Paper for a Colloquium on Christianity in Korea (The Hahan Moo-sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities), October 21, 2000, George Washington University [Preliminary version]

Unexpected Fruit:
Catholicism and the Rise of Civil Society in Korea

Don Baker, University of British Columbia

If you were taking a word association test and heard the words "Roman Catholicism," it is unlikely that "democracy" would be the first word to come to mind. After all, the Pope is not elected, and neither are his bishops. In fact, Catholics can not even select their own pastors. Moreover, for most of its history, the Roman Catholic Church, as an authoritarian institution itself, has been a supporter of monarchies and other authoritarian forms of government, and has usually been suspicious of popular uprisings against such governments. That is why few observers have paid much attention to local Catholic communities when studying the fall of dictatorships and the growth of political freedom around the world in the second half of the twentieth century. There are exceptions, of course. Cardinal Sin is widely recognized for his contribution to the democratization of the Philippines. And Catholic organizations are given some of the credit for the collapse of communism in Poland and other Eastern European nations with sizable Catholic populations. Nevertheless, historians have tended to view the Roman Catholic Church overall as more of a hindrance than a help to the rise of democratic societies.

That, however, has not been the case in Korea. Quite the contrary. On that northeast Asian peninsula far removed from the traditional strongholds of Catholicism, the birth of a Korean Catholic church over two hundred years ago sent ripples through Korea's political culture, ripples which eventually grew strong enough to undermine the foundations of the traditional authoritarian Korean state. Those first Korean Catholics unintentionally introduced one of the conceptual building blocks out of which the edifice of democracy has been erected.

Democracy can exist only with the support of a civil society, a society in which barriers have been erected to limit the reach of state authority. Such barriers define arenas for citizens to fill with voluntary organizations operating independently of, and sometimes against, the government. When the Catholic Church appeared on Korean soil in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and encountered violent resistance from the Confucian officials of the Chosŏn dynasty, it began to demand a sanctuary from government interference. Eventually, after a long and bloody struggle, that demand was granted, creating a zone of autonomy in which a Korean civil society could eventually sprout. Though the first Catholics in Korea did not talk of civil society, and would not have understood that term if they had heard it used by others, they inadvertently laid the foundations for its later emergence.

I recognize that this is not a widely accepted proposition. In fact, in a recent series of articles in the *Korea Journal* debating the origins of civil society in Korea, the early Catholic Church was hardly mentioned. David Steinberg, Han Sangjin, and Kim Sunhyuk argue that a civil society is a rather recent phenomenon in Korea, since there can be no civil society until differences of opinion are tolerated and those differences can be articulated in a public arena. Under both the Chosŏn dynasty and Japanese colonial rule, dissent was not allowed and Koreans were not allowed to form private organizations in opposition to government policies. Therefore, they conclude, we can not speak of a civil society emerging until the 1960s at the earliest.[1]

---

[1] David I. Steinberg, “Civil Society and Human Rights in Korea: On Contemporary and Classical Orthodoxy and Ideology, “ KOREA JOURNAL vol 37, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 145-165; Han

Cho Hein and Jahyun Haboush disagree. Cho and Haboush both locate the origins, or at least the forerunner, of Korea's civil society in the private academies established by literati outside of Seoul, starting in the 16th century. Cho asserts that Confucian scholars who lived in the countryside and did not hold any government posts constituted a "self-governing society of 'spiritual' leaders" which enjoyed "a considerable degree of autonomy and influence vis-a-vis the state."[2] Haboush is somewhat more cautious. She admits that "Chosŏ n Confucians did not have a perception of society as multiple and independent organizations." Nevertheless, she argues, the private academies they created and led served as intermediary bodies, standing between the state and the people, and thus created space for the public sphere essential to a civil society to emerge.[3]

There is some merit in both positions. A true civil society, in which certain areas of society are off-bounds to state control, and citizens are therefore able to form voluntary private organizations which can then exert public pressure on the government to change its polices, is a recent phenomenon in the southern half of the peninsula and has yet to emerge in the north. In that sense, Steinberg, Han, and Kim are correct. However, the conditions which allowed a civil society to emerge in the south did not themselves appear overnight.

Sang-jin, "The Public Sphere and Democracy in Korea: A Debate on Civil Society," KOREA JOURNAL, vol 37,no. 4 (winter, 1997), pp. 78-97; Kim Sunhyuk, " Civil Society and Democratization in South Korea," KOREA JOURNAL vol 38,no. 2 (summer, 1998), pp. 214-236.

[2] Cho Hein, "The Historical Origin of Civil Society in Korea," KOREA JOUNAL, vol. 37, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 24-41.

[3] Jahyun Kim Haboush, "Academies and Civil Society in Choson Korea, " in Léon Vandermeersch, ed. La Société civile face à l'Etat: dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coréene et vietnamienne. (Paris: Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient, 1994), p381-390.

Seeds of the mature civil society we have seen in recent South Korean elections can be identified in the soil of the Chosŏn dynasty which ended in 1910. In that sense, Cho and Haboush are correct.

However, I am not as willing as Cho and Haboush are to see literati-run private academies as truly autonomous. After all, those academies were chartered by the state and, as we saw when the Taew□n'gun ran Korea in the 1870s, they could be shut down by the state. Moreover, the literati, whether in-office or out-of-office, accepted the Confucian premise that there were no theoretical boundaries to the reach of the state. Where literati disagreed, they disagreed over the goals of government intervention in society, not over whether such intervention in itself was justified.

There are probably as many definitions of civil society as there are scholars discussing it. However, one common element in all of the various definitions scholars wield is that a civil society is a society free from government control. That is possible only when the state has retreated from total hegemony over society, creating a power vacuum men and women can rush into and fill with voluntary associations. In Western history, growing commercial activity, and the merchant's associations that generates, is often given credit for erecting the first barriers to the power of the state. Since Korean merchants remained under the thumb of the state until recent years, if we look for the origins of civil society in the merchant community, we can not trace its origins back more than a few decades. That is why both Cho and Haboush has turned to literati, and the academies they established, to see if there are any older ancestors of today's Korean civil society.

However, they have overlooked another segment of the Chosŏn dynasty population which fought harder than literati ever did against the hegemonic reach of state power. Unlike the literati, Korean converts to Catholicism in the late 18th and early nineteenth century rejected the theoretical right of the state to reach into every corner of society and force the people there to abide by every directive issued by the government. Korea's first Catholics insisted instead that the power of the state was not absolute, that there were limits to how much the state could interfere in what those subject to its authority believed and did. They did not raise those objections to total state authority under a banner of civil society or democracy, since those terms were not only foreign to them, they were alien to the Catholic teachings they had accepted. Nevertheless, when they asked that their government recognize their right to practice their faith without interference or harassment, they had taken the first step toward carving out an arena in which civil society could emerge.

They did not win such religious freedom right away, of course.When they followed the dictates of their pope and refused to erect the spirit tablet essential to proper Confucian mourning ritual, they violated the laws governing ritual in Chosŏ n Korea. That made them criminals in the eyes of the government, since traditional Korean governments had never allowed personal religious convictions to stand in the way of a subject's obligations to society.[4] The Catholic refusal to grant the state authority over the rituals Catholics used to mourn their dead led to a century of deadly persecution, with thousands dying at the hands of Chosŏ n dynasty officials in 1801, 1839, 1846, and 1866 through 1869. Nevertheless, by insisting publicly and repeatedly that the state does not have absolute authority over every aspect of its subjects' lives, they introduced the inhabitants of the peninsula to a defining characteristic of a civil society. In 1899, when France forced the Korean government to grant Korean Catholics legal guarantees of freedom of worship, that cornerstone of a civil society gained new respectability. By signing that treaty, the state formally abandoned its claim to total authority over the religious and ritual lives of every single one of its subjects. Limits were thus placed on the power a government could exercise over those under its control. Once in place, those limits could not easily be removed or ignored. Though in the decades ahead there would be many challenges to religious freedom, and to other freedoms essential to a civil society, the conceptual foundations of Korean politics had been permanently altered. The relationship between a Korean government and those it governed would never be the same again.

---

[4] Don Baker, "The Martyrdom of Paul Yun: Western Religion and Eastern Ritual in Eighteenth-century Korea," TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY, KOREA BRANCH, no. 54 (1979), pp. 33-58.

The Catholic Church in Korea did not immediately take advantage of its new legalized autonomy to carve out an even larger sphere for civil society to operate within, however. Instead, the Church, as though fearful of losing the gains it had already made if it pushed for more, operated under the assumption that there should be a clear dividing line separating church from state. From the last decades of the nineteenth century into the second half of the twentieth century, Korea's bishops and church hierarchy tended to grant the state sole responsibility for political issues, and avoided involvement in secular affairs. The lack of much Catholic participation in the Enlightenment movement at the end of the nineteenth century, or in the nationalistic protests against Japanese colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, is as striking as is the central role of Korean Protestants in both such movements. Rather than speaking out on larger issues, up until the 1960s the Korean Catholic Church tended to look inward and focus on its own needs, building additional churches for Korean Catholics to worship in as well as schools for Catholic children to study in and medical clinics for ill Catholics to be treated in.

By the late 1960s, however, the Korean Catholic Church had begun to move beyond that rather passive concept of a civil society and adopt a more active stance. After over a century and a half on the Korean peninsula, the Korean Catholic Church, for the first time, began as an institution to assert the right of Catholics and other Koreans, following the dictates of their own consciences or in pursuit of their own self-interest, to organize pressure groups to bring about changes in society at large. Catholics were not the first Koreans to form non-governmental organizations in order to promote changes in government policies. However, once the Catholic Church put the power of its numbers and its prestige behind this shift from a negative to a positive concept of a civil society, the state was forced to retreat farther and faster than it might otherwise have. Once the Church began arguing that not only should the state grant Catholics religious freedom, it should also grant Catholics and all other citizens of the Republic of Korea political freedom and economic justice as well, civil society was strengthened and democracy was brought closer to realization. A church which has not generally been known as a progressive force in recent world history has, in Korea, played an important role in bringing South Korea into the modern world.

The Catholic Church was able to play such an important role in fostering the growth of a civil society on Korean soil because the Catholic missionary publications which introduced Catholicism to Korea included an understanding of the nature of religion, and of the relationship between church and state, which challenged the traditional range of state authority. Before Korea encountered the modern world, the word "chonggyo" [religion] did not exist in the Korean language. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Koreans did not look upon religion as a separate and distinct sphere of human activity meriting a term of its own. Religious groups were granted no privileges that political, economic, or social groups did not share. All such groups were viewed as a part of society rather than apart from society and were expected to recognize that the locus of ultimate authority was the state. In other words, there was no such thing as freedom of religion, nor could pre-modern Korean society be deemed a civil society in which certain types of community activity were beyond the theoretical reach of state power.[5]

Ritual, Religion, and Restraints on the Authority of the State

That began to change when Catholicism appeared on the Korean peninsula at the end of the eighteenth century. Korea's first Catholics were home-grown. The Korean Catholic Church was founded by Koreans, not by foreign missionaries. Moreover, its leadership was in non-Korean hands for most of its first half-century. A few young men, their curiosity aroused by Jesuit missionary publications from China, had sought out Catholic priests and publications in China and brought that new religion back into Korea themselves. Though those founders of the Korean Catholic Church were scions of the staunchly Confucian yangban elite, they refused to accept the traditional subordinate role Confucianism assigned religions in East Asia.

That refusal signaled a rejection of a political principle which had first been articulated in China over two thousand years earlier and had defined political authority in both China and Korea ever since. That principle, that both ritual and war are the responsibility of the state[6], was totally contrary to the post-Renaissance separation of civil ritual and authority from religious ritual and authority which was the norm in most of Europe in the eighteenth century. Acting in accordance with that imported European norm, those pioneer Christians refused to honor state control of ritual. They refused to let the state determine what rituals they could celebrate, when and how they could celebrate them, and who would officiate.[7] The Pope, not the Korean King, determined how Catholics should honor their dead. Similarly, the dictates of the Church, not the laws of the state, determined who could be a priest and when those priests could offer mass.

---

[5] Cho, p. 34, argues that Confucian scholars in the second half of the Chosŏ n dynasty created a civil society which "not only enjoyed a high degree of autonomy but also sought to influence [the state's] policies through its nationwide networks of communication." For a persuasive refutation of Cho's argument, see Steinberg

[6] Tso-chüan, Duke Ch'ing, 13th year, as reprinted in James Legge, trans. The Chinese Classics, volume 5, (The Ch'un Ts'ew, with the Tso Chuen), (p. 379) (London: Oxford University Press, 1895).

Those first Catholics not only insisted on holding their own rituals even without state approval, they also insisted they could not be forced to follow strict state regulations concerning such rituals as *chesa*, the Confucian ancestor memorial ceremony.[8] Their refusal to privilege the ritual demands of the state over the moral code of their particular religious community constituted a fundamental challenge to the traditional relationship in Korea between a government and those it governed and laid the foundation for a radical new notion in Korean political culture: the notion of religious freedom. Out of that notion of religious freedom grew the notion that there are limits to the authority the state has over its subjects. It is precisely just such an assertion that the state is not almighty that constitutes a defining characteristic of a civil society.

---

[7] The first confrontation between Korea's Catholics and their government occurred in 1785 when a policemen discovered a group of Confucian students engaging in their version of Catholic ritual. Yi Manch'ae, ed. Pyŏ gwip'yon [A collection of documents attacking heterodoxy and defending orthodoxy] (Seoul: Yŏ lhwadang, 1971), pp. 105-06.

[8] The Korean Catholic refusal to perform *chesa* (sometimes called "ancestor worship" and thus idolatry in Catholic eyes) in the prescribed manner is based on rulings made by the Vatican in the much broader rites controversy in China. See David E. Mungello, ed., The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning (San Franciso: The Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, 1994).

The Korean Catholic Church began its long fight to place restraints on the reach of the state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when beleaguered believers tried to escape immediate martyrdom by arguing with government officials over the legitimacy of their demands that Catholics grant supreme moral and ritual authority to the state. One of the most eloquent of those martyrs was Paul Chŏ ng Hasang (1795-1839).

In a memorial to the throne he wrote in expectation of persecution, Chŏ ng asked, "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." [9]

Chŏ ng 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.[10]

---

[9] Sang chaesang sŏ [A letter to the Prime Minister] (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1976), pp. 25, as translated in Peter Lee, Don Baker, et. al., Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp.156.

Catholics, unfortunately, did all those things which Buddhists and shamans did not do. Catholics, even before Catholicism was explicitly outlawed, met secretly to read Christian books. They created an unauthorized organization and gave unauthorized titles, such as "sinbu"[priest] and "kyoju" [bishop], to its leaders. They refused to perform rituals such as *chesa* in the manner the government told them to perform them. 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 guidance 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.

In an even more dangerous departure from the traditional relationship between the Korean government and those it governed, the persecuted Korean Catholic community sometimes went beyond mere verbal appeals to reason and fairness. Some of Korea's first Catholics wanted to resort to arms, European arms, to force the Chosŏ n government to leave them alone. For example, Hwang Sayŏ ng (1752-1801), the husband of one of Paul Chŏ ng's cousins, attempted to smuggle a message out of Korea to the Bishop of Beijing, begging him to arrange for French military intervention to force the Korean government to leave Catholics alone. In his famous Silk Letter, he asked the bishop to,

---

[10] Don Baker, " Science and Religion in the Chosŏ n dynasty," in James Palais, ed. Cambridge History of Korea, vol. III, forthcoming.

"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. At the same time, drop off three or four shrewd and persuasive Chinese scholars along the coast so that they can deliver a letter to the king of Korea. That letter should say,

'We have sailed here on European ships to tell you about our religion. We are not here to steal your sons, your women or your riches. We are here because we have received orders from our religious superiors to come here and save souls in this remote corner of the world. If you will allow a Catholic missionary to enter your kingdom and proselytize freely, then we will ask nothing more of you. 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. After a brief celebration to honor our joining hands in eternal friendship, we will sail away.

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. Would it not be better to save your entire country by offering a warm welcome to this one man? Would you rather turn this man away and, by so doing, bring destruction on your kingdom? It is your choice, Your Majesty.'"[11]

---

[11] Hwang Sayŏ ng paeksŏ [The silk letter of Hwang Sayŏ ng], edited and translated into modrn Korean by Yun Chaeyŏ ng (Seoul: Chŏ ngŭ msa, 1975, pp. 107, as translated in Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, II, pp.149-150.

The Korean government was aware of how serious this Catholic threat was. That is why the Chosŏn court persecuted Catholics off-and-on for almost a full century. Chosŏn officials knew that the implications of the Catholic challenge went far beyond the simple refusal to perform *chesa*, or even the threat of attacks by French naval forces. They recognized the Catholic challenge for what it really was--an unprecedented attempt to place restrictions on the exercise of state power and carve out autonomous zones of community activity. For example, in the decree justifying the persecution of 1839 , the ch'ŏksa yunŭm, Catholics were condemned in the following words: "They use terms such as 'emperor of our religion" [the pope] and 'leader of our religion '[bishop]. 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?"[12]

I am well aware that most scholars of Korean history do not agree with my explanation of why the Chosŏn dynasty reacted so violently to the birth of a Catholic community within its borders. Two of the more popular explanations are that the persecution of Catholics was part of a much larger on-going factional struggle, and that Catholics were persecuted because they wanted to modernize Korea and threatened the dominance of the literati class by preaching the equality of all God's human creatures.

Factionalism clearly was involved in the decision to attack Catholics. However, any attempt to dismiss the bloody century-long persecution of the Korean Catholic Church as motivated primarily by factional interest or by a selfish desire to protect literati privileges underestimates the depth of the challenge Catholicism posed to the Confucian state.

---

[12] Yi Manch'ae, pp. 423-24.

Most of the literati leadership of the Korean Catholic Church in its first decade sympathized with a group of officials now known as the *sip’a* (“expedient faction”) for their support of King Chongjo and his plans to strengthen royal authority at the expense of literati officials. Most of those who instigated the first large-scale anti-Catholic persecution, in 1801, were members of the group of officials now known as the *pyŏkp’a* (“hardline faction”) for their continuing distrust of King Chongjo because of the sins of his father. That much is true, and therefore it is not unreasonable to say that the *sip’a* flirtation with Catholicism gave the *pyŏkp’a* an excuse, once they held the reigns of power, to attack many *sip’a* literati and officials as dangerous heretics.

However, *sip’a/pyŏkp’a* rivalry does not explain why the first attacks on Catholic converts were launched by men who had been associated with the *sip’a* rather than the *pyŏkp’a* camp. Nor does it explain why so many commoners and women who had played no role in factional disputes at court lost their lives in the anti-Catholic persecution, nor why that persecution continued on and off for another seventy years, long after the *sip’a/pyŏkp’a* dispute had become irrelevant. No other factional dispute in all the five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty cost as many lives or involved people from such a wide range of social classes. That indicates to me that much more than factional competion was behind the vigor and venom with which anti-Catholics tortured and executed Catholics.

The assertion that Catholics were attacked because they threatened the privileged status of the literati holds even less water. There is not one shred of evidence that Catholics in Korea in any way intended to undermine the traditional agricultural economy or hierarchical social structure of the Chosŏn dynasty. They were more interested in going to heaven after they died than in transforming the society in which they lived. Korea's first Catholics, unlike many of Korea's first Protestants a century later, were not self-conscious modernizers.

Moreover, though Catholic writings taught that all men and women were equal in the eyes of God, Catholics in 19th century Korea did not treat men and women as equal in the eyes of human beings. Although most of those who gave their lives for their new faith were women,the leadership of the church remained firmly in male hands. There were no women priests. In addtion, the vast majority of that male leadership, clerical or otherwise, came from the literati and technician (chungin) classes which had always occupied the top rungs of the Korean social order. The few exceptions were usually the descendants of revered martyrs, showing the continuing importance of herditary status in Korean Catholic society. In other words, Catholics did not challenge the pre-modern Korean patriarchal hierarchical social structure, they imitated it.

To find out why the persecution of Catholics went on much longer and was much more bloody than any mere factional struggle, and why Catholics were persecuted with much more venom than were those who challenged the traditional social order by calling for better treatment for slaves, peasants, or the sons of conbubines, we have to return to the traditional relationship between religion and government in Korea, and how the rise of Catholicism on the peninsula challenged that tradition.

As noted earlier, before the term *chonggyo* was imported from Japan, there was no word for "religion" in Korea. Instead what we now call religions were called by a variety of different terms, such as *kyo* (teachings), *to* (a way), *pŏp* (laws, methods), *hak* (scholarship, ways of thinking), and even *sul* (techniques, practices). It is important to note here is that none of theses terms referred to beliefs or practices which could 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.

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 Korea accepted the subordinate role of lending support to the state's moral code. As long as it was confined to such a role, religion could not carve out those autonomous spheres of activity from which civil society could sprout.

However, Korea's first Catholics refused to accept such a limited role. When their government tried to force them to abandon their demands for religious autonomy, thousands of them refused and paid with their lives for their defiance of tradition and state power. Others fled into remote mountain valleys, where they established autonomous communities out of sight of the government.[13] These *kyouch'on* ("village of fellow believers") can not exactly be called outposts of civil society, since they tried to keep their interaction with the outside world to a minimum. Nevertheless, they kept alive on Korean soil the concept that there were limits to the legitimate exercise of governmental authority. In doing so, they contributed to the eventual birth of civil society in Korea.

---

[13] For more information on the Kyouch'on, see the 1990 Harvard M.A. thesis of Alan Pate, "Catholic Persecution and Catholic Survival: The Korean Kyouch'on and Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth-century Korea"

A major step toward that civil society came when the Chosŏ n government reluctantly (and indirectly) granted legal recognition of religious freedom for Catholics. In 1886 France had forced the Korean government to sign a treaty which included a clause allowing free travel for French missionaries (though they were identified only as "Frenchmen") in Korea and another clause which permitted French citizens to teach in Korea, though exactly what they could teach was not specified . Korea's native Catholics did not gain clear legal protection of their right to practice their faith as they saw fit until the very end of the 19th century, in 1899. That year, the bishop of Seoul, Gustav Charles Mutel of France, negotiated a agreement with Chŏ ng Chun-si, the director of the Regional Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. That agreement, without stating specifically that Korea recognized freedom of religion, protected Korean Catholics against the adoption of anti-Catholic measures by local officials.[14] The battle Korea's Catholics had waged for more than a century to gain that protection planted a revolutionary notion in Korean soil: that there can exist within a society organizations with a certain degree of autonomy and that there are some areas of human life which should be free of government control.

Separation of Church and State

The Korean Catholic Church did not, as an institution, join in the battle for the next stage of civil society until decades later. Instead, savoring the fruits of the religious freedom they had fought so hard, and suffered so much, to gain, the Church in the first half of the twentieth century preserved the tradition it had begun in its *kyouch'on* and concentrated on its own community of believers, almost ignoring the larger society surrounding it.

---

[14] Ch'oe Chong-ko, Kukka wa chonggyo [State and Religion] (Seoul:: Hyŏ ndae sasangsa, 1983), pp. 160-163; Yi Wŏ n-sun, "Han.Pul choyak kwa chonggyo chayu ŭ i munje [Treaties between Korea and France, and the problem of freedom of religion], Kyohoesa yŏ n'gu, no. 5 (1987), pp. 63-96.

"Ignore" is probably too strong a word. A better description of Korean Catholic behavior in the first half of the twentieth century is that Catholics tried not to make waves, tried not to antagonize those wielding secular authority, whether they were Korean or Japanese. In other words, they tried to live in accordance with the Biblical injunction to "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."[15]

The relative lack of attention paid to the secular affairs on the peninsula during this period may be partially due to the fact that foreigners rather than Koreans dominated the leadership of the Korean Catholic Church. Bishop Mutel from France was overall head of the Church hierarchy in Korea from 1891 until 1933, when he was replaced by another Frenchman, Adrien Larribeau. There were no Korean bishops on Korean soil until 1942. Moreover, Catholic priests in Korea were more likely to be French, German, American or Irish than Korean until the early 1940s, when most foreign missionaries were expelled by the Japanese.

This foreign-led church did not devote much of its resources to educational outreach, unlike the Protestant churches which, soon after the first Protestant missionaries arrived in 1884, began establishing schools which quickly made significant contributions to Korea's first strides toward modernity. The first Christian school in Korea was not a Protestant school but a Catholic seminary established by French missionaries in a potters' village (a *kyouch'on*) in 1855. However, that seminary was shut down in the persecution which began in 1866 and took the lives of thousands of Korean Catholics as well as of nine of their twelve French priests (the other three fled the country to safety in China).

---

[15] The Gospel According to Matthew, 22:21

After the persecution of French missionaries ended with the signing of the treaty between France and Korea in 1886, French missionaries, who had been operating underground to escape the persecution which had earlier taken the lives of twelve of their compatriots, came out from underground and began establishing schools in Seoul and elsewhere. However, not only did they open schools at a much slower rate than their Protestant competition did, they focused more on orphanages, night schools, and vocational schools and on religious education for Catholic children than on introducing the latest knowledge from the West which Korea needed for its modernization. The priests from France were more concerned with producing devout Catholics than with educating the future leaders of a modern Korean society.[16] In fact, Bishop Mutel even went so far as to explicitly reject a suggestion by a devout Korean Catholic activist, An Chung-gŭ n (1879-1910), that the Church establish a university in Korea. According to An, the Bishop told him that higher education would be detrimental to the faith of Korea's Catholic.[17] As a result, the Catholic Church in Korea failed to establish the private secondary and post-secondary schools which generate some of the unofficial personal networks out of which civil society is formed.

---

[16] No Kil-myŏ ng, Kat'ollik kwa Chosŏ n hugi sahoe pyŏ ndong [The Catholic Church and social change in the latter half of the Chosŏ n dynasty] (Seoul: Seoul: Koryŏ taehakkyo minjok munhwa yŏ n'guso, 1988), pp.223-228.; Ch'oe Sŏ k-u, Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe ŭ i yŏ ksa [The History of the Catholic Church in Korea], (Seoul: Han'gu kyohoesa yŏ n'gusŏ , 1982), pp. 347-351.

[17] Yi Chu-ho, "Sin'ang in An Chung-gŭ n non,"[The Catholic believer An Chung--gŭ n] Han'guk kyohoesa nonch'ong (Seoul:Han'guk kyohoesa yŏ n'guso, 1982), pp. 391.

The Catholic Church in first half of the twentieth century also missed an opportunity to contribute to the emergence of civil society when it refused to support private political activity, particularly activity resisting Japanese imperialism. In fact, many of the statements and actions of the leaders of the Korean Catholic Church seem to have actually hindered the emergence of civil society by condemning political activity not authorized by the government in power. At least, that was the Catholic position Koreans could infer from the editorial stance of the Catholic newspaper *Kyŏ nghyang sinmun* in the years leading up to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, and from the stance the Catholic Church adopted in the 1930s toward the Japanese demand that Koreans participate in Shinto rituals honoring the Japanese emperor.

The *Kyŏ nghyang sinmun* began publishing in 1906, at a time when Korea's very existence as an independent nation was in mortal danger. Nevertheless, this Korean newspaper, whose official editor-in-chief was Fr. Florian Demange of the Paris Society for the Foreign Missions, did not encourage its readers to resist encroaching Japanese imperialism. Quite the contrary. Its editorials, reflecting the official Catholic position that Catholics should obey the directives of legally constituted governments, explicitly condemned the righteous armies which rebelled against Japanese encroachment, labeling their resistance to the Japanese seizure of political power on the peninsula not only ineffective but also improper. Despite this pro-government stance, the *Kyŏ nghyang sinmun* did not survive the annexation. The Japanese colonial goverment forced it to cease operation on December 30, 1910.[18]

---

[18] Ch'oe Ki-yŏ ng, "Kuhanmal Kyŏ nghyang sinmun e kwanhan yŏ n'gu," Han'guk kyohoesa nonmun chip, I [A collection of articles on Korean church history, vol. 1] (Seoul: Han'guk Kyohoesa Yŏ n'gusŏ , 1984), pp. 795-835.

Though the French hierarchy of the Korean Catholic Church was willing to work with colonial authorities, many Korean Catholics were not. Separation of church and state for those nationalistic Catholics meant that they did not have to obey the dictates of their spiritual leaders in political affairs. One such nationalist was An Chung-gŭ n. On October 26, 1909, ignoring the warnings of his spiritual advisors to avoid excessive involvement in secular affairs, An shot and killed Ito Hirobumi, one of the founders of the Japanese empire.[19] Bishop Mutel pronounced An a murderer, excommunicated him, and even attempted to keep An from meeting with a priest to confess his sins before he was executed by the Japanese.[20] Other Catholic nationalists were not deterred, however. One of the 105 men charged in 1912 with conspiring to assassinate Governor-General Terauchi was Yi Ki-dang, a devout Catholic. After his release from prison, Yi fled to Manchura where he devoted himself to organizing armed resistance to the Japanese. However, like An, Yi was excommunicated from his church for attempting the violent overthrow of a colonial government the Korean Catholic Church officially recognized as legitimate.[21] Those displays of official Church disapproval of anti-government activism did not stop some of the young Korean men studying to be priests from joining the March 1st demonstrations for

---

[19] Yi Chu-ho, pp. 383-404.

[20] Pae Se-yŏ ng (Marcel Pélisse), "Han'gukesŏ Pali woebang chon'gyo ŭ i sŏ n'gyo Pangch'im,"[The proselytizing strategy of the Paris Society for the Foreign Missions in Korea] Han'guk Kyohoesa nonmun chip, I , pp. 761-62. On August 21, 1993, Cardinal Kim Su-hwan revoked An's excommunication and reinstated him in the Catholic Church, declaring that the assasination of Ito Hirobumi was not a sin but was instead a righteous expression of love of country. KOREA NEWREVIEW, vol. 22, no. 35 (August 28, 1993), pp.32.

[21] Ch'oe Sŏ k-u, Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe ŭ i yŏ ksa [The history of the Korean Catholic Church] (Seoul: Han'guk kyohoesa yŏ n'guso, 1982), p. 363.

Korean independence in 1919. However, they were expelled from the seminary for their actions.[22]

The activism of those few Catholic nationalists does not seem to have contributed much to the growth of civil society in Korea, since they received little support from their church. Most of Korea's Catholics appear to have sided more with the apolitical stance of their priests and bishops than with the anti-Japanese stance adopted by An, Yi, and the demonstrating seminarians. When Protestant and Ch'ŏ ndo-kyo leaders declared Korea's independence from Japanese rule on March 1, 1919, there were no Catholics among the singers of that declaration and relatively few Catholics (no more than 53) among the thousands arrested for demonstrating in support of that declaration.[23] During the decades Korea was suffering under Japanese colonial rule, the Korean Catholic Church, particularly its hierarchy, appeared satisfied with the space it had carved out for autonomy in religious affairs. It saw no need to risk conflict with secular authorities by expanding on that autonomy and taking an active role in society at large, whether as educators or as anti-imperialists. This was a period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church when Rome stressed accommodation rather than confrontation with non-Christian cultures. Though less than a century and a half earlier Korea's first Catholics had suffered martyrdom for their refusal to conform to the ritual demands of their government, in the 1930s Korea's Catholics were told by the Pope that not only could they show respect for their ancestors with the traditional *chesa* ritual, they were also permitted to engage in a Shinto ritual which the Church defined as a secular ceremonial display of respect for the Japanese emperor.[24] This policy of accommodation to secular authority meant that Catholic contributions to the creation of a civil society during the Japanese colonial rule were minimal.

---

[22] Ch'oe Sŏ k-u, Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe ŭ i yŏ ksa, p. 365.

[23] Ch'oe Sŏ k-u, Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe ŭ i yŏ ksa, p.366.

[24] Sung-Gun Kim,"The Shinto Shrine Issue in Korean Christiantiy under Japanese Colonialism," Korean Studies in Canada, vol 3 (1995), pp. 83-100.

Nor was there much change in this passive stance when Japanese overlords were replaced by American administrators and then by Syngman Rhee and his minions. Even the brief rise of the devout Catholic layman John Chang Myŏ n (1899-1966) to the prime ministership in 1960 did not produce a shift toward a more active involvement by the church in social issues. However, in the 1960s, as Korea began its transformation from an agrarian rural society into an industrial urban society, the Catholic attitude toward Korean society began to change as well. The first evidence of that change came in 1958, when a Young Catholic Workers' Association was established on the initiative of a visiting bishop, Bishop Joseph Cardign. In 1966, another organization, the Korean Catholic Rural Youth Movement, was created to concentrate on the problems of young farmers. The next year, 1967, the Korean Bishops' Conference established the Korean Catholic Justice and Peace Commission as a further sign that Korea's Catholic Church was awakening to the social gospel.[25] At first, these three organizations did not have much impact outside of church circles, perhaps because the dominant figure in the Korean Church until he retired in 1968 was the relatively passive Bishop Paul Ro Ki-nam, a man who had become bishop of Seoul when the Japanese expelled his French predecessor. Bishop Ro's replacement as the archbishop of the Seoul archdiocese was Kim Suhwan, a man more comfortable with church involvement in political, social, and economic issues. Bishop Kim (he was elevated to Cardinal Kim in 1969) led the church down a new path, one which brought the Church back into the battle to create a civil society.

---

[25] Kim Mal-yong, "Hyŏ ndae Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe wa nodong undong," [The Korean Catholic Church and the labor movement], Han'guk kyohoesa nommun chip, I, pp. 317-334; Chŏ ng Ho-kyŏ ng, "Hyŏ ndae Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe wa nongmin undong" [The Korean Catholic Church and the farmers' movement], ibid, pp. 335-361; Han Yong-hŭ i, "Hyŏ ndae Han'guk Ch'ŏ njukyohoe ŭ i chŏ ngŭ i-in'gwŏ n undongsa" [A history of the movement for justice and human rights] and the Korean Catholic Church today], ibid., pp. 363-430.

The Church and the expansion of civil society

Cardinal Kim had been the pastoral director of the Young Catholic Workers' Organization, so it is perhaps not surprising that the first Catholic challenge to entrenched power in the modern era arose from a labor dispute. In 1967 workers at a textiles plant on Kanghwa island organized a labor union, only to meet resistance from their employer. They were successful in winning formal recognition for their union only after the Korean Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a public statements in 1968 supporting the right of workers to organize.[26] Though it did carve out some space for civil society on the factory floor, that was a relatively moderate action, especially compared to the activites of Bishop Chi Hak-sun of Wŏ nju and other more radical Catholic clerics and laymen in the 1970s.

In 1971 Bishop Chi began using his pulpit to condemn political corruption and demand social justice. After the 1972 "revitalizing reforms" of Park Chung-hee, which gave President Park dictatorial powers, Bishop Chi grew more outspoken and may have even financially supported a student movement to overthrow the Park dictatorship. At least, that is what the Park government claimed when they jailed Bishop Chi in July, 1974, convicted him of crimes against the state, and kept him in prison until February of 1975. The arrest of Bishop Chi reminded Catholics of the persecution their church had endured during the Chosŏ n dynasty and convinced many of them that they were facing the greatest challenge to religious freedom the Catholic Church in Korea had confronted since the late nineteenth century. Even those who did not agree with Bishop Chi's politics believed that they had to defend his right to speak and act as his conscience dictated. They held special masses and prayer meetings throughout the country to call for the release of the bishop and for a more just society and government. Activist priests went further and formed their own Korean Priests' Association for the Realization of Justice to wage their own battle for social justice and democracy, free of the relative restraint of the Korean Catholic Justice and Peace Commission which was under the control of moderate bishops. The Catholic lay community also rallied to the defense of the defense of one of their own, the poet Kim Chi-ha, who was jailed along with Bishop Chi, accused of being a communist revolutionary, and condemned to death.[27]

---

[26] Han, p. 373-74

The Korean Catholic church, or at least a highly visible part of its clergy and laity, began more openly and more frequently to actively intervene on the side of workers, farmers, students and others who were fighting against the Park dictatorship and its violations of human rights. The Catholic Church had grown to be a million strong by 1974. By throwing the weight of that membership behind the struggle for democracy, the church strengthened the movement to restrict the power of the government and expand the range of civil society. For example, in 1975 the Catholics Church joined many other individuals and organizations in openly supporting the Tonga Ilbo newspaper in its fight for freedom of the press. And on March 1, 1976, Cardinal Kim's Myŏ ngdong Cathedral was the site of a joint Protestant-Catholic Declaration for National Salvation which called for the Park regime to accept responsibility for human rights abuses and resign.[28] That March 1 declaration established a precedent: the cathedral came to be seen as a visible symbol of civil society, as a sanctuary from which dissident groups (whether they had any formal connection with the Catholic Church or not) could mount challenges to government authority in relative safety. (The police were reluctant to enter the cathedral grounds to arrest demonstrators without the permission of church authorities, although there was no explicit legal barrier to doing so.)

---

[27] Han, p.379-84; Wi Jo Kang, Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: A History of Christianity and Politics (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp.104-05.

[28] Han, pp. 385-388; Kang, p. 113.

Korean Catholic activism intensified in the 1980s, stimulated by the Kwangju massacre of May, 1980 which solidified the seizure of the government by General, later president, Chun Doohwan. Korean Catholics were, of course, not the only ones horrified by that attack by South Korean special forces on the peninsula's fifth largest city. However, Catholic activists were responsible for smuggling out of that unfortunate city many of the eyewitness accounts which let the rest of Korea, and the rest of the world, know the details of the tragic events which occurred there. The Japanese Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, translating into English material it received from Korea, became a major source of information about Kwangju during the early 1980s, when it was dangerous for anyone in South Korea to discuss openly how many had died and how they had been killed. Moreover, in a clear sign that the Korean Catholic church had grown concerned with much more than narrow issues of religious freedom, in 1982 Catholic churches throughout the peninsula began observing the second Sunday in Advent as "Human Rights Sunday."[29] And when the Pope made his historic visit to Korea in May of 1984 (no pope had ever visited Korea before), Kwangju was one of the few cities he visited.[30]

---

[29] Francis X. Buchmeier, S.J. "The Catholic Church in South Korea: Social Involvement and Church Growth," Pro Mundi Vita, Dossiers, 1986, no. 1

[30] Yŏ nhap Yŏ n'gam, 1985, [Yŏ nhap News Agency Yearbook for 1985), p. 257.

The Kwangju massacre is just one of many political issues the Korean Catholic Church has spoken out on since the early 1980s. For example, Catholic organizations were among the founding members of the United Minjung Movement for Democracy and Unification, an umbrella organization established in 1985 to right the wrongs of the Chun Doohwan regime. And hunger strikes by Catholic priests helped galvanize public sentiment against Chun's stonewalling of constitutional reform in April, 1987.[31] One sign of the new political activism of the Korean Catholic Church is that Myŏ ngdong Cathedral was one of the major staging rounds for the demonstrations demanding free elections and a democratic constitution in 1987. Moreover, both priests and nuns were visible in the front lines of the demonstrating crowds which filled the streets of Seoul and other South Korean cities that June. That is quite a contrast with the behavior of Catholic lay people as well as priests and nuns in the demonstrations of March 1, 1919.

With this change in how it saw its relationship with the state and in how it viewed active involvement with secular issues, the Roman Catholic Church in Korea began once again to contribute to the emergence of civil society on the Korean peninsula. By supporting organizations of young Catholic workers and farmers, and by speaking out against government policies it considered unacceptable, it helped provide legitimacy for all citizens' organizations which acted independently of, and sometimes against, the government. Though the first Catholic missionaries came to Korea to save souls, not to introduce democracy, by declaring publicly and repeatedly that there were limits to state authority, they helped pave the way for a more limited and a more responsive government. When more recent generations of Catholic leaders began arguing that restrictions on the power of the state should be matched by an expansion of the rights of citizens, they helped foster the growth of a civil society in the space vacated by the retreat of state power. Joining hands with students, workers, farmers, intellectuals, and Protestant activists, the Korean Catholic Church has helped bring about the modernization of Korean political life. The civil society of South Korea today has its origins in the struggle of Catholics two centuries ago to follow their religious convictions without political interference. And the success of civil society over the last decade in forcing the government to pay attention to the voices of those it governs is partially a result of the struggle of Catholics to voice their political convictions despite government attempts to silence them.[32] A church with a reputation for being more authoritarian than democratic has, in South Korea at least, proven to be a powerful promoter of human rights and a major factor behind the birth of civil society and the democracy which accompanies it.

---

[31] Chung Chulhee, "Social Movement Organizations and the June Uprising," Korea Journal, vol 37, no. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 81-97.

---

[32] One Catholic layman who had been particularly persistent in demanding that government be accountable to those it governs is now the president of South Korea. Kim Dae-jung's election in December, 1997, marked an historic turning point in the democratization of Korea, since not only was he the first opposition leader to assume the reins of government in a peaceful transfer of power, he had to survive assassination attempts in the 1970s as well as several months on death row in the early 1980s to do so. Though he did not run as the official candidate of the Catholic Church (in fact, his leading challenger was also a Catholic), his victory provides one more piece of evidence that Korean Catholics have made major contributions to the rise of civil society and the realization of democracy on the southern half of the Korean peninsula