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Religions in Cold War Korea and Peacemaking

Guest Editors' Introduction

The Cold War is commonly understood as a global conflict that was principally about secular ideologies, the confrontation between two mutually exclusive visions of modernity that we refer to as capitalism and socialism. This understanding prevails in the existing academic literature concerning the second half of the twentieth century, and it also affects how we conceptualize the constitution of the contemporary world. The decade following the end of the Cold War witnessed rising ethnic nationalism of a religious nature, especially, but not exclusively, in the former Eastern Bloc. The Bosnian War (1992–1995) in the former Yugoslavia was one of the most shocking and tragic examples in this regard. The ensuing decade saw a series of other military crises—conventional and unconventional—which were often conducted in the name of specific religious doctrines or as countermeasures to these manifestations of religious fundamentalism. This situation provoked prolific debates, both in academia and the broader public, about the nature of modern secular society. Concerned commentators questioned what had happened to the ethics of secularism and whether modern political systems could coexist with forces that denied religious freedom and pluralism, the cardinal principles of modern political life. The whole situation reinforced the impression that religion had reentered politics in today's world, and the related understanding that our time is in contrast to the Cold War era in which secular, rather than religious, ideologies held sway.

Recent studies of Cold War history clearly show, however, that the above impression is misguided. Religious ideas and forces played formative roles in the making (and unmaking) of the bipolarized world of the Cold War era. For instance, Andrew Preston (2012) has explored the role of American Christian groups and movements in shaping US foreign policies during the Vietnam War. Observers of Central Asia and the Middle East are well cognizant of the fact that questions of Islamic fundamentalism, which are debated furiously

today, were inseparable from the end game of the Soviet-US standoff, especially in the history of Afghanistan. Cold War history also contains other streams of religious fundamentalism. Some of the evangelical movements in the so-called American Bible Belt evolved closely with radical anticommunist politics. Thus, Helen Jin Kim argues in her essay featured in this present collection that, “religion is not an epiphenomenal or second order variable, but a central and independent category in the historical reconstruction of the global Cold War.” Kim investigates a transnational network of evangelical anti-communism activity that was once active between South Korea and the United States, the legacies of which continue to reverberate in both societies today. Similarly, Jeongran Yoon’s recent work explores the impact of the Korean War on some of Korea’s Protestant groups (Yoon 2017). She shows how these groups developed powerful transpacific ties with church leaders and sectors in the United States, a network that exerted considerable influence in state policies in both places as well as in the unfolding of the alliance between the two countries.

One commonality among the recent innovative studies of religion and the Cold War is that they raise a subtle yet crucial difference between actors in South Korea and their counterparts in the United States in their respective understanding of the meaning of anticommunism. Whereas the latter generally understood communism as a form of atheism and a force of the anti-Christ, for Korean evangelicals, especially those who experienced the Korean War, communism was far from an abstract principle. Rather, it was an immediate and unforgivable enemy and a primary existential threat, responsible for the death and suffering of their families and kin who had succumbed to North Korea’s violent anti-religion politics. For these actors, the Bible, rather than capitalism, was the singularly meaningful antagonist to communism, and the Cold War was, fundamentally, an existential struggle between the church and a particular secular ideology. Within this framework of values, communism was also principally an ideology of religious disposition, that is, a political religion that was defined, above all, by its negation of the place of religion in human society. Many of these transnational historical episodes of the Cold War remain untold and unanalyzed. Melanie McAlister (2001) writes about youth groups in the American South in the 1950s and how some of them marched with the flag of

Israel as part of local festivities. We recently overheard a heated conversation among youth in Seoul on the meaning of the Israeli flag that is becoming an increasingly familiar part of public protests organized by right-leaning Christian groups in South Korea. What are these Israeli flags doing in the streets of Seoul, a generation after the end of the Cold War? These material objects may be as significant as North Korea's nuclear warheads in coming to terms with Korea's place in Cold War history, past and present. To explore these important questions, we can no longer afford to ignore the impact of the Cold War on religion or the role of religion in shaping Cold War history.

The last is especially true for Korea's experience of the global conflict. In the conventional understanding, the Cold War was not merely a struggle between secular ideologies but also a time during which this struggle fell short of an all-out armed conflict. The Cold War was neither a war nor genuine peace, and was characterized by the anomaly of preparing competitively for war as a way of averting an actual war. The industrialized world enjoyed an unprecedented "long peace" during the second half of the twentieth century, according to John Lewis Gaddis (1988), in contrast to the first half that witnessed destruction of enormous proportions. This way of understanding the Cold War, however, goes against the experience of many political communities in the postcolonial world, including Korea.

Korea is located on the periphery of the transpacific region, a geographical zone that experienced "turbulent decolonization, which often involved vicious civil wars and other exceptional forms of political violence" (Kwon 2014, 65). There is a clear distinction between the transatlantic experience and transpacific experience of the Cold War. If the term "cold" in the transatlantic region implies a highly rational containment of violence, the postcolonial experience of the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific region cannot be told without considering the regional history of political violence. Political violence in Korea in the context of the Cold War manifested itself in a civil war—the Korean War. The Jeju (Cheju) April Third Incident (often referred to as the "Jeju 4.3 Incident") is a quintessential example of regional political violence. The 4.3 Incident began on April 3, 1948 as a local uprising against US military occupation, but soon erupted into a civilian massacre, and more precisely, a planned act of state terrorism toward the "reds" by the newly established anticommunist state

in South Korea. The violent events of civilian massacres continued through the Korean War period. In the context of the global Cold War, the Jeju 4.3 Incident and the Korean War were “linked to the evolution of the *longue durée* of America’s informal global empire” (Lee 2011, 111). This year of 2018 is the 70th anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Incident.

After the Korean War and national partition, the anti-communist Cold War ideology continued to dominate state politics in South Korea, effectively silencing much of the memory of the political violence in both personal family life and the national public sphere (Kim Seong Nae 2013). However, the conflict between secular political ideologies was often so intense that it was akin to a war of religions. If secular ideologies had taken on an element of religious power in this context, the opposite was also true. The existing religious groups and their practices were not free from the forces of bipolarizing politics. In certain cases, they actively sought to translate politics into religious language.

This special issue explores the ways in which the legacies of the Cold War in the Asia-Pacific region, and Korea in particular, are reconstituted in the religious language of suffering and salvation, trauma and healing, reconciliation and peacemaking, as well as in the divergent works of personal, family, community, and official memories of the violent events and their aftermath.

Helen Kim’s investigation of the Campus Crusade movement in the 1970s shows that a strong transnational solidarity existed between that movement’s South Korean group and its American counterpart. However, it also finds an interesting divergence, caused in part by the Korean group’s historical experience of North Korea’s violent anti-religion politics during the Korean War, which made the group’s approach to anticommunism much more existential. Heonik Kwon and Jun Hwan Park deal with issues of war and religion with reference to a more traditional and relatively less institutionalized religious form of shamanism in a localized context. Although this study focuses on shamanism’s encounter with American power in the context of the Korean War, and thus corresponds thematically with Kim’s investigation, its conclusion departs considerably from the latter. Here, we see how the encounter between a local religious form and symbols of foreign political power spoke much less of ideologies of war than of the creative potential of Korea’s traditional

popular religious sensibilities. Sungman Koh's moving rendering of the aftermath of the 1948–1949 tragedy in Jeju shifts attention to another religious-cultural sphere of great importance in the region, domestic and communal ancestral death remembrance practices. Koh approaches this sphere both as a site where the wounds of war are endured and as a field where forceful communal reconciliation and peacemaking initiatives can take place. Myung-Lim Park's article delves into a similar subject more broadly and from a more philosophical perspective. Park shows the central importance of community-based initiatives in Jeju's broad societal development and for transitional justice beyond the violent and divisive legacies of the Cold War. Jieun Han's article on the renowned anarchist and Catholic activist Thomas An Chunggŭn expands the horizon of war and religion from Korea's postcolonial Cold War experience to the outset of the nation's colonial experience. Han is sympathetic to the way in which Thomas An struggled with his religious commitment to pacifism, on the one hand, and, on the other, his conviction about the profoundly unjust nature of colonialism and the related idea of righteous violence against colonial injustice.

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