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South Korea's Christian Military Chaplaincy in the Korean War - religion as ideology?¹

朝鮮戦争における韓国軍キリスト教チャブレン制度—イデオロギーとしての宗教

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Summary: The present paper examines the military chaplaincy in the context of a problem which has long intrigued researchers, namely the reasons for the rapid growth of the Christian (Protestant and Catholic) churches in 1950-80s South Korea compared to Japan or Taiwan. The author suggests that, whereas a general answer to the question may be the use of Christianity as a de facto state ideology in the years 1948-1960 and its functioning as an ideology of capitalist modernisation in the 1960s-80s, a particularly important part of government-induced Christianization of South Korea was the institution of military chaplaincy. In 1951-1968, Christians – despite being a numerical minority! – monopolized the chaplaincy in the military, and fully utilised this monopoly, “solacing” vulnerable youth forcibly conscripted for military service and making many “church family members”. The loyalties won in such a way, often lasted for life, thus providing the churches with new recruits and the hard-core anti-Communist state – with docile anti-Communist Christian subjects.

From its very beginnings in the wake of Japan's defeat and US occupation, South Korea suffered from an acute deficit of political legitimacy. Its lack of nationalistic credentials was mainly due to the fact that the privileged layers of the colonial society, tainted by their collaboration with the Japanese, conspicuously retained their positions. While South Korea's first Constitution (1948) promised workers a share in company profits (*iik kyunjŏm*), the reality of mass pauperism and hunger wages was only too obvious (Sō 2007: 22-43). One of the ways of compensating for the evident lack of socio-economic progress was to emphasise the “freedom and democracy” in South Korea – as opposed to what South Korean propagandists termed the “totalitarian regime” in the North. But the claims to “democracy” were belied by the authoritarian behaviour of South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭngman), whose regime was by 1952 routinely characterized as “dictatorial” even by his conservative opponents from the parliamentary Democratic Party (Pak 1998).

Facing a serious deficit of compelling ideology – aside from rabid anti-Communism and primordialist invocations of “Korean blood and glory” (Sō 1998) – the newborn pro-American regime turned to religious symbols to substitute for secular ideological tools. This turn was hardly new as such: Protestant Christians, together with indigenous Ch'ōndogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way) activists, were among the main organizers of the March 1, 1919 pro-independence demonstrations, although none of them anticipated the degree to which the movement would eventually radicalize participants (Lee 2000), and the Protestant YMCA was among the many “cultural-nationalist” groups conducting rural reconstruction work in the 1920s and 1930s (Wells 1990: 98-162). Kim Il Sung's father, Kim Hyōngjik, was a Protestant nationalist, and, unsurprisingly, some elements suggestive of formative Christian influences surfaced in the *chuch'e* (self-reliance) ideology which substituted for Soviet “Marxism-Leninism” in 1960s-80s North Korea (Ch'oe 1986). Raising the status of religious – mainly Christian – ideology to that of state ideology was, however, somewhat new in late 1940s-early 1950s South Korea, although state Shinto of colonial times (Grayson 1993) did provide a blueprint of sorts. Syngman Rhee's religious turn was greatly helped by a number of interrelated contextual circumstances:

1. The clashes between Protestant and Catholic establishments and North Korean authorities in 1945-1950 made the overwhelming majority of Korea's Christians North and South into hard-core anti-Communists, and guaranteed their loyalty to Seoul regime. The conflict was hardly inevitable, since North Korea was originally planned as a “people's democracy” where “progressive religionists” were ensured their rightful place as builders of a new society. Mao's China conducted a broadly similar policy too in the early years of the PRC; in Stalin's USSR, by contrast, the Orthodox Church was a target for state suppression in 1930-1941, although its position was strengthened as a part of the wartime “national reconciliation” policy in 1941-1945 (Fletcher 1965). North Korea's initial, rather tolerant, position towards religion seems to have been influenced by the wartime improvement in relations between the Orthodox and the Soviet state. In fact, as a result of the People's Committees² elections in November 1946, 2.7% of their members (94 persons) turned out to be “full-time religion practitioners” (*sōngjikcha*); approximately the same share of pastors, priests and monks was among the People's Committee members elected in June 1949 (cited in Kim 2012, 400). However, already in January 1946, Christian political leaders in the northern part of Korea, led by the chairman of the Korean Democratic Party, Cho Mansik, defied the Soviet occupation authorities on the issue of the Allies' proposed trusteeship over Korea. The Soviet authorities – unwilling to establish a “friendly” state of their own in the North at this stage – were prepared to enforce the decision of the December 1945 Moscow conference of US, British and Soviet foreign ministers and put Korea under an Allied trusteeship for five years, something right-wing Korean nationalists opposed to (although in reality it could theoretically be one way to keep Korea intact. See Lankov 2001). When Cho was placed under house arrest, a sizeable number of his followers fled south. The conflict between the majority of the Christian leadership and the Soviet and North Korean authorities afterwards was ostensibly ignited by such symbolic issues as Peoples' Committees elections on Sunday, November 3, 1946³; in the background, however, lurked the conflict between mostly middle-class and richer Christians, who comprised only about 2-3% of North Korea's overall population⁴, and the new power-holders themselves mostly hailing from and reliant upon the poorer majority of North Koreans (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yōksa Hakhoe 2009, 45-50). In the end, around 25% of the Presbyterian and 59% of the Methodist pastors from North Korea migrated to the South, together with an estimated 70-80,000 lay Protestant believers and some 6,000 Catholics (Kang 2006: 410-431). Many of these migrants lost their possessions in North Korea, often due to the egalitarian land reform there in March 1946 (on the reform, see Armstrong 2003: 75-85), and that too strengthened their support of the anti-Communist regime in South Korea.
2. A large part of the new ruling elite in South Korea (?) was comprised of Christians, especially Protestants, in a society where only slightly over 2% of the population (500,198 out of the total population of 20,188,641 in 1950) were Protestants. The three most prominent right-wing émigré nationalists who returned to (South) Korea by late 1945 and were contending for leadership – Syngman Rhee (1875-1965), Kim Ku (1876-1949) and Kim Kyusik (1881-1950) – either were devout Protestants or at least experimented with Protestantism at some point in their lives (Kim Ku's case), and all of them agreed that the “new Korea” should be grounded in “Christian ideals” (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yōksa Hakhoe 2009, 41). 21% of the parliament deputies elected in South Korea in the first-ever separate elections on May 10, 1948 –elections that were seen as illegitimate and were boycotted by most of the Left – were Protestants, a large part of them being wealthier right-wingers. Among the administrative elite, the proportion of Protestants was even higher. 38% of the 242 persons who served as ministers or vice-ministers under the Syngman Rhee presidency in 1948-1960, were Protestants, a large part of them being wealthy individuals with either American or Japanese educational background (Kang 1996: 175-178). Small wonder that in such an atmosphere, the majority of Protestant clergymen identified “democratic spirit”, “anti-Communism” and “Christianity” as largely synonymous, and felt committed to “grounding our new country in the Gospels' message”, with obvious encouragement from the political authorities who saw them as their strongest, most unwavering supporters (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yōksa Hakhoe 2009: 43-44). The “inseparable alliance” between the new political and administrative elites and Christian, especially Protestant, leadership, was further cemented by the Korean War in 1950-1953, as right-wing Christians came to regard the South Korean authorities as their only protectors from the threat of “victimization by Communists”. Buddhists felt more estranged from what they – with good reasons – tended to perceive as “Christian government”, but the interests of the conservative *sangha* leaders, mostly abbots of the richer, land-owning temples, were well served by the very moderate South Korean version of the land reform (conducted in 1949-1950) which obliged the peasants to pay for

the land they were to receive (Sō 2007: 38-43) and additionally protected the landholdings of the temples as long as they were tilled by the monks themselves (Kim 2000: 108-111). Some renowned lay and monastic Buddhist leaders (Chōn Chinha, Paek Sōng'uk etc.) joined Syngman Rhee's government too as ministers, although such cases were relatively rare.

3. Christianity was one of the main links between South Korea and its American sponsors. As Lee Chae-jin formulated it, South Korea as a separate state was a Cold War creation of the Truman administration which primarily viewed it as "a buffer to protect security and integrity of Japan in the larger context of America's regional and global policies" (Lee 2006: 23). As a gateway to Japan, South Korea was a global asset of the United States; at the same time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff came by autumn 1947 to the conclusion that South Korea's military-strategic value was relatively low. This conclusion was accepted by the Truman administration and was reflected in the famous January 12, 1950 speech by Secretary of State Dean Acheson, excluding both South Korea and Taiwan from the US "defence perimeter" in the Pacific, which otherwise included the Philippines and, very centrally, Japan (Lee 2006: 24-25). US entry into the Korean War, dictated by the general Cold War paradigm (Cumings 1990: 550), did cement US commitment to its military protectorate in the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, but relations with the Syngman Rhee government remained strained on many counts (Park 1975). In such a situation, the image of South Korea as a "Christian country" could serve as an important element in appealing to the American public an important consideration in obtaining badly needed humanitarian help through Protestant and Catholic churches in the US and elsewhere in the western world. No wonder then that a prominent lay Catholic elder, John Chang (Chang Myōn, 1899-1966), was selected as South Korea's first ambassador to the US in January, 1949 (Lee 2006: 24). Another good example was the demonstrations organized by South Korea's National Christian Council in June 1949 calling for the adoption of the Korean Aid Bill by the US Congress. "Let the churches of the world unite their forces to protect the church in Korea" was one of the slogans, together with more direct appeals to American Christian brethren (Haga 2012). The chaplaincy in the military – the topic of this paper – was to become yet another link between South Korea and it's not fully reliable, but still indispensable American protector and sponsor. It was fully modelled on the American system – in fact, South Korea was one of the first non-European societies penetrated by American missionaries where such an institution took roots (Kang 2006: 346). US missionaries were also well represented among the pioneering chaplains in the South Korean army. For example, a US Maryknoller with Korea experience since 1931, George M. Carroll (1906-1981), was a chaplain to the United Nations' forces from the beginning of the Korean War and concurrently a member of the committee for the advancement of the establishment of chaplaincy in the Korean army beginning in September 1950. He was later charged with training of the Korean chaplains and translation of the relevant regulations of the US Army into the Korean language. Another pioneer of Korean chaplaincy was William E. Shaw, a prominent Methodist missionary who worked in Korea since 1921 (Haga 2012; Kang 2006: 347). The US army employed 1618 chaplains by 1953 (Johnson 2013), and fighting side by side with it was a huge stimulus for the new-born South Korean army to develop a chaplain corps of its own, a key measure in uplifting Korean civilization.

As the above discussion indicates, religion in the Syngman Rhee government's ideological policy, contained from the very beginning the seeds of a possible conflict between different religions. "Religion" meant first and foremost Christianity in both Catholic and (primarily) Protestant versions, but hardly "native" religions, Buddhism included. It is not that they were deliberately excluded: rather, the very situation in which Christian elites were to dominate the new state and obtain important advantages through their ability to communicate more directly with its chief international backer, led to marginalization of non-Christians. The dominant view of Buddhism as peripheral in relation to Christianity translated also into administrative measures which the Buddhist community perceived as religious discrimination. For example, US military government in Korea made Christmas an official holiday, but did not allow Korean Buddhists to take over the deserted Japanese Buddhist temples despite the fact that forty-three such temples in Seoul were taken under *de facto* control and management of Korean Buddhists after Japanese withdrawal. In the provinces, however, a number of former Japanese temples became the objects of embittered disputes between Korean Buddhists and other claimants (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong Kyoyug'wōn Purhak Yōn'guso 2008, 25). Nor was the Syngman Rhee administration any more flexible on this issue. However, it conducted the 1949-1950 land reforms in a way arguably less ruinous for the monastic economy than more confiscatory – and thus more egalitarian – reforms in North Korea, allowing the temples to keep the land within atwo km. zone around them. That was one of the factors beyond the willingness of the mainstream *sangha* to collaborate with the perceived "Christian" government, and to marginalize the few radicals – who protested against the establishment of a separate South Korean state, and wished Korea to remain unified at any cost – within its own ranks (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong Kyoyug'wōn Purhak Yōn'guso 2005: 162-174). In any case, the alternative – the North Korean regime, which was gradually radicalising on account of the general Cold War confrontation and especially Korean War – looked significantly worse, especially for monks who had collaborated with the Japanese colonial authorities, since the purge of collaborators was one of the main ways in which North Korea was establishing its nationalist legitimacy (on the collaboration between *sangha* and the Japanese colonial authorities, see Im 1993; on the purge of collaborators in North Korea, see Armstrong 1995). The only remaining realistic alternative was to emulate Christian successes – first and foremost, their success in proselytising. This pattern of institutional behaviour was clearly recognizable in the issue of establishing the Buddhist military chaplaincy, to be treated below.

A part of this "religious turn" in the military pivoted on the chaplaincy – initially purely Christian, established in 1951. The chaplaincy, a time-honoured institution utilized by the European powers and the US as early as the First World War, gained renewed significance in the global Cold War. In the US military, chaplains were not only expected to prevent demoralization and to assure that soldiers were not won over by radical doctrines. They were also to aid in the "moral strengthening" of the occupied areas of Europe and Japan through active proselytising, and to implement "moral training" programs instituted throughout the armed forces in 1951. These programs were designed to forestall criminal behaviour and venereal diseases in the ranks, as well as curbing rapes and attacks against civilians, to win the "hearts and minds" during the Cold War (Gunn 2009, 87-91). US military chaplaincy was the primary model for its South Korean counterpart; and, not unlike the US chaplains, especially Evangelicals, the South Korean chaplains also regarded their mission as a proselytising one, taking advantage of privileged access to youth experiencing danger and hardships. As for Korean Buddhist efforts at religious propagation inside the military, the pre-1945 Buddhist chaplaincy in the Japanese imperial military (Victoria 1997) was an obvious role model. While there were no Korean Buddhist chaplains during the Pacific War, pro-Japanese Korean Buddhist leaders actively encouraged younger monks to volunteer for the service in the Japanese imperial military – telling them, for example, that they were to "wield the sword which false refute the false and disclose the true, and become military missionaries of Korean Buddhism in battle" (Cited in: Im 1993, Vol. 2, 441). Most of these people retained their influence after 1945 and were keen to utilize once again the past experiences of the wartime collaboration with the state.

In the South Korean case, the establishment of the field chaplaincy was an initiative of Christian leaders, lay and ordained, including some leading military figures in the newly established South Korean army and navy. It was, however, quickly embraced by the Syngman Rhee administration, assumedly in hope that it would ideologically cement the army of the new state lacking nationalistic legitimacy and broadly perceived as externally imposed (*oesapchōk*) (Chin 2000: 108-139). However, once established, the chaplaincy played several roles. In addition to spreading the message of Christian anti-Communism – which belonged to the ideological mainstream of the new state – it also functioned as a tool of Christian proselytising, and was partly responsible for the strong numerical growth of the Christian churches in the 1950s and 1960s. As Christians were enlarging their share of the religious market (on this theoretical approach, see, for example, Hadden 1987), their exclusive right to military chaplaincy was increasingly seen as an expression of unduly state favouritism – that is, unfair competition – by the Buddhist community, eager to emulate Christian proselytising methods. In the end, institutional Buddhism succeeded in establishing the military chaplaincy of its own, an event which signified further strengthening of its cohesive ties with the authoritarian anti-Communist state.

This paper shows how the military chaplaincy was established and functioned in the 1950s, how it fulfilled its ideological roles, and what were the competing influences in the process of its institutionalization. It will hopefully help to improve understanding of the role of such a state-sponsored institution as military chaplaincy in the functioning of religious markets under conditions of religious pluralism and relatively activist state building – but it was not fully able to dominate civil society (on "semi-competitive authoritarianism" in 1950s South Korea, see Han 1990). It will also shed some light on the role religion and religious ideology played in the global Cold War, on the forefront of which both parts of divided Korea found themselves by the late 1940s.

The Committee for the Advancement of the Establishment of the Chaplaincy in the Korean Army (*Kunjong chedo ch'ujin wiwōnhoe*) was formed on September 18, 1950. Together with George M. Carroll, mentioned above as one of the "fathers" of the Korean chaplaincy, its members included the most prominent hard-line anti-Communists in the Korean church world, Rev. Han Kyōngjik (1902-2000) from Presbyterian Church and Yu Hyōnggi (1897-1989) from the Methodist Church. Both were refugees from North Korea, and were appalled by what they deemed a lack of fighting spirit in South Korean soldiers – forcibly conscripted by the government, which most still had difficulties to recognise as their own. The anti-Communist churchmen obviously hoped that the chaplaincy would strengthen the *élan* of the South Korean troops, and their hope was shared by Syngman Rhee who quickly endorsed their proposal. In fact, a *de facto* chaplaincy, under the name of "spiritual training" (*chōnghun*), was already run by the South Korean navy from 1949 onwards, its chief, Admiral Son Wōn'il (1909-1980), a son of famed Methodist pastor, Son Chōngdo (1872-1931), being a firm believer in "Christian spirit" as the only way to effectively lead the

South Korean military (Kang 2006: 348). In considering the plan, Syngman Rhee was, however, fearful of opposition within the ranks of the army commanders (Haga 2012). A large part of the middle- and high-ranking officers of the South Korean army were ethnic Koreans with Japanese imperial army experience. Among army officers who received military training before 1948 and eventually reached the full general rank, 226 served in the Japanese army, 44 served in the army of Manchukuo and only 32 fought against the Japanese, predominantly in Korean military units attached to the Guomindang (Han 1993: 130). Some of the former Japanese and Manchukuo officers, notoriously colonel (in 1952 promoted to full general) Paek Sönyöp (b. 1920), infamous for his brutal suppression of the Communist guerrillas in South Korea in 1948-1950, were Christians, but the majority were not. Syngman Rhee feared possible negative reactions in the military ranks to what could appear to be imposition of his own faith onto the soldiers. Thus, when the Bureau of Military Religion (*Kunsüngkwa*, later *Kunmokkwa*) was created in the Personnel Department of the Infantry General Staff on February 7, 1951 (general order no. 31), it was supposed to be staffed by civilians who were to be paid by their own denominations. The first Korean chaplains, trained by Shaw and Carroll, were dispatched to military units in early April 1952; the number reached 139 by June 1952 (Hwang 2008: 193-194).



A field church in the South Korean army, the early 1950s. [Source](#)

genuinely adopting Christianity as a personal way, both psychological and socio-political, out of the predicaments of national division, war and detention. Voelkel and his Korean colleagues made a sizable contribution to making more than 80,000 North Korean POW decide to reject repatriation to the North (Kang 2006: 349-351; Yi 2010). As a reward, the status of chaplains was quickly raised. On June 16, 1952, all 139 active-duty chaplains were given the status of salaried civilian employees of the South Korean military and in December 1954, were further promoted to active-duty military officers (*hyö'n'yök changgyo*) (Kang 2006: 347). By this time, the South Korean military chaplaincy fully resembled its US prototype. With one significant difference – while the US military had non-Christian (namely Jewish) chaplains already from 1862, South Korea – in which, unlike the US, Christians were numerically a tiny minority – at first did not allow any non-Christian denominations in its chaplaincy services. This fact testifies to the degree of Christian influence inside the South Korean elites of the 1950s, and also to the paramount importance of Christianity to Syngman Rhee's state, as well as the degree of Christian loyalty to the militantly anti-Communist South Korean regime.

Rhee's worries notwithstanding, the new institution quickly proved its usefulness to South Korean army commanders. Chaplains and their field churches were instrumental in increasing the number of active, practicing Christians inside the army – under conditions when being Christian practically implied being a committed anti-Communist, and thus, by extension, an active supporter of the South Korean regime rather than a passive victim of forcible conscription. The absolute majority of chaplains were Protestants, mostly Presbyterians and Methodists. By April 1954, out of 296 military chaplains, 35 were Catholics and the rest were Protestants, 209 of them being either Presbyterians or Methodists. The Protestant chaplains built 186 military churches, and succeeded in raising the percentage of Protestants in the army to 20%, almost five times higher than the share of Christians in the general population at that time (Kang 2006: 349). Especially important for Syngman Rhee's anti-Communist cause was the ministry to the North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war incarcerated – under rather appalling conditions (Lee, Kang and Huh, 2013) - in a specially built concentration camp on Köje Island near the southern coast of Korea. There, Harold Voelkel (1898-1984, Korean name: Ok Hoyöl), an experienced missionary who first came to Korea in 1928, and some twenty of his Korean colleagues in chaplaincy were busy converting the prisoners to Christianity and anti-Communism. The results were considered excellent: 15,012 out of some 140,000 North Korean POWs became believers by April 1952, and several tens of thousands more showed at least some interest in the evangelization

activities in the camp, some evidently in hope of receiving better treatment, and some



US military church and the US and South Korean chaplains together with Sunday school children. Late 1950s, South Korea. [Source](#)

newly established Christian monopoly on such an important institution in a hard-core conscription society (Moon 2005) as military chaplaincy. Some of these attempts are also noteworthy for the ideology deployed to legitimise the state violence of the Korean War in the name of Buddhist religion and traditions. For example, the official mouthpiece of Korean Buddhism, *Pulgyo Sinmun*, editorialized in 1964 – in an attempt to persuade the military to allow the Buddhist chaplaincy in its ranks – that only Buddhism, “the essence of our national tradition”, with its “brilliant traditions of state protection”, had imbibed the “view of life and death acutely needed by the soldiers”. Buddhism – in addition to being a good “spiritual weapon” making soldiers more willing to die for the state – was also advertised as the “religion of harmony best suited to the military chain of command”, since, unlike Christians, Buddhists were not supposed to distance themselves from non-believers (cited in Hwang 2008, 206). In a way, Buddhist leaders were struggling for the attention of the military bureaucracy, begging to be utilized as a “weapon” in the anti-Communist crusade.

Buddhists found themselves in incomparably more difficult circumstances than Christians during the Korean War for a number of reasons. First, they did not dispose of any comparable resources, since, unlike Christians, they received no significant financial or other help from abroad. Foreign humanitarian, financial and technical help was of huge importance in a country almost completely destroyed by the war, and almost half of the foreign aid organizations which joined the Korean Association of Voluntary Agencies (KAVA), were Christian. US Presbyterians alone raised USD 1,800,000 for Korea in 1950-1954 (Rhodes and Campbell 1965: 322), and much of this money was channeled through Korean churches, which gave them an enormous advantage in the domestic religious market. By contrast, institutional Buddhism lacked not only any aid from outside, but also international network of contacts aside from its leaders' participation in the World Fellowship of Buddhists' meetings beginning from the second meeting in Japan in 1952 (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong Kyoyug'wön Purhak Yö'n'guso 2000: 69). Second, as described above, the Buddhists were much more alienated from the new state's power centres than Christians. Third, the three year war destroyed a large number of richer temples (Pongsönsa, Könbongsa, Naksansa, Wö'chöngsa etc.) which before the war had contributed significantly to the Korean Buddhists' Central Executive Committee (Taehan Pulgyo Chung'ang Ch'ongmuwö'n), further undermining its economic position (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong Kyoyug'wön Purhak Yö'n'guso 2000: 69). Finally, Syngman Rhee, in his populist attempts to position himself as a devoted anti-Japanese patriotic fighter, initiated on May 20, 1954, a campaign for expulsion of the married (“Japanized”) monks from Korean temples. Since the married monks were in the majority, the campaign opened the gates for embittered struggles between celibate and married monks over control of the temples, and left little room for other concerns until the early 1960s, when the state started to intervene more systematically to sort out the conflict (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong Kyoyug'wön Purhak Yö'n'guso 2005: 196-228). This explains why institutional Buddhism was in no position to forcefully protest the discrimination to which it was subjected as a result of establishment of a Christian-only chaplaincy in the country in which the majority of the actively religious population was predominantly Buddhist, especially in the countryside.

The inability to protest on the level of organized Buddhism did not mean, however, that some individual monks, temples and monastic groups did not attempt to challenge the

The first to attempt compete with the Christians in the field of military chaplaincy were middle-level Buddhist leaders based in Southern Kyöngsang Province, especially those based in areas around Pusan, which were never occupied by the North Korean army and were the least devastated by the war. Mansan (O

Kwansu, 1900-1971), a married monk who worked as a missionary at Southern Kyōngsang Provincial Buddhist Executive Committee (Kyōngnam Chongmuwōn), took the initiative and secured the cooperation of several local monks, some of them, as abbots of temples in and around Pusan, were able to mobilize resources needed for chaplaincy. Some of these monks later came to play an important role on the Korean Buddhist scene – Yi Pōphong, the Japanese-educated and married abbot of Pusan-based Kūmsusa, is currently the spiritual head of *Avatamsaka-sutra*-based Wōnhyojong (Wōnhyo Order), and Tōg'am (An Hūngdōk, 1912-2003), also a Japanese-educated married monk, was to become one of the leaders of the separate order for married monks, the T'aegojong (T'aego Order), which would be established in 1970. The activist monks were able to visit at least some front-line military units due to help rendered by some commanding officers who were either Buddhists or favourably inclined towards Buddhism. One of them, then colonel (later general) Ch'oe Honghūi (1918-2002), became well-known as a systematizer of *t'aekwōndo* (a Korean martial art) in the late 1950s; another, Sin T'aeyōng (1891-1959), a lieutenant-general, was to become the South Korean Minister of Defense during the last period of the war (March 29, 1952 to June 30, 1953). Both had Japanese military experience. Sin, who entered the Japanese Imperial Army Academy in 1912, was often mentioned as one of the "elders" of one of the influential groups inside the South Korean military, namely the network of Japanese Imperial Army Academy alumni. Ch'oe, a Hamgyōng Province native who was proud of his mastery of Confucian classics, seemed to intensely dislike the "Christian general" Paek Sōnyōp, who was especially favoured by fellow Christian Syngman Rhee. Yet another important helper was a married monk, Posōng (Chōng Tusōk, 1906-1998, later the supreme spiritual leader of T'aegojong), who served as a Korean Army Academy teacher during and after the Korean War, and was seemingly alienated by Christian hegemony there. In the end, either pro-Buddhist sympathies or antipathy towards Christianity on the part of some important military figures laid the foundation for an "informal" chaplaincy conducted by some Buddhist clerics during the war. With the assistance of friendly commanders, they were even able to build the first, short-lived military Buddhist temple, Towōnsa (Kangwōn Province, Yanggu County), close to the DMZ, in a mountainous area where several military units were based (Ch'oe 1997: 301-302; Han 1993: 167-173; Hwang 2008: 192-198).

What was the message that activist monks sought to extend to the soldiers? The declaration of intentions drawn up by the 15 member-strong Society for Buddhist Missionary Work in the Army (founded March 7, 1951), mentioned such standard themes of South Korean propaganda as "sacred war" (*sōngjōn*) and "unification of the country through the destruction of Communism" (*myōlgong t'ong'il*). It also mentioned, however, military chaplaincy as the "first step toward making of a Buddhist world" (*segye purhwa*), as well as the "spirit of *hwarangs*" as the "guiding philosophy" of the South Korean army (Hwang 2008: 197). It was indeed so, in a way. The Japanese-educated historian Yi Sōn'gūn (1905-1983), one of the chief ideologists of the Korean military (appointed chief of the Spiritual Training Department *Chōnghunkwa* of the Ministry of Defense in February 1950), wrote and published in 1950 a book in which he – as an admirer of *bushido* – suggested that the *hwarang* organization of aristocratic youth in the sixth-tenth century Silla Kingdom (on this organization, see Lee 1993: 101-107), with its distinctive culture of battlefield self-sacrifice, was the source of a "genuinely Korean spirit", as well as a "spirit of anti-Communism" (Yi 1950). Since two of the *hwarang* organization's early seventh-century members were known to have received their "five commandments" from a well-known Buddhist preceptor, Wōn'gwang (541-630?), and the fourth of these commandments prescribed never to retreat in battle (for English translation of the commandments see Lee 1993: 100), the self-styled Buddhist chaplains would claim that the brave South Korean soldiers were indeed upholding Buddhist priest Wōn'gwang's "five commandments" (Hwang 2008: 197). In a way, the ample appropriation of Korean ancient history – in which Buddhism did play a crucially important role – for the sake of developing South Korea's distinctive brand of cultural and historical nationalism helped the activist monks to root their claims to nationalistic legitimacy in the military's own ideological guidebooks. The traditional-style Buddhist chant written and put to music by Mansan, *Chonggun hoesimgok* (The Melody of Converting one's Heart while Following the Army), again mentioned Wōn'gwang's "five commandments" as the "greatest spiritual weapon" the South Korean army possessed. In reality, however, much of the "ideological work" by the Buddhist monks in the army was about distributing the amulets and pictures of Avalokitesvara (Kwan'ūm) and rings with Amitabha's image, all supposed to assuage the loneliness and fear the soldiers felt, and conducting funeral services for fallen soldiers, 65% of whom reportedly were from Buddhist families (Hwang 2008: 198-199).

The enthusiasm of some Buddhist figures notwithstanding, the May 6, 1952 petition of the Society for Buddhist Missionary Work in the Army, in which it asked the Defence Ministry to grant Buddhist chaplains the same status as their Christian colleagues, was rejected. Given both the political and diplomatic weight of the Christian community and its unwavering support for the Syngman Rhee regime, it was deemed wiser to keep its lucrative monopoly on religion inside the army ranks intact. The Buddhist community was in no position to protest, for reasons enumerated above, and concentrated on missionary work in units whose commanders were supportive. Ch'oe Honghūi was reportedly one such commander who used his military authority and connections to help rebuild an important temple, Naksaksa, in Kangwōn Province. Yet another crucially important field of Buddhist missionary work was the Korean Army, Naval and Air Forces Academies, whose graduates could potentially help institutional Buddhism in a society in which the military was among the most dominant institutions (Hwang 2008: 200-201).

From the very inception of the service academies, Christians dominated them, and Buddhist activists had to fight an uphill battle. By 1966, at the most technologically advanced Air Force Academy, Protestants comprised 34.7% of the student body, and Catholics an additional 20.5%. In the largest and most influential Army Academy, Protestant students accounted for 24.2% and Catholic students for 17.1% of the total respectively (Kang 2006: 355). Christian churches were quickly expanding in the 1950s and 1960s, and by 1970, Protestants alone constituted approximately 10% of the South Korean population (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yōksa Hakhoe 2009: 116), but even taking this into account, the share of Christians among academy students greatly exceeded that among the general population. The main reason for such a phenomenon was the strong position of Christians among the academies' teachers, as well as among the South Korean elite in general; Christian faith counted as one of the factors of personal success. Sometimes, Christianity was even forcibly promoted – both by teachers and senior students (*sōnbae*) who wielded significant power over younger students. Yu Sangjong (brigadier general) – the Buddhist officer who later made decisive contribution to the establishment of the Buddhist chaplaincy in the late 1960s – remembers that his school seniors made church attendance obligatory to him and his fellow students. Christianity was seen as "American/civilized religion" and a symbol of state loyalty. Buddhist monks could not enter the Army Academy unless they changed the traditional robes for "civilized" Western suits (Pak 2009). Despite all odds, and, significantly, with the help of the two future military dictators of South Korea, Chōn Tuhwan (Chun Doo-hwan) and No T'aeu (Roh Tae-woo) – both were Yu's seniors at the same academy at that time, and both were Buddhists – Yu succeeded in organising the first-ever Buddhist students' society at the Army Academy in 1954. The Naval Academy followed suit in 1959 and the Air Force Academy – in 1960 respectively (Pak 2009). Some former members of this society – Pak Hūido (b. 1934, the Army Chief of Staff in 1985-1986), Yi Sōk'pok (former commander of Army's fifth division, currently chairman of the Buddhists Society for Defending the Republic of Korea *Taehan Minguk Chik'igi Pulgyodo Ch'ongyōnhap*), Sōn Yunhūi (former commander of the South Korean military police) and others – later played central roles in developing cohesive ties between the military and Buddhist establishments (Pak 2009).



A prayer meeting of the Protestant military chaplains, 2011.

[Source](#)

In conclusion, although the Syngman Rhee regime's favouritism towards Christians in general and especially close ties with Protestants did not save it from a relatively easy demise in April 1960 as a result of a "student revolution" – grounded in the frustration of the middle classes, and especially younger, educated urbanites at the lack of socio-economic development, the "privatisation of power" by ruling groups and their underlings and subsequent corruption (Sō 2007: 266-300) - it did have important consequences. The number of Protestant believers alone grew thrice in 1950-1960 (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yōksa Hakhoe 2009: 116), and the Christian chaplaincy system in the military contributed significantly to this growth. Under the "Christian president" Syngman Rhee, most commanding officers, their own personal religious affiliation notwithstanding, provided chaplains with privileged access to barrack life, and chaplains made use of the resources made available to them by their congregations to win soldiers' "hearts and minds" (Kang 1996: 352-353). The soldiers who became Christians in such a way, tended to have long-lasting loyalty to the denomination they first encountered while undergoing the deprivations of military service, and, by extension, to become loyal to the hard-core anti-Communist state that the churches whole-heartedly supported. Consequently, the South Korean state, its initial externally imposed

characteristics notwithstanding, was able to gradually win a sort of Gramscian "ideological hegemony" in society. "Christian presidents" did not emerge in South Korea after Syngman Rhee's overthrow in 1960 and until Kim Young-sam's (Kim Yōngsam) assumption of presidential powers in 1993. However,

conservatively interpreted Christianity, especially in the form represented by the “mammoth churches”, with their message that “God blesses the rich” and extreme anti-Communist rhetoric, did become one of the important ideologies of the quickly developing industrial capitalism in South Korea (Kim 2012). A small minority of left-wing Protestants in pre-1950 South Korea relocated to North Korea either immediately before or during the Korean War, as their survival in the anti-Communist “fortress state” in South Korea was close to impossible. Rev. Kim Ch’angjun (1890-1959), a US-educated Methodist pastor who ended up as one of the foremost critics of US war crimes in 1950-53 in Anglophone publications abroad, and was ultimately buried in the Patriotic Martyrs’ Cemetery in Pyongyang, is a case in the point. Interest in labour, human rights and unification reappeared among a minority of Korean Christians only in the 1970s, in the course of the struggle against the semi-fascistic Yusin (revitalization) system (1972-1979) (Yi 2001, 374-380).

Buddhists remained in the majority among South Korea’s religious population in the 1950s, but were in a comparatively weaker position due to their relative alienation from state power, relatively weaker economic position vis-à-vis the Christian churches lavishly supported by the Korean state and from abroad, weaker nationalist legitimacy (on account of their full-spectrum collaboration with the colonial powers from 1910 to 1945 and the well-known images of the “Japanized” married monks), and preoccupation with internal affairs from the beginning of the purge against the “Japanized” monks initiated on May 20, 1954 by Syngman Rhee himself with devastating effects on institutional Buddhism. Thus, it lacked the negotiating power vis-à-vis the state needed to formally challenge the Christian monopoly on military chaplaincy. Some activist monks attempted, however, to make local, de facto challenges to the Christian monopoly by mobilising a network of sympathetic non-Christian officers, and by deploying Buddhism’s own version of religious legitimization for state violence, deliberately linked to state-promoted nationalistic discourses on “*hwarang* spirit”. In a way, instead of trying to resist the state which openly engaged in practices of religious discrimination in favour of Christians, Buddhists – the monastic establishment being just as anti-Communist as their Christian counterparts – entered a “competition in loyalty” of sorts against the Christians. The successes were limited in the 1950s, but more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s when new, non-Christian military dictators, interested in winning the allegiance of the predominantly Buddhist rural and lower-class urban populations, entered into an ideological alliance with the conservative monastic establishment, allowing the latter to fully deploy its doctrine of “state-protected Buddhism” (*hoguk Pulgyo*). The Buddhist chaplaincy in the military was established in 1968, first and foremost because Buddhists were a significant group among South Korean troops sent to fight in the Vietnam War after 1966. It was calculated that Buddhist chaplains would “strengthen” their spirit and help them to build some understanding with the largely Buddhist Vietnamese (Hwang 2008: 212-241). For the anti-Communist monastic establishment, any criticism of the Vietnam War and Korean involvement in it was unthinkable. The establishment of Buddhist chaplaincy in the wake of the dispatch of Korean troops to Vietnam was celebrated as an “achievement” in the Buddhist missionary field, indeed as a “milestone” of sorts for contemporary Korean Buddhism (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong P’ogyowŏn 1999: 234).

The dominant paradigm of anti-Communism and “state-protective Buddhism” was challenged only by *minjung* (“People’s”) Buddhist activists in the 1980s, but even then, the legitimacy of the Buddhist chaplaincy in the military was rarely, if ever, questioned (Jorgensen 2010). While it was widely recognized that, as a matter of principle, Buddhists should totally abstain from bad *karma*-generating violence, even the *minjung* monks approved of “altruistic violence” (“for the purpose of saving other sentient beings”), and were perhaps too nationalistic to question the very institute of the *national* army – as opposed to the obviously “anti-national”, USA-dependant military dictatorship (Jorgensen 2010). Thus, not unlike mainstream Catholics and most Protestant denominations, the majority in the South Korean Buddhist community came to perceive the institute of military chaplaincy as a fully legitimate missionary tool, essential for “competition in the acquisition of believers” since religious loyalties gained in the military by the conscripts in their early twenties tend to stay long (Taehan Pulgyo Chogyejong P’ogyowŏn 2007: 203-205) – without much thought given to the Cold War origins of this institution in South Korea, its ideological underpinning, or its essentially problematic relationship to Buddhism’s original teachings on *ahimsa* (non-violence).

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Notes

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² Peoples' Committees were the main type of elected authority in early (1945 to 1950) North Korea. They originated from the spontaneously formed local self-governing bodies which mushroomed all over Korea immediately after imperial Japan's demise in August 1945. In the USA-occupied South Korea, however, these self-governing bodies were never officially acknowledged by the Occupation authorities. See (Armstrong 2003: 67-70).

³ The conservative majority of both Presbyterians and Methodists – which already regarded the new, egalitarian regime as “devilish” –opposed both doing anything other than prayer on Sunday and to the use of churches as polling stations in some districts. Kim Il Sung attempted to persuade conservative church leaders to collaborate in the “historical national enterprise” – with the help of his maternal relative, Rev. Kang Ryang'uk (1903-1983) – with little result (Han'guk Kidokkyo Yöksa Hakhoe 2009, 48-49)

⁴ On the phenomenon of the predominant Christianization of the enterprising population of northwestern Korea in the 1900s and during the colonial period, see Kang 1999.