

KOREAN POLITICS OF ISOLATIONISM AND ROMAN CATHOLIC ENCOUNTER

The political tragedy of modern Korea resulted from the longevity of the Yi dynasty. The Yi dynasty initiated its rule in 1392, a century before the first voyage of Columbus to America, and it continued into the twentieth century until 1910, when Japan formally annexed Korea. During these long years of rule, the Yi family adopted Neo-Confucianism as a political ideology and system of rule that kept Korea in total isolation. The only country that had access to Korea was China. Confucian family ethics were thus reflected in the political realm in the interaction between big brother China and smaller brother Korea.

It was the introduction of Roman Catholicism that initially challenged Korea's political attachment to China and broke Korean isolationism. The first Korean contact with Roman Catholicism is reported to have come through the Japanese soldiers who invaded Korea in 1592. When Toyotomi Hideyoshi dispatched his troops to conquer Korea, a Roman Catholic general, Konishi Yukinaga, was among them. About eighteen thousand Catholic soldiers were in General Konishi's division. The soldiers were Japanese converts, the result of missionary work by St. Francis Xavier, who came to Japan in 1549, and his Jesuit successors. At Konishi's request, Fr. Gregorio de Cespedes, who was working in Japan as a Jesuit missionary, came to Korea with a Japanese assistant to minister to the Japanese troops. But Father de Cespedes' ministry was limited exclusively to the Japanese soldiers, and there is no evidence that it had any direct influence on the native Koreans.

The real foundation of Catholicism in modern Korea was laid in the eighteenth century by Koreans who visited and studied in China. Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit missionary, began his work in Beijing in 1601. His knowledge of Western mathematics and sciences, plus his appreciation of Confucianism, attracted the attention of the Chinese royal court and the literati. His successors also served the imperial court, firmly establishing the Roman Catholic church in the Chinese capital. To Korean visitors to Beijing, the Roman Catholic church seemed influential, so they became interested in learning more about the teaching of this new faith. When they returned home, they brought with them not

only knowledge of Western science and astronomy, but also books that told about “the Lord of Heaven,”¹ and the Catholic church’s teachings.

These books on the teachings of the Roman Catholic church appealed to Korean scholars who were searching for new ideas. Many accepted Catholicism as a new branch of philosophical learning and called Christianity “Western learning.” Among these scholars was Yi Pyök, whose friend, Yi Söng Hun, was about to accompany his father to Beijing as the Korean envoy in 1783. Hwang Sa Yöng, a Korean Catholic, writes in his memoirs:

When Yi Söng Hun was about to go to Beijing with his father, Yi Pyök visited him and told him secretly “In Beijing there is a temple of the Lord of Heaven (Catholic church) and there are some Western priests. Go to see them and get a copy of the Sacred writings. Ask them to baptize you and that will certainly please them. Then they will give you many precious things.”²

Yi Söng Hun was impressed by the enthusiasm of Yi Pyök and promised to visit the churches in Beijing to seek more information about their teaching. While in the Chinese capital, Song Hun was converted and baptized. He received the baptismal name Peter, which proved to be a prophetic symbol, since he became a foundation stone for the Korean Catholic church. When “Peter” Yi returned to Korea, he baptized his friend Yi Pyök, who took the baptismal name John the Baptist. These men baptized others, and the followers of “the Lord of Heaven” increased.

As the numbers of Roman Catholic adherents grew in Korea, the archbishop of Beijing took note. In 1790 he instructed Korean Catholics to abolish the practice of ancestor worship. Accordingly, Korean Catholics burned their ancestral tablets and shunned the ancient practices. As a result, the government became alarmed and began prohibiting envoys from bringing Catholic Christian books out of Beijing.

The Korean government operating under Confucian ideals considered Catholicism to be *sa-kyo*, an “evil religion,” because of its proscription of ancestor worship. This made Catholics appear to be unfilial and thus disloyal members of Korean society. The natural outcome of this conflict, considering the rapid spread of this “evil religion,” was persecution. Yet, despite fierce repression, Korean Catholics withstood the persecution bravely.

They stood firm because they had a strong sense of pride in having laid the foundation of this new religion themselves. Christianity had been introduced by native leaders returning from China rather than by strangers from faraway lands. It spread rapidly among Koreans with very little need for foreign missionary assistance, creating strong bonds among the Catholics and inspiring loyalty to their faith. Many converts, especially the former Confucian literati, be-

came unemployed and were displaced in society as a result of internal political conflicts. They were considered “foreign Koreans” and gravely mistreated. But their faith remained their source of inspiration and hope for future change in their social status. Even when some Catholics renounced their faith, persecution continued; the only other alternative for Korean Catholics was to withstand persecution.

The first organized persecution took place in 1791; John Baptist Yi was one of the first martyrs. In spite of the storm, the church’s work in Korea not only continued but increased. However, the members of the Korean church had no ordained priesthood to minister to them, nor was there an organized hierarchy to unite and direct the faithful. To remedy this, Korean Catholics tried to develop their own hierarchy and elect priests, but in 1789, Bishop de Govea of Beijing objected, informing them that it was not permissible for them to choose priests in that manner. Since it was also not permissible for them to administer the sacraments—baptism was the only exception—the bishop acknowledged the problem and promised to send an ordained priest.

In February 1791, Jean dos Remedios, a priest from Portuguese Macao, was appointed to go to Korea. After a long and hard midwinter journey, he reached the Manchurian border but was unable to cross. He returned to Beijing and died soon after. In September 1794, a Chinese priest, James Chu, was sent by the bishop. He succeeded in secretly crossing the border and became the first official Roman Catholic missionary to enter Korea and work among Koreans. Father Chu was able to minister openly to the people for six months; then he had to take refuge in a Christian home to avoid arrest. His two guides and an interpreter were apprehended and were ordered to reveal his hiding place. Though tortured and finally beheaded in June 1795, they never disclosed Father Chu’s hiding place. After Father Chu had been in hiding for three years, a public proclamation by the government legally outlawed him. When he read the proclamation, he left his hiding place and voluntarily surrendered himself, not wishing to further endanger the lives of his Korean friends. On May 31, 1801, he was martyred at the age of thirty-two.

Father Chu’s death left Korea without a Catholic priest for thirty-three years. Meanwhile, persecution continued, and Korean Catholics, abandoned, stood alone, surviving especially harsh persecutions in 1815, 1819, and 1827. Korea was not forgotten by European missionaries, however. In 1829, the great French missionary society *La Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* resolved to found a mission in Korea directly attached to the Holy See. In 1832 Barthélemy Bruguière, then a missionary in Siam (Thailand), volunteered to go to Korea. Unfortunately, he died before crossing the Korean border, but in 1836 Fr. Pierre Philibert Maubant, a French priest, successfully crossed into Korea. The following year another French priest, Jacques Chastan, joined Maubant in Seoul. On December 19, 1839, Laurent Marie Joseph

Imbert came to Korea as vicar apostolic. There was undoubtedly much rejoicing among Korean Catholics at the arrival of these missionary priests, especially the bishop. The joy over their arrival was short-lived. Confucian politicians further enforced Korea's politics of isolationism, forbidding any contacts with foreigners. In 1839 a new storm of persecution swept through the country. Bishop Imbert and Fathers Maubant and Chastan were arrested with 130 Korean Catholics and executed. Again the young church suffered a blow to its leadership.

At this time there was a young pious Korean student in Macao, Andrew Kim, sent there by Father Maubant to study at the seminary. He knew of the need for priests in Korea, and he labored to bring in more European missionaries. Early in 1843, Kim returned to Korea at Uiju with a group of Korean merchants, but he fell under suspicion and was forced to return to China. From there he tried to help Jean Joseph Ferreol enter Korea when the latter was appointed bishop in December 1843. It proved too dangerous for the bishop to enter at that time, so he returned to Macao. Then in 1844, Kim and eleven other Korean Catholics, none of whom had any navigating experience, sailed in a small fishing boat to Shanghai, where Bishop Ferreol met Kim and ordained him into the priesthood. Later, in that same small boat, Father Kim smuggled Bishop Ferreol and Fr. Nicholas Daveluy into Korea. Father Kim continued such efforts to bring more missionaries in by sea, but he was soon arrested as a traitor to his country. Andrew Kim, the first native Korean to be ordained a priest, was beheaded on July 25, 1846, at the age of twenty-six.

Two decades later, in 1866, the politics of isolationism was at its peak and marked the bloodiest period in the history of Roman Catholicism in Korea. Taewonkun was an ardent isolationist and a strong ruler who despised foreign intervention. Still, he was rather indifferent to the spread of Catholicism in the early period of his rule. As a matter of fact, his wife, Min, was sympathetic toward Catholic teachings, and Pak, the nurse of the young king, was a devout Catholic. Some high officials in Taewonkun's government were also Catholic converts.

Trouble began in January 1866, when a Russian war vessel appeared at Wonsan Harbor and threatened to open Korea by force for Russian trade. Taewonkun was greatly upset by the Russian demands and sent a special envoy to China to consult with Chinese officials concerning the matter. Meanwhile, John Nam, a government official and a Catholic, saw this as an opportunity to gain religious tolerance in Korea. He suggested that Taewonkun seek an alliance with France and England which would aid in thwarting the Russian advances.

Another leading Korean Catholic, Thomas Kim, asked Berneau, the French bishop in Seoul, to assist the government in solving the "Russian problem." The bishop assured him that he would try to approach the regent. Kim also wrote a

letter to Taewonkun suggesting that the most effective way of resisting Russian aggression would be to sign a treaty with France and England. In the letter he suggested that an anti-Russian alliance with France and England could easily be made through the French bishop in Seoul. The regent responded favorably to the suggestions and expressed a desire to see the bishop, but as it turned out Bishop Berneau was away from the capital by that time. When he returned, the Russian warship had voluntarily left Korea, and the regent no longer felt any need to see him.

Shortly after, the envoys who had returned from Beijing started a rumor that the Chinese government was executing all Europeans who were in China. Taewonkun, encouraged by the rumor and determined to pursue a more strict isolationist policy, began a bloody persecution. Between February 26 and 28, 1866, Bishop Berneau, Fathers Bretenières, Beaulieu, and Borie, and several leading Korean Christians were arrested. On March 8 the four foreign missionaries were beheaded. Father Pourthie and Father Petitchols were executed three days later. Fortunately, three priests—Ridel, Calais, and Feron—were visiting remote country districts during the early stages of the persecution, and they managed to escape. With the courageous assistance of Korean Catholics, Fathers Ridel and Feron were reunited in May 1866. About a month later, they were informed that Father Calais was also alive, and soon the missionaries exchanged letters from their hiding places.

According to the rules of *La Société des Missions Etrangères*, Feron—who had been in Korea longer than the other two priests—became the leader. Feron directed Ridel to leave Korea and report to concerned Catholics in China. After a difficult time in obtaining a boat and completing the voyage, Ridel and eleven Koreans reached Chefu, China, in July. Ridel soon met with Admiral Pierre Gustavus Rose, commander of the French Indo-China fleet at Tienjin, and reported on the persecution of Catholics in Korea.

Admiral Rose relayed the report to H. de Bellonet, the French chargé d'affaires in Beijing. Bellonet became furious at hearing the news and wrote to Prince Kung, the Chinese premier, on July 13, 1866:

Sir:

I grieve to bring officially to the knowledge of your Imperial Highness a horrible outrage committed in the small kingdom of Korea, which formerly assumed the bonds of vassalage to the Chinese empire, but which this act of savage barbarity has forever separated from it.

In the course of the month of March last, the two French bishops who were evangelizing Corea, and with them nine missionaries and seven Corean priests and a great multitude of Christians of both sexes and of every age, were massacred by order of the sovereign of that country.

The government of His Majesty cannot permit so bloody an outrage to be unpunished. The same day on which the king of Corea laid his hands upon my unhappy countrymen was the last of his reign; he himself proclaimed its end, which I, in turn, solemnly declare today. In a few days our military forces are to march to the conquest of Corea, and the Emperor, my august Sovereign, alone, has not the right and the power to dispose, according to his good pleasure, of the country and the vacant throne.

The Chinese government has declared to me many times that it has no authority over Corea, and it refused on this pretext to apply the treaties of Tientsin to that country, and give to our missionaries the passports which we have asked from it. We have taken note of these declarations, and we declare now that we do not recognize any authority whatever of the Chinese government over the kingdom of Corea.

I have, etc.,
H. de Bellonet³

In September 1866, with a flagship, *Primaquet*, and two gunboats, *Deroulede* and *Tardif*, Admiral Rose began an invasion of Korea. Father Ridel accompanied him as an interpreter, and three Koreans went as guides. The small fleet left Chefu on September 18; it docked two days later near Inchon Bay. On the September 19, Admiral Rose dispatched the *Deroulede* to test the possibility of sailing upriver to Seoul. The next day the *Deroulede* reported that passage up the Han River was possible and the admiral ordered his ships to proceed. However, the *Primaquet* soon struck a rock, and only the two gunboats continued the voyage.

On Sunday, September 23, Father Ridel led the sailors in a celebration of mass on the deck of the *Deroulede*. On the following day the ships approached Seoul to find that the Korean government had sent ships to block the river against them. The French ships fired upon, and sank, two Korean boats, but Korean land troops returned fire, and the French ships were unable to proceed any farther.

The fleet had to return to China, but the idea of a conquest was not abandoned. The admiral increased the number of his ships and returned to Korea with six hundred marines in October of that year. On October 14, the marines landed at Kanghwa and fired on several Korean forts. Again the Koreans fought back, and the expedition failed. Even threats of a French invasion did not stop the persecution. On the contrary, it became more intense, and the country's door to any foreign influence closed more tightly than ever. By 1870, over eight thousand Christians suffered martyrdom.⁴

However, Korea's isolationism and the persecution of Christians were not to go on forever. In October 1873, Taewonkun retired from the regency and

Queen Min became the new ruler. Soon the numbers of foreign ships on Korean shores increased, and in 1876, Korea opened her long-closed door by signing the Treaty of Amity with Japan. In 1882, Korea signed a treaty with the United States, and shortly thereafter Great Britain, Germany, and Russia all established diplomatic relations in Korea.

France, however, had more difficulties establishing official ties because of the tension that still existed due to the presence of French Catholic missionaries and the invasions by French gunboats in previous years. In addition, the purpose of other Western nations in making treaties with Korea was commercial, while that of the French was to gain freedom for the propagation of the Roman Catholic church and protection for French missionaries. The Korean government was unwilling to grant France such concessions, but eventually those countries that already had diplomatic ties with Korea pressured the court into making a treaty.

In 1886, the Korean-French Treaty was signed, and as a result, the work of the Catholic mission progressed much more favorably. Major Korean ports, such as Inchon, Pusan, and Wonsan, were opened to the French, and French missionaries were able to continue work among the unemployed literati and the common people. The antagonistic attitude of government officials toward the missionaries did continue, but at least it was no longer necessary for priests to disguise themselves or to celebrate mass in secret.

Then in August 1890, Fr. Gustave C. Mutel, who had been in Korea before and who was at that time the dean of a seminary of the Foreign Mission Society of Paris, was appointed the new bishop of Korea. Before his departure, a special mass was held for him at the seminary he served on September 21, 1890; it was held in conjunction with a mass commemorating the deaths of early missionaries to Korea. In the service, the head of the seminary spoke these words to the new bishop of Korea: "*Florete flores marturii*" (Bloom, flowers of martyrdom). Father Mutel left Paris on November 26, 1890, and arrived at Inchon on February 22, 1891. He was welcomed by cheering Korean Catholics and missionaries, and the Catholics' work progressed.

The use of military force by the French to invade Korea, and thereby to introduce Roman Catholicism to the country, constituted illegal acts of imperialism. Also, the actions of Korean Catholic converts were at times treasonous. Hwang Sa Yǒng wrote a secret letter to the French bishop in Beijing, asking him to encourage the French naval forces to attack Korea. It was Hwang Sa Yǒng's hope that such an attack would end the Yi government's isolation and would also promote the toleration of Roman Catholic missionary activities, for the continuous isolationist policies of the Korean government kept Korea blind in a time of rapid change. The end of isolation was necessary! The persistence of Roman Catholic missionary work in Korea

made contributions to end the politics of isolation and to open Korea to the outside world, although that opening eventually resulted in the demise of the Yi dynasty.