

# **On the Discourse of Religious Freedom in Modern Korea: *Freedom of Conscience vs. Freedom of the Church***

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## **Introduction**

Article 20 of the Republic of Korea's present day constitution is composed of two clauses that state, "All citizens enjoy the freedom of religion" (clause 1), and "No state religion may be recognized, and church and state are to be separated" (clause 2). These two clauses mean that the Korean constitution guarantees freedom of religion for all citizens by maintaining a separation of church and state and by not recognizing any official state religion. Thus, while the constitution clearly specifies freedom of religion as one of the fundamental human rights, in fact the true meaning and scope of this right, as well as its limits, have become points of debate and conflict.

This paper will elucidate the characteristic of the current discourse on freedom of religion and its production, distribution, and consumption in Korean Society. The current problem related to freedom of religion does not concern an individual's freedom of conscience, but rather the freedoms of the church, as religious organizations. Occasionally problems arise due to an individual's refusal,

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based on religious beliefs, of military service or blood transplants, yet a much more significant problem is the emergence of powerful religious organizations that are able to push through with their own agendas regardless of governmental or social restraints by using freedom of religion as a shield.

As these powerful religious organizations make use of freedom of religion for their own institutional ends, they tend to repress the freedom of conscience belonging to members within the organization. In other words, while these religious groups conducted missionary activities, which were tinged with expansionism, in hopes of achieving a monopoly within the religious market place, internally they restrict their members' freedom of religion by constructing an authoritarian structure. Freedom of religious institutions is repressing the individual's freedom of conscience. Therefore, in order to understand the discourse today in Korean society about freedom of religion, one must take a close look at the relationship between the freedom of a religious organization and an individual's freedom of conscience.

This paper will examine the historical conditions within Korea that have led to this peculiar situation. The introduction and active deployment of the discourse on freedom of religion in Korean society began in tandem with the formation of a modern society—it emerged and spread during the period of Japanese occupation and the opening to the West, just as Korea began importing Western ideas of modernity. First it will be necessary to look at what role discourse on religious freedom played in the formation of modern Western society. Then it will be necessary to examine how modern religion and modern intellectuals vitally influenced the formation of the discourse on religious freedom. In other words, this paper will analyze the differences between the ways in which the representative religions of Catholicism and Protestantism approach freedom of religion, as well as the two main positions, state-centered and citizen-centered, taken toward modern religion by the intellectual class. Finally, this paper will examine the effect of this discourse on contemporary Korean society.

## Modernity and the Discourse on Religious Freedom in Western Europe

Religious freedom in Western European society originated with the Judaic and Christian traditions, however our current understanding of the freedom of religion arose with the formation of modern society. Western Europe's rise to modernity is marked by the collapse of the Christendom, symbolizing the authoritarian system of the Catholic Church, and the emergence of the modern nation-state. The discourse on freedom of religion can be said to be a product of this process.

The Reformation and religious wars were direct causes of the formation of the discourse on religious freedom. Through the Reformation movement, numerous sects emerged and competed with one another, putting cracks in the might of Christendom. As this happened, many smaller Christian kingdoms emerged that used a certain sect as the basis for their nations' power and authority.<sup>1</sup> The dictum "The religion of the monarch is the religion of the people (*Cuius regio eius religio*)" symbolized the concept of "state-church." With this concept, although the many smaller Christian kingdoms thus formed sought unification through the religious wars, no single sect was able to achieve supremacy over the others. This historical context brought about disgust with religious absolutism while providing the basis for religious tolerance built upon religious relativism.

It was the Enlightenment that provided the theoretical foundation for religious freedom and tolerance. Of particular import was deism, which criticized "revealed religion" while advocating natural religion based upon man's rational reasoning. Deism deemed the oppression of heretics and religious wars to be the acts of mere fanatics, and instead it promoted tolerance. Deism's main tenet joined together reason and religion, requiring that a man look to the former, to that point of commonality linking all of humanity, to free himself from religious

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1. Peter Berger, *Jonggyo-wa sahoe*, trans. Yi Yang-gu (Seoul: Chongno Book Center, 1981), pp. 154-155; originally published as *The Social Reality of Religion*.

bias.<sup>2</sup> Deism was conducive to both the universalizing and abstracting of modern religion.<sup>3</sup>

While deism played an important role in the universalizing and abstracting of religion, romanticism and pietism played an enormously significant role in the internalization and privatization of religion. Romanticism and pietism both criticized the enlightenment thinkers for their overemphasis on intellectualism, and these two lines of thought searched for religion's true meaning not within the rules and tenets of the religion, but rather within the emotions and life experiences of the individual. This allowed religious doctrine to be criticized rationally, and moved religion into a very private space within each individual.

It can be said that Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Pietism made up part of a greater epistemological framework of modernity. The modernity of Western Europe is an immensely intricate structure, but most importantly it stands upon the foundation of the individual. This is not to say that the concept of the individual did not exist before modernity. Nevertheless, the individual as a basic unit of society and an epistemological entity has become a unique and essential element of modern society.

The individual's rise above the restraints and authority of tradition and ecclesiastical powers made him subject of the modern era, and this rise to prominence led to discussions on the freedoms of the individual. The individual as a free actor in the modern world demanded freedom from external interference and equality with other individuals.<sup>4</sup> Carrying through this demand, the individual was guaranteed a variety of rights that were held absolutely supreme within

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2. Allen W. Wood, "Deism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, pp. 262-264.

3. Peter van der Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity," in *The Fundamentalism Project, Accounting for Fundamentalisms: the Dynamic Character of Movements*, p. 658.

4. Jang Seok-man, "Gaehanggi hanguk sahoe-ui 'jonggyo' gaeyeom hyeongseong-e gwanhan yeon-gu" (A Study of Korean Views on Religion during the Opening of the Country to the West) (Ph.D. dissertation, Seoul National University, 1992), pp. 21-22.

the framework of modernity.

Yet the very absoluteness of the individual's rights entailed inherent conflicts. In the event that every individual's rights were truly extended without limit, there would inevitably arise conflicts with the rights of other individuals, and when taken to an extreme, this logic leads to every individual's freedom being threatened. Therefore, encountering this situation, the free individual will create society in order to iron out conflicting interests through rational calculation. The civil society formed in this process is distinctly separate from the state.<sup>5</sup> The separation of public and private, a unique feature of modernity, arose in connection with the formation of a relationship between the individual and society. Thus the economy and politics, centering around the institutions of the market and the state, became public domain, while the family and the individual were relegated to the private domain.<sup>6</sup>

The principle of the separation of church and state arose within this process of defining the bounds of the public and private. Basically the political world called for this principle requiring a separation between religious and political spheres. Politics in the modern world was essentially a public realm ruled by reason that was incompatible with religion, which was a realm ruled by the supernatural and irrational, thus making it quite necessary to prevent the latter's involvement in the former. However, religion in the modern world could not be completely eliminated. Instead, religion was allotted a kind of protected area. This protected area was the private domain, and it was in this domain that religious freedom is guaranteed.

Within this private domain, individuals formed group entities, or churches based on free expressions of faith. The religious group enti-

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5. Ibid.

6. In the event that emphasis is placed on the separation of "state" and "civil society," it can be said that politics and the government belong to the public domain, while economics and civil society belong to the private domain. Shlomo Avineri, *Karl Marx-ui sahoe sasang-gwa jeongchi sasang*, trans. Yi Hong-gu (Seoul: Kachi, 1983), pp. 36-41; originally published as *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*.

ties of modern Western Europe, formed by the free will of the individual, are perfect representatives of voluntary associations. The state does not interfere in the matters of this type of church as long as this church does not involve itself in the public domain. This represents the freedom of the church. At the same time, members of the church possess the right to be free of oppression from church authorities regarding matters of faith. This is known as freedom of faith, or freedom of conscience.

To summarize, the religious freedom of modern, Western European society is composed of both the individual's freedom of faith and also the freedom of the church. These two types of freedom are only guaranteed within the private domain. A special characteristic of modern Western society is that, in the event that a conflict arises between the individual's freedom of conscience and the church's freedom, the individual's freedom of conscience takes precedence. The church within Western European society is built upon the individual's freedom of faith, thus permitting the individual to freely leave the church at any time his freedom of faith is oppressed or threatened by the church authorities, to form a new religious group entity. The essence of Western European society is the individual, and this individual's freedom of faith and conscience, within the domain of religious freedom, are accorded the highest importance.

## **Introduction of Western European Religion and the Discourse on Freedom of Religion**

### *Catholicism*

Throughout Enlightenment and Reformation period, the discourse of religious freedom obtained hegemony in modern Western society. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church did not acknowledge freedom of religion within its organization. During the so-called "age of Popes Pius" from the end of the eighteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church maintained that freedom

in choosing and adhering to any religion would destroy the Catholic Church, and termed such freedom of religion a monster. This attitude is based on their logic that abstract truth, not the individual, is the holder of freedoms, and other misguided religions were the object of tolerance not the subject of freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In a society where Catholicism was the religion of the majority such a rigid stance might have been possible, but in a society where Catholicism was in the minority it was difficult for the Catholic Church to uphold its principle of intolerance. Particularly when faced with competition from native religions or pressure from states as yet un-Christianized, the Catholic Church could not help but actively promote the idea of religious freedom in order to justify its proselytizing activities.

Accordingly, in an epistle by a missionary who had carried out his work in secret in nineteenth-century Joseon (Chosŏn), the words “freedom of religion” (*la liberté religieuse*) frequently appear. Father Pourthié referred to Joseon in a letter as “a country with absolutely no intention of permitting freedom of religion,”<sup>8</sup> and Bishop Berneux said “the hope that freedom of religion would come to Joseon has proven ill founded.”<sup>9</sup> In *A History of the Catholic Church in Joseon*, written by Dallet, the author says, “If we had demanded in Joseon the same freedom of religion that we have just secured in China,” freedom of religion would have been accepted in Joseon, too.<sup>10</sup> As can be seen from these writings, the Catholic Church promoted or oppressed free-

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7. For a more concrete understanding of the Catholic Church’s position on religious freedom, see *A Record of the Second Vatican Meeting* 5 (1993); Ku Byeong-jin, “Gatolik gyohoe-wa jonggyo jayu” (The Catholic Church and Freedom of Religion) I, *Sinhak jeonmang* (Journal of Catholic Theology) (spring 1981); “Jonggyo jayu-wa in-gwon—Jonggyo jayu-ui yulli sinhakjeok gochal” (Religious Freedom and Human Rights—A Moral and Theological View on Freedom of Religion), *Hyeondae gatollik sasang* (Contemporary Catholic Thought) 2 (1988).

8. Ch. Dallet, *Histoire de l’église de Corée*, tome II (Paris: Librairie Victor Palme, 1874), p. 443.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

dom of religion as appropriate to the situation, maintaining a double stance that persisted until the Second Vatican Council.<sup>11</sup> To the French missionaries working in Joseon at the time, freedom of religion simply meant “Freedom of Catholicism.”

In the France-Korea Treaty of 1886, the French side insisted on the inclusion of the ambiguous term “enlighten”(教誨). The French missionaries took the inclusion of this term as permission from the Joseon government to conduct missionary activities, while the Korean government had not meant the inclusion of this term as any kind of formal statement allowing such missionary work. However, the missionary activities of the Catholic Church from the time of this treaty were given a kind of tacit approval by the Korean government. The combination of this tacit approval and the missionaries’ rights of extra-territoriality imparted upon these Westerners great power. As Catholic missionaries appeared to Joseon people to be possessing strong power even the royal court could not control, society’s weak began to convert to Catholicism in order to take advantage of the missionaries’ extra-territorial rights and the “power” of Catholicism, rather than out of their own faith and religious conscience. In this way, some Catholics began using the church to pursue worldly benefits, thus leading to repeated clashes with local officials and citizens. In attempts to resolve these clashes, concordats between the Joseon government and the missionaries were signed on several occasions.

The key contents of the first Concordat (1899), the second Concordat (1901), and the third Concordat (1904), signed between the Catholic Church and the Joseon government, basically state that missionaries can not take part in administrative state affairs, and government officials can not interfere in missionary activities.<sup>12</sup> Through

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11. This is similar to the case of the Puritans, who preached freedom of religion when they were the minority in Europe, but who then did not heed this idea once they became the majority in the New World. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), pp. 16-37.

12. “傳教師毋得于預行政 行政官勿得關涉 傳教事.” (article 2).



these agreements, the Korean government and the Catholic Church relegated government business and church business each to its own particular domain and thereby took the first steps in defining and recognizing, according to the modern understanding of the term, the separation of church and state. Yet these agreements mention only the distinction between the roles of government and the church, not an individual's freedom of faith.

Later the Catholic Church sought to further this principle through the church published newspaper *Kyunghyang Shinmun*. An editorial stated, "All will be well if the state attends to worldly affairs to ensure happiness in this world, and the church attends to the affairs of the afterworld to attain happiness there."<sup>13</sup> This article clearly stated the logic that the state must watch over worldly business and the church must watch over business pertaining to the next world. Furthermore, the government's role was defined as follows:

The government has two responsibilities. One is to avoid impairing religion or morality and to punish those who do so; the vital importance to each man of religion and morality must be recognized. Those who disparage the value of religion and morality are a danger to all men and as such they must be punished just as one who commits any other act of evil. Furthermore, in conducting its business through laws and state officials, the government must not act contrary to religion or morality. The second responsibility of the government goes beyond merely ensuring that morality and religion are not disparaged; that is, the government must actively assist morality and religion to prosper.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, morals and religion are essential to man, and thus the state must not only protect them both, but also promote them. At the same time, this newspaper stressed that the church must not interfere in worldly affairs and must not break the laws of the state.<sup>15</sup> Further-

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13. "The Purpose of a State," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 19 November 1909.

14. "The Government Helps the People," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 16 December 1910.

15. "The Purpose of a State," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 19 November 1909.

more, by stating, "It is unavoidable that we follow all laws,"<sup>16</sup> the church acknowledges that even bad laws must be obeyed. The church showed its political adaptation to the Japanese annexation of Korea in stating, "The Church chooses to absolutery not interfere in politics, and this political stand is consistent before and after the annexation of Korea."<sup>17</sup> and "The Catholic Church will not interfere in politics, unlike other newspapers."<sup>18</sup> In this way the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* clearly expressed its non-political stance. This stance was maintained by the Catholic Church throughout the Japanese occupation.

It cannot be said that the realm of the state and the realm of religion do not run counter each other. However, the Catholic Church strives to be a support to the state and does not obstruct the state in the conducting of its affairs. For did Christ not say, give unto heaven its due, and give unto Caesar his due.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the modern Catholic Church in Korea strove to preserve a principle requiring the state to avoid interfering in church affairs, and it voluntarily ruled out its own involvement in politics. This aimed to the spread and acceptance of religious freedom. The most important matter for the church at the time was attaining the government's acceptance of missionary activities and its active protection of the whole church structure within the system of state laws. Therefore the Catholic Church's approach to religious freedom focused on preserving freedom of action for the church as an institution, while there was relatively little attention given to an individual's freedom of faith. In short, in the modern Catholic Church in Korea was established a discourse on freedom of religion by focusing on the "freedom of the church."

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16. "Strict Regulation for Private Schools," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 18 September 1908.

17. "A Word on Annexation," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 9 September 1910.

18. Ibid.

19. *Gatollik cheongnyeon* (The Young Catholic) (February 1935): p. 18.

### *Protestantism*

Protestants came from the United States at the time that Korea opened to the West and were well aware of the trials that the Catholic Church had faced. Rather than petitioning the Joseon government directly for permission to conduct missionary activities, the Protestants engaged in indirect missionary work such as building schools and hospitals in order to lay a foundation for later direct missionary activities. Shortly thereafter the Catholic Church obtained, through a series of agreements with the government, permission to freely conduct missionary work. The Protestant Church also benefitted from these same agreements. In such a way, the modern Protestant Church in Korea was lucky enough to secure freedom of religion without any theoretical or actual conflicts.

In 1901, a resolution of Presbyterian Congregational Council for Missions offers a good illustration of the Protestant conception of religious freedom. There are five articles to this resolution, but the fourth is the most interesting. It proclaims, "The church shall not force any church member to participate in state affairs, nor shall it prohibit such participation. Also, if any church member commits some mistake or crime vis-à-vis the state, this is not a matter which the church is responsible, nor is it a matter which the church should conceal."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the church would not interfere with a church member's individual political activities.

However, more than emphasizing the individual's freedom of conscience, this resolution stresses the fact that the church does not take any responsibility for its members' political actions. This stance is clearly defined by the remaining four articles. 1) The minister shall not participate in politics. 2) The church will instruct its members that state affairs and church affairs are separate, and that state affairs are not to be conducted in the church. 3) The church will instruct its members to obey the law, government officials, and the emperor. 4)

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20. *Geuriseudo sinmun*, 3 October 1901.

Political matters shall not be discussed in the church.<sup>21</sup> In the final analysis, it can be seen that this resolution places emphasis on the “protection of the church” through compliance with the political powers of the state rather than on any guarantees of the church members’ freedom of conscience.<sup>22</sup>

If one examines the major incident in which the Protestant Church came into conflict with the Japanese authorities over the problem of securing religious freedom, it becomes very clear that freedom of the church was emphasized more than individual freedom of conscience. The first instance in which the Japanese Governor-General and the Protestant Church came into conflict over religious freedom revolved around religious education in the mission schools. The Governor-General at the time prohibited religious education in both private and public schools as part of the policy mandating a separation of religion and education. The Governor-General insisted that “religious dogma fell solely in the jurisdiction of the church, while the business of education fell entirely within the jurisdiction of the government,” and that “just as the government must not intervene in affairs of religion, the church must not interfere in political administration, particularly that administrative sphere of education.”<sup>23</sup>

In response to this, the Protestant missionaries stated, “In every country of the world, missionary schools possess the special right to hold religious ceremonies and to teach scripture,”<sup>24</sup> and thus continuously demanded freedom of religious education. The Governor-General then ruled that all schools having religious education as a required subject should be officially downgraded on the government’s ranking system of schools. They were no longer recognized as formal educational institutions. Despite the fact that this lack of official recognition by the government brought many disadvantages to

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21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. A. J. Brown, “Japanese Nationalism and Mission Schools in Chosen,” *International Review of Mission* (1919): p. 594.

24. Bureau of Education, Government-General, 『朝鮮の統治と基督教』 (Christianity and Governing Joseon) (1920), p. 48.

the students after graduation, the Presbyterian missionaries retained the religious education system and resigned themselves to their schools' greatly reduced position within the national educational hierarchy. This attempt by the Protestant missionaries to secure and maintain freedom for religious education in the mission schools is evidence that the missionaries considered these schools extremely important as grounds for missionary work. The operation of these schools was undertaken by Western missionaries themselves, so that in this particular incident there is no real indication of Korean church members' stance on religious freedom.

The Korean Protestant's position is more easily seen in the opposition movement to the law on religion. This law was first submitted to the Japanese imperial council in 1898, and after numerous revisions and rejections, it was finally passed in 1939. Each time the law was resubmitted to the council, there were, of course, minor corrections made. However, the main thrust of the law did not change. The law dealt with the control and restriction of religious organizations through the licensing of religious organizations, the qualification requirements of church leaders, and the incorporation of religious organizations.

In response to the passing of this law, the Korean Protestant Church embarked upon an opposition movement based on the following logic. "Politics has the political realm, and religion has the religious realm. Is not religion a matter of the soul, while politics deals with matters of state administration? One must not intrude upon the realm of the other."<sup>25</sup> In other words, state administration and control of matters that the church should rightly have the freedom to conduct runs contrary to the principle of a separation of church and state, and the contested law is a violation of the constitution's guarantee of religious freedom. This stance reveals the belief that freedom of religion has more to do with the freedoms of the church as an institution than

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25. Yun Tae-gyeong, "Jonggyobeop silsi-e gwanhan il gochal" (An Inquiry into the Implementation of Religious Law), *Gidok sinbo* (Christian News Weekly), 15 January 1936.

with an individuals freedom of conscience.

At the end of the era of Japanese occupation, enforcement of the law requiring all Koreans to worship the Japanese Shinto shrine threatened the Protestants' freedom of faith more than anything else. The Japanese government insisted that because worshipping the Shinto shrine was not termed a religious act but rather a duty of citizenship, every Japanese citizen regardless of faith had to participate. Nevertheless, most Protestants regarded worshipping the Japanese Shinto shrine as a kind of idolism, and as such it was seen as an act that ran counter to the tenets of the church and to their own conscience. Yet, the Korean church did not initiate any strong movement to oppose this forced worship, which was based on the freedom of conscience; only a minority of believers privately expressed their outrage.

It was the American Protestant missionaries, not the Korean church leaders, who actively opposed the worshipping of the Japanese Shinto shrine, based on an appreciation of the sanctity of freedom of conscience. G. S. McCune, then head of Sungsil School, sent a letter to the governor of Pyeongannam-do province, clarifying his attitude shortly before resigning from his post.

As a Christian, I believe I support the government and respect its officials. . . . In respect to the worship of the Japanese Shinto shrine, I understand the government's position that this is simply an act of patriotism. However, this worshipping is truly a matter related to religious belief. Furthermore, government officials have maintained that the government has no intention of forcing Christians to perform any actions that are offensive to their consciences.<sup>26</sup>

He said that he had made this decision after careful "consideration of the freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution." In contrast to McCune, the Korean Protestant leaders acquiesced in the mandatory

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26. Kim Seung-tae, ed., *Hanguk gidokgyo-wa sinsa chambae munje* (Korean Christianity and the Worshipping of the Japanese Shinto Shrine) (Seoul: Institute for Korean Church History, 1991), p. 382.

worship in order to protect the church as an institution rather than to defend freedom of conscience. Most sects of the Protestant church eventually yielded to outside pressure and the government's line that the worship was a non-religious activity by permitting the worshipping of the Japanese Shinto shrine. Yet, the Presbyterian church stood apart in reiterating that its constitution protected both freedom of the church and freedom of conscience.

The sole master of the conscience is the Almighty. He has bestowed upon us freedom of conscience, and as for worship and our faith, he has allowed us to be free from teachings and commands that contradict his Holy Word. Man is not to be restrained in his expressions of faith, and has the right to judge matters of religion according to his own conscience. None can be denied this right. . . . The church does not rest upon the power of the state. It is only to be hoped that the state will protect the religious institutions within it, and treat them without discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The ability of the Presbyterian Church to resist the enforcement of the mandatory worshipping of the Japanese Shinto shrine longer than other religions stems from the strict adherence to its constitution, in which both the freedom of the church and the freedom of conscience are guaranteed. Yet in the end, even the Presbyterians sacrificed freedom of conscience for the protection of the church by permitting worship of the Japanese Shinto shrine, which was so clearly offensive to the freedom of faith.

As seen above, although the Protestant Church under the Japanese occupation varied somewhat according to particular sect, for the most part, these protestant religions placed much more stress on freedom of the church than on the individual's freedom of conscience.

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27. *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church of Korea* (1934), pp. 65-66.

## Formation of Modernity and Discourse on Freedom of Religion

While the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, as one religious organization, opened the discussion on religious freedom in the context of missionary work, modern intellectuals debated religious freedom outside the context of any specific religion. These intellectuals can be divided into citizen-centered or state-centered, according to whether they stressed the rights of the citizens or the rights of the state. The former emphasized the utmost importance of freedom for the individual and the individual's rights, while the latter gave precedence to the state's rights under the assumption that individual rights can only be guaranteed if the state's rights are secure. Each camp differed in its approach to religious freedom.

### *State-Centered Thought and a State Religion*

A great number of intellectuals at the time that Korea opened to the West advocated the reformation of Korea into a strong modern state in order to confront the imperialistic encroachments from Japan and the West. They divided the indicators of a strong nation into tangible factors, such as intellectual power, military might, and financial power, and intangible factors, and placed religion in the latter category.<sup>28</sup> Here, intangible power was considered as a driving force behind tangible power.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, intellectuals believed that a national spirit of independence could be preserved and national sovereignty restored as long as the intangible power of religion was protected, even if tangible factors such as wealth and military might were weak.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, at this time there was not just one religion. Traditional reli-

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28. "Competition among Religions," *Daehan maeil sinbo* (Korea Daily News), 12 July 1907.

29. "Building a Strong Nation through Religion," *Daehan maeil sinbo*, 1 December 1905.

30. *Ibid.*



gions such as Confucianism and Buddhism, religions from the West such as Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as other newly formed religions, all competed with each other. Intellectuals likened the situation to “ten brains existing in one person,”<sup>31</sup> and insisted on the establishment of a strong state religion to remedy this chaos.

The world’s powers each have a religion by which they lead their people. Now in Korea, though there are often calls for freedom of religion, there is no such religion, however it would do the nation much good if the state formally proclaimed a state religion.<sup>32</sup>

This quote notes that the Western countries grew in power by establishing a state religion, and it deplores the constant demands in Korea for freedom of religion. It also calls for the establishment of a state religion in Korea. Exactly which religion this should be it does not say, however in the expression “we must choose a religion that best preserves our national character and allows the introduction of new knowledge”<sup>33</sup> it can be inferred that the intellectuals considered Western Christianity and the traditional Confucianism to be implicit alternatives. Christianity, particularly Protestantism, was seen as the mark of civilization, while Confucianism was seen as an effective means of uniting the people spiritually.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, state-centered thought, faced with the special crises of the time, considered the state and state’s rights to be of greater importance than the individual and the citizen’s rights, and led to a passive stance towards religious freedom, which could only be built upon a foundation of individual freedom and rights. This stance, in the extreme, led to the advocacy of a state religion with which an individual’s freedom of religion could not easily coexist. Yet, the idea of a state religion as advocated by the state-centered line of thought dif-

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31. “The Future of Religion in Korea,” *Daehan maeil sinbo*, 18 May 1910.

32. “Religious Wars,” *Daehan hakhoe wolbo* (The Korean Society Monthly), 25 October 1908.

33. “The Future of Religion in Korea,” *Daehan maeil sinbo*, 18 May 1910.

34. Jang Seok-man, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-57.

ferred from the concept of Confucian state already in existence since the founding of the Joseon dynasty. This difference arose from the fact that state-centered thought had already absorbed Western Europe's notions of modernity. While the Confucian state did not differentiate between politics and religion, or the state and religion, state-centered thought both differentiated between these two realms and sought to employ religion as an engine promoting national unity under the nation-state system. Given this fact, state-centered thought was similar to the Western view of religion in the era of absolutism, which held that "without religious unity national unity could not be easily achieved,"<sup>35</sup> and thus attempted to take religion as a driving force behind nation building. Then, as the country fell under the rule of Japan, the colonial authorities inherited this view under the slogan of "Shintoism as state religion."

### *Citizen-Centered Thought and Freedom of Religion*

Supporters of state-centered thought looked for the driving force behind Western civilization in the idea of a state religion. In contrast, supporters of citizen-centered thought looked for this driving force in the notion of freedom. The citizen-centered thinkers saw Luther's Reformation as the starting point of Western ideas on freedom.

Under the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church, many countries of medieval Europe were denied ideological, academic, and political freedom, thus creating a world of darkness. Martin Luther, perhaps the greatest man of the sixteenth century, brought about an event that laid the foundations of modern civilization. Finally man was able to live a free life, science and culture advanced, and it became possible to begin the construction of a free political society. . . . The worst abuse brought on by religious despotism is the binding of man's soul and intellect, the repression of his talents and potential. Thus, if the condition of slavery is not done away with, how can man build a civilization based on free thought and the expected

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35. Leo Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 26.

realization of civilization based on his potential?<sup>36</sup>

Thus, despite the fact that the absolutism of the Catholic Church oppressed the academic thinking of the people and imposed restraints on their political activities, through Luther's Reformation in the sixteenth century great developments in knowledge and culture were in fact made, and freedom in political society became a real possibility. These developments related to the freedom of ideas served as the foundation upon which modern civilization was built.

Discussions of freedom as it is defined in modern society emerged at this time as an important topic of intellectual discussion. Yu Seong-jun, younger brother of the enlightenment thinker Yu Gil-jun, had this to say about the freedom of ideas.

As the most spiritual of all things in the world, man received his defining characteristic [reason] from Heaven and has unlimited freedom to use both his mind and body as he sees fit. Thus man, an independent entity, is not inextricably bound to do either right or wrong within himself, nor is he to be dominated by the thoughts of others externally. In choosing between good and evil man simply follows his own consciousness, and he will not bear being forced by anyone to accept or perform ideas or actions that stand contrary to his personal beliefs.<sup>37</sup>

To Yu Seong-jun, man is born with the inherent and divine right to make use of both his body and soul as he sees fit, without interference from any other man. Modern freedom as defined by enlightenment thinkers of that time was an inclusive term encompassing such notions as the freedom of body and the right to live, the right to own property, freedom of occupation, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech. Freedom of religion was always mentioned as one among many. Yu Gil-jun explained freedom of religion like this.

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36. *Hwangseong sinmun*, 20 November 1909.

37. Yu Seong-jun, *Beophak tongnon* (An Introduction to Law) (Seoul: The Asian Culture Press, 1981), p. 384.

Freedom of religion allows the faithful to follow the high and noble teachings of the church with a joyous heart, and to return to paradise free of repression and oppression. Duty of religion demands that those converted be accepted into the larger church community and that the rules of the church be made explicit. Therefore, to the extent that such actions do not greatly obstruct the peace of the nation, every person must do his own works, and none shall be subject to manipulation by others.<sup>38</sup>

Religion is a matter to be left to an individual's free choice. There must be no outside restraints imposed on an individual's choice of religion, and this freedom must be guaranteed even when believers gather and make rules for their church, as long as such rules do not violate the national law.

Although enlightenment intellectuals of the time maintained that religious freedom was one of many of the people's freedoms, its value was overshadowed by the international and domestic crises then facing the country and threatening the state. Bak Yeong-hyo, an enlightenment intellectual and a member of the group supporting Korea's opening to the west, wrote in his proposal to the King entitled "Gaehwa so" (Memorial on Enlightenment) (1888) that in religion existed the root of the people's enlightenment, and thus the country could only prosper if religion prospered. He hoped to strengthen the nation by reviving Confucianism, the traditional religion of Korea that had withered away. His opinions were in line with those of the state-centered thinkers.

However, believing that all things have their season, he saw that the time to attempt a restoration of Confucianism had passed, and he affirmed, "religion should be left to the freedom of the believer. The government must not interfere."<sup>39</sup> Despite this view, he included in

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38. Yu Gil-jun, *Seoyu gyeonmun* (Observation on a Journey to the West) (Seoul: Dayang Seojeok, 1973), p. 384.

39. Yi Gwang-nin and Sin Yong-ha, eds., *Saryo-ro bon hanguk munhwasa—geundae pyeon* (Sourcebook of Korean Civilization: Early Joseon) (Seoul: Iljisa Publishing House, 1984), pp. 119-122.

his proposal an article stressing that Christian missionary activities should not then be allowed.<sup>40</sup> Thus, he acknowledged freedom of religion while at the same time maintaining a negative view of the introduction of Western religions. This kind of dual stance can be said to characterize discourses on religious freedom at this time of national crisis.

Yu Gil-jun, an enlightenment thinker representative of his peers, held a similar view of freedom of religion. He raised the question of whether it would be feasible to tax the people to support a particular religion. He suggested a hypothetical situation. That is, some people insisted on giving financial support to religion because it made the world beautiful and nurtured love among believers.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, others argued that the provision of such financial support was not really practical, as there was more than just one religion, and to choose one at the expense of another would be an offense against the people's freedom of choice.<sup>42</sup> Those opposing financial aid to any faith pointed out that even if aid were offered to many religions in order to remedy the bias of supporting just one, the complexity of the endeavor would make it nearly impossible to carry out. They also indicated that such a policy would disgruntle some people and thereby lead to disturbing the tranquility of the state.<sup>43</sup> Referring to this problem, Yu Gil-jun offers a solution based on the people's level of education.

The traditions and customs of our country have not yet advanced beyond a rudimentary level, and as a result, the education of our citizens is not carried out on a widespread or systematic basis, leaving the public mind far from fully developed. For this reason, implementation of the first recommendation seems to be the better choice. Because the citizens are not educated, they cannot judge between good and bad for themselves and accordingly they tend to become engrossed in licentious lives and fall prey to the seduction

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40. *Ibid.*

41. Yu Gil-jun, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

of strange and uncanny ways. The foolish look only to distinguish between worldly fortune and woe, and the poor poison their hearts with thoughts of riches, all of which has thrown our country's traditions into a great confusion.<sup>44</sup>

As people held a low level of education, "they can not judge between good and bad for themselves," and are likely to fall into strange and unnatural means of searching for pleasure and riches, and this made chaos of the peoples' spiritual and mundane lives. "Because following the second recommendation would cause much damage, the government must exert effort to maintain a religion esteemed by the nation so that the peoples' lives and spiritual growth are not cut short."<sup>45</sup> However, there was also a provision stating that believers of religions other than that supported by the government should not be forced to abandon their faith, and moreover, these non-state religions should enjoy the protection of the government.<sup>46</sup> This is because all religions possess in common that "quality of justice that respects the state and that sense of integrity that honors the king."<sup>47</sup> He maintained that if all the citizens were sufficiently educated, the government would have no right to interfere in religious matters, and in such a case, taxes collected to support a state religion could not be justified.<sup>48</sup>

In this way, Yu Gil-jun, despite his recognition of freedom of religion as a basic ingredient of a civilized nation, deemed it inevitable to allow government to temporally support a specific religion in its favor given the peculiar circumstances of the time. In other words, until the Korean people had attained a certain cultural enlightenment through education, it was deemed necessary and proper for the government to guide the religious lives of its citizens.

Even the citizen-centered thinkers who, unlike the state-centered thinkers, considered freedom of religion to be a basic human right

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44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

drew limits around this freedom when the country was just opening to the West. For this reason, in modern Korean society the individual's freedom of conscience and faith were not emphasized to the same degree as the freedoms of the nation.

## **Conclusion**

As has been demonstrated, the development of religious freedom in Korean society is closely tied to the development of modernity during the opening to the West and the Japanese occupation. Ideas of religious freedom first arose as a product of Catholic and Protestant missionary work, and then these ideas became widespread through the interplay of the citizen-centered and state-centered thinkers. Essentially, the concept of religious freedom in Korea emerged along with the rise of modern religion and the formation of a modern society.

In contrast to modern Western society, which stressed above all else individual freedom from rigid conventions and ecclesiastical authority, Korean society emphasized freedom of the nation and the group in order to meet successfully the challenges and threats posed by Western power. In other words, Korean society emphasized the importance of the group, such as the state or the nation, more than that of the individual. The challenges of the time had a definite effect on notions of religious freedom in Korea. The state-centered thinkers, stressing the need to build a strong nation-state, believed that a flood of religious freedoms would detract from the unity of the people and that the establishment of a strong state religion was necessary to prevent this national fragmentation. Using different logic to arrive at a similar conclusion, the supporters of individual rights, the citizen-centered thinkers, were willing to accept the government's intervention in the religious marketplace until the people had attained a certain cultural maturity through education. Between the two positions held by the citizen-centered and the state-centered thinkers, there was no room for emphasis on the individual's religious freedom.

Yet, at the time of Korea's opening to the West, the supreme task

of the Catholic and Protestant churches was to secure freedom of proselytizing activities from state power. Both religions strove to attain this goal by calling on adherence to the principle of separation between church and state. In other words, rather than charging the political power with injustice, the Catholic and Protestant churches submitted to this system and demanded the allocation of a small, protected sphere of operations as the price of their submission. Both religions expanded the freedom of the church through their dealings with the government, though they devoted relatively little attention to the individual's freedom of conscience.

The problems of group selfishness and authoritarianism that are currently being exposed within Korean Christianity have their roots in these historical developments. Korean Christianity, which has grown into a massive social force, has insulated its repressive inner structure from social criticism and observation by extolling the virtues of religious and church freedoms. One of the internal causes perpetuating this repressive structure is the church's historical lack of experience with freedom of conscience. When Korean Christianity used the separation of church and state to insulate itself from social and state scrutiny and erect an internal authoritarian structure, the layman's freedom of conscience could not act as a restraint to the church's power. Therefore, in the future, discussions on freedom of religion in Korea must focus more on the dynamic relationship between freedom of conscience and freedom of the church.