined in either unauthorized rituals or unauthorized ritual-centered organizations<sup>80)</sup>.

Following the Chinese model, the state in traditional Korea exercised both moral and ritual hegemony, which meant that it imposed a moral orthodoxy of certain ethical and ritual standards and obligations. Doctrinal differences dividing Buddhists, Taoists, and shamans from Neo-Confucianism were tolerated as long as Buddhists, Taoists, and shamans remained loyal to the state and filial to their parents and did not challenge or appropriate for themselves the rituals which the state used to legitimize its own authority and preserve social order and harmony.

Religious communities, in other words, were compelled to accept the supremacy of the state on basic moral issues. Ethical demands generated by specific religious traditions were not allowed to override the behavioral demands of the political community. Rather than serving as a primary, or even an alternative, source of moral guidance, as it had in the West, religion in traditional East Asia accepted the subordinate role of lending support to the state's moral code.

Another assumption underlying the traditional Korean religious tradition which distinguishes Korean religion from Western religion, at least since the fall of Rome, was the ritual hegemony of the state. The state monopolized the performance of the most important rituals, those honoring the gods of soil and grain, for example. This does not mean that all rituals had to be performed by

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79) Legge, *Li Chi*, (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1967,) vol. I, p. 116. ( *Chu Li* , Section II, part III).

80) Dan Overmyer, "Attitudes Toward Popular Religion in Ritual Texts of the Chinese State: The Collected Status of the Great Ming," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, #5 (1989-1990), p. 213; B. J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese History*. (Honolulu:University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 129.

government officials. Under the Joseon dynasty, for example, Buddhist monks still carried out Buddhist rituals and shamans still carried out shamanistic rituals. However, to be legitimate and legal, those rituals had to be licensed by the state. State authorization was more important than the character of the ritual itself. The same ritual which was legal when performed by someone who had government permission to perform it would be illegal when it was performed by someone who was not authorized, either formally or informally, by the government to perform it..

For example, even though shamanism was repeatedly condemned by the Neo-Confucian governments of Joseon Korea, shamans continued to practice their craft throughout the entire five centuries the Joseon dynasty lasted, sometimes at the invitation of members of the royal household. Some shamans even held official government appointments. King Sejong, for example, though he condemned privately-held kut as lewd rituals, appointed shamans to posts in the official public health clinic, the hwalinseo, a precedent his successors followed off-and-on for at least another three centuries. In the first part of the dynasty, shamans were also appointed to another government agency, the Seongsukcheong (*The Hall of the Heavenly Bodies*), from which they were dispatched to the official Taoist temple to participate in ceremonies held under the stars honoring the gods of the sun, the moon, the important planets, and important stars and constellations.<sup>81)</sup>

There were also shamans assigned to serve in local government offices. Spirit halls (sindang) were established within the grounds of those offices for the use of those shamans. Moreover, shamans were occasionally mobilized by government officials, both in the capital and in the provinces, to participate in a number of state-sanctioned rituals, such as rituals for rain in times of drought, rituals for the recovery of the health of an ill member of the royal family, or rituals in honor of local guardian deities (such as the sadangje in Goseong in Gangwondo or the Taebaeksan sinje). In a further sign of official state recognition of shamans, there was a nation-wide occupational tax on shamans similar to the tax on artisans and fishermen.<sup>82)</sup>

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81) Yu Dongsik, *Han'guk mugyo ui yeoksa wa gujo* [The history and structure of Korean shamanism] (Seoul: Yeonsei Taehakkyo chulpanbu, 1975), pp. 198-99.

82) Yu Dongshik, p. 2-3-217; Yi Pilyeong, "Joseon hugi ui mudang gwa kut" (Shamans and shaman rituals in the latter half of the Joseon dynasty), Jeongsin

What appears on the surface to be an ambivalence in official attitudes toward shamans and shamanism, condemned as immoral on the one hand yet utilized by the state on the other, is actually a reflection of a government strategy to gain control over and regulate access to spirits whose existence government officials never denied. It is also a recognition that shamans had privileged access to the invisible realm in which those spirits dwelled, and could influence the behavior of those supernatural personalities through their rituals and prayers, and thus could be ignored only at the state's peril.

In order to assert its ritual hegemony over the Korean peninsula, and thus strengthen its claim to be the legitimate government of Korea, the Joseon dynasty had to ensure that all contact with the invisible world took place only with its approval. Thus government-sanctioned kut, held for government-approved purposes, were legal while privately-commissioned kut were condemned and declared illegal. Even when the shamans wanted to honor in their rituals gods worthy of honor, such as the local guardian deities, the state insisted they should do so only when told to do so by government officials, since they were of too low a social status (below chungin and commoners and on the same level with monks, slaves, and entertainers) to interact with such a lofty supernatural personage on their own initiative.

This uneasy relationship between the state and shamans continued all the way to the end of dynasty, with the state never able to overcome resistance to its attempts to monopolize interaction with the supernatural realm. The deepening penetration of Korea by Neo-Confucian beliefs and values meant that after the sixteenth century shamans were not asked to exercise their talents in any official capacity as often as they were in the first two centuries of the dynasty. Nevertheless, in the villages and towns in which the vast majority of Koreans lived, shamanism and its practitioners remained strong and were never subjected to the comprehensive persecution which Catholics endured.

Like shamanism, Taoism also received some official support, though Taoism also was considered to be idan. When the Joseon dynasty replaced the Goryeo

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munhwa yeon'gu, 16, no. 4 (1993), pp. 23-26; Im Hakseong, "Joseon sidae ui muse jedo wa geu siltae" (The shaman tax during the Chosŏn dynasty and how it operated), Yeoksa minsok hak, 3 (1993), pp. 90-126.

dynasty, there were several Taoist temples in Korea. However, Taoism had never established the popular institutional infrastructure Buddhism had established with its many mountain temples. The only Taoist temples in Korea were government-run. Therefore the existence of these temples became a matter of debate in the first year of the newly-established Neo-Confucian regime.

Rather than totally eliminate official Taoism from the peninsula, and risk offending some potentially dangerous deities, it was decided that one Taoist temple would remain, staffed by priests selected through a Taoist civil service examination. The Sogyekjeon began the dynasty with a clerical staff of six or seven. However, as the Neo-Confucian tone of the court grew stronger, those numbers were reduced and the Sogyekjeon (The Hall for Enshrining Deities ) itself was downgraded to the Sogyekseo (The Office for Enshrining Deities) in 1466. As the Sogyekseo, however, it survived for over another century, only to be destroyed during the Hideyoshi's invasions and never rebuilt.<sup>83)</sup>

While it existed, the Sogyekseo was used for a number of Taoist rituals imported from China, usually those asking the gods who dwelled in the heavens above to be kind to those who lived on the earth below, particularly to members of the royal family , such as a newly born crown prince or to peasants who needed rain for their crops. This was official Taoism, to which those who did not have appointments to central government posts did not have access.

As literacy grew among the commoner population in the last two centuries of the dynasty, Taoism began to appear among the general population as well but it was a different form of Taoism, a Taoism more of prayer and morality books than of formal ritual. Commoners began to circulate copies of the popular Taoist texts the Okchu gyeong (The Classic of the Jade Pivot) and the Chilseong-gyeong (The Classic of the Big Dipper) without any fear of the legal penalties which faced those who passed around copies of Catholic writings, even though both Taoist works were based on heterodox beliefs that certain celestial deities played an important role in determining human fate and fortune.

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83) Yi Jongeon, "Sogyekseo Gwan'gye yeoksa jaryo keomto" (An investigation of the documentary record on the Sogyekseo), in Joseon dogyo sasang yeon 'guhoe, ed., Dogyo wa Han'guk munhwa (Taoism and Korean culture) (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1988), pp. 87-190.

Buddhism, as heterodox as shamanism and Taoism, also managed to coexist with the Neo-Confucian government as Joseon Korea. And, just as the Joseon government hired shamans and Taoist priests to perform certain rituals on its behalf, so too it utilized the talents of Buddhist monks.

How Buddhism was viewed, however, and how it was utilized, by the government and by the general population changed over the five hundred years of the Joseon dynasty. In the first two centuries after Yi Seonggye ascended the throne, he and his descendants displayed a uneasy ambivalence toward Buddhism. Under pressure from Neo-Confucian bureaucrats, the kings of Yi's Joseon dynasty slowly ended government support for Buddhism. However, some among them preserved a role for Buddhism in the private affairs of the royal family.

As a part of the new dynasty's drive to establish absolute authority over the land, people, rituals, and public morality of Korea, and in order to eliminate any institutional base from which a Buddhist challenge to that authority could arise, the Neo-Confucian government of the Joseon dynasty began slowly eliminating those rules and regulations it had inherited from the Koryeo dynasty which gave Buddhism the appearance of a state religion. The third king of the Joseon dynasty, Taejong, eliminated the official positions of Royal Preceptor and National Preceptor which had existed since early in the Goryeo dynasty. He also reduced the number of officially recognized Buddhist denominations from eleven to seven. His successor King Sejong reduced that number further to two, one meditation-oriented denomination and one doctrine-oriented denomination. He also reduced the number of temples, and of the monks allowed to dwell in those temples, until only 36 temples, with a total population of less than 4,000 monks and approximately the same number of temple slaves, were granted official sanction. Then, a little over a century later, King Myeongjong (r. 1545-1567) abolished the official civil service examination system for Buddhist monks which had been established in 958. He also repealed the law which provided for official certification, and therefore official recognition, of clerical status, ending tax exemptions for monks and for temple land.<sup>84)</sup>

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84) Yi Chaech'ang, *Han'guk bulgyo sawon gyeongje yeon'gu* [Studies of the economic



Yet, since even kings and their wives occasionally encounter areas of unpleasant uncertainty in their lives, such as when disease attacks or threatens them or a member of their family, Buddhist practices were not completely eliminated from the palace grounds. Nor would the potential power of the Buddha be ignored when a natural disaster such as a drought threatened the well-being of the inhabitants of the peninsula and of the dynasty which ruled over them. At such troublesome times the Neo-Confucian reliance on virtuous behavior restoring harmony to nature may not provide enough assurance that illness or a natural calamity can be overcome or prevented and death defeated. Seeking supernatural assistance to supplement the beneficial impact virtuous behavior was believed have on nature, even kings who had sought to eliminate Buddhism from the public sphere would sometimes invite monks into their palaces to pray privately for them or for royal offspring, or they would permit the women of the palace to discretely sponsor a Buddhist ritual.

When the dynasty was still in its adolescence and Neo-Confucian strictures on official behavior has not yet solidified into barriers even kings could not ignore, a government printing office could be used to reprint Buddhist texts. In another sign that anti-Buddhist sentiment did not yet totally dominate the court, one of the first prose works published in han'geul was the *Seokbo sangjeol*, a life of the Buddha compiled, edited, and translated by the future king Sejo for his father Sejong. Furthermore, when Sejo took the throne, he established a Buddhist sutra printing office which published eleven other Buddhist works in the new Korean alphabet as well as some in pure Chinese. Even as late as King Seongjong's reign, the Joseon government was still publishing Buddhist texts.<sup>85)</sup>

Moreover, unwilling to waste the talents of even those with as low a social status as the Joseon dynasty accorded monks, the Joseon court availed itself of the manpower and expertise monks represented. Monk-healers were sometimes dispatched when an outbreak of disease threatened the population of a local area and monks were attached, along with shamans, to some official public health clinics<sup>86)</sup>. Monk-artisans were required to manufacture paper and other products

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situation of Buddhist temples in Korea] (Seoul: Bulgyo sidae sa, 1993), p. 151-156.

85) Gang Sinhang, *Hunmin jeonggum yeun'gu* [Studies of the Hunmin jeonggum] (Seoul: Seunggyun'gwan University Press, 1990), pp. 221-286.

86) Han Ugeun, *Yugyo jeongch'i wa Bulgyo* (Seoul: Iljogak, 1993) p. 135-138.

for the use of government officials. And monk-soldiers were called upon to defend Korea's borders against bandits in the north and against pirates along the southern coasts.

The growing domination of Neo-Confucian values over Joseon dynasty intellectual and political life meant that, by the end of the 16th century, all official support for Buddhism as a religion, even the official division of monks into two denominations, was ended. No longer did the government grant monks or monasteries any privileges or tax exemptions denied commoners, nor were government printing facilities used to print Buddhist texts any more. Instead, the government increasingly treated monks and their monasteries as simply another resource available to serve the needs of the state.

One of those needs was defense. When the Japanese invaded Korea in 1592, King Seonjo asked the monk Hyujeong (1520-1604), revered today for his guides to monastic practice and his eloquent defense of Buddhist beliefs and practices, to organize all of Korea's monks into a fighting force to defend Korean soil against Hideyoshi's forces. Hyujeong did as his king asked him to do, creating an army 5,000 monks strong. Impressed by how well those monks fought, for much of the rest of the dynasty Korea's kings relied heavily on monk-soldiers. Under royal orders, monks built and defended the fortresses on both Mt. Namhan and Mt. Bukhan. A nation-wide network of monastery-military outposts was established and there were even monks serving as a naval fighting force.<sup>87)</sup>

Outside of these mountain fortresses, leading monks such as Hyujeong continued to espouse the importance of both doctrinal study and meditative practice, but they also began to give almost equal weight to chanting (yeombul) the name of the Amitabha Buddha, Lord of the Pure Land. They met no opposition from the government when they preached Buddhist doctrines or encouraged Buddhist practices. In addition, though the government was no

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87) An Kyeheon, *Han'guk bulgyo sasangsa yeon'gu* [Studies in the history of Buddhist thought in Korea] (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 1983), pp. 325-402; Yeo Eun-gyeong, "Joseon hugi sanseong ui seunggun cheongseup" [The Nation-wide network of monastery-military mountain fortification], in Yang Eunyong and Kim Deoksu, ed. *Imjin Waeran gwa bulgyo ui seunggun* [The Japanese invasions of the 1590s and Buddhists monk-soldiers] (Seoul: Kyeongseowon, 1992), pp. 383-425.

longer printing Buddhist sutras, temples continued to publish such heterodox works with no interference from the government. Even apocryphal but popular and less philosophical texts such as the Bumo Eunjung-gyeong [The sutra stressing our debt to our parents] were published without any attempts by the government to block their publication.

The records of the Joseon dynasty are clear. That Joseon dynasty did tolerate and even at times support other heterodox religious traditions. There were no government orders calling for the arrest, torture, and execution of Buddhists, Taoists, or shamans throughout Korea. The Korean government did not attempt to force Korea's Buddhists, Taoists, or shamans to renounce their religious beliefs and practices.

The question then arises. Why did the Joseon dynasty government not grant the same toleration, the same "religious freedom," to Korea's first Catholics or to the Tonghak movement? I would like to suggest that the government of Joseon Korea was trying to protect what it sincerely believed was the proper relationship between a government and those it governed. To understand why so many government officials were so violently opposed to both Catholicism and Donghak, we need to understand the nature of the challenge both Catholicism and Donghak posed to authority of the government.

There are two features of Catholicism and Donghak which made them different from Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism, and made them a threat to the authority of the Joseon dynasty.

First of all, both of those religions took as the object of their religious faith a God more powerful than any king or government official. They were monotheistic. Monotheistic religions are usually a greater threat to a government than a polytheistic religion, since if there are many gods, one god is not usually granted enough power to pose a threat to a government which can not be countered by assistance from another god.

It might be argued that Buddhism, in some of its forms, can also be seen as monotheistic, since Buddha is a powerful god. However, Buddhism came to Korea under the sponsorship of the governments of the Three Kingdoms and

ever since has normally supported governments rather than challenging them. Neither the Cheonju of Catholicism nor the Hannullim of Donghak received government permission to enter Korea, not did they receive any support from the government after their presence was announced. Buddha could be worshipped because the government had invited him to Korea and encouraged Koreans to worship him, just as shaman rituals could be performed when a government official invited a shaman to perform such a ritual. However, Cheonju and Hannullim could not be legally worshipped because they had not been officially welcomed to Korea, not had the government established any temples in which they could be worshipped under government supervision or sponsorship.

The second feature shared by Catholicism and Donghak which made them both dangerous to the government is that followers of those religions believed that their God had directed them to perform certain rituals, and therefore they had to perform those rituals whether they had government permission to do so or not. To make matters worse, the rituals of both Catholicism and Donghak are group rituals, which require people to gather together to perform them. To support such group ritual activities, both Catholics and Donghak followers formed networks of small groups of believers who would meet regularly to study their sacred writings and perform the rituals those writings told them to perform. Such group rituals constituted an illegal activity, and the networks organized to support them resembled the communities of faith formed by secret societies in China which had been outlawed by the Ming dynasty and therefore by the Joseon dynasty which adopted many of the laws of the Ming.

The responses of the Joseon government to both Catholic and Donghak claims that there was a God with much greater authority than any king, and that the king had no authority to determine when, how, and by whom that God would be honored through ritual, was bloody persecution. The Catholic response to persecution was to ask the government of Catholic France to send military force to Korea for force the Joseon government to grant Catholics the freedom to worship their god and perform their rituals as they best saw fit. The Donghak response was to publicly demand that the government admit it made a mistake when it executing their founder Choe Je-u, and to stop persecuting those who continued to follow Choe's teachings. When their peaceful demands for toleration were denied, some Donghak then took up arms to force the

government to grant them religious freedom.

Neither the Catholics nor the Donghak in the 19th century used the term "religious freedom" since that term was unknown in Korea at that time. However, when they asked that their government leave them alone to worship their god, perform their religious rituals, and read their sacred writings, there were actually asking for religion freedom even though they didn't use that term. Moreover, it was the struggles of the Catholics and the Donghak which first introduced Korea to the concept that there are limits on the power of the state, and that the state should not interfere in peaceful, non-political religious activities. In other words, the Catholics and the Donghak introduced to Korea the revolutionary concept that religion is a separate sphere of human society, existing alongside rather than under the state. Catholics and the Donghak challenged the ritual hegemony of the state and in so doing laid the first bricks in the road which eventually led to religious freedom in South Korea in the second half of the twentieth century.

The persecution of Catholics began in 1791 when Yun Jichung and his cousin Gweon Sangyeon held a funeral service for Yun's mother without the usual spirit tablet. Yu and Gweon were both yangban. Buddhist monks and even commoners might be able to honor a deceased ancestor without a spirit tablet, but a yangban could not. The Confucian government of Joseon Korea required that yangban set a example of proper filial piety for the rest of the population. When Yun and Gweon failed to do so, they were arrested, interrogated, and then executed.

Yun was accused during his interrogation of "believing in wild ideas even though those ideas are strictly forbidden. Even worse, you try to put those ideas into practice. That is really disloyal."<sup>88</sup>) In other words, Yun Jichung's greatest crime, in the eyes of his prosecutors, was that he was disloyal. He was considered disloyal because he denied that the government had the authority to tell him how to conduct a funeral for his mother. Moreover, he insisted that he had done nothing wrong because he had followed God's orders, and the commands of his God had precedence over any commands issued by his king.

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88) Charles Dallet, *Han'guk Cheonjugyohoe sa*, Translated by An Eung-nyeol and Choe Seogu, I, (Seoul: Bundo Press, 1980), p. 342.

However, what made his crime a capital-punishment crime is that he not only held disloyal ideas, he had acted in accordance with those ideas. In other words, he had challenged the ritual hegemony of the state.

Because of their rejection of the ritual hegemony of the state, Yun and the many Catholics who followed him were regularly accused of threatening to turn Korea into a land of wild beasts and barbarians. For example, an official 1839 condemnation of Catholicism, the cheoksa yuneum, warned that "Catholics are ensnaring every increasing numbers of our subjects and now threaten to turn our kingdom into a land, not of men, but of wild beasts and barbarians." That same statement goes on to condemn Catholics by asking rhetorically, "Weren't Catholics born in this land? Don't they sleep and eat on Korean soil? Why do they abandon the ways of their ancestors, teachers and friends to adopt instead these evil practices which come from tens of thousands of li away?"<sup>89)</sup> Notice the emphasis on "practices," on what the Catholics did more than on what they believed.

The execution of Yun and Kweon was only the beginning. In 1801, after King Jeongjo died, large-scale persecutions of Catholics began. At first, the government began arresting Catholics because they had violated national sovereignty by smuggling a Chinese Catholic priest into Korea. The Catholics had smuggled Fr. Chou Wen-mo into Korea in 1794 because many Catholic rituals can only be performed by a priest. Fr. Chou had to be smuggled into Korea because the Joseon government would not have allowed him to enter Korea legally, since the rituals he performed were not authorized by the government. In other words, the Catholic rejection of the ritual hegemony of the state led them to reject the territorial sovereignty of the state.

When the government executed Fr. Chou and those Korean Catholics who had helped him early in 1801, one Catholic who escape persecution, Hwang Sayeong, wrote a letter to the French bishop in Beijing asking him to summon the French fleet. Unfortunately for Hwang and for the rest of Korea's Catholics, that letter was intercepted. When government officials read Hwang's letter, they realized that Catholics were willing to use military force to gain religious

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89) Translation of Yi Manchae, *Byeogwipyeon* (Cheonjugyo jeon'gyo bakhaesa), (Seoul: Gukje Gojeon gyoyuk heophoe, 1984) p. 359.

freedom. The language in Hwang's letter was unmistakable. He wrote:

"Dispatch a fleet of several hundred ships, filled with fifty or sixty thousand of the best troops, along with lots of cannons and other deadly weaponry. [Then inform the king of Korea] if you cooperate with us, we promise that we will not fire our cannons and arrows at you. In fact, we promise that we will not disturb one speck of dirt or one blade of grass in your land. ...However, if you refuse to permit this messenger of the Lord of Heaven to come ashore, then we will have to inflict the punishment of the Lord on you. In no time at all, you will all be dead."<sup>90</sup>

The discovery of this letter written on a piece of silk to be smuggled into China confirmed the worst fears of the Confucian authorities: The Catholic Church was a threat to the very foundations of the state, both its monopoly of ritual and its monopoly of force. Hwang's letter convinced the government to intensify the persecution of Catholics, a policy which stayed in place for another 70 years.

One young Catholic who escaped the executions in 1801 was Jeong Hasang. Before he was finally captured and executed in 1839, Jeong prepared a written argument against the persecution of Catholics. In part of his Letter to the Prime Minister (Sang Jesang seo), Jeong wrote:

"Buddhism has been allowed to spread its poisonous tentacles throughout our land for centuries. There are temples spread throughout the eight provinces and enormous amounts of resources have been wasted on those temples themselves as well as on the gold-plated and bronze statues those temples contain. Yet Buddhism is nothing more than a heretical sect from the remote Western regions. Buddhists have stolen the language of the sages in order to make themselves appear to be followers of sagely learning but in actuality their ethical principles are quite different. They totally reject the moral obligations which should prevail among men. Their presence in our society is like an ugly stain on a silk jacket or tall weeds in a flower bed. They make false claims

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90) Hwang Sayeong Baekso [The Silk Letter of Hwang Sayeong], lines 110-111 (Seoul: Seong Hwang Seokdu Luga Seowon, 1998, p. 289-290.) Translation from Peter Lee, Don Baker, et. all. Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, vol 2: From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 149-50

that they can help people avoid misfortune and obtain good fortune and have thus been able to dupe many ignorant people. They have become a bizarre and corrupting influence on our society.

As for shamans, geomancers, fortune tellers and the like, they prey on innocent women and children, winning their confidence and then swindling them out of their money and property. Yet they are treated no different from anybody else.

Why are we Catholics denied the tolerance granted to Buddhists and shamans? Does Catholicism harm the family? Does it harm the state? Look at what we Catholics do, study our behavior, and you will see what kind of people we are and what kind of teachings we follow. Catholics are not rebels. Catholics are not thieves. Catholics do not engage in lewd activities or murder.“  
91)

Jeong Hasang missed a key point in his attempt to win for Catholics the same tolerance which had been granted Buddhists and shamans. He was right that both Buddhism and shamanism were considered *idan*, beliefs and practices unacceptable to the Neo-Confucians who ruled Korea. He was also right that, nonetheless, Buddhists were allowed to read their sutras and pray in their temples, and shamans were allowed to hold *kut*, despite the fact that such activities were heterodox. What he did not realize is that the Buddhists and the shamans were able to pursue their *idan* practices because they accepted the ultimate authority of the state over their actions. They did not try to hide what they were doing from the government. They did not give themselves unapproved titles. They did not challenge the authority of the government to determine which rituals could be performed, who could perform them, and where and when they could be performed. Buddhist monks or shamans did not form secret organizations or maintain contact with foreigners beyond Korea's borders.

Catholics, unfortunately, did all those things which Buddhists and shamans did not do. Catholics, even before persecution began, met secretly to read Christian books. They created an unauthorized organization and gave unauthorized titles, such as “*sinbu*” and “*gyobu*,” to its leaders. They refused to perform rituals such as *jesa* in the manner the government told them to perform them.

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91) *Byeogwipyôn* translation, pp. 353-54; Sourcebook, pp. 155-56.



Moreover, they performed their own rituals, such as baptism and the mass, which the government had not given them permission to perform. And, worse of all, they looked to the Pope in Rome and his representatives in Beijing rather than to the King of Korea for advice on their moral and ritual obligations. This was a departure from the traditional relationship between the state and religious communities which the Korean government could not tolerate.

When the government interrogated suspected Catholics in the 1801 persecution, among the most frequently asked questions were those concerned who the leaders, the "kyoju" and the "sinbu," were and what rituals did Catholics perform. The government appeared particularly interested in finding out more about baptism and the mass. There were many more questions about the organization of the Catholic community and the rituals they performed than there were about Catholic doctrine or beliefs.

It is not the fact that Catholics had formed an organization with a clearly defined hierarchy or that Catholics performed heterodox rituals that concerned the government so much as it was the fact that their hierarchy and their rituals were unauthorized by the government and thus constituted a challenge to government authority. Unlike Buddhists, Taoists, and even shamans, in the eyes of the Joseon government Catholics appeared to constitute a dangerous secret society much like the secret societies which had caused so much trouble in China.

For example, in the decree justifying the persecution of 1839, the cheoksa yuneum, Catholics were condemned in the following words: "They use terms such as 'emperor of our religion' and 'leader of our religion.' Not only do they want to usurp the power which barbarian chieftains and bandit chiefs wield over commoners, they want to usurp the power wielded by government officials as well. They want to make themselves beyond the reach of the moral transforming power of our government and exempt themselves from our laws. What could be more likely to cause civil unrest and create disastrous situations than this?"

That same statement goes on to say "They throw around fancy terms like

'baptism" and confirmation and various other strange names just to make it easier for them to delude people. They gather secretly in the dark of night in hidden rooms to hear lectures on their faith or in hidden valleys deep in the mountains....they are just like the Yellow Turbans or the White Lotus rebels in China." 92) In other words, rather than acting like Buddhists, Taoists, or shamans, who engaged in heterodox but tolerated religious activities, Korea's Catholics were accused of acting more like the secret societies of China which rejected the authority of their government, formed secret organizations, and met in secret to discuss forbidden doctrines and hold forbidden rituals.

The Korean Catholic Church did not gain that right to religious freedom until 1899. In 1886 France had forced the Korean government to agree that the persecution of French missionaries in Korea would stop. However, Korean Catholics did not gain clear legal protection of their right to believe as they saw fit until the beginning the 20th century.<sup>93)</sup>

Catholics were not the only religious group which faced persecution during the Joseon dynasty.<sup>94)</sup> The Donghak religion was also persecuted. Choe Je-u, the founder of Korea's first indigenous organized religion, Donghak, was arrested and, on March 10, 1864, hanged for acting more like a Catholic than like a traditional Korean by preaching subversive doctrines which undermined the all-inclusive authority of the state.

Much of what he taught his followers was not new. Most of his moral principles were Confucian, as was much of his terminology. His hanmun essays, published after his death as *Dongkyeong Daejeon*, and his vernacular poems, published as *Yongdam yusa*, are filled with traditional Confucian praise for the virtues of sincerity and reverence accompanied by exhortations to develop a moral character. Moreover, the *gungung* and *taegeuk* symbols on his sacred talisman had been used many times before in popular religion without being treated as subversive. When he advised his followers that that talisman would protect them from disease, particularly if they took the piece of paper on which those characters were written, burnt it, mixed the ashes in water which they then drank, he was advising them to imitate the *Jeseok* ritual of the

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92) Byeogwipyeon, translation, p. 361-62, in Yi Manhae text, pp 423-25.

93) Choi Jonggo, *Gukka wa Jonggyo* (Seoul: Hyeondae sasang-sa, 1983), pp. 153-166.

94) Yu Byeongdeok, *Donghak, Choendo-gyo* (Seoul: Kyomunsa, 1987) is a definitive source of information about the history of Donghak and Cheondo-gyo.

shamans.

Most of the Donghak religion was thus traditional Korean religion merely rearranged into a new configuration. What made Donghak different, and made it appear so dangerous to the government, were the same elements which made Catholicism so dangerous to the Joseon government: a focus on one God, the notion that belief in that God made Donghak followers a group apart from the rest of society, and, most important, a rejection of the ritual hegemony of the state. Unlike Buddhism, Korean Taoism, and shamanism, Donghak had an initiation ritual, signaling the lay believer's joining of a community of faith. Moreover, Donghak established a hierarchical network to link believers across the peninsula with districts called jeop and leaders called jeopju. It was this unauthorized organization, together with Choe Je-u's claim to be the designated messenger of the Divine Ruler of the universe, which made persecution inevitable, since this implied, though Choe never said so explicitly, that he could claim, if not authority over the state, at least independence from it.

The religious movement Choe Je-u started in 1860 did not die with him in 1864. Choe Sihyeong took over the reins of that movement and put it on a stronger theological and organizational footing. One important step Choe Sihyeong took was to begin illegally printing Donghak materials (using woodblocks for printing) in large quantities in 1880. The most important publication was, of course, the scriptures of Donghak, since they were necessary if Donghak followers were to pray properly and perform rituals correctly.

Choe Sihyeong was not interested in direct confrontation with the government. He preferred to build an underground movement out of sight of the government in the hope that eventually the Joseon government would permit Donghak followers to practice their faith openly. Not all of his followers were as patient. As early as 1871, some Donghak believers began resorting to violence in an attempt to force the government to retract its condemnation of Choe and his ideas. In what has become known as the Sinmi sakkeon (1871 incident), on the anniversary of Choe Je-u's execution, five local Donghak leaders, led by a man named Yi Pilje, attacked a local government office, setting it on fire, and seized the weapons they found there. There may have been a hundred or even as many as five hundred men involved in that attack but they were not able to

hold on to the town they captured for more than a day. Their leader, Yi Pilje, was arrested after he carrying out another raid on a government arms storehouse. That ended for a while the movement to exonerate Choe Je-u and gain freedom from persecution for those who followed his teachings.

However, in 1891, a particularly harsh official in Chungcheong province revived the persecution of Donghak followers, causing them to again demand an end to religious persecution and the rehabilitation of their founder. This persecution must have seemed particularly unfair because pressure from the government of France had forced the government of Korea to ease its persecution of Catholics in 1886. When Catholic priests were allowed to move freely around the peninsula and then Protestant missionaries were allowed to open churches, Donghak followers wondered why they were still had to practice their faith in secret. Followers of the foreign religion of Catholicism enjoyed more freedom to gather together to pray and perform rituals to their God than followers of the Korean religion of Donghak had to gather together pray and perform rituals to their God.

Twenty years after the failure of Yi 'ilje's attack on the government, in 1892, a group of Donghak followers gathered in Gongju to peacefully present a petition demanding that the persecution of Donghak followers stop and that Choe Je-u have his conviction erased and his good name restored to him. When their request was not granted, they demonstrated again a couple of months later. Finally, in February 1893, Donghak followers gathered in Seoul to petition the king directly to lift the ban on the Donghak rebellion, reverse the verdict on Choe Je-u, and order local officials to stop seizing the property of Donghak followers. That petition to the king was no more successful than the previous petitions to local government officials.

The Donghak demand that the verdict which condemned Choe be erased at first appeared no different from similar demands by Confucian political factions that verdicts condemning their revered predecessors be reversed. Gradually, however, Donghak protests took on a broader significance. The Donghak were not asking for what Confucian factions asked for, for a restoration of access to government posts and a return to the political respectability, but simply to be left alone. In other words, they were asking to be ignored by government

officials, not to join them. In asking for the freedom to follow their beliefs without government interference, they were calling for religious freedom, though they did not use that modern term.

Frustrated by the failure of the government to heed their plea to be left along, a large group of Donghak followers and other sympathetic peasants gathered in Boeun in March, 1893. That group added one more slogan to the previous calls for religious freedom: they also demanded the expulsion of foreigners from Korea. That last demand changed the character of those protests and led to the peasant rebellion of 1894 which had little to do with Donghak per se, except that it tarnished the name of Donghak and made it even more difficult for Donghak followers to gain religious freedom.

The defeat of the peasant rebellion of 1894 forced Donghak followers deeper underground and their leader Choe Sihyeong into hiding. However, he was eventually captured by government forces and was executed in July 1898. The official charge against him was that he had violated Korea's ritual regulations, specifically the provision borrowed from the Ming code making unauthorized rituals against the law.

Before Choe was captured, he passed the torch of Donghak leadership to Son Byeonghui (1861-1921), who became the third patriarch. Son fled Korea for Japan in 1901, and did not return to Korea until 1905. At that time he changed the name of Donghak to Cheondo-gyo (The Religion of the Heavenly Way). Under this new name, Donghak was finally able to enjoy the religious freedom Catholics and Protestants had begun to enjoy decades earlier.

The Donghak religion and Catholicism shared certain common traits which made the Confucian government of Joseon Korea much more intolerant of them and their activities than it was of the beliefs, rituals, and practices of Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism. In addition to their belief in one supreme deity and their creation of nation-wide organizations of believers, Catholicism and Donghak both drew a line over which they asserted government authority should not cross. That line defines what we now call religious freedom.

It would have been highly unusual in pre-modern Korea for a monk or a shaman to suggest publicly that there are limits to the power of the state over

its subjects. And it would have been highly unusual for any of them to suggest that religious communities have any right to autonomy in what they believe and particularly in what they do. If any of them had done so, they would have been persecuted as harshly as Catholics and Donghak followers were. Before the nineteenth century, no religious organizations dared to openly and explicitly propose that the state had no right to exercise ritual hegemony over any organization, even religious ones. That is why Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism were not persecuted, and Catholicism and Donghak were. Ritual autonomy is an essential element in religious freedom. If you can't pray to and honor God the way you believe God wants you to, then you don't enjoy religious freedom. That is why I say the Catholic and Donghak battles for religious autonomy in the 19th century were actually fights for religious freedom, even though neither group used that term at the time. The clash in the nineteenth centuries of Donghaks and Catholics with Korea's Confucian government did not win total religious freedom for the Korean people, but it was a long first step toward that goal.

The battle for religious freedom continued into the twentieth century, but with additional contestants. On the one hand, new indigenous religions appeared in Korea and began struggling to gain the same legal recognition Christians and Donghak had gained. On the other hand, the forces denying religious freedom had changed. In the first half of the century the Joseon dynasty was replaced by a Japanese colonial government, and then, in South Korea after 1945, by a government dominated by Christians and American ideology. Neither the Japanese nor the Christians had much respect for Korea's indigenous religious tradition, and neither was prepared to treat religions originated in Korea with the same respect they had been forced to grant religions of foreign origin.

The Japanese attitude toward religious freedom was made clear in the first decade of their colonial rule over Korea. In 1915, colonial authorities announced that only Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity (in both its Catholic and Protestant forms) were authentic religions. All the rest were "pseudo-religions" (*yusa chonggyo*), a term Japan had coined a few decades earlier when it had developed policies to deal with new religions which had appeared in Japan as Japan entered the modern world. In 1919, the colonial government clarified how it viewed religious activities by followers of what it considered

"pseudo-religions." In March 1919, the Religious Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Education issued a regulation stating:

If anyone who is not a member of Buddhist, Shinto, or Christian religious organization engages in religious-type activities, authorities we will investigate them and, if necessary, report them to the proper authorities." 95)

Among the religious organizations labled as "pseudo-religions" by the Japanese were those formed by followers of Gang Jeungsan, including the predecessor of Daesoonjinrihoe. The largest group of followers of Gang Jeungsan during the 1920s and the 1930s were under the banner of Pocheon-gyo, led by Cha Kyeongseok. Because it was so large, with at least hundreds of thousands of believers and possibly a million or more, Pocheon-gyo suffered the most severe persecution. In 1919, for example, almost 140 members of Pocheon-gyo were arrested and tortured in Jeju on the charge of plotting against the Japanese colonial government. The next year 3,000 were investigated and dozens were arrested and tortured in Gyeongsan-do<sup>96</sup>).

Later Cha began cooperating with the Japanese, believing that, since Gang Jeungsan had predicted that the Japanese would not control Korea for more than a few decades, he did not need to fight them but could instead wait for the great transformation to restore independence to Korea and raise it to its rightful place in the world. However, when Cha died in 1936, the colonial government betrayed the good will he had shown it. Japanese Authorities in Seoul issued an order dissolving all religious organizations which followed the teachings of Gang Jeungsan and confiscating their property.<sup>97</sup>)

Before it was banned in 1936, the predecessor of Daesoonjinrihoe, the Mugeuk-do, led by the man Daesoonjinrihoe followers now call the Doju, Jo Jeongsan, had already suffered from Japanese persecution. In 1929 Doju Jo Jeongsan had formed an organization to help poor followers bring new land under cultivation. Over the 17 years that organization lasted until it was

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95) Yun I-Heum, "Han'guk minjeok chonggyo ui yeoksajeok siltae" [Historical Conditions Faced by Korean New Religions], Han'guk jonggyo vol. 23 (1998), pp. 102-103.

96) Kim Hongcheol., Han'guk sin jonggyo sasang ui yeon'gu [What Korea's new religions believe] [Seoul; Jimmundang, 1989), pp. 307-8.

97) Ibid. pp. 310-11

dissolved by the Japanese, it fought against Japanese regulations restricting its activities and even had to endure the seizure of land it had brought under cultivation. In 1936, the Japanese even sent police to occupy the main worship hall of Mugeuk-do.<sup>98)</sup>

Jo Jeongsan was able to resume public religious activities after the Japanese were forced out of Korea in 1945. However, he and others in Korea's indigenous religious faced a new obstacle. Though the Japanese were gone, the terms they had used to denigrate the indigenous religions of Korea, terms such as yusa chonggyo and, even worse, saibi chonggyo (fake religion), were adopted by the Americans who occupied South Korea in 1945 and by the Christians who assumed control of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Many of the elite in South Korea in the first two decades after liberation mistakenly assumed the modernization meant Westernization, and that Westernization meant adopting Christianity. That is why Christmas was a national holiday long before Buddha's birthday was. And that is why indigenous religion often found themselves libeled by the press as "nothing more than superstition" and "fake religion."

Though Taegeuk-do (the new name for Mugeuk-do) was not outlawed by the Republic of Korea, it was not treated with much respect in its early years. It was not until the 1960s, when the Buddhist Park Chung-hee was president instead of the Christian Syngman Rhee, that the government of the Republic of Korea began referring to the indigenous religions by the more respectable name of "new religion." And it was not until the 1980s that scholars began to label indigenous religions such as the successor to Taegeuk-do, the Daesoonjinrihoe, with the more accurate title of Minjok jonggyo (indigenous religion.)<sup>99)</sup>

As we enter the twenty-first century, South Koreans enjoy much more religious freedom than they ever have before in their history. Indigenous religions such as Daesoonjinrihoe are able to compete with the more established religions such as Buddhism and Christianity by building not only halls of worship and cultivation centers but also universities and hospital complexes.

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98) 鬚賊亂崩○ 槩. 314.

99) Yu Pyeongdeok, Keun-hyeondae Han'guk chonggyo sasang yeon'gu (Seoul: Madang kihoek, 1999), pp. 334.



Open proselytizing is now permitted, and bookstores throughout the Republic of Korea sell material published by the indigenous religions alongside the books published by Christian and Buddhist publishers.

It is easy to forget, in this age of relative religious freedom, how difficult that freedom has been to achieve, and how long it took to realize. Those who are free now to decide for himself or herself whether to believe in God or not, and what name to call that God if he or she does believe in him, those who are free to worship God in whatever way he or she feels is appropriate, should occasionally pause to thank those in previous generations who made it possible for them to enjoy that freedom of conscience. And those who are free today to join together with like-minded individuals to study writings they consider sacred, to pray together, and to perform rituals they consider necessary or appropriate, and even to erect halls of worship in which they can perform those rituals and discuss those writings, should occasionally recall that they enjoy this freedom of religious association because previous generations of Catholics, Protestants, and particularly in the last century followers of Korea's indigenous religions fought against government attempts to tell them what to believe and when, where, and how to worship. Only if we appreciate the sacrifices our ancestors and predecessors have made can we truly appreciate how fortunate we are to live on this earth at the beginning of the twenty-first century, at the dawn of a new age.

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