

Ultimate concerns: religion, the state and the nation in Korea

The summer of 2008 saw protests in Seoul against the perceived lack of *laïcité* of the administration of President Lee Myung-bak. A permanent protest centre was established in the city centre with panels informing the public about the transgressions of the government. The climax was a large demonstration in which as many as 200,000 people took part. However, as Boudewijn Walraven reveals, the protest was not inspired by Korean followers of Richard Dawkins and not at all directed against religion itself.

Boudewijn Walraven



IT WAS THE MAIN TEMPLE of *Chogye-jong*, Korea's most prominent Buddhist order, that hosted the headquarters of the protests and many, if not most, of the protesters were Buddhist monks and nuns who had come from all over the country to vent their anger. They judged, not entirely without reason, that Lee Myung-bak, a Presbyterian elder, condoned pro-Christian pronouncements by his officials that contravened the religious neutrality that might be expected from the state. Someone familiar with Charles Taylor's assertion that secularism in the West is an offshoot of Christianity,¹ would perhaps have expected things to be the other way around, with Christians, who have accepted a Western religion and with it many Western values, as the champions of secularism against the Buddhists. This prompts the question what meaning secularism has for Korea.

Until the end of *Koryŏ* dynasty (918-1392) Buddhism, then the dominant religion, was closely tied to the state. As Sem Vermeersch has stated '...political power was often articulated in terms of Buddhist symbols or ideas. Buddhism was especially invoked to justify the *Koryŏ* kings' right to rule: in a relationship of mutual dependence, the king relied upon the dharma, but the dharma also needed the protection of the king.'² At the same time, however, Buddhism did not enjoy a monopoly and one person could very well be a pious Buddhist as well as a staunch Confucian. The potential of a possible conflict between the two creeds only became a significant actuality when, at the end of the *Koryŏ* period, Neo-Confucianism, with its more ambitious philosophical or metaphysical claims, garnered a following in Korea. This heralded the 'Confucian transformation of Korea', which began in earnest in 1392 when a dynastic change put an end to the dominance of Buddhism and started a process that aimed to make Confucianism the only officially acceptable orthodoxy and a blueprint for the social order.³

There is no doubt that the Confucian view of the universe became the ultimate concern of the literati, who in their fervour did not hesitate to resort to iconoclastic violence to destroy shamanic and Buddhist temples. Nevertheless, Confucianism never managed to establish a true monopoly, except in the public sphere. There, by the second half of the *Chosŏn* period all other creeds and cults – whether shamanic, Daoist or Buddhist – had been eliminated, while everyone in the ruling elite was expected publicly to adhere strictly to mainline Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.⁴ In this respect, Korea was different from both China and Japan. The state tried to limit rituals to those that were acceptable to Confucians and attempted to prescribe exactly who was allowed to perform what rites. The result was a ritual structure that above the level of ancestor worship neatly coincided with the administrative structure, with the king at the apex, as the state's high priest.⁵ The sacred order, in other words, was immanent in the social order, and consequently completely centred on man. *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* (What Ignorant Youths Should Learn First), a popular primer of Confucian teachings in *Chosŏn* Korea, states this at the outset: 'Among the ten thousand beings between Heaven and Earth it is Man who is the most noble, and this is because only man possesses the Five Bonds [i.e. the values that regulate the most important human relationships]'.⁶

The humanism of Confucianism

It is tempting to compare the human-centred ideology of *Chosŏn* Confucianism with some of Charles Taylor's statements about the origins of secularism: 'I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularism in my sense [that is, as a state in which people have the conscious option to believe or not] has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option' and '...the general understanding of the human predicament before modernity placed us in an order in which we were not at the top.'⁶ Of course, Taylor aims to explain the genesis of secularism in the West and does not formulate a theory with pretensions to universal validity. It is possible, however, to see parallel developments in East Asia, albeit that the specific conditions were very different. It is my contention that in *Chosŏn* Korea Confucianism as the dominant creed created a very similar state of affairs, propagating an ideology of a 'purely self-sufficient humanism', in which man stood at the top and that, as in the West, a religious view that regarded the sacred as immanent in the worldly order was an essential step in the direction of secularism, if we take the term as denoting an order that was centred on man rather than the divine. Consequently, Confucianism as it flourished during the *Chosŏn* period also had a lasting impact on Korea's religious configuration even after it had gone into a decline itself, fundamentally influencing the way other religions were seen and are seen, even today. A tendency came into being to judge all religions in terms of the contribution they make to human society.

It is clear, though, that the humanism of Confucianism did not necessarily or immediately imply secularism in the full sense of the word. If theism was more important in Confucianism, I would be tempted to call *Chosŏn* Korea a theocracy, because its officials were also its priests. All rituals explicitly sanctioned by the state, except ancestral rituals, were performed by the king and his bureaucracy. By the end of the *Chosŏn* period, however, even before the dynasty formally ended, the legitimacy of the Confucian state and its sacred nature was undermined by external and internal challenges. To use Peter Berger's terminology, the 'sacred canopy' of Confucianism, so intimately linked to the administrative apparatus, lost its 'plausibility structure' due to the government's failure to find adequate solutions to the problems of the times. The nearly universal consensus that the Confucian state embodied the sacred order disappeared for ever.

The notion of the Confucian state as sacred disappeared, but not the idea that the nation embodied an ultimate, sacred value. Modern historians are often inclined to see the origin of the nation-state in Korea as something of recent times, after Korea had come into contact with the West. There is substantial evidence, however, that even before that a widely accepted concept of an imagined community already existed; a political unity with clearly delineated borders, a common history and common customs, in which all layers of the population had a stake. This concept was largely Confucian in origin and elaboration and as such, in the early *Chosŏn* period, had probably not yet filtered down to the classes below the *yangban* elite. For the second half of the *Chosŏn* period, though, there are good reasons to assume



Left: Portrait of Holy Mother Mary with Child Jesus in Korea. Painting by Jang Woo-Seong (1912-2005). The painting is displayed at the bishop's residence of the Myeongdong Cathedral.



Left: A Confucian ritual ceremony in Jeju, South Korea. Photograph by Joonghijung at Flickr.com

that Confucian values in general – and the concept of the nation in particular – reached more and more people, and touched even those who were completely illiterate. Songs sung during shamanic rituals, which were popular among the lower classes but abhorred by the elite, presented such a concept, and warmly supported Confucian values, including that of loyalty to the nation. The rapidity with which Korean nationalism developed, after the opening of Korea to the West in 1876, is much better explained by referring to the existing Confucian concept of the nation than only to the influence of the West. The nation was a Confucian heritage, as was the tendency to ascribe a sacred character to it. Confucianism left its mark not only on Korean nationalism, but also contributed to the nationalism of other religions, including the numerous new religions that emerged.

While Confucianism's sacred canopy collapsed, people's expectations of what a religion should be continued, to a large extent, to be conditioned by the past. The most obvious examples are seen in the peculiar category of what in Korea are called *minjok chonggyo* – 'national religions' – newly created religious groups that tend to place Korea at the centre of the universe and claim to protect the national spirit against foreign encroachment. The first of the *minjok chonggyo*, and in many ways the ancestor of many other new religions, was *Tonghak* – 'Eastern Learning' – dating back to 1860 and renamed the 'Teaching of the Heavenly Way' (*Ch'ŏndogyo*) after *Tonghak* ran into trouble in 1894 because of its association with a popular rebellion that expressed the discontent of the peasants. This religious movement had a national focus in its insistence that it countered the foreign influence of 'Western Learning', the *Chosŏn* term for Catholicism. It also developed the 'humanistic' notion that 'Man is Heaven', directing its view to activities in this world. *Ch'ŏndogyo*'s supreme deity has been described as 'the power we experience in ourselves to join with the rest of the universe to continue the process of creation and build a better, more harmonious world'.⁷



Nation-centred new religions

Perhaps the most striking example of a nation-centred new religion is Taejonggyo, the 'Teaching of the Great Progenitor', which was founded in 1909 with the overt aim of strengthening Korean national consciousness at a moment when Japan was in the process of annexing Korea. The Great Progenitor is Tan'gun, the mythical founder of the ancient state that is seen as the first Korean state (assumedly in 2333 BCE). As is common with many of these new religions, Taejonggyo spawned a whole series of new groups, some of which have been active in recent decades. One of these propagates the idea of the worship of Tan'gun as a kind of civic cult for every Korean, irrespective of religion: it is the duty of every citizen to honour the national progenitor, they insist. So much importance is vested in Tan'gun as the national ancestor that intellectuals of various religious backgrounds, including Christians, have made attempts to give Tan'gun a place in the teachings or theology of their own beliefs.

Among Christians, too, the idea of the close connection between ultimate (religious) values and society remained strong. The remarkable growth of Christianity in the 20th century distinguishes Korea most from its neighbours. Christianity's success has been such that, although distributed over several denominations, at present it is the dominant religion. Of major importance for its success was the fact that from the outset Christianity was presented as beneficial to society, as a remedy for social evils, as well as a pathway to modernity.⁸ Foreign missionaries introduced modern education and health care even before they were allowed to proselytise. Protestant missionaries also argued that the nation would only flourish if it accepted Christian faith, an argument they claimed was supported by the evidence of history.

In the colonial period, Protestants engaged in efforts for rural regeneration, trying to develop the social life of villages ('which would become demonstrations of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth'),⁹ and also provided modern education. Concern with this world also surfaced in activities that were directed against colonialism or aimed at preparing Korea for independence. At this time, Korean Christians often identified with the Ancient Israel of the Old Testament (as the Dutch had done in the 17th century when they fought Spain for independence), assigning religious significance to the nation. As Ken Wells has pointed out, at least some of their leaders – Yun Ch'ihō (1864-1945) and Kim Kyoshin (1901-1945) – had quite sophisticated views in this regard and are to be distinguished from secular nationalists.¹⁰ Wells also suggests, however, that Koreans' identification with the Chosen People was much more straightforward among the rank and file. He summarises Kim Kyoshin's view of Korea as follows: "Korea" and the 'Bible' were to be identified as Two Persons in One Body; national history was the expression of the nation's soul and the key to its development was providence. Since all Korean history was equally under the same divine direction, a complete identification of Christianity and the nation was apparently effected'. And: 'What Kim Kyoshin did do,..., was to answer the question whether God privileges the 'nation' over other categories very firmly in the positive'.¹¹

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In post-liberation Korea, Christians are divided over many denominations and a wide political spectrum, from ultra-conservatives – often ferociously anti-communist – to social liberals and left-leaning quasi-marxists. Obviously, this means that Christianity cannot be a monolithic force, which stands in the way of their exerting undue influence over the secular sphere and other religions. There is no doubt that Christians generally would like to increase their influence. One of the reasons the government ran into trouble last year was that the national chief of police had expressed support, on a poster, for an evangelisation meeting for police officers. It is also not unusual to hear pastors advocating the eradication of all Buddhist temples and shamanic shrines from the pulpit.

In his thoughtful book *Korean Spirituality*, Don Baker recently described the introduction of Christianity in Korea as an important paradigm shift, from 'ritual-based' to 'faith-based' religious communities, pointing out that the term that is usually translated as 'belief' (*shin*) changed in meaning from 'relying on/trusting' to 'believing in the existence of'.¹² I do not think that this paradigm shift is irrelevant to the problem of the relationship of religion, state and nation. In fact, it is behind Korean Christians' intolerance toward other faiths, which is the cause of recent Buddhist protests against the government, and occasionally has even induced Christian fanatics to set fire to Buddhist temples, threatening freedom of worship. However, a paradigm shift that is more crucial for the relations between state and religion took place in the *Chosŏn* period, when a system came to dominate that seamlessly merged liturgical structures with social and administrative structures, opening the way for an identification of ultimate concerns with concerns about this world and its social institutions. The collapse of *Chosŏn* Korea allowed the transfer of the ultimate Confucian values, which were embodied in the nation, to be further secularised, in the sense that belief became a free choice. Although some Christians might wish otherwise, the situation that prevailed in *Chosŏn* Korea, with one single creed – *in casu* Confucianism – as the backbone of a coercive national structure that was in a position to dominate all other existing religious strands, has little chance of a return under the present conditions of a pluralist society in South Korea (in which, it should be remembered, a sizable proportion of the population – 47% according to a 2005 census – does not identify with any religion at all).

On the other hand, the heritage of the past, when the sacred was embodied in the social order, endures in North Korea. If we consider Chuch'e (or Juche) philosophy the national religion of North Korea (as Eun Hee Shin does in her contribution to *Religions of Korea in Practice*), the situation in the North is comparable with that which prevailed in *Chosŏn* Korea.¹³ Chuch'e thought combines the 'philosophical principle that the human being is the master of everything and decides everything,' with rituals with strong religious overtones such as the worship of Kim Il Sung (whose death was followed by his apotheosis as the eternal leader). Kim Il Sung's statement that 'the people are my Heaven' echoes with Mencius's concept of the supremacy of the people, and the Chuch'e

insistence that it is Man's essential quality and value that he is a sociopolitical being ('Man/woman's life becomes noble when he is loved and trusted by the social collective; it is worthless when he is forsaken by it,')¹⁴ may be regarded as a modern translation of the first lines of *Tongmong sŏnsŭp* quoted earlier ('Among the ten thousand beings between Heaven and Earth it is Man who is the most noble, and this is because only man possesses the Five Bonds'.)

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