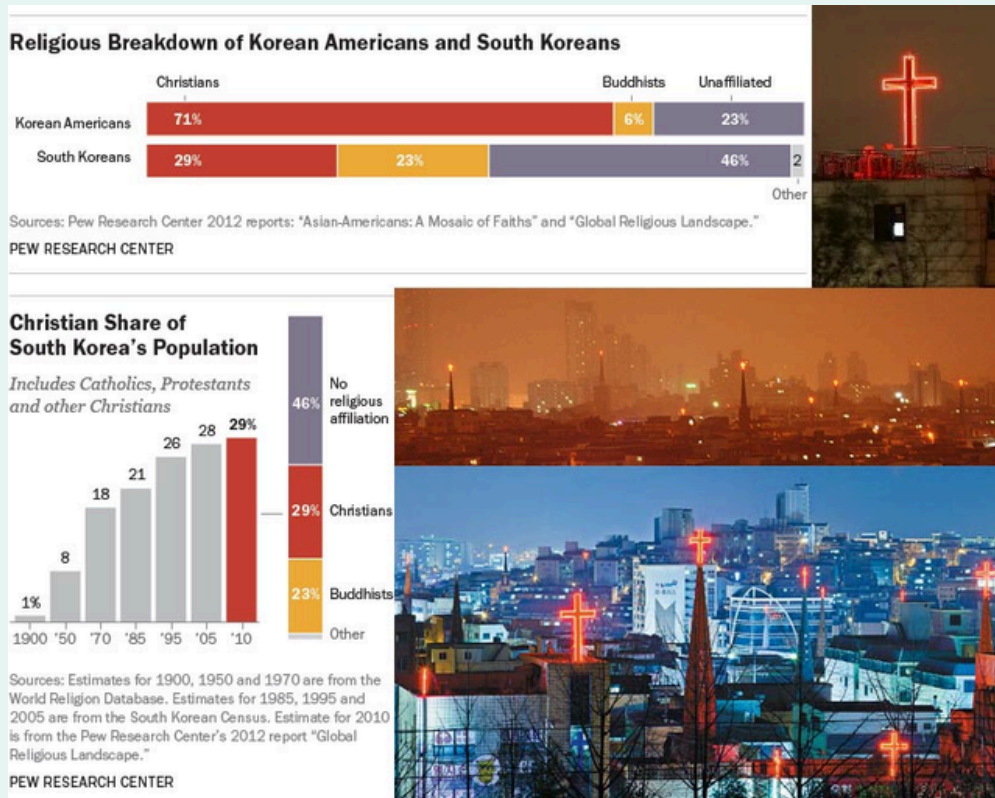


# MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSONS

Lesson #5

## CHRISTIANITY

JUNE 14, 2024



### MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSON #5: CHRISTIANITY

*Written by Dr. Kyle Messick*

"In South Korea there is no modernization without Christianity and no Christianity without shamanism" – taken from a 2000 journal article by Andrew Eungi Kim

With the exception of the Philippines, South Korea has the highest rate of Christianity in the non-Western world. It is the largest religion in Korea after those that identify as non-religious. Although I had trouble finding more recent data, a decade ago a third of Koreans identified themselves as Christians. Christianity was introduced in Korea in 1794, but it wasn't until 1945 when it grew exponentially. The meteoric rise of

Christianity (which seems more stable now) is due to some unique cultural factors. The reasons suggested by scholars are varied and certainly debated, but I've included some of them here. There are two key factors: compatibility with shamanism (the prior ideology) and as a tool for modernization following Japanese occupation. Facets of shamanism could be intuitively incorporated into Christianity, such as beliefs about evil spirits and requesting materialistic

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goods through communication with spirits (i.e. prayer). The almost capitalistic and materialistic approach of shamanism is an especially intuitive transition into Christianity brought by Americans. The Korean idea of Hananim (the Almighty that presides over the affairs of earth) easily became their Christian God. Their version of the Christian God largely maintained the qualities of the Hananim and so Christianity promised prosperity in the same way that prior beliefs did. Kim described that for many, "fulfillment of practical wishes through faith in Hananim in the guise of Christianity has represented the essence of their religion." When good events occur, many Korean Christians will donate money to their church as a way of showing gratitude and communicating hope for continued blessings. The other key factor is that the Christian Church served as a key agent in economic, political, and social modernization. It was in 1945 when Americans liberated Korea from Japan that Christianity really gained momentum. Koreans value education, and in their war-torn state, Christianity was a convenient bundle that included education due to the presence of missionaries. It was these missionaries that were the first to implement a system that included kindergarten through college in Korea, which included modern science and medicine. Protestant and Catholic churches still

operate some of the nation's top universities. Because the Church provided the keys to modernization, Koreans largely accepted Christianity as a stepping stone towards their economic, political, and social progress. Many Christians also held positions of power following Japan's occupation. Between 1952 and 1962 one third of political leadership was Christian despite only 4% of the general population being Christian at that time. By 1993 they had their first Christian President. Churches also served as a symbol of opposition against authoritarianism despite often maintaining neutral views in politics.

Why didn't Christianity catch on in neighboring China and Japan? Christianity didn't 'catch on' in China due to the popular Marxist view that was religion was "the opium of the people." Japan's polytheistic approach that already had afterlife beliefs built-in through Buddhism meant that some functions of Christianity would be superfluous, and it didn't make for a smooth transition. The form of shamanism rooted in Confucianism that was popular in Korea did not address mortality concerns in the same way. Another reason is that Japan's oppression of Christianity made it intuitive to associate Christianity with Korean nationalism, since Japan similarly oppressed Korea. Koreans associated Christianity with education and viewed it as being a religion of middle class, youth, intellectuals, and urbanites, so that was the direction they wanted to move in. Missionary

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reach in Korea was also tremendous. During Korea's industrialization churches established industrial chaplaincies among workers in factories. Chaplains were also set up in the military, so many converted either through their work or during their mandatory military service. Korea is second to only the United States when it comes to the number of commissioned missionaries currently operating. In only a few decades Christianity skyrocketed in Korea at levels not seen anywhere else in the world in such a short span of time. The government reported that there was about 77,000 churches in Korea a decade ago. That's three times more churches than there are convenience stores. The competitive nature of South Korea extends to their signage, including for churches, so it can be an unexpected sight at night to see dozens of red crosses illuminating the city of a country that is Asian and thought of as primarily secular.

The growth of Christianity in Korea has more recently slowed, which some have attributed to scandals, fundamentalism, and conflicts, including increased hostility by Protestants towards Buddhists (one example is praying for the destruction of Buddhist temples). There was also a push to bring in creationist ideas including the removal of evolution from education curriculum, but that was

eventually denied by the government, but not before some examples were removed from textbooks.

I've included some relevant images, including how Korean Americans differ in religious demographics compared to Koreans. You'll see images of red crosses illuminating the sky in Seoul. Red in Korean culture symbolizes vitality, joy, passion, energy, and luck. Red also represents the blood of Christ.