

Coexistence and Conflict between Buddhism and Protestantism in Modern Korea: Concentration in its Geographical Background and Actuality

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1. Introduction

On August 27, 2008, about 200,000 Buddhists gathered in crowds at the Seoul City Plaza at a meeting called the “All Buddhist Meeting of Korea.” This event is rarely held and only when Buddhism in Korea is at a critical moment. The main agenda of this meeting was the impeachment of President Lee’s Government for religious discrimination, especially against Buddhism.²

The Korean Buddhists were complaining against the religious propensity of the government.³ Last year’s case was the bursting forth of the accumulation of discontent and conflict between Buddhists and the government (or Christians). President Lee, also known as an elder of the Presbyterian Church, and his close staff members who all are Christians broke down the massive and intensive Buddhist protest. Buddhists had researched many cases in which government official speeches and administrative dispositions were pro-Christian.⁴

As a result of this meeting the Korean Government revised the National Public Service Law and the Local Officials Act according to the Buddhists’ demands for the forbidding of religious discrimination, and also created an Advisory Committee for Religious Discrimination of Public Officers in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.⁵

However there are still many factors in the conflict between Buddhism and Protestantism in Korea as it is possible for these two religions to clash against each other at any time. In this paper I am going to provide the fundamental background of this conflict and outline the present situation with data from the national census of the population as well as describing the actual situation. I will also present the main cases of conflict between Buddhism and Protestantism with some photographs to illustrate this.

The purpose of this paper is to confirm the fact that there are some inevitable conditions in Korea which easily create conflict between Buddhists and Christians,⁶ and that the most critical conflict between

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² See the following website for video materials concerning the “All Buddhist Meeting of Korea” of 2008. <http://video.naver.com/2008082717381471352>.

³ One of their documents is The Center of Propagation, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, ed., *White Book on Religious Prejudice* (Seoul: The Center of Propagation, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2005). Also see Kyoung-Jae Kim, “A Study of the Situation of Religious Conflicts and its Solution: Concentrating to the Co-relation of Buddhism and Protestantism in Korea,” Institute of Theological Studies in Hanshin University, *Theological Studies*, No. 42 (2001): 225-226.

⁴ See the official website of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism: <http://www.buddhism.or.kr> (“The Registration Center of Religious Discrimination of Public Officers”)

⁵ See Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, ed., *A Manual of Service for the Prevention of Religious Discrimination of the Public Officials* (Seoul: Division of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2008).

⁶ There are four types of religious conflict in Korea. The first is the conflict of a religion with other religions; the second is conflict between denominations or religious orders of one religion; the third is that between religion and non-religious organizations like state, press, etc; the last is conflict in the personal relations. Sung Pyo Jun, “The Actual Condition and Potentiality of Religious Conflicts in Korean Society,” *Proceedings of Academic Congress the first half of 2001*, Korean Association for Social Science (2001. 6), 3-11. In my opinion, the first one is the most critical problem since it covers a third of our society. This paper concentrates on this.

the two religions takes place in public, rather than private.

2. The Geographic Spread of Protestants and Buddhists in Korea, and the Coexistence and Conflict between them.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is the southern part of the Korean Peninsula which lies on the northeastern section of the Asian continent. Korea as a whole (North and South) is about 220,000 square kilometers. The actual size is almost equal to the United Kingdom. South Korea covers about 100,000 square kilometers of this. As of the end of 2005, South Korea's total population was estimated to be 47 million with a density of about 500 people per square kilometer.

The latest census of the population in Korea was held in 2005. The population by religion is shown in the table below.

<Table 1> Adherents of religions in Korea (Nov 1, 2005)

	Number	Percent
religious	24,970,766	53.1
Buddhists	10,726,463	22.8
Protestants	8,616,438	18.3
Catholics	5,146,147	10.9
Confucians	104,575	0.4
Won-Buddhists	129,907	0.5
Cheondogyo	45,835	0.2
Dejonggyo	3,766	0.0
Jeungsangyo	34,550	0.1
Others	163,085	0.3
unidentified	205,508	0.4
nonreligious	21,856,160	46.5
Total population	47,041,434	100.0

Source: The official website of Korea National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr>)

As you can see in Table 1, there is little difference in number between the religious and non religious population. The top three religions (Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism) dominate the religious population. The other religions such as Confucianism, Won-Buddhism (圓佛教), Cheondogyo (天道教), Dejonggyo (大倣教) and Jeungsangyo (甑山教) originated in Korea, and their populations are under 1% of the total population. In reality, Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism are the three great religions in Korea.⁷

Also, the distribution of religious people by area shows remarkable differences, and it is important to get a hold of this for understanding the situation of religions in Korea. In general, South Korea is divided into five areas of geographical distance and cultural tendency. They are the Capital area, Central area, Gyeongsang area, Jeolla area, and Jeju area.⁸ As you can see in Table 2, there is a striking contrast in the religious populations of the Jeolla and Gyeongsang areas. The percentage of Buddhists in Korea is 22.8%, but it is 37.3% in the Gyeongsang area and 14.4% in the Jeolla area. The difference is over 20%. The percentage of Christians is 18.3%, but it is 22.8% in the Jeolla area and 10.1% in the Gyeongsang area. The difference is over 10%. We find similar differences in the Jeju area, but as Jeju is the smallest

⁷ It is a very interesting fact that Christmas and Buddha's Birthday are all National Holidays in Korea. The ceremonies of Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism are performed in turn in national funerals in Korea. [Editor's note: In Korea, Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism are popularly and officially regarded as being different religions – a distinction maintained in this paper.]

⁸ There are 16 cities and provinces in Korea. Seoul City, Incheon City and Gyeonggi Province are in the capital area; Daejeon City, Chungcheongnam, Chungcheongbuk and Gangwon provinces are in the central area; Gwangju City, Jeollabuk, and Jeollanam provinces are in the Jeolla area; Busan City, Daegu City, Ulsan City, Gyeongsangbuk and Gyeongsangnam provinces are in the Gyeongsang area; and Jeju (province) Area.

province and an island and only 1.1% of the total population of Korea lives there, it is meaningless to compare it with other areas.

Table 2 The ratio of religious population by areas

Area	total	total religious	Buddhists	Christians	Catholics
whole country	100.0	53.1	22.8	18.3	10.9
Capital	100.0	53.0	16.5	22.3	13.3
Central	100.0	50.4	22.2	17.8	9.7
Jeolla	100.0	50.2	14.4	22.8	10.9
Gyeongsang	100.0	55.8	37.3	10.1	7.4
Jeju	100.0	51.4	32.7	7.2	10.3

Source: The official website of Korea National Statistical Office (<http://kostat.go.kr>)

The most critical locality has been found in the two southern areas of the Korean peninsula, Gyeongsang and Jeolla. There are so many conflicts between them, and they are a synonym for regional conflict in modern Korea. A simple result from the presidential vote of 2007 shows how the regional conflict between them is revealed in politics (see table 3).

Table 3 Distribution of the vote-getting in the 2007 presidential vote by the two candidates in the Gyeongsang and Jeolla regions

Area	cities and provinces	number/%	Jeong	Lee
Gyeongsang	Busan	number	236,708	1,018,715
		%	13.5	57.9
	Daegu	number	75,932	876,719
		%	6.0	69.4
	Ulsan	number	70,736	279,891
		%	13.6	54.0
	Gyeongsangbuk	number	96,822	1,033,957
		%	6.8	72.6
	Gyeongsangnam	number	189,436	843,662
		%	12.4	55.0
	total	number	669,661	4,052,944
		%	10.2	62.0
Jeolla	Gwangju	number	527,588	56,875
		%	79.8	8.6
	Jeollabuk	number	777,236	86,149
		%	81.6	9.0
	Jeollanam	number	757,309	88,834
		%	78.7	9.2
	total	number	2,062,133	231,858
		%	79.6	8.9

Source: Election Affairs Team, National Election Commission, ed.,
A Comprehensive Bibliography of the 17th Presidential Vote (Dec. 19, 2007)
 (National Election Commission, 2008).

As we can see in Table 3, there is a radical difference between these two areas. Mr. Jeong who was a

candidate of the New Democratic Party gained only 10.2% in Gyeongsang but 79.6% in Jeolla. On the contrary, Mr. Lee who was a candidate of the Grand National Party and is the current president obtained 62.0% in Gyeongsang, but only 8.9% in Jeolla. Similar situations like this have been repeated for several decades.⁹

There have been only a few cases in which religious conflict combined with locality in modern Korea, but its possibility has remained in our society. I found the fact that the partiality of religious people by religions (especially Buddhism and Protestantism) intensified more and more during the last 20 years.¹⁰ The percentage of Buddhists in Gyeongsang was 28.7% in 1985 but 37.3% in 2005. In Jeolla, the distribution of Protestantism was 16.4% in 1985, but 22.8% in 2005. In other words, Buddhism is becoming the more influential religion in Gyeongsang, while Protestantism is becoming more influential in the Jeolla area. If this deviation in religious distribution of the two areas connects with conflict of locality, the possibility of religious conflict will also increase.

There are few religious conflicts connected with racial differences in Korean history. These conflicts are more common in the regions of religious conflicts or wars such as Ireland-England, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus-Turkey, Israel-Palestine, etc.,¹¹ because Korea is a racially homogenous nation. However, the distinction in locality has frequently become the cause of conflicts in various fields such as politics, economics, and culture in contemporary Korean society.¹² As suggested above, it is a chronic disease for Korea to be divided into two regional societies whenever the presidential race starts. It is important to be cautious of combining the conflict of locality with religious problems.

We can see that the coexistence of religions in Korea is based on an historical background in which there has been no war or critical social crisis due to religious problems in Korean history. A number of religions have existed together for thousands of years. Buddhism and Confucianism found their way into Korea in the fourth century and became traditional religions of Korea. They became open to the indigenous religions of Korea and worked with and for Koreans' religious need. Catholicism was introduced into Korea in the 18th century, and the Catholics had a severe conflict with Confucians. As a result of these conflicts, many Catholics were martyred in the early stage of planting Catholic roots in Korean soil. In the latter half of the 19th century, Catholicism received official recognition, and did not cause conflicts with governments or other religions. Catholics learned a good lesson for the coexistence of religions through the historical experience of conflict and persecution in their early history. The history of Protestant Christianity began at the end of the 19th century, and its mission was established on the basis that many religions were to exist together. Although some missionaries took no account of Korean culture and other religions, it was impossible not to recognize the existence of traditional religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, etc. A good example of this was when thirty-three religious leaders who were Buddhist, Cheondogyo, and Protestant worked together on the March First Independent Movement in the Japanese colonial period.¹³

There has been much conflict among religions since 1945 when Korea set up its national government, but this conflict did not make social confusion or reach a critical crisis of social disintegration. However, "the all Buddhist Meeting of Korea" of 2008 brings to our mind the possibility of severe religious strife. If those religious-social problems combine with local conflict, it may bring a more serious result.

It is the Buddhists and the Christians who are involved in the religious conflicts in the modern society of Korea. As shown above, the local differences are more and more intensified in these two religions, so it is necessary to investigate the cases of conflicts between these two.

3. The Actual Conflicts Between Buddhism and Protestantism in Modern Korea

⁹ Election Affairs Team, National Election Commission ed., *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the 17th Presidential Vote* [Dec. 19, 2007] (Seoul: National Election Commission, 2008), 596-597.

¹⁰ Sung-Min Ryu, "The Change and Distinctive Features of Religious Population Pyramid in Korea: Concentrating to an Analysis into the National Census 1985, 1995, and 2005," Korean Association for the History of Religions, ed., *Proceedings of Academic Congress the first half of 2009: Coexistence and Connection of Religions in Korea* (Korean Association for the History of Religions, 2009), 37-41.

¹¹ See Hukuoka Masayuki, *21st Century's Ethnic Wars in the World*, trans. by Kim, Hee-Ung (Seoul: Kugil Media, 2001).

¹² See The Korean Political Science Association, ed., *The Solution of localism in Korea* (Seoul: The Korean Political Science Association, 1999); Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation, ed., *Proceedings of the Dialogue for South-South Relation: The Regional Conflict of Korea and the Problems of North-South Koreas* (2002); The Korean Sociological Association, ed., *The Localism and Conflict* (Seoul: The Korean Sociological Association, 1997).

¹³ Yee-Heum, Yoon, *Studies of Religions in Korea*, Vol. 3 (Seoul: Jibmundang, 1991), pp. 291-292.

It is the Buddhist camp that has mainly brought to notice the problem of prejudice or conflict in religious affairs. In 2005, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism which is the largest Buddhist order in Korea published a massive volume titled; *A White Book on Religious Prejudice*.¹⁴ It contains many cases of the vandalism of Buddha images and temples, and of religious prejudice in education, military, mass media, etc. This book also includes some examples of disturbing Buddhist rituals and events. It is a very interesting fact that most of the cases introduced in this book took place in the public sphere and were related to Protestantism. Let us look at several cases as examples.

The case of destruction of Buddha statues

In June 3, 1998, Mr. Kim who is a Protestant entered a Buddhist Temple in Seoul and destroyed many statues of the Buddha with a hammer. He was arrested several days later and imprisoned.

Photo 1



Source: <http://blog.daum.net/dlww9091/6818820>

Note: A young Christian cut off the heads of 750 stone Buddha statues in a Buddhist temple of Jeju Province in June of 2008.

Photo 2

¹⁴ The Center of Propagation, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, ed., *op. cit.*



Source: <http://blog.daum.net/dlww9091/6818820>

Note: Someone painted a cross on the Buddha Image in Dongguk University Campus with red spray paint, and wrote the words “Only Jesus” on the bottom step of the statue.

The case of religious prejudice in the military

In June 27, 1998, approximately 40 marines in active service sang some Christian hymns at the front of Seoul Station. The Buddhist Committee for Countermeasures against Religious Prejudice organized a protest and asked Naval Operations Headquarters and the Minister of National Defense for the prevention of a reoccurrence. The Headquarters and the Minister took a proper step to punish this act of delinquency and promised to prevent any reoccurrence in the future.

The case of religious prejudice in public education

A public middle school in a city of the Gyeonggi province held a graduation ceremony at a Protestant church in 2000. The Buddhist camp protested this as religious prejudice in education. This resulted in the city office of education admitting the problem and sending out a warning to the principal.

The case of religious prejudice in public organization

A quarterly magazine that was issued by the Gangwon province in 1999 carried an article in which the content disparaged Buddhism. The Buddhist committee sent an official protesting letter to the governor of the province. The writer apologized to them for offensive writing, and printed the apology in the next issue.

These cases are just a small part of the several dozen cases collected by the Buddhist Committee of Countermeasures against Religious Prejudice during a two year period. Most of them were protests to the government organizations or the public institutes. It is the attitudes of the government officials or the public service personnel that the Buddhist camp called into question in these cases. The Buddhists asserted that the public officials who aided and abetted, gave tacit permission or expressed indifference were the most important causes of religious prejudice and crime.

The cases that occasioned a massive street demonstration of Buddhists last year clearly show us the problem of religious prejudice in the public sphere. Here are a couple of cases which the Buddhist committee presented as typical examples for the past six months.

Case 1: The half-length photograph of the chief of the National Police Office was printed in a pictorial poster of the Meeting for the Evangelization of Policemen in the Whole Country with a famous pastor in Korea (June, 24, 2008). (See photo 3.).

Photo 3



Source: Beopbo The Weekly Newspaper (<http://www.beopbo.com>)

Case 2: A teacher in an elementary school in Gyeongju City gave a lesson in class saying that if girls and boys believe in Buddhism or religions other than Christianity, they will go to hell. (June 30, 2008)

Case 3: A district office in Seoul City had a prayer meeting and sent an official notice for all high-ranking officials to attend the meeting in office hours. (August 7, 2008)

Case 4: The marks of Buddhist temples were omitted from a map prepared by the Traffic Information of the Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs, while the marks of the Protestant and Catholic churches remained present. (June 20, 2008). (See Photo 4)

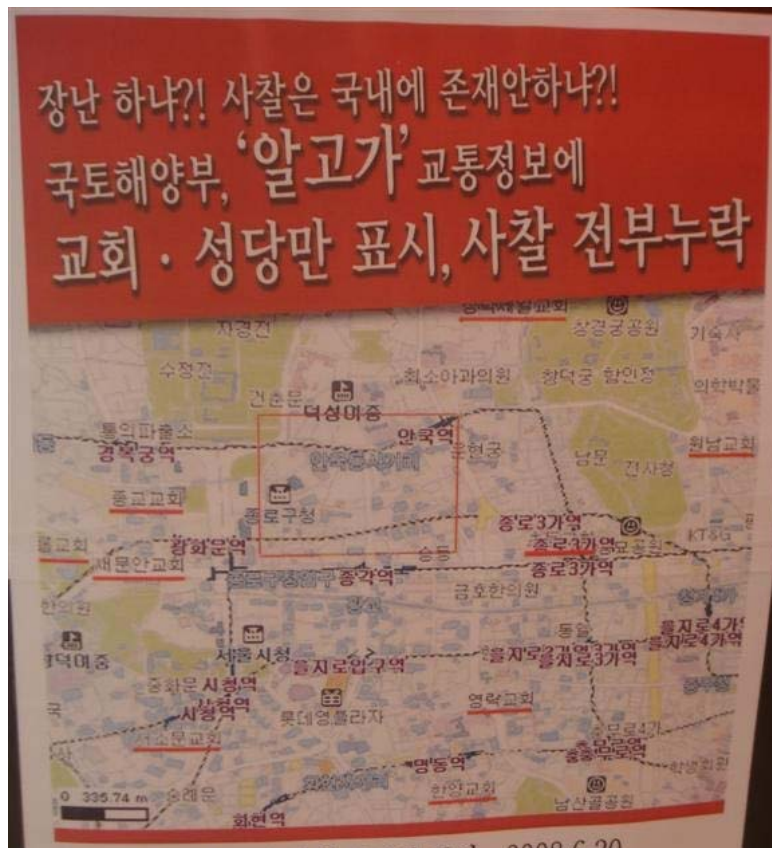


Photo 4

Source: Beopbo The Weekly Newspaper
(<http://www.beopbo.com>)

Case 5: A superintendent of education in Seoul City attended a Christian Prayer Meeting with several principals of middle schools in Seoul. The information from the meeting was sent through the electronic document system of the city office of education. (September 2, 2008)

All these cases are obvious examples of religious prejudice in the public spectrum. In most cases the relevant public authorities have officially apologized and rectified whatever events took place. Similar cases, however, have happened everywhere in Korea.

There are many studies about the potentiality of religious conflict in Korea. Some deal with the elements such as religious doctrine and belief, group identity and exclusionism, static solidarity and personal connection in the culture of Korea, and poorness in religious exchange.¹⁵ But many scholars point to the exclusive attitude of conservative Protestant religions as the most important cause of religious conflicts in Korea.¹⁶ Most acts of the cases mentioned above were done by conservative Christians, and their deeds were regarded by public opinion as criticism of Buddhism. The important fact which we should hold to is that they performed these activities on a personal basis, not an organizational one. This is why the protest of the aggrieved Buddhists was turned to government.

4. Conclusion

¹⁵ Sung Pyo Jun, *op. cit.*, 14-17.

¹⁶ KyoungJae Kim, *op. cit.*, 272-229; Sung Pyo Jun, "The Potential for Religious Conflicts in Korea: A Comparison of Tolerance toward Other Religions and Social Issues Between Religious Groups, *Studies in Religion: The Journal of the Korean Association for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 49 (Winter, 2007): 76-82.

In a religious pluralistic society, it is absolutely necessary that the freedom of religious faith be secured as a fundamental human right, and the separation of religion and state is established in the constitution. Many religions coexist in most countries of the world, and the Republic of Korea is a typical religious pluralistic country in which there are many religions, but there is no religion in which the adherents are over 50% of the religious population.

Even though no religious war or severe strife among religions has taken place in the history of Korea, and the coexistence of religions is the historical legacy and reality that most Koreans regard as a natural actuality, we need to acknowledge that large and small scale conflicts between religions have happened in Korean society. As mentioned above, most critical religious conflicts have broken out between Buddhist and Protestant, and their main cause has been the pro-Protestant attitudes and policies of government or public service personnel.

The Korean government has been awakened to the severity of religious prejudice, and has made a move to accepting the Buddhist's requests to revise laws and organize a committee for preventing religious discrimination in the public sphere. But while these measures are necessary, they are not sufficient for peaceful religious coexistence. It is more important for the government to keep the enduring policy for uprooting religious discrimination and to pour all efforts into education for understanding the value of freedom in religion.

One fact we have to pay attention to is that the local differences between numbers of Buddhists and Christians keep increasing in the two regions in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, Gyeongsang and Jeolla. We know that the most critical local conflicts have taken place between these two areas in modern times, and as found above, the difference in political orientation is by no means negligible. In my opinion, we have to concentrate our concern on the possibility that local conflict may combine with religious prejudice. The peaceful coexistence of religions is not a gift given naturally from heaven but a reality we need to make for ourselves on this earth.

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