

CHRISTIANITY IN KOREA

GRADES: 10-12

AUTHOR: Elizabeth Rice

SUBJECT: World History, Modern Asian History

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Understand the uniqueness of Korea's large Christian population in Asia.
2. Gain an overview of the history of Christianity in Korea.
3. Identify and analyze reasons behind the growth of Christianity in Korea.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

Handouts of attached readings

BACKGROUND:

There are many cultural ties between Korea and her closest neighbors, China and Japan. However, while Christians make up only a tiny portion of the population of modern China and Japan, in Korea estimates are that Christians make up from one-third to nearly half of the population. This lesson is an attempt to briefly survey the history of the Christian churches in Korea and find explanations as to why they have gained so many followers.

This lesson assumes that students are already familiar with Confucianism and Buddhism as well as Christianity's frequent ties to the history of western imperialism. This also should not be the first introduction students have to the history of modern Korea. They should already have some understanding of Korea's experience in WWII, the Korean War and beyond.

PROCEDURES:

1. Display Overhead 1, which has a comparison chart of the percentages of the population who identify themselves as Christian in several modern Asian nations. Have the class as a whole grapple with the questions provided on the sheet.
2. Next divide the class into five groups. Give every student in each group one copy of the same reading. For instance, all students in group A will receive Reading 1. Group B will receive Reading 2, etc. Have the students complete the reading on their own and then discuss with their group members the questions posed. Group members should take brief notes on the group's responses to the questions and be able to verbally summarize the reading.
3. Now students move into mixed groups. The new groups should contain five students, each of whom read a different handout. Moving in sequence (chronological order) each group member should briefly explain the reading s/he did and the questions they answered. Then, as a group, they should complete the new chart portraying the growth of Christianity in Korea, discuss and answer the general questions. The full class will then meet for a debriefing, where each group presents their response to one of the questions.

EVALUATION:

Students will be graded on their thoughtful completion of the reading and general questions, as well as their active participation in group discussions. For a homework assignment, or if time does not permit full written responses to be completed in class, the groups can discuss their answers together and make some brief notes. At home each student would be responsible for answering the general questions in fully developed paragraphs or writing an essay expanding on question four.

As an alternative, students could be assigned one of the readings and attached questions for homework; when they come to class they could move immediately into mixed groups to share their reading and tackle the general questions together.

RESOURCES:

Cho, Kwang. "The Meaning of Catholicism in Korean History." In *The Founding of Catholic Tradition in Korea*, edited by C. S. Yu, 115-140. Ontario: Korean and Related Studies Press, 1996.

Ch'oe, Sok-u. "Korean Catholicism Yesterday and Today." In *The Founding of Catholic Tradition in Korea*, edited by C.S. Yu, 141-160. Ontario: Korean and Related Studies Press, 1996.

Clark, Donald. *Christianity in Modern Korea*. New York: The University Press of America, 1986.

Hunt, Everett Nichols. *Protestant Pioneers in Korea*. New York: Orbis Books, 1980.

Kang, Wi Jo. *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: a History of Christianity and Politics*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.

Kim, Andrew E. "History of Christianity in Korea: From its Troubled Beginning to its Contemporary Success." *Korea Overseas Information Service*, <http://www.kimsoft.com/1997/xhist.htm>

Wright, John W. *New York Times Almanac 2000*. New York: Penguin Reference, 1999.

Lew, Young Ick. *A Brief History of Korea*. Seoul: Korean Educational Development Institute, 1994.

OVERHEAD 1: CHRISTIANITY IN MODERN ASIA

Country	Percentage of Population Identifying as Christian
China	1%
Japan	0.7%
North Korea	0% (officially)
Philippines	92%
South Korea	49%
Thailand	0.5%

All figures taken from The New York Times Almanac, 2000 edition.

1. Which Asian nation listed has the largest Christian population? What might account for the widespread practice of Christianity in this country?
2. Which country has the second largest percentage of Christians? Why might it be more difficult to account for the large percentage of Christians in this country?
3. Why is there such a large difference between the number of Christians in North and South Korea?

READING 1: ORIGINS OF THE KOREAN CHURCH

Excerpts from:

Clark, Donald. *Christianity in Modern Korea*. New York: The University Press of America, 1986.
Kang, Wi Jo. *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: a History of Christianity and Politics*.
Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.

The first Korean contact with Roman Catholicism is reported to have come through the Japanese soldiers who invaded Korea in 1592. When Toyotomi Hideyoshi sent 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. The Japanese general also brought along a Jesuit missionary, Father de Cespedes. However, it appears 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 (Kang, 1).

The Korean Church began with a small group of eighteenth-century Confucian scholars, who found themselves out of favor with the government. Yi Pyok and his friends felt Korean Confucianism could be invigorated through a clearer understanding of man's relation to nature—"the investigation of things." Among the texts studied by these scholars was a smuggled copy of *The True Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven*, a Chinese work by the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. Ricci's description of the Christian god seemed much like their idea of the neo-Confucian Supreme Ultimate and they decided to learn more. This was risky. The Pope's condemnation of ancestor worship in neighboring China had scandalized Korean Confucians. The church was therefore regarded as hostile to the Confucian order of the Chosŏn dynasty.

The scholars decided to send a representative to Peking. Yi Sunghun, was the son of a recently appointed Korean envoy bound for China in 1783. They persuaded him to accompany his father, find out everything he could and bring back books. Yi Sunghun did more: in Peking he became a Christian himself and was christened Peter, a name suggesting his destiny as founder of the Korean church. When he returned home in 1784, he carried books, crucifixes, images and information about Christian rituals. Then he joined with Yi Pyok to found a small lay congregation of Catholics. This was Korea's first known Christian church (Clark, 5).

1. Why do you think the first time Christianity entered Korea, it attracted no converts and had basically no influence on the Korean people or society?
2. What is unique about how the first Christian church was established in Korea as compared to the formation of early churches in other parts of the non-western world?
3. How might this unique start have continued to influence how Christianity is regarded in Korea?

READING 2: GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY, 1780s–1880s

Excerpts from:

Cho, Kwang. “The Meaning of Catholicism in Korean History.” *The Founding of Catholic Tradition in Korea*, edited by C. S. Yu, 115-140. Ontario: Korean and Related Studies Press, 1996.

Lew, Young Ick. *A Brief History of Korea*. New York: The Korea Society.

Christianity took root in Korea during the middle of the Chosŏn kingdom. This kingdom had come to power in 1392 after overthrowing the weakened Koryŏ kingdom. Koryŏ, in addition to having been overrun by the Mongols, was seen as removed from the people and corrupt. Buddhism, the state religion under Koryŏ, was associated with this corruption: pampered Buddhist monks served as advisors to the king and temples had amassed huge quantities of wealth. When the Chosŏn kingdom came to power they nationalized the land of all but a few Buddhist temples and severely limited the activities of Buddhist monks in cities and major towns. Buddhist temples continued to exist in remote mountain areas but Buddhism was not longer used by kings to legitimate their rule. In place of Buddhism, the Chosŏn leaders emphasized a strict, intellectual brand of state sponsored Confucianism. It took time for Confucian beliefs and cultural practices to trickle down to the common people, but by the eighteenth century Confucian social practices were dominant in Korea. It was in this environment the first Catholic church was formed in Korea

The earliest Christian converts in Korea were from the scholarly elite. However, this new religion soon began to spread to other segments of Korean society. Christianity may have been especially attractive to lower class Koreans, because, in addition to a promise of life after death in heavenly paradise, Christian teachings made reference to the equality of all people before god. For instance, one western missionary recorded an account of Hwang Ilgwang, an early convert to Christianity who came from the class of butchers, one of the lowliest groups in Korean society. He was so amazed that “believers who came from the *yangban* (noble) class treated him equally and accorded him the honor of entering the room and taking a seat” that, supposedly, he exclaimed for himself there were two paradises, one on earth because of the manner in which he was treated despite his background, and the other in heaven (Cho, 118).

Women made up a large portion of the early Christians converts. They were able to participate in the religious and social life of the church. Furthermore, the Catholic church’s condemnation of forced marriage, of husbands taking a concubine or a second wife, and its favorable view of allowing widows to remarry, might have made the Catholic church seem a welcoming place to some women.

The Chosŏn government however, viewed the new Catholic Church as dangerous. Christianity was outlawed through a special royal edict in 1785. Korean Christians were persecuted and put to death for not following the Confucian ritual of worshipping the souls of their ancestors. Yet the Catholic Church continued to grow and, by 1865, there were some 23,000 converts. A year later the largest wave of persecutions of Christians began. From 1866-1872 at least 8,000 Korean Christians and nine illegal French missionaries were killed (Lew, 28-29).

1. Why might Korea under the Confucian Chosŏn dynasty have been an especially fertile ground for Christianity to take root?
2. What other religion that existed in Korea might have appealed to lower classes in a similar manner as Christianity? How might this other religion have been hindered in attracting new followers?
3. Why did the government care which religion people practiced?

READING 3: INTRODUCTION OF PROTESTANTISM, CHRISTIANITY 1880s-1910s

Excerpts from:

Clark, Donald. *Christianity in Modern Korea*. New York: The University Press of America, 1986.

Kang, Wi Jo. *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: a History of Christianity and Politics*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.

By 1800, missionary activities and Korean practice of Christianity had been officially outlawed in Korea:

While the Korean Catholic community was suffering in the nineteenth century, the Protestant faith was also putting down roots. In Chinese Manchuria, in the 1870s, Scottish missionaries studied Korean and then translated scriptures, which they passed to traveling Korean merchants. The merchants in turn set up small family congregations in Korea. Protestant missions to Korea began in 1884 when Dr. Horace N. Allen was transferred from the Presbyterian Mission in China. To gain access to Korea, he came not as a missionary but as a physician to the U.S. delegation in Seoul. A short lived palace coup in December 1884 gave him the chance to heal the wounds of a Korean prince, thereby earning the gratitude of the king and permission to start a clinic (Clark, 6).

We can see how rapidly the Protestant community grew when in 1912 an American missionary described its assets as including:

Approximately 330 foreign missionaries, 962 schools, a medical college, a nurse's training school, 13 hospitals, 18 dispensaries, an orphanage, a school for the blind, a leper asylum, a printing press, 500 churches, a Christian community of 250,000, property worth approximately one million dollars and annual expenditures of over 250,000 dollars (Kang, 48-49).

Protestant Churches also continued the Catholic church's practice of translating texts and writing hymns in *han'gul*, the Korean script developed by King Sejong's advisors in the 15th century but not widely used until the 1880s when its use by the Christian community helped promote its acceptance. *Yangban* (noble) scholars were educated in Chinese characters and typically used them to read and communicate. Lower classes, which had no opportunities to attend school, usually did not read and write at all, let alone in a foreign language. The phonetic *han'gul* alphabet was much more accessible, especially in the new schools opened by Christian missionaries.

1. How was the first Protestant missionary able to legally gain entrance to Korea?
2. Besides their spiritual message, what else did the Protestant community have to offer which might have attracted interest and converts?
3. How did the churches' actions positively identify it with Korean nationalism?

READING 4: KOREAN CHRISTIANITY UNDER JAPANESE OCCUPATION 1910-1945

Excerpts from:

Clark, Donald. *Christianity in Modern Korea*. New York: The University Press of America, 1986.

The Japanese formally annexed Korea and governed it from 1910 to 1945. Christian leaders were prominent in groups organized to awaken Korean resistance to colonization. The church itself was seen by many as a refuge from Japanese rule. Its organization and networks posed political problems for the Japanese. Foreign missionaries wrote letters home with frank reports about Japanese oppression. They also taught about freedom and democracy. Thus, from the start, the Japanese were apprehensive about Christianity in Korea. They set out to neutralize the church and to co-opt the missionaries (Clark, 8).

The Japanese colonial administration issued a series of orders:

...Requiring church institutions such as schools and hospitals to meet government standards for staffing and facilities. These included a requirement that religion not be part of the regular school curriculum. This rule eliminated the *raison d'être* [reason to exist] for most church and mission-related schools. At this point, churches virtually abandoned elementary education to the government. Higher academies were forced to teach religion after hours and, in some cases, off campus, generating a bitter dispute among the missionaries about whether or not they should be in education at all. Together, foreign and Korean church leaders felt the pressure and most missionaries came around to the view that the Japanese regime was an enemy of religious freedom (Clark, 9).

The March First 1919 Independence Movement was a pivotal event in modern Korean history. The Korean Declaration of Independence proclaimed on that day had 33 signatories, of whom 15 were Christians. Christians circulated copies of it underground. Christian groups organized rallies and demonstrations across the country. The fury of the *kempeitai* [Japanese military police] came down hard on the Christian community. Church leaders were rounded up, followers were beaten and shot and in one instance guards locked a congregation inside a church and set it ablaze, killing everyone within. Clearly, Christians were a target in the aftermath of the March First Movement and the Church suffered heavily. Yet it continued to grow despite this—or because of it, as some would argue, for the Korean church prides itself on its willingness to endure adversity (Clark, 9-10).

During the 1930s the colonial government began to require all Korean citizens to honor the emperor and Japanese state by worshipping at Shinto shrines. Many Korean Christians went along with this and the Vatican itself declared this was a political, not religious, duty and Korean Catholics should obey the rules of the state. However, some Protestants declared such action equivalent to idol worshipping and they publicly resisted. These resisters often suffered severe persecution and even death. After the end of the war this was a source of conflict within the Christian community—there were bitter feelings between those who had cooperated with the Japanese and those who had resisted that led to the division of some congregations.

1. Why did the Korean Christian churches continue to grow despite harassment by the Japanese colonial government?
2. How did conditions under the Japanese create tension within the Christian community?

READING 5: KOREAN CHRISTIANITY SINCE 1945

The Korean Peninsula was divided in 1945. Even though North Korea previously had a large concentration of Christians and the new leader Kim Il Sung had himself been raised Christian, under his strict interpretation of communist doctrine, all religious activities were suppressed. During the Korean War, Christians, who were seen as likely American sympathizers, were specially targeted for imprisonment, torture and death.

South Korea emerged from the Korean War with most of its agricultural and industrial base destroyed and its economy in shambles. The South Korean government and population focused their efforts on rebuilding and joining the ranks of the modern, developed nations of the world. They were very successful in this endeavor. South Korea's per capita GDP was 20 times higher in 2000 than it was in 1950. In 2001 South Korea's economy was the 11th largest in the world. Partly in order to achieve these results and partly due to this success, Korean society has undergone many significant changes. Women have joined the workforce in large numbers and the work day for most employees and school children has significantly lengthened. Millions of people have left their small towns and agricultural villages, moving cities where they seek better jobs and educational opportunities for their children. Today, 83% of South Koreans live in urban areas, especially Seoul, which now contains nearly half of the country's total population.¹

The growth of Christianity in South Korea has mirrored the tremendous growth of the economy. During and after the Korean War, Christian aid organizations were among the most effective groups in providing the people with food, shelter, clothing and other types of material relief. Many people, grateful for the help, became interested in the teachings of the church and converted. In 1957 it is estimated that South Korea's Christian population numbered about 1.85 million. However, it was during the following three decades that the number of Christians in South Korea really took off. In the 1960s and 70s churches became active in the democratic movement, strengthening the perception that Christianity was a social force for good.

By 1978, there were approximately 6.5 million Christians in South Korea and today some estimates put the figure as high as 21 million. Seoul is home not only to the world's largest church, Yoido Full Gospel, but also several close runners up. Yoido Full Gospel Church claims more than 800,000 members and its main church building seats up to 12,000. The church runs several services each Sunday and has numerous annex churches throughout Seoul and other parts of the county. Like many other Korean churches, it sponsors youth groups, Bible study classes and social events for its members, including music and sports activities. It encourages its members to get involved in missionary and charity work and has helped to set up counseling, job training and child care programs. Yoido's motto is "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" (John 3:2), seems to resonate with thousands of South Koreans striving to improve their lives in the fast paced modern world.²

1. Why might Christianity have benefited from the push towards modernization and economic growth and eventually democracy?
2. What did churches offer that might have attracted followers during this time of tremendous change in South Korea?

¹ Economic and demographic statistics from NationMaster.com

² Religious statistics from Andrew Kim, "History of Christianity in Korea" www.kimsoft.com/1997/xhist.htm

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Complete the chart: Each member of the group (except those with Reading 4) should contribute the numbers found in their reading.

Year	Approximate # of Korean Christians
Reading 1 1784	
Reading 2 1865	
Reading 3 1912	
Reading 5 1957	
Reading 5 1978	
Reading 5 2000	

1. During which period did Christianity experience the largest increase in Korea?
2. Although Christianity is not indigenous to Korea, at various points Christianity has been associated with Korean nationalism. Describe three examples of this.
4. How might the fact that Christianity was a foreign religion, associated with the West, also have helped to attract followers? At what points in time do you think this aspect was particularly important to its development?
5. Looking back at the original chart comparing the percentages of Christians in several Asian nations, what do you now see as the reasons for the strong Christian presence in Korea? Rank in order of importance the causes for the popularity of Christianity in Korea and explain your reasoning.
6. How do the roles Christianity has played in Korea differ from the roles it has played in many other non-Western nations where it was introduced? How is it similar?
7. What is your prediction for the future of Christianity (and other religions) in Korea? Do you think it will surpass or continue to grow at its recent rapid rate, even off or lose ground to another religion? Or will Korean society become more secular? Why?

BRIEF ANSWER KEY

A. Initial chart depicting Christianity in Modern Asia

1. The Philippines has the largest Christian population. It was colonized by Spain, a Catholic country.
2. South Korea has the second largest percentage of Christians. It was never colonized by a Christian country.
3. North Korea is a communist state, which officially has abolished religion.

B. Reading 1

1. The first time Christianity arrived, it was with invading Japanese soldiers whom the Koreans regarded as enemies, making it unlikely they would be interested in the soldiers' religion. Furthermore, no effort was made to attract Korean converts.
2. The first Christian church in Korea was established independently by Koreans interested in the religion, not by foreign missionaries.
3. This may lend itself to viewing the Church in nationalistic terms, as a Korean institution supporting Korean nationalism.

C. Reading 2

1. Under a strict Confucian system, those at the bottom of the Confucian hierarchy might be attracted to a religion that theoretically saw all believers as equal.
2. Buddhism may also have appealed to those at the bottom of the Confucian hierarchy. However, it had been somewhat discredited at the end of the Koryo kingdom.
3. The government wanted its subjects to respect its authority and Confucianism promoted this behavior. Christianity, which clashed with some Confucian rituals and taught that Jesus and the Bible were the ultimate authorities, might undermine the people's loyalty to the government.

D. Reading 3

1. The first Protestant missionary came to Korea as a doctor, caring for U.S. diplomats in Seoul.
2. Protestants opened hospitals, orphanages and clinics to serve needy people with modern medicine. They began schools and colleges, open to all classes. Through these new opportunities many people may become interested in Christianity.
3. The teaching of the *han'gul* alphabet, rather than Chinese characters, could be seen as supporting Korean nationalism.

E. Reading 4

1. Christians were seen as standing up to Japanese aggression while promoting Korean nationalism, which may have attracted converts.
2. Some Christian churches were more willing than others to cooperate with the Japanese colonial government. For instance, when missionaries' schools were not allowed to teach religion, some thought there was no longer any point in teaching while others thought they should continue.

F. Reading 5

1. Christianity might be associated with the modern and wealthy West, which represented the material goals South Korea strived to reach. Also, Christian leadership in the democratic movement earned admiration and new converts.
2. Churches offered practical help with urban living, but more importantly, at a time when many people left their families and hometowns, joining a church provided a replacement community. It provided a network of friends and social activities.

G. General Questions.

1. Year Approximate # of Korean Christians

Reading 1 1784	Few dozen
Reading 2 1865	23,000
Reading 3 1912	250,000
Reading 5 1957	1 million
Reading 5 1978	6.5 million
Reading 5 2000	20 million

2. Three examples of Christian Korean nationalism.
- Independent founding of churches by Koreans, not foreigners.
 - Missionary schools teaching Korean *han'gul* script as opposed to Chinese characters.
 - Active participation of Christians in the resistance movement against the Japanese occupation.
 - Pro-democracy activism of Christians in 1960s and '70s
3. As a religion from the West it may have been associated with Western modernity and technology. Also its association with the West may have increased its anti-Japanese appeal during WWII.
4. Students' opinion supported by evidence.
5. Differences: Christianity in Korea was never associated with an occupying colonial power. In many other parts of the world, Christian missionaries' conversion of local people helped reduce resistance to the establishment of colonial governments. In Korea, Christianity has more often been associated with Korean nationalism. Similarities: Christian missionaries often brought schools and hospitals into new areas. During independence movements of former colonies, Christian teachings were sometimes used to support nationalist movements, often led by people educated in missionary schools.
6. Students' opinion supported by clear reasoning.