
Syncretism: The Mystery Behind Korean Miracle

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Research Article

Submitted: 24.10.2023 | Accepted: 30.11.2023

Abstract: South Korea created miracles out of a mess in the second half of the twentieth century. They have built an industrial production and export giant called Han Miracle and a democratic culture. They also began to create a cultural fever worldwide called the Korean Wave. However, what makes the Korean modernisation story unique compared to other development experiences in Asia is neither its industrial development nor its democratisation. The rapid Christianisation, especially the Protestantisation of Korea, which walks alongside modernisation, is what makes this story special. Catholics entered Korea first, but they failed due to various reasons. Then, a peasant movement called Tonghak, which is organised around a syncretic religion named Cheondogyo, began to rise. They even started a nationwide uprising and gained massive supporters, but they could not succeed in expanding aggressively after the Japanese occupation. The latest comers, the Protestants, eventually became the largest religious group in South Korea. The Protestants studied the Catholics' failure and the Tonghak movement's success well and created a syncretic folk religion that did not exclude local religious elements. This syncretism was the key to their mind-blowing success in South Korea.

Keywords: South Korea, modernisation, Christianisation, Protestantisation, syncretism.

Introduction

The Republic of Korea, *aka* South Korea is one of the youngest nation-states in the world. The country was built by people who survived significant traumas and is located on a peninsula that witnessed or hosted considerable destruction in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ However, and miraculously, in the second half of the same century, South Korea entered the new global international relations system that emerged after the Second World War as an industrial production and export giant.

The way the Korean people, divided into two countries at the end of the Second World War and lost all their resources regarding labour force and wealth,² reached this point has been told as a special story, a fairy tale of modernisation. This transformation of South Korea into a giant economy producing both patents and industrial products towards the end of the twentieth century has been called the Han Miracle by experts on South Korea. In other words, the path South Korea has taken with astonishing speed is presented as an example for many countries of the world by the ideologues of modernisation.

The reason why South Korea has become a model of modernisation is not only its miraculous industrial development. South Korea also seems to have made significant progress in democratisation. The emergence of a mass of people capable of giving a swift and organised democratic reaction, such as the example of the ousting of Park Geun-hye from the presidential seat in 2017,³ when maybe millions of people took to the streets overnight with

¹ Which are thirty-five years of Japanese occupation, the Second World War, and the Korean War.

² At the end of the war, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of sixty four dollars. *Cf.*, Karl J. Fields, "From Take-off to Drop-off? Postwar Economic Development and Industrialization," *Modern Korean Society: Its Development and Prospect*, ed. Hyuk-Rae Kim & Bok Song (New York: California University Press, 2007), 106.

³ Pak Gün-hye [박근혜]. She is the very daughter of Pak Chông-hŭi, who is seen as the most critical executive of the development process considered the Han Miracle.

torches in their hands, may be shown as an example of the democratic maturity that South Korea has reached.

At the beginning of the 21st century, South Korea made another breakthrough, gaining worldwide popularity in visual communication products,⁴ cosmetics and football, and started to export these cultural products. The term Korean Wave, or Hallyu, which refers to this process, has been established in the social science literature.

The Fairy Tale

The Koreans, who had existed throughout history under the patronage of the Chinese, and then the Japanese, whose identity was determined by the colonisation rivalry of these two political centres, and who regarded this relationship as a virtue under the name of *sadae*,⁵ established two new nation-states under the patronage of two new global power centres in 1945, after the defeat of their coloniser Japan in the Second World War—north of the 38th parallel was guided by Russians and the Chinese, and south was under the influence of the USA.

The first ruler of the South was a US general, John R. Hodge. In other words, General Hodge was *de facto* the first president of South Korea. In the meantime, Syngman Rhee,⁶ was brought from the USA, and the stage was set for him to be elected president in the first possible elections. In 1948, he was elected president in the first elections. Making good use of the production infrastructure established by the Japanese during the colonial period and of the US grants, Syngman Rhee, with an import-substitution-oriented production economy and a development-oriented regime, quickly repaired the damage caused by both the Second World War and the Korean War that broke out during his term. His successor, Park Chung-hee,⁷ transformed the import-substitution-oriented

⁴ Especially through Korean dramas known as K-Drama and bands performing popular music called K-Pop.

⁵ Sa-dae [사대]. The term means “service to the supreme.”

⁶ Yi Sŭng-man [이승만]. A Methodist, *i.e.*, Protestant Christian.

⁷ Pak Chŏng-hŭi [박정희].

production economy into an export-oriented heavy industrial economy with the military regime he established, so the development-oriented Korean modernisation reached a point where it could be shown as an example to the world.

After the election of Kim Dae-jung,⁸ one of Park Chung-hee's late successors, as president, South Korean history was marked by another aspect of modernisation: democratisation.⁹ The progress South Koreans made in making their voices heard in creating an ethics of debate or a public sphere, in organising themselves, and in protesting the corrupt governments, in short, in developing a mature democratic culture, attracted the attention of the world.

Although the pace of development declined with democratisation, *i.e.*, with the overthrow of Park Chung-hee and the weakening of the strong development-oriented authoritarian state, by the 21st century, South Korea had overtaken Japan, which had embarked on this path nearly a hundred years before Korea, and which had gained momentum by exploiting Korea in all respects.

In other words, the production economy, which was import-substitution oriented under Syngman Rhee and export-oriented under Park Chung-hee, grew so fast that in a short period of fifty years, South Korea caught up with its former patron Japan, which had entered the same path about a hundred years earlier, and surpassed it in certain areas.

Not That Simple!

Looking at the story this way, one might think South Korea's modernisation process has been just like Japan's and Taiwan's. However, South Korea's modernisation experience has a critical by-product that is not seen in other Asian countries: A massive Christianisation, or rather Protestantisation.¹⁰

⁸ Kim Dae-jung [김대중].

⁹ Chang Yun-shik, "Conclusion: South Korea: In Pursuit of Modernity," *Transformations in Twentieth Century Korea*, ed. Chang Yun-Shik & Steven Hugh Lee (New York: Routledge, 2006), 360.

¹⁰ By the 2000s, more than twenty-five per cent of the country, more than ten million people, identified themselves as Protestant. *Cf.*, Keith Pratt & Richard

Although both Catholic and Protestant missionaries entered other Asian countries much earlier than they entered Korea,¹¹ they did not achieve anywhere near the success they achieved in Korea. This high-speed Christianisation, which went hand in hand with development and democratisation and even served as their background catalyst, should be an obstacle to equating the Korean modernisation story with the modernisation experiences of other Asian countries, to reading it in a similar way and to reaching short-cut conclusions.

Christianisation is the aspect of Korean history that makes Korean modernisation unique. Unlike its rivals or neighbours, China and Japan, whose modernisation adventure began long before and in a similar manner, Korea's modernisation process went hand in hand with rapid Christianisation. As a matter of fact, the percentage of Christianity in Korea exceeded twenty-five per cent, whereas in Japan it did not even reach one per cent, a level that Korean Protestantism had already surpassed by 1910.¹²

In addition to or like the modernisation process, contact with Catholic and Protestant missionaries began much earlier in China and Japan than in Korea. This seems to reinforce the uniqueness of South Korea's modernisation, especially its Christianisation process.

The Christianisation of the peninsula contains another remarkable nuance: Protestants, who entered the peninsula much later than Catholics, have been way more successful than Catholics who entered Korea earlier. Indeed, by 1995, the proportion of Koreans who considered themselves "Protestants" was twenty per

Rutt, *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 361.

¹¹ The entry of Jesuit missionaries into China and Japan is dated to the 16th century. The most famous of these, Matteo Ricci, set foot on Chinese soil in 1582. Again, the Jesuit missionary Alessandro Valignano is said to have arrived in Japan in 1579. Cf., J. F. Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹² James Huntley Grayson, "A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea," *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell & Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 13.

cent of the total population. The corresponding figure for Catholics was around five percent.¹³ Thus, to understand the dynamics that make Korea's modernisation experience special, it is a must" to turn attention to Korea's Christianisation, especially its Protestantisation.

General Narrative

The story of Korea's Christianisation, as well as the whole story of its modernisation, begins with Silhak, *aka* Practical Learning, which is a common name for a bunch of scholar-officials, a part of the *yangban* elite. These scholars, being convinced that the increasingly speculative nature of Neo-Confucianism could not solve the problems of Choseon, wanted to establish in Korea a school analogous to the School of Han Learning they had encountered during their visits to China. Their main aim was to draw attention to *technique*, which was underestimated in Confucian societies, and to create a more pragmatist Confucianism.

The Silhak scholars, fascinated by the technical devices and books they had acquired from the Jesuit missionaries they had met during their visits to China, were convinced that Western science and technology, together with Western religion, were one inseparable thing, almost a package programme named Seohak¹⁴ or Western Learning. Thus, through the Silhak scholars, Western Learning, or rather Catholicism, entered the peninsula.

However, even if they had been baptised, their main objective or motive was not to abandon Confucianism altogether and convert to a new religion. What the Silhak scholars expected from Western Learning was technical and moral knowledge that would pave the way for them to attain Confucian wisdom.

On the other hand, the Silhak scholars were not initially informed that in order to become a member of Catholicism, they had to obey the Pope in the Vatican. It was only through a letter from a bishop in Beijing that they became aware of this and learned

¹³ Grayson, "A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea," 20.

¹⁴ Sō-hak [서학].

that, according to the Pope's attitude, they had to choose between Christianity and Confucianism, and that if they chose the Catholic faith, they were not to participate in Confucian rituals ever again. The letter's content led the majority of Korean Catholics to renounce the path they had just embarked on, especially the Silhak scholars, who, late in their lives, denied that they had converted to Christianity.

However, one of the scholars who insisted on becoming or staying a Catholic, following the instructions of the Vatican, refused to perform the funeral rituals approved by the Confucian tradition upon the death of his mother. This attracted the attention of the court. The palace, which had previously been indifferent towards Catholics, was disturbed by the attitude of the top of the Catholic sect towards Confucian rituals and embarked on the purge and execution of Catholics.

Meanwhile, in the Jeolla region,¹⁵ where the Catholic purge had begun, a new religion was born: Cheondogyo,¹⁶ aka the religion of the Heavenly Way. Apparently Christian in essence, Cheondogyo, a syncretic religion, successfully blended various elements from all local belief systems in Korea.¹⁷

Cheondoism, which rapidly became a mass movement with its structure appealing to the aggrieved layers of the traditional social structure and tax system, especially the peasants, could not escape the wrath of the state, even though it called itself Tonghak,¹⁸ meaning Eastern Learning when it was considered as “Western Learning or *Seohak* in disguise” by the palace.¹⁹ Su-un,

¹⁵ Chŏl-la [전라].

¹⁶ Ch'ŏn-do [천도] => *ch'ŏn* [천] which means “heavenly” + *do* [도] which means “way” = Heavenly Way.

¹⁷ See images 1-3 below.

¹⁸ Tong-hak [동학].

¹⁹ Regular Sunday masses within church-like buildings, along with the theological elements of Christianity blended with local religious elements and embedded inside Cheondoism, may have fairly forced them to believe so. Cf., Choi Dong-hi, “Donghak Philosophy,” *Korean Thought*, ed. Chun Shin-yong (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1982), 68.

aka Choe Je-u,²⁰ the spiritual leader of the movement, was executed on the grounds that he was a Christian and/or propagated Christianity.

Unhappy with the execution of their spiritual leader, so to speak “prophet” of the Heavenly Way, and disturbed by the increasingly corrupt traditional order, the peasants appealed to the palace with demands for Su-un’s reinstatement, an easing of the tax burden and a weakening of the barriers between social *strata*. Unable to get what they wanted, the Tonghak members started a nationwide uprising. The uprising grew to such an extent that the palace had to ask for military support from both China and Japan to suppress the uprising.

China and Japan, who had brought troops to the peninsula at the invitation of the palace and violated the treaty between them, fought a war on the peninsula. As a result, the Japanese dominated Korea until the end of the Second World War, although they occasionally lost this dominance. Once in control of the peninsula, the Japanese immediately introduced a series of reforms based on the demands of the Tonghak: Kabo Reforms.²¹

Meanwhile, Protestant missionaries became active in the peninsula. Again, in this very period, various agreements were made between Choseon and Western countries to open the country to the outside world. The common feature of these agreements is that they guaranteed the presence of Protestant missionaries in the country.²²

The Protestants’ first work in Korea was to use their funds for

²⁰ Ch’oe Che-u [최제우].

²¹ Kabo is a term that corresponds to the year in question (1884) in the traditional calendar. The main objectives of the reforms can be summarised as changing the cabinet system, reorganising the ministries, limiting the king’s financial resources, modernising the traditional Confucian examination system, changing the local government map, expanding the use of silver coinage, creating a technologically advanced and trained army, and ending slavery. It would be fair to say that the demands of Tonghak pioneers lay at the basis of Kabo reforms. Cf., Pratt & Rutt, *Korea: A Historical and Cultural Dictionary*, 194-195.

²² These agreements provide them with a kind of diplomatic immunity. Cf., Don Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 71.

free education, health care and social work. They then became a symbol of Korean independence by resisting Japanese rule and jointly drafting and signing a Declaration of Independence²³ along with certain members of the Cheondogyo.²⁴ After the end of Japanese rule and the Korean War, they became a symbol of the labour movement, acting as a trade union for workers without trade union rights.²⁵



Image 1. Cheondogyo Church in Insa-dong. Hard to claim that this is not a protestant church.

²³ March First Movement.

²⁴ James Huntley Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 160.

²⁵ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 74-75.



Image 2. Inside Cheondogyo church.



Image 3. The Cheondogyo headquarters in Insa-dong. Facade of the building.

Protestant Missionary in Korea

It is said that the first Protestant missionary to enter Korea was Dr John Ross (1842-1915). Ross visited Korea in 1874 and 1876 and found a Korean teacher. Ross would later go down in history as the translator of the first Korean Bible (1887) and the author of the first history of Korea in English (1879).²⁶ Ross's free translation, which was considered "dialectical," worked for a long time, although a commissioned translation later replaced it. Ross's usage of an original Korean word for God, which is *hananim*,²⁷ seemed much more sincere and familiar to Koreans than the Chinese word *cheonju* used by Catholics,²⁸ and this detail, however minute, is thought to have played a significant role in the success of Protestantism in Korea.²⁹

One of the first Protestant missionaries to enter the peninsula was Horace Allen (1858-1932) in 1884, in a climate of persecution and executions of Catholics. Other missionaries followed him. What eased the hands of Allen and other Protestant missionaries in entering the peninsula was their willingness to provide modern education and health services needed by both the palace and the people, and the fact that their immunity was guaranteed in bilateral agreements with the West.

Allen's treatment of Min Yongik, who was severely wounded during the 1884 Kapsin Coup Attempt, seems to have further paved the way for Protestant missionaries in Korea. In 1885, Allen opened a Western-style hospital in Seoul, which was the first in

²⁶ Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 156.

²⁷ *Hananim* [하나님], or *Hanüllim* [하늘님], meaning "my lord in the heavens" or "the heavenly king." It may well be argued that the more familiar Korean idea of saying *hananim* for the God belonged to Su-un, the founder of Tonghak, and that Protestants recognised and used this successful choice in Tonghak.

²⁸ Ch'ön-ju [천주].

²⁹ Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 157-158. Ross, who is said to have been one of the first missionaries, translated the Bible into Korean and found local equivalents for important terms (e.g., *hananim* for God), which must have given Protestantism an advantage over Catholicism, which was based on Chinese and Latin, Neo-Confucianism, which was based on Chinese, and Buddhism, which was based on Sanskrit. Cf., Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 72.

the peninsula. The following year, Protestant missionaries founded two universities.³⁰ Henceforth, social work, education and health services in Korea were carried out by Protestant missionaries.³¹

However, during Japanese rule, Protestant churches had serious difficulties with the Japanese administration. The main issue that drove a wedge between the Japanese and the Protestants was the fact that the mythology of the Shinto religion, which the Japanese were trying to establish in the peninsula, was not recognised by the Protestants as a historical fact, and the Protestants did not participate in Shinto rituals. This tension continued to escalate until the Japanese surrendered the country to the US forces, and the number of purges and executions reached tens of thousands. This tension between Korean Protestantism and Japanese rule led to the identification of Protestants with independence and nationalism in the eyes of Koreans and contributed to the growth of Korean Protestantism in the medium term, if not in the short term.

In addition to the tension between Korean Protestantism and Japanese rule on the peninsula, the active role of Protestants in the March 1st Independence Movement made Protestantism the banner of patriotism and independence in Korea, and it can be easily argued that this situation caused Koreans to warm up to Protestants and Protestantism.³²

³⁰ One of them is Ewha Woman's University, still one of the best universities in South Korea and the largest women's university in the world.

³¹ The fact that the introduction of Protestantism into Korea coincided with the signing of treaties with the West seems to have provided the missionaries with diplomatic immunity. However, it can also be argued that the large sums of funds transferred to Protestant missionaries in Korea to be used in education, health care and social work contributed greatly to the Protestant presence on the peninsula. For the better part of the last hundred years, social services in Korea have been provided almost exclusively by Protestants, and Koreans expect religion to solve their problems in this world. In addition to the schools and hospitals, the propaganda that was carried out in radio stations which were largely in the hands of Protestants played an undeniable role in the rise of Protestantism. Cf., Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 71-75.

³² Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 160.

Moreover, Protestants were the most visible and active religious group in the cities as a remedy for the lack of solidarity and loss of meaning that emerged as a result of the migration of peasants to the cities in the peninsula as a result of the seizure of agricultural lands by Japanese monopolies at the beginning of the twentieth century, or the return of those who went to Manchuria and Japan as labourers to the peninsula. Again, the fact that Protestants pioneered labour movements and the defence of workers' rights can be considered one of the important reasons for the success of Protestantism in Korea.³³

At the turn of the twentieth century, Protestants were outnumbered by the members of Tonghak, which is considered a mere regional peasant movement. This began to change in 1907—a year they named “the year of the great revival.” By 1910, Korean Protestantism had grown to one hundred and forty thousand members, and by the 1930s it was the largest religious group on the peninsula.³⁴ In 1960, the number of members reached six hundred thousand, and in 1970, it reached the three million level. In 1980, the number of Protestants exceeded seven million, and in 2005 it passed the eight million level.³⁵

The road map for Protestant missionary activity in Korea was drawn by John Nevius, a missionary invited from China in the early 1890s. This road map, which placed the responsibility for evangelisation on the Koreans who accepted Protestantism,³⁶ rather than on the missionaries and was quite successful, was accepted as a universal principle for Protestants in Korea as the Nevius Method.³⁷

The Crucial Role of Syncretism

What was the secret behind the Protestants' success? Andrew

³³ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 74-75.

³⁴ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 71.

³⁵ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 75.

³⁶ Self-evangelisation.

³⁷ Grayson, “A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea,” 13.

Eungi Kim, one of the most prominent scholars in the field, attributes this success to the efforts of the missionaries.³⁸ These efforts include the so-called Nevius Method, and the role Protestant missionaries took in education, healthcare, and social work. This is the widely accepted general explanation, which is true in all respects. There is no doubt that such efforts of the missionaries fuelled the rise of Protestantism in the peninsula.

However, this does not explain *per se* how they managed to build these methods and how Koreans, who are claimed to be conservative people raised under strong Confucian values, were made ready for such a big transformation.

Above all, the Protestants seem to have analysed the mistakes of the Catholics. What were the Catholics' mistakes? First, they entered Korea through the *yangban* (e.g., Silhak scholars), the scholar-official elite, a segment of the society that is not as loved and respected as it used to be. Second and worse, they expected the Korean Confucian scholar-officials to abandon Confucianism totally. That is, they did not leave the door open to syncretism,³⁹ and they did not show this flexibility.⁴⁰ Thus, although they were the first Christians to enter Korea, they failed relatively.⁴¹ So, the protestants focused on the ordinary people and/or the peasants instead of the *yangban*. They also seem to have studied the success of the Tonghak movement or Cheondoism and adopted their syncretic beliefs and practices, such as healing rituals, ancestor commemoration ceremonies, and mass prayers in the mountains, which proved successful in Korea.⁴² In 1907, for example,

³⁸ Andrew Eungi Kim, "Christianity in Korea and Japan: Cultural and Socio-political Factors for Dissimilar Impacts," *Korean Society: An Introduction*, ed. Andrew Eungi Kim (Seoul: Korea University Press, 2017), 230-256.

³⁹ Syncretism signifies a mixture or a blend of religious elements (doctrine or ritual) taken from distinct religions that initially seem incompatible.

⁴⁰ It is ironic, though, for Catholics have historically been more open to syncretism than Protestants.

⁴¹ Relatively, because, even though they were not as successful as the Protestants, compared to the level Christianity reached in Japan, which is less than one per cent, they seem to have done well in infiltrating Korea.

⁴² Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 165.

Protestant missionaries began to organise revival meetings, like the ones Cheondogyo carried out, in every region of the peninsula.⁴³ These meetings, which can be seen as Christianised versions of the healing rituals of local religion, especially Shamanism, seem to have considerably increased the number of converts to Protestantism.⁴⁴

Meetings or rituals in Korean Protestant churches also had shamanistic rather than otherworldly Christian elements. The content of sermons and rituals in churches usually consisted of prayers called *kibok*,⁴⁵ which were prayers for the return of one's fortune in this world. The objective of the prayers [*tongsong kido*],⁴⁶ prayed collectively and loudly during the services, was generally the attainment of worldly gains.

The fact that Protestants created *kidowon*,⁴⁷ collective or individual prayer spaces in the mountains, indicates that Protestantism transformed itself by blending with local religion.⁴⁸ Moreover, the *kidowon* is often the site of healing rituals.⁴⁹ Moreover, the *chudo yebe*⁵⁰ rituals, which resemble Confucian *chesa*⁵¹ ceremonies, seem to have saved Koreans from having to choose matters such as honouring the ancestors and funeral rites.⁵²

Again, the fact that Korean Protestantism drew a picture of the family in the axis of God, Mary, and Jesus,⁵³ and emphasised

⁴³ These meetings played an important role in the Protestantisation of Korea. Cf., Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 73.

⁴⁴ Kim Byong-suh, "Modernization and Korean Protestant Religiosity," *Christianity in Korea*, 324.

⁴⁵ Ki-bok [기복] meaning "relief."

⁴⁶ T'ong-sōng Ki-do [통성기도].

⁴⁷ Ki-do-wōn [기도원].

⁴⁸ It is known how sacred the mountains are for both Shamanism and Buddhism.

⁴⁹ Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 165.

⁵⁰ Ch'u-do Ye-bae [추도예배].

⁵¹ Che-sa [제사].

⁵² After all, as already mentioned, Confucian funeral rites were considered blasphemous and/or idolatrous by the papacy, and the rejection of these rites caused a rift between the Catholics and the court. Cf., Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 166.

⁵³ Father, mother, and the son, correspondingly.

the family in its hymns composed in the Korean language shows that Korean Protestantism did not underestimate the importance of the family, which is perhaps the most crucial element for the Confucian Korean society, and blended its cosmology with the discourse of the family.⁵⁴ Therefore, Korean Protestantism can be considered to have pre-empted such possible crises by transforming itself according to the local or civil religion, creating a *minjung sinhak*,⁵⁵ a theology of and for the people.⁵⁶

Conclusion

South Korea, as a young nation-state, or Korean people, created miracles out of a mess in the second half of the twentieth century. They have built an industrial production and export giant called Han Miracle and a democratic culture. From the beginning of the twenty-first century onwards, they also created a cultural fever worldwide called the Korean Wave. However, what makes the Korean modernisation process significant and remarkable, in other words special, compared to other development miracles in Asia (e.g., Japan and Taiwan), is neither its industrial development nor its democratisation. The Christianisation, or rather the Protestantisation of Korea, which goes hand in hand with modernisation, is what makes this story unique.

Catholics entered Korea first. But they failed due to various reasons. Then, a peasant movement called Tonghak, which is organised around a syncretic religion named Cheondogyo, began to rise. They even started a nationwide uprising and gained massive supporters, but they could not succeed in expanding aggressively after the Japanese occupation. The latest comers, the Protestants, eventually became the largest religious group in Korea.

The Protestants, who could act relatively more easily than other religious movements, undertook the duties that the state

⁵⁴ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 72.

⁵⁵ Min-jung sin-hak [민중 신학].

⁵⁶ Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 166-167.

should fulfill, such as social services, education, and health.⁵⁷ They became the banner of anti-Japanese sentiment, patriotism, independence, and labour rights in South Korea. But these factors, however efficient, were not sufficient to create such a miracle and explain such a huge success.

Rather, the mystery behind their miracle was syncretism. They studied the Catholics' failure and the Tonghak movement's success very well and created a syncretic folk religion that did not exclude local religious elements.⁵⁸ They created a *minjung sinhak*, a local religion of and for the people. This syncretism was the key to their mind-blowing success in South Korea.

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⁵⁷ So, whenever people were broke, they ran to the churches. For better education, they went to the schools founded by the churches. For health care, they turned to the churches. This helped both the protestants and the state. The protestants reached a broader audience, in fact, the masses; and the state could use that money they would otherwise spare to social services for industrial development. In fact, in the first thirty years of the new nation-state, the share of social services in the budget was kept at an average of one per cent. Even in Japan, one of the countries in the world where the share of social services in the budget is one of the lowest, this rate is five per cent on average. In the West, this ratio is a minimum of ten per cent on average. Cf., Edward S. Mason *et al*, *The Economic and Social Modernization of the Republic of Korea* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 22. It can be argued that this opportunity provided to the state was one of the most important factors that paved the way for the state to realise the development miracle.

⁵⁸ Grayson, *Korea. A Religious History*, 166-167.

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