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Introduction

During a conversation with *AsiaNews* journalist Kim Hwayoung in 2010, science of religion professor Kim Jongseo of Seoul National University reflected on various reasons for an increasing number of Roman Catholic Christian adherents in South Korea amidst slower growth rates in the number of Korean Buddhist adherents and decreases in the number of Korean Protestant adherents. The academic spoke of transparency in everyday business management, a collaborative work ethic, a desire for peace, respect for Asian traditions of ancestor veneration, friendliness to non-Catholic religious adherents as well as adherents of irreligion, and charity work among the poor as shared characteristics among Catholics who lived in Korea. After discussing these six reasons, the professor then referred to “the important influence of figures such as the Korean martyrs” as a reality that no observer of Korean Catholicism could ignore.¹

The history of martyrs alluded to by Dr. Kim involves reflections on two broad topics, namely the history of the earliest Korean Christians who suffered under unimaginable persecution and the history of missionaries who introduced the Christian religion to the Korean people. In present-day liberal democratic societies like South Korea where people of different faiths tend to peacefully coexist, a history of tensions between the earliest Korean Catholics and those who wanted to violently extirpate or at least verbally abuse Christian believers seems dead and forgotten in the public memory. But in archives the world over, a diligent researcher can find writings handled, penned, and read by the very individuals who witnessed, participated in, and criticized Korea’s nascent plunge into Christianity. In these letters, people long deceased can speak to students of the history of Korean Catholicism.

European missionaries who interacted with the earliest Korean converts did not see themselves as lonely workers far from the comforts of home. In the context of the history of a Christian faith that grew through the efforts of people who journeyed to places near and far in order to persuade others of the profound doctrines of the faith, these missionaries saw themselves as loyal servants of the so-called Great Commission laconically but resonantly summarized by Jesus Christ: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”² The Jesuits hardly viewed a foreign territory as a mere sounding board for Christian morals. They sought to harmonize the Christian faith with cultures that lacked prior exposure to Christianity, which meant adapting the faith for consumption by non-Christians. By 1540, the Jesuits had won papal approval for sending missionaries.

The history of early Korean encounters with Catholic missionaries invites an interdisciplinary approach. For decades and centuries before the so-called official advent of Korean Christianity in 1784, the history of Korea’s formative immersion into the faith has come down to us through documents that describe people like Jesuit linguists who mastered Asian languages, Asian converts who contravened social pressures to embrace Christianity, and Asian leaders in whose charity or oppressiveness rested the hope of a viable Korean Christian community that could survive and even flourish. From these documents emerges a narrative that we may describe as a history distinctly epistolary in character. As a contribution to epistolary history, this dissertation serves to examine how European Jesuit missionaries and Korean listeners tried to find a shared expression of Christianity. This search for a common vocabulary most obviously unfolded in actual meetings of Jesuits and Koreans, but as we shall soon see, this search also unfolded in the fecundity of an individual Jesuit’s or an individual Korean’s thoughts.

As it addresses disciplines as disparate as theology, cultural history, and ethnohistory, this dissertation focuses on the history of Jesuit-Korean interactions as a series of narratives of accommodation and conflict in the context of European Christianity's first encounter with Koreans. Key questions hinge on the methodologies of conversion laid out by Jesuit missionaries who dedicated themselves to a culturally sensitive missionary approach that respected the cultures of foreigners encountered in lands that had never known the faith—and the receptivity or lack thereof shown by the Koreans themselves. Early interactions between Koreans and European Jesuits offer rare examples of cross-cultural discourse that left both sides encouraged and wanting to learn more about each other.

The Jesuits saw the calling of worldwide missionary evangelism as a spiritual pilgrimage that required the engagement of hearts, minds, and souls. Among Korean exiles and natives from about 1596 to 1784, Jesuits carefully learned about Sino-Korean culture and solicited the expertise of natives. In letters, the Jesuit missionaries described a piety among Korean converts who mostly lived as exiles abroad, but these letters arguably illustrate more the Jesuit missionary consciousness and less the consciousnesses of Korean audiences. Their anxieties and prejudices aside, Jesuits stripped the Catholic faith of a doctrinaire need to abide by every nuance of Catholic theology and—at least in the Jesuit view—offered the Koreans a synthesis of Catholic and Confucian ideas that nurtured a profoundly emotional faith in converts. In the 1700s, the Christian faith sparked debate among secular Korean elites who, despite their opposition to a religion predicated on an eternal salvation that disdained the material comforts of the secular world, could not ignore the Christian faith as a religion that would simply go away.

The outline of this dissertation traces the origins of Jesuit missionary attitudes and the applications of those attitudes in Europe, Japan, China, and ultimately Korea. In the first chapter (“The Jesuits and Emerging Notions of a Worldwide Missionary Evangelism in the 1500s”), the reader will find a discussion of the emergence of a Jesuit missionary consciousness that Jesuits, varying degrees of agreement aside, saw as a uniquely sensitive and novel approach well-suited for preaching. In the second chapter (“Japan and China, Steppingstones to Korea: (Almost) Everyone Accommodates, 1543-c. 1625”), the author will intertwine the narratives of accommodation and early Jesuit successes in Japan and China with the development of Jesuit plans on evangelizing Korea.

While the accommodation of Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit contemporaries in the Far East has already invited analysis from scholars, this dissertation traces the evolution of that accommodation alongside the beginnings of what the author would like to characterize as an imagined Korea in the European consciousness. One has to remember that the Jesuits arguably lived in a time known less for cross-cultural discourse and more for petty jealousies between cultures, peoples, and states. While we know how the story of Korean Catholic history ultimately ends with a vibrant and respected faith-based community that boasts about one in every ten South Korean nationals today, this dissertation paints a narrative whose future remained far from certain in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.³ And even the Jesuit missionaries sometimes found themselves patently unable to rise above an insidious narrow-mindedness that led them to savagely demonize other peoples. The imagined Korea of the Jesuits existed as the very offspring of a missionary consciousness pregnant with lofty virtues and manifestly human failings.

The dissertation not only begins discussions on relatively new topics like the idea of an imagined Korea in the European consciousness, but also revisits discussions formerly seen as exhaustively touched upon. In the third chapter (“Early Jesuit Work among Koreans, the Issue of Korean Emotionalism, and the Ministry of Tears”), the author hopes to discuss a scholarly as well as popular notion of Korean emotionalism that may help to teach historians more about the fervent piety among the earliest Korean converts so stirringly described by the Jesuits. Unlike previous chapters mostly anchored to Jesuit accounts of average Koreans, the final chapter (“Nascent Korean Christianity, Jesuits, and the State: Debates over Catholicism to 1784”) discusses interactions between Jesuits and elite Koreans as well as debates among Korean elites over the strengths and frailties of Catholicism.

As historians read what the Jesuits wrote about Korean converts, students appreciate how the art of subjective interpretation as done by the Jesuits becomes just as cherished as the objective truth of what happened among the converts. Although the scantiness of accounts written by Koreans from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries precludes a thorough investigation on the extent to which the faith truly resonated or failed to resonate among Koreans, historians should not see this field as impenetrable. Missionary histories left behind by the Jesuits show how Jesuits seemed enraptured by a mission to accommodate peoples who had cultural sensibilities divergent from the sensibilities of European Christians. To a Jesuit convinced of the propriety of his apparently sensitive missionary zeal, the temptation to write with self-congratulatory prose testifies to the human element of an early Korean Christian history that moved not just the audiences of Christian evangelization, but also the evangelizers themselves.

Notes

¹ Kim Hwayoung, “Church Growing Stronger in Korea,” *AsiaNews* 23 March 2010, asianews.it/news-en/Church-growing-stronger-in-Korea-17958.html (accessed January 14, 2014). This dissertation will retain the convention of presenting East Asian names as last names before first names. Whenever possible, the dissertation will employ the South Korean government-sponsored Revised Romanization system that dispenses with the cumbersome apostrophes and diacritical marks of older romanization systems (as a general rule, exceptions will only arise for titles that retain the spellings of older romanization systems). For every note in the notes section, the dissertation author will also take special pains to present comprehensive information on every cited source. This approach eschews the use of obscure abbreviations and shortened titles that can frustrate scholars unfamiliar with the works consulted for this dissertation. For any researcher, such an approach also allows a fast and easy determination of a source used on any given note in the notes section. The researcher will not need to see an abbreviation for a source used in, say, note #100, and then laboriously go back note by note (or to a table of abbreviations) to find out what the abbreviation originally stands for. Regarding the use of descriptive terminology, this dissertation will also interchangeably use terms like “Roman Catholicism,” “Catholicism,” “Catholic Christianity,” and “Roman Catholic Christianity.” This dissertation will contain line-for-line source translations (in the art of translation’s so-called formal equivalence school of thought) interspersed with paraphrases (in the art of translation’s so-called dynamic equivalence school of thought). In order to facilitate readings of certain primary sources, the dissertation author will occasionally use modern spellings of words found in those sources. As a final remark in

this first endnote, the dissertation author recognizes that many of the sources consulted for this undertaking come from inaccessible book and manuscript collections. As it just so happens, the notes that follow contain substantial excerpts of primary sources from books extremely difficult to locate. All the primary source works from which these substantial citations hail have passed out of copyright, but this circumstance simply emphasizes the physical rarity of these source works in public and academic libraries. The approach of inserting substantial excerpts of primary sources into the notes allows the dissertation's body to stay anchored to a nuanced and focused discussion of the thesis. In the meantime, the notes can act as repositories for interesting side discussions and elaborations that, while broadly relevant (as, for instance, suggestions for further reading) to the thesis and profoundly fascinating in and of themselves, remain strictly unnecessary for the structural and argumentative development of the actual text of the dissertation's four separate chapters from pages 1 to 100. And yet the readers will undoubtedly recognize that the considerable body of quoted material in the notes that follow will facilitate the needs of researchers who may not have access to older books whose passage out of copyright seems humorously symbolic of passage out of the public eye.

² Matthew 28:20, *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments: Revised Standard Version: Translated from the Original Tongues being the Version Set Forth AD 1611, Revised AD 1881-1885 and AD 1901: Compared with the Most Ancient Authorities and Revised AD 1946-1953, Second Edition of the New Testament AD 1971*, pocket text ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 833.

³ The figure of Korean Catholics as approximately ten percent (in 2010) of South Korea's population comes from Kim Hwayoung, "Church Growing Stronger in Korea,"

AsiaNews 23 March 2010, asianews.it/news-en/Church-growing-stronger-in-Korea-17958.html (accessed January 14, 2014): “According to the data, the total number of Catholics in the country is 5,004,115: This is 9.9% of the population, an increase of 130 thousand units compared to previous data.”

⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, “Principle and Foundation,” *Spiritual Exercises* (1539-1541), as presented in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George Edward Ganss, with the collaboration of Parmananda R. Divarkar, Edward J. Malatesta, and Martin E. Palmer, preface by John W. Padberg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality Ser.* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 130. As the autobiography of the founder of the Jesuit order seems to indicate, Ignatius’s reform of himself began with great earnest: “When he arrived at Montserrat, he passed a long time in prayer, and with the consent of his confessor he made in writing a general confession of his sins. Three whole days were employed in this undertaking. He begged and obtained leave of his confessor to give up his horse, and to hang up his sword and his dagger in the church, near the altar of the Blessed Virgin. This confessor was the first to whom he unfolded his interior, and disclosed his resolution of devoting himself to a spiritual life. Never before had he manifested his purpose to anybody. The eve of the Annunciation of Our Blessed Lady in the year 1522 was the time he chose to carry out the project he had formed. At nightfall, unobserved by any one, he approached a beggar, and taking off his own costly garments gave them to the beggar. He then put on the pilgrim’s dress he had previously brought, and hastened to the church, where he threw himself on his knees before the altar of the Blessed Mother of God, and there, now kneeling, now standing, with staff in hand,