Korean Protestant Churches’ Attitude towards War: With a Special Focus on the Vietnam War

Ryu Dae Young

Abstract

The modern history of Christianity has witnessed an increasing unease with the traditional doctrine of a “just war.” Nonetheless, until quite recently, Korean Protestant churches appeared to know only “just war” theory. Since the Korean War, these churches have been among the most avid advocates and supporters of war, with two ideological assumptions underlying this attitude—anti-communism and pro-Americanism. The churches’ approach to the Vietnam War demonstrated how the two ideological concepts brought them to support Korean involvement. For them, the war was a fundamental part of the global struggle against the encroachment of “evil” communism, hence necessitating South Korean help to the United States and its allies in defending a “free” South Vietnam. Their attitude blinded Korean churches to the post-colonial dimensions of the Vietnam War. However, beginning in the 1970s, some churches began to move out of this cold war mentality and reevaluate America’s role in Korean history. The divided opinions on the War in Iraq show that many Korean Christians no longer embrace these traditional views towards communism or the United States.

Keywords: just war, Korean Protestant churches, anti-communism, pro-Americanism, Korean War, Vietnam War, War in Iraq

Ryu Dae Young (Ryu, Dae-yeong) is an assistant professor in the Department of Christian Culture and Mass Communication at Handong University. He obtained his Ph.D. in Religion at Vanderbilt University in 1998. His articles include “Treaties, Extraterritorial Rights, and American Protestant Missions in Late Joseon Korea” (2003). E-mail: rudy@handong.edu.
Introduction

Christian churches’ attitudes towards war are indeed complex. Early Christians living at the time of the Roman Empire, when Christianity was not yet officially accepted and was still considered a new religion, believed that war or the use of military force was unjustifiable. For these early Christians, the teachings of Jesus Christ, such as “He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword,” were self-evident. Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire following Emperor Constantine’s conversion to the faith. Christianity, which became closely intertwined with politics, suddenly found itself unable to unconditionally refuse the notion of war. It was under these circumstances that the concept of bellum justum (just war) was born. This concept, which was established by Augustine of Hippo, was used to justify the use of military force to maintain order within the Roman Empire and to defeat the barbarians. Accepted by both the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and Protestants during the Reformation, this concept of a just war became the central tenet of Christianity’s approach to war.

Although the majority of Christians have accepted the concept of a just war, the identification of what constitutes a just political authority, just purposes, and just methods remains a point of contention. The rapid development of science and technology in the modern era has led to the introduction of weapons capable of inflicting harm on an unprecedented scale. When such weapons of mass destruction are used, a significant number of civilians inevitably perish. Furthermore, as Christians have pondered the causes, process, and results of war, the viewpoints of contemporary Christianity towards war have also become more critical. However, despite the changing attitudes of world churches toward war, Korean Protestant churches’ attitudes have remained for the most part unchanged since Korean liberation. In large part, Korean churches have supported the wars launched by the Korean government without ever sincerely and reflexively considering the archaic notion of a “just war.” This phenomenon can be ascribed to the ideological tendencies of Korean churches, their relationship with the state, and their view of the United States. This paper analyzes Korean Protestants’ perception of war, and more specifically, their attitude towards the Vietnam War.

Korean Churches’ Perception of Vietnam War

The Vietnam War and the Dispatch of Korean Military to Vietnam

Ho Chi Minh, the communist-nationalist leader of the Vietminh, proclaimed the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam immediately after World War II. He then proceeded to spearhead a war of independence from France, who desired to retake its colony that had been seized by Japan. The French military, though armed with modernized weapons, was unable to defeat the Vietminh guerrillas, who were armed with a strong desire for independence and ingenious military strategies. Unable to prevail on its own, France turned to the United States for help. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam began in earnest in July 1950 with the provision of military aid to France. By 1954, the United States were paying 78% of the French government’s war costs.¹ The U.S., which relied on a policy of containment for preventing the spread of communism, did not want the Vietminh, led by the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, to expel France and dominate Vietnam. The U.S. intended to establish a pro-American and anti-communist bulwark in South Vietnam.

During the Geneva Conference following the formal defeat of France in 1954, all parties involved in the Vietnam War made the decision to temporarily divide Vietnam, based on the assumption that reunification would be achieved following the holding of a general election.² However, the U.S. government and its counterpart in Saigon,
knowing full well what the results of a general election in North and South Vietnam would be, refused to accept the agreement. Ho Chi Minh’s government in North Vietnam had the overwhelming support of the majority of the Vietnamese population. Right after the Geneva Conference, in September 1954 to be more precise, the U.S. set about strengthening the pro-American and anti-communist alliance structure by organizing the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). With the support of the U.S. government, the Republic of Vietnam was founded in October 1956, after the period (July 1956) within which a unified government was to have been established through general elections had elapsed.

The Vietminh communist and nationalist followers of Ho Chi Minh decided to launch an armed struggle designed to bring about the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, whom they thought to be a puppet regime of the U.S. By this point, the U.S. was widely regarded as the new foreign presence in Vietnam replacing France. For these Vietminh Communists and nationalists, the conflict with the U.S. and its allies represented an extension of their anti-imperialist struggle for independence, which had continued unabated since the French colonial era. Despite the rosy predictions made by the Department of Defense that the conflict in Vietnam would be wrapped up quickly, the war effort rapidly deteriorated into a quagmire-like war of attrition with no end in sight. The U.S. attempted to use the same approach they employed during the Korean War: that of using multilateral bodies such as the UN, NATO, and SEATO to justify its intervention in the Vietnam War, thus allowing the war to be painted as an international action. However, once it became clear that this plan was not proceeding as intended, the U.S. government changed gears and began asking its allies in the Asian-Pacific region to dispatch troops to Vietnam. Korea was the first country to eagerly respond.

An advance party of the Peace Dove Division, which was responsible for combat support operations, arrived in Vietnam on 25 February 1965. Given that Lyndon B. Johnson first approved the dispatch of U.S. combat troops on that same date, and these troops only arrived in Vietnam on 8 March, the alacrity with which the Korean government intervened in the Vietnam War is evident. The dispatch of the Korean military to Vietnam was carried out under the pretense that the Korean government had accepted a formal request for aid from the American and South Vietnamese governments. However, the truth of the matter is that Park Chung-hee had expressed his desire to participate in the Vietnam War as early as November 1961, when he visited the U.S. and met John F. Kennedy shortly after the military coup which brought him to power. The dispatch of the Korean military to Vietnam provided Park Chung-hee with an opportunity to secure political, military, and economic benefits for his regime while also improving his relationship with the U.S.

In October 1965, or shortly after the Johnson administration’s decision to “Americanize” the Vietnam War, the Korean government dispatched a division-size battalion of the Tiger Division. While taking part in combat operations, the U.S. government was forced to reevaluate the military strength of its enemy, and send additional ground troops. General William Westmoreland, the head of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, asked the U.S. government to supply him with at least 470,000 soldiers by the end of 1966, a request which was soon raised to 550,000. The U.S., unable to mobilize any additional troops because of the growing anti-war sentiment at home, made a formal request to the Korean government for an additional dispatch of troops. Following negotiations with its U.S. counterpart, the Korean government decided to dispatch an additional division-sized battalion. The troops that were dispatched were from the 9th Division, more commonly known as the White Horse Division.

Korean Churches’ Perception of the Vietnam War

At 10:00 AM on 26 August 1966, a farewell service hosted by the National Council of Churches in Korea (KNCC) was held for the troops headed for Vietnam in the barracks of the White Horse Division located in Yeouido. Before this, the KNCC sent out a letter under the name of six denomination leaders, asking all churches nationwide to hold a special prayer service for the soldiers who were being dispatched to Vietnam. The prayers and sermons delivered by church leaders during this farewell service for the White Horse Division clearly demonstrated Korean churches’ perception of the Vietnam War and the dispatch of Korean military to Vietnam. This service hosted by the KNCC included many high-level clergymen from various denominations, such as Yi Cheon-hwan of the Episcopal Church, president of the KNCC, Kil Jin-geong of the Presbyterian Church, KNCC’s acting general-secretary, and Jang Un-yong of the Salvation Army, who encouraged the soldiers and prayed for their safe return. In a speech responding to the church leaders’ blessings and concern, General Yi So-dong of the White Horse Division pledged to those assembled that his forces would obey God’s will and would only be used for good. General Yi also asked those present to continuously pray for his soldiers and their victory, stressing his certainty that God would use fire and brimstone to protect his forces. While most other churches in the world opposed the U.S. government’s intervention in Vietnam, Korean churches maintained a close affinity with the Korean troops dispatched to Vietnam in alliance with the U.S.

The speeches made by the leaders of these Korean churches during the farewell service for the members of the White Horse Division were very similar to the message that President Park read out during the official farewell ceremony held in the square of the Central Government Complex. President Park justified the Korean troop dispatch to Vietnam based on the American-led Cold War, anti-communist ideology. The fact that Korean churches adopted the same attitude as the President explains why these churches so closely cooperated with the state on issues related to the War.

The Korean churches’ perception of the Vietnam War was that of a confrontation between the expansionist forces of communism and the free world aligned to stop it. The Christian press and Korean churches tended to describe the dispatched soldiers as having been sent to “protect the freedom of the South Vietnamese allies,” or as “repelling the communist invaders.” The use of such expressions demonstrates how the Vietnam War was viewed as a confrontation between North Vietnam and the Vietcong on one side, whose supposed intention was to destroy a free South Vietnam, and the United States and its allies on the other, who were endeavoring to stop this invasion.

In a column published in May 1966, before the additional dispatch of the White Horse Division, the monthly journal, Gidokgyo sasang (Christian Thought), expressed its concerns over the growing anti-American protests in South Vietnam. It went on to identify the Vietnam War as an issue that was not only linked to the freedom of Vietnam, but one directly connected to the destiny of the free peoples of Asia. At the prayer meeting for dispatched soldiers, the KNCC adopted a recommendation stating that Korean soldiers had been sent to help defeat communism and protect peace in Asia and the freedom of the Vietnamese.

Kim Hwal-lan, the director of the missionary division of the KNCC, who led the above-mentioned farewell service for the members of the White Horse Division, prayed for God to bless them. She identified the Korean soldiers as crusaders fighting for the freedom of humanity and the dignity of mankind. Similarly, Yu Ho-jun, the
The desire for global hegemony. The decisive factor in the formation of the pro-American and anti-communist ideology of Korean churches was the division of Korea and the subsequent Korean War. Most Christians in the North, especially those in the northwest part of the peninsula who led the Korean Protestant movement prior to Korea’s liberation and were imbued with pro-American and capitalist sentiments, could not accept the socialist regime. The majority of these church leaders escaped to South Korea, and once there, began to make anti-communism a tenet of theology to justify their own behavior. As the political division deepened, Christians became divided in accordance with their ideological orientations. The leadership of South Korean churches was assumed by anti-communist and pro-American individuals. These South Korean church leaders, who had been influenced by American missionaries and their own studies in the U.S., exhibited pro-American tendencies, with many of them regarding the U.S. as the model upon which the state should be established after liberation. The tragic Korean War created a deep-seated hatred of communism within the hearts of South Korean Christians that proved difficult to overcome. This polarization

18. Kennan (1984, 163); Leffler (1994). The world order during the Cold War era was the result of a “specter” created as a result of the mutual misunderstanding and suspicion between the capitalist and communist blocks. This misunderstanding created an acute sense of fear within both camps.


20. For example, in 1949 Han Gyeong-jik identified communism as the red dragon of the apocalypse. Han (1992, 300).

of emotions is well represented by the case of Kim Jae-jun, a church leader who was considered progressive and was opposed to the establishment of a separate government in South Korea. In the aftermath of the crucible, Kim defined those who had any sympathy for communism as being delusional.\textsuperscript{22} As such, South Korean Christians became anti-Communists, regardless of their theological standpoint. As the U.S. government intervened in the Korean War and launched relief activities through American churches, Korean churches took on an even stronger pro-American stance, coupled with their anti-communist outlook.\textsuperscript{23}

The vivid memories of the Korean War had a decisive influence on Korean churches’ perception of the Vietnam War. As only a decade had passed, it was only natural that Korean churches regarded the Vietnam War as an extension of the Korean War. At the prayer meeting for dispatched soldiers, the KNCC lent added significance to Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War by stating that Korea was now at the forefront of the war against communism.\textsuperscript{24} Kim Hwal-lan praised the White Horse Division soldiers for setting out to repay the debt Korea had towards its allies who had come to Korea in its time of need, and for helping out a neighbor in a similarly difficult situation.\textsuperscript{25} In an article published in the Gidokgyo sasang, Ji Myeong-gwan criticized the anti-Vietnam War movement among churches in Asia, including the East Asian Council of Churches, and attributed such a movement to a lack of understanding regarding the true nature of communism. He asserted that only people like Koreans, who had experienced the division of their nation because of communism and had lived through the invasion of these “barbaric” Communists, could understand the atrocious nature of the Communist regime.\textsuperscript{26} In January 1967, Kil Jin-gyeong, secretary-general of the KNCC, based his opposition to the UN Secretary-General U Thant’s position on the war on similar grounds. Kil refuted U Thant’s demands that the Vietnam conflict be resolved through dialogue on the grounds that, during the Korean War, Koreans had learned first-hand the impossibility of sincere dialogue with Communists.\textsuperscript{27}

Their anti-communist and Cold War-based outlook led Korean churches to view the world and the Vietnam War as a struggle between good and evil, with the U.S. and its allies on one side, and the “evil” communist nations on the other. This Manichean dichotomy was easily accepted by the Korean churches. Moreover, Korean churches went one step further and painted the war with their own theology-based perceptions. Yu Ho-jun told the White Horse Division that God, who had created this world and defeated evil, was sending them to Vietnam to protect the lives and destinies of Vietnam, Korea, and Asia.\textsuperscript{28} Kil described the Vietnamese people as suffering, because their freedom was usurped by invading Communists, and their economy and society as having been destroyed by the oppressive Vietcong dictatorship. He condemned the Vietcong while arguing that they disturbed the Vietnamese social order, committed acts of violence, and destroyed peace through violence.\textsuperscript{29}

Development of the Christian Signification of the Vietnam War

The Christian signification of the Vietnam War was developed through the following methods: First, Korean churches emphasized that the majority of the commanders of the troops dispatched to Vietnam were Christians, including Commander Chae Myeong-sin of the Korean forces stationed in Vietnam, Commodore Yi Gye-ho of the Navy’s Seagull Division, and General Yi Bong-chul of the Blue Dragon Marine Brigade. There were an especially large number of Christian
ian officers within Chae Myeong-sin’s Tiger Division, such as the commander of the armored division, the artillery commander, and the director of the 6th evacuation hospital. In fact, according to statistics published in April 1966, 88 of the 97 officers stationed in Vietnam were Christians.30

On 20 August 1966, Gidok gongbo (Christian News) carried the following article regarding the inaugural ceremony of Yi Gye-ho as the commodore of the Navy’s Seagull Division:

Korean soldiers who are dispatched to Vietnam are welcomed by the free world. The Korean military will be forever remembered as the guardian of world peace and freedom. Furthermore, as these soldiers are imbued with Christian spirit in their quest to defeat the atheist enemy, they are even more fondly evaluated as an army of the free world.31

Thus, we can see that Korean churches regarded the Vietnam War as a confrontation with communism and from a religious standpoint, a battle with evil. As Yi Gye-ho was Christian, the entire Seagull Division was regarded as soldiers imbued with the Christian spirit. The fact that the majority of the Korean commanders were Christian helped these churches identify the entire deployment as crusaders for God, and also facilitated their interpretation of the Vietnam War as a holy war. When Chae Myeong-sin returned to Korea in July 1966, the KNCC held a welcoming prayer service and invited Church leaders. Kim Chi-muk gave a speech in support of the war and prayed that the Vietnam War would be a conflict in which all the nations would join hands together under God to achieve victory in this “just” war.32

The Christian signification of the Vietnam War by Korean churches was given in large part through the Immanuel Battalion. This Immanuel Battalion was a company within the White Horse Division (the 5th company of the 29th regiment) that was composed of only Christian soldiers. The very fact that a battalion composed solely of Christian soldiers, as well as its name, shows the close relationship that existed between the government and the Korean church.33 Kil Jin-gyeong, who gave the sermon for the White Horse Division’s farewell prayer service, said that the presence of the Immanuel Battalion meant the division could be regarded as crusaders for the faith and an army for justice. He prayed to God to further bless the White Horse Division because of the presence of this Immanuel Battalion.34 In his letter to the Gyohoe yeonhap sinbo, Bak Gwi-hyeon, army chaplain for the Immanuel Battalion, identified his men as twentieth-century crusaders for freedom sent to implement God’s will. He then went on to add that his battalion, which was sent on a holy mission from God, was the shield protecting the freedom of Vietnam. Thereafter he added his hope that all the troops in Vietnam, and further all of the Korean military, would follow the path set by the Immanuel Battalion and become crusaders for justice sent to impose God’s will.35

Army chaplains played the role of linking Korean churches to the Vietnam War. Korean churches’ interest in the war began with the dispatch of 2,000 soldiers from the Peace Dove Division in March 1965. The dispatch of these troops, although they were not a combat unit, signified the onset of Korea’s full-fledged participation in the war. In addition to the dispatch of this Peace Dove Division, Korean churches’ interest in the war also began to arise with the dispatch of Protestant army chaplains. The Korean government decided to send a Presbyterian army chaplain from the 26th Division, American-educated Yi Chang-sik, to Vietnam.36

The dispatch of army chaplains to Vietnam as the first chaplain marked the onset of the Korean churches’ direct involvement in the Vietnam War. From that point on, army chaplains acted as the bridge

34. Gyohoe yeonhap sinbo, 4 September 1966.
Korea, Yi Chang-sik stated that as the Vietnamese people only fully trusted the Korean soldiers, and the Vietcong had been defeated by the power of Taekwondo, the Vietnamese situation would settle down within 2-3 years.\(^\text{41}\)

Korean churches’ reactions to the international anti-war and peace movements

Korean churches supported the dispatch of soldiers to Southeast Asia, which surfaced as a critical issue with the dispatch of the Peace Dove Division to Vietnam. No criticism was voiced of either the Vietnam War or of the legality of the Korean troop dispatch to Vietnam. Korean churches’ attitudes towards the Vietnam War and the dispatch of Korean soldiers appeared to be solely based on hostility towards communism and on a sense of crisis, which was in turn based on a Cold War and an anti-communist ideology. However, the United Nations and other international organizations, churches in other countries, influential intellectuals, as well as factions within the U.S. and Vietnam themselves, continuously questioned the justification for the U.S. government’s intervention, as well as its objectives, and how the war was being implemented.

As the Vietnam War became a confrontation between U.S. pride and its military forces on one side and the national pride of the Vietnamese people and their willingness to die for their cause on the other, the war dragged on and became more destructive. The international community began to demand a stop to the war and a peaceful resolution to Vietnam-related issues. The majority of Korean churches were opposed to these international anti-war and peace movements. While some individuals did attempt to reconsider the war from a theological standpoint, and even raised issues surrounding the justification for the Vietnam War, such efforts were limited to the efforts of a few individuals.

37. In October 1966, the number of army chaplains in Vietnam was 400, consisting of 86 priests, 3 rabbis, and 310 Protestant ministers. For its part the army chaplains whom Korea sent out were fathers and ministers. However, the exact number of these Korean army chaplains remains unclear. Gyohoe yeonhap sinbo, 9 October 1966.

38. For example, the diaries of Son In-hwa and of an army chaplain nicknamed Ilam were published in Gidok gongbo.


The Early Anti-War and Peace Movements

The U.S. and other international churches began to adopt a more serious and organized interest in the war in 1965, the year when the U.S. directly intervened militarily in the conflict. In the New York Times on 4 April of that year, the Clergymen’s Emergency Committee for Vietnam, in the name of 2,500 clergymen from Protestant churches and Jewish rabbis, published an advertisement in which they raised their objections to attacks on North Vietnam. In May, the Interreligious Committee on Vietnam, which was composed of religious leaders such as John C. Bennett, the president of the Union Theological Seminary, and civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., carried out a silent protest in front of the Department of Defense. The Interreligious Committee on Vietnam, expressing their concerns about large-scale attacks on North Vietnam and the tragedy and pain caused by these attacks, also urged the president of the United States to peacefully resolve all Vietnamese issues through dialogue involving all concerned parties. A month later, Christianity and Crisis, one of the representative Christian magazines in the U.S., whose editorial committee included such people as Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett, and Harvey Cox, identified the Vietnam War as a civil war, and criticized the U.S. government for trying to establish an independent government in South Vietnam.

Despite these early anti-war movements, Lyndon B. Johnson decided to Americanize the Vietnam War. He therefore decided to launch a massive war in order to avoid having Vietnam fall to the Communists. As the Vietnam War intensified, the anti-war and peace movements became more organized and spread across the globe. These international efforts to urge a peaceful solution to the Vietnam War soon came to the attention of Korean churches. Korean churches’ negative reaction to international efforts to bring about a peaceful resolution of the Vietnam War was made known immediately after the National Council of Church in the U.S. (USNCC) publicized their resolution in October 1965, along with the joint report prepared by the East Asian Council of Churches and the USNCC soon thereafter.

During the Sixth World Order Study Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, the USNCC adopted a series of resolutions and urged the U.S. government to negotiate with all concerned parties, including the National Liberation Front (Vietcong), stop the bombing of North Vietnam, limit the sphere of attacks to military bases in South Vietnam, and recognize the Vietnamese people’s right to choose their own government. This resolution, which was moderately critical of the U.S. government’s Vietnam policy, was one of similar resolutions adopted in the same period by other religious organizations, such as the Catholic Peace Fellowship and the Union of American Hebrew Congregation. Based on this resolution, the USNCC sent out a letter to churches around the world in which it clearly spelled out its position on the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, from 1 to 4 December 1965, clergymen from the United States, Indonesia, Vietnam, Australia, Singapore, and Thailand participated in a meeting hosted by the East Asian Council of Churches in Bangkok, a meeting in which participants adopted the following report: the U.S. government should stop attacks on North Vietnam; all concerned parties should suspend military operations and join negotiations; and both sides should cooperate with settlement efforts being made by the UN.

The overarching theme of the report and resolutions passed in St. Louis and Bangkok was that the Vietnam problem could only be resolved through negotiations and not through war, an approach in keeping with the basic Christian tenet of love and reconciliation. However, Korean churches’ reaction to this approach was less than enthusiastic. In January 1966, Kim Deok-su, secretary of the interna-

---

42. Hall (1990, 9).
43. Hall (1990, 9).
44. Hall (1990, 9-10).
46. Hall (1990, 10); Yeonhap gidok sinbo, 16 January 1966.
Vietnam War was one of the most important issues on this conference’s agenda. The resolution on Vietnam passed by this conference, and Korean church leaders’ reaction to this resolution clearly exposed the extreme differences between these two camps’ positions on the Vietnam War.

According to the official report of the World Conference on Church and Society, the Vietnam War was discussed by the 3rd subcommittee under the theme of “Structures of International Cooperation: Living Together in Peace in a Pluralistic World Society.” A final resolution was adopted following discussions of the Cold War nuclear order. This resolution called for recognition of the right to establish new states, and called on the nuclear powers to refrain from using their own ideological prejudices and interests to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Moreover, the resolution also included demands that all hostilities and military actions be stopped immediately and that a peaceful resolution of the Vietnam conflict be brought about through the combined efforts of the UN, the countries participating in the Geneva Conference, and other international organizations. Furthermore, the resolution unanimously deplored the fact that China could not join the UN and decried the international isolation of China, which was seen as becoming an increasing threat to world peace.

Korean church leaders such as Jang Hong-sik and Kim Jun-yeong of the Methodist Church, along with Baek Nak-jun, Kim Jae-jun, Kang Chi-muk, Kim Jong-dae, Kim Yong-gu, and Bak Yeong-suk.

49. Yeonhap gidok sinbo, 6 February 1966.
51. This resolution was drawn up by Yu Ho-jun, Kim Deok-su, Kim Jong-dae, Kim Chi-muk, Kim Yong-gu, and Bak Yeong-suk.
Kang’s assertions regarding the inclusion of the brutality of the Vietcong and the deferment of China’s membership in the UN in the resolution were different from what was described in the official report. In general, the remarks and conclusions reached by the world conference did not jibe with the anti-communist values of Kang Won-yong and other delegates, which led us to believe that Korean church leaders were less than happy with the results of this conference. Kang Won-yong argued that the participants’ attitude towards communism was akin to “running into the tiger’s den scared by the bears.” He also added, “I am worried that the WCC will wind up siding with the Communists.” Such comments by comparatively progressive leaders provide us with a clear illustration of the Korean churches’ perception of the Vietnam War.

Other Discussions

As we can see from the above discussion of the World Conference on Church and Society, the issue of China’s ascension to the UN was closely related to the Vietnam War. By the 1960s, China was no longer a simple bystander in the Cold War structure erected by the U.S and the Soviet Union. The world had no choice but to accept the fact that China had risen to become an influential power in the Southeast and East Asian regions. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1960s, China began to attack American and Soviet imperialism and revisionism, respectively. China’s criticism of the two countries encouraged nationalists in Indochina, including those in Vietnam, to develop anti-American and anti-foreign power resistance movements.

The United States regarded China—a country it had entered into direct conflict with during the Korean War—and its anti-imperialist platform as more dangerous than Russia, and tried to isolate Beijing from the international community by blocking China’s entry into the UN.
This strange phenomenon, in which Korean churches opposed the WCC demands for the peaceful termination of the Vietnam War, continued well into the 1970s. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which was a union of the Reformed and Presbyterian Alliance and the Congregational Council, adopted a joint resolution on issues related to race, war, and development during their general council held in August 1970. In this resolution, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches stated that the U.S. should withdraw its military from Vietnam in order to bring an end to hostilities, and also pursue the peaceful resolution of the Vietnamese problem. The Korean clergymen, including Han Wan-seok, participating in this general council, along with their Filipino counterparts, expressed their objection to this resolution.

In May 1972, when U.S. ground forces had been almost completely withdrawn from Vietnam as part of the U.S. Vietnamization policy, the WCC Executive Committee proclaimed the Vietnam War an immoral war, while also calling the “Vietnamization” policy a racially discriminatory approach designed to make Asian countries do the dirty work of the U.S. Upon hearing this, Gidok gongbo published an editorial in which it expressed “righteous indignation.” The editorial stressed that although the ultimate goal of all Christians was peace, the painful experience of the Korean War had made it clear that neither peace nor the Church could exist as long as communism existed. According to the newspaper, Korean soldiers were dispatched to Vietnam in order to play the role of crusaders for peace and to express their unforgettable gratitude toward Korea’s allies who participated in the Korean War.

As more and more U.S. ground forces withdrew, the situation on the ground became increasingly tenuous. The safety of the Korean soldiers in Vietnam became the most important issue for Korean churches. On 15 May 1972, the Korean Christian Laymen’s Associa-

---

64. Kil (1967).
Of course, differing opinions about the Vietnam War did emerge within Korean churches. In the essays published in Gidokgyo sasang, some argued that since a war should always be a moral action taken for purposes of self-defense, the Korean soldiers dispatched to Vietnam should labor to create peace and not simply be ruled by their hostility towards communism. Other essays pointed out that the serious dilemma Korea found itself in was its participation in a war that had unclear objectives and was unpopular around the world. Others argued that the impasse that had been reached in the Vietnam War, which now appeared to be impossible to win militarily, would only increase the number of soldiers sacrificed for no good reason. Another argument was that if humankind was going to be saved from the horrors of war and if peace was to prevail, Korean churches needed to launch global appeals for peace and ally with religious organizations around the world to begin the reconciliation process. In this way, one saw Korea's duty as joining hands with its allies for a peaceful resolution of the Vietnam War, while forming a true friendship with the Vietnamese people in the process. Yet another opinion was that it was necessary for Korean churches to oppose nuclear war and promote arms reduction. Nevertheless, these minority voices had little influence on the general perception of the Vietnam War among Korean churches.

Conclusion

Richard M. Nixon chose to disengage from Vietnam shortly after his victory in the 1968 presidential election through his proclamation of

---

68. Gyohoe yeonhap sinbo, 14 May 1972.
75. O J. (1967, 43).
“Vietnamization” of the war and the Nixon Doctrine. Nixon hoped above all to assure the permanent division of Vietnam through negotiations. He adopted a strategy of launching unprecedented, massive air strikes against North Vietnam in order to force them to the negotiating table. From 1969 to 1973, U.S. forces dropped on average one ton of bombs per minute, an action that earned Nixon the infamous nickname “the greatest bomber in history.” However, Nixon failed. The unceremonious withdrawal of the U.S. from Vietnam was completed with the ceasefire agreement signed in Paris in January 1973. In the end, Vietnam was unified under North Vietnam.

The biggest mistake the U.S. government made in Vietnam was to view Vietnamese nationalists, including Ho Chi Minh, as nothing more than Soviet or Chinese puppets. It was nationalist sentiment and not Marxist ideology that spurred Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese, the National Liberation Front, and Indochinese Communists on to victory over such powerful enemies as Japan and France, and eventually even the U.S. The United States has exhibited a tendency to divide the world into good and evil, believing that all difficulties and problems facing the U.S. stem from a single external evil. This tendency is in all likelihood related to the U.S. belief that it has received a special mandate from God to decide the destiny of the world. This tendency has made it impossible for the American government to grasp the fact that the factors hindering implementation of their objectives are not always simple ones, and that consequently, these complicated factors may not originate from a singular source of evil. During the Cold War, the source of all evils for the United States was the communist Soviet Union. The manner in which the Vietnam War was carried out, and the war’s eventual outcome, clearly proves just how wrong that judgment was.

As part of this U.S. strategy to block the expansion of communism, Korean troops were mobilized and sent to take part in the “Americanized” Vietnam War. Of course, the Park Chung-hee government’s decision to send troops was based on more than the passive fulfillment of a unilateral request from the U.S.; as such, calculations of the military, political, and economic advantages that could be reaped also loomed large in Korea’s decision. However, the Americanization of the Vietnam War was a decision that was difficult to justify on either moral or practical grounds. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” The world’s conscience criticized the arrogance of the U.S., which had launched this unjust and immoral war, and demanded a peaceful resolution. Religious groups, and world churches in particular, were the ones who most loudly voiced their opposition to this war.

Nevertheless, in the case of American churches, the degree of criticism of the U.S. government’s Vietnam policy, and the fervor with which demands for the peaceful resolution of the war were made, were heavily dependent on the denomination to which they belonged. Theologically more conservative groups tended to want to achieve victory by escalating the conflict, not by achieving its peaceful resolution. NCC members were among those who were the most active in the anti-war movement. Meanwhile, fundamentalists such as the Southern Baptists and the Missouri Synod Lutherans were the biggest supporters of the escalation of the war. The Presbyterian Church in America, a conservative denomination, officially announced its loyalty to the government’s position in Vietnam. In the case of the conservative churches, lay Christians tended to support the Vietnam War more than the ministers did. The majority of the Southern Baptists remained supportive of the war effort, and critical of the anti-war movement throughout.

The KNCC, which was composed of the most progressive de-
nominations in Korea, demonstrated an attitude towards the Vietnam War that was very similar to the one adopted by fundamentalist denominations in the United States. The KNCC was critical of several domestic matters, such as the Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty, unfair elections, and the Constitutional revision to extend the number of presidential terms to three, all of which emerged during the Vietnam War. The rigid attitude of the KNCC towards the Vietnam War can be understood from the fact that South Korean churches as a whole were transformed into a pro-American and anti-communist entity during the division of the Korean peninsula. Therefore, as long as issues were in any way related to America and communism, very little difference emerged in terms of the positions adopted by theological conservatives and progressives. The attitudes of the Korean churches towards the Vietnam War clearly exhibit the damage that was done to their moral and theological judgment during the division, the Korean War, and by their subsequent adoption of pro-American and anti-communist ideologies.

In the 1970s Korean progressive churches were able to overcome their Cold War ideology and began actively participating in the democratization and unification movements. However, the political attitudes and statements made by right-wing churches in the 2000s clearly prove just how deeply these notions of pro-Americanism and anti-communism have taken root within Korean churches. This simple fact is also supported by conservative Korean churches’ approach to the Iraq War and the dispatch of Korean forces to Iraq, which has been very similar to the attitude exhibited by Korean churches towards the Vietnam War. In a statement in October 2004, the Christian Council of Korea, a representative organization of conservative Protestant churches, urged Korea to send troops to Iraq on the grounds that the U.S.-led Iraq War would contribute to the democratization of Iraq, to the justice of mankind, and to world peace.

The pro-American and anti-communist leanings of this group are made clear by their assertion that as long as the North Korean Communists’ strategy of unifying the Korean peninsula by force remains in place, the National Security Law should also continue to exist.

However, unlike the past, various positions have emerged within Korean Protestant churches regarding the dispatch of Korean forces to Iraq. Some have openly criticized the Iraq War and the dispatch of Korean soldiers to Iraq, thus proving that there are now many people within the Korean churches who are not constrained by the pro-Americanism and Cold War sentiment of the past. Criticism of the Iraq War has also been voiced in some conservative churches. All of this would seem to indicate that the Korean churches’ perceptions of the Korean War and Vietnam War were based on ideological and emotional factors, not theological ones. As such, it is evident that in the contemporary post-Cold War era, pro-Americanism and anti-communism do not remain as the only ideology of Korean churches.

Religion creates within followers what is “really real.” However, given how deeply Cold War ideology was imbedded within the Korean churches’ consciousness, one might ask whether religious values could have remained intact alongside ideological ones. The Korean churches’ attitude towards war during the Cold War era clearly demonstrates that Christian logic can be overwhelmed by ideology. Moreover, the overlap between religion and ideology as seen in both South and North Korea suggests the need for a fundamental reconsideration of the correlation between religion and ideology, as well as of the ideological characteristics of religion and the religious characteristics of ideology. In this regard, the Korean churches’ attitude towards the Vietnam War spurs a reconsideration of Christianity’s power and inherent limitations to influence human judgment and values.
REFERENCES

Korean Organization, Supports the Dispatch of the Korean Military to Iraq. www.newsnkoy.co.kr, 15 October.


Ryu, Dae Young (Ryu, Dae-yeong). 2004 “Icheonnyeondae hanguk gaesingujeul-ui chinmi ban-gongjuui ihae” (Understanding the Pro-American and Anti-Communist Stance of Korean Christian Conservatives in the 2000s). Gyeongje-wa sahoe (Economy and Society) (summer).

