Building the Nation: The Success and Crisis of Korean Civil Religion

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Abstract: Civil religion refers to a country’s beliefs, symbols, and rituals that bolster national unity and strengthen its citizens’ sense of identity and belonging. However, the literature on civil religion is divided between those who attribute it to bottom-up cultural spontaneity and those who see it as an ideological top-down construction. Moreover, there has been a relative lack of scholarly attention to Korean civil religion. This paper addresses both issues by arguing that a strong civil religion indeed exists in the country and that it has been an important part of the “nation-building” process since the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948. The paper highlights how a succession of authoritarian regimes (1948–1987) successfully mobilized a strong civil religion for political purposes. The resulting civil religion targeted economic growth as the national goal to overcome all social ills, focused on the country’s ethnic and cultural homogeneity to boost national confidence and pride, exalted its traditional religions, especially Confucianism, as repositories of Korean traditional culture, and rendered sacred meanings to national symbols such as the flag and national anthem. Even after democratization, Korean civil religion remains largely ideological, as the Korean government is heavily involved in framing, planning, sponsoring, and promoting the country’s civil religion. Nevertheless, the paper concludes by observing that this civil religion is entering a period of crisis due to political fragmentation among Korean elites and deeply rooted cultural and societal change.

Keywords: civil religion; Korea; Confucianism; nationalism; national identity; ethnic identity; nation building; state building; national symbols; national heroes

1. Introduction

Originally coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his seminal book The Social Contract (Rousseau [1762] 1968), the term civil religion can be said to be a set of beliefs that are intentionally created, and imposed on the public, by the state to uphold social order (Aldridge 2007, pp. 142–44). Although Rousseau first used the term civil religion, the basis of this concept is akin to the idea of Emile Durkheim (1965), who argued that religion reaffirms societal norms and values, as well as social relationships, and that it serves as a source of social harmony and unity. Indeed, Durkheim believed that, in any religion, the ultimate object of worship is society itself, i.e., the entity who is being worshipped may be perceived as “God” or a supernatural being, but it is actually a society (Kim 2005, p. 118).

However, it is difficult to precisely define civil religion, as a vast literature has subsequently been added to the foundations established by Rousseau and Durkheim. It is thus prudent to provide representative definitions of the concept as follows. Civil religion refers to “the beliefs, symbols, rituals and institutions which legitimate the social system, create social solidarity and mobilize a community to achieve common political objectives” (Abercrombie et al. 2006, p. 53). Civil religion is a “set of beliefs, rituals, and symbols that makes sacred the values of the society and places the nation in the context of the ultimate system of meaning” (Roberts 2004, p. 356; see Parsons 2002; Cristi 2001; Shanks 1995; Marty 1992; Balitzer 1974). Civil religion can also be defined as “a system of symbols, beliefs,
and rites of a reverent and celebratory kind, concerning the myths, history and destiny of a people that is used to establish and express the sacred character of their social identity and the civic and political order associated with it” (Crisi and Dawson 2007, p. 269). In drawing upon the above characterizations, a working definition of civil religion for this paper is as follows: Civil religion refers to the beliefs, values, symbols, public ceremonies, national heroes, and places of a particular country that are endowed with religious or sacred qualities to reinforce the national identity and promote unity for a common national purpose. The question of how civil religion is different from nationalism is very difficult to answer. Scholars who have published works on civil religion all have recognized the difficulty of making the distinction between the two. However, they point out that it is important to identify civil religion as a meaningful concept and research issue in its own right, because it may explain how, when, and why people’s national identity, their sense of belonging to the nation, and their feeling of unity for national purposes exhibit religious-like intensities.

There is a strong degree of American centrism in work on civil religion. Gardella (2014, p. 6), for example, suggests that “American civil religion may claim to be the strongest and most elaborate civil religion in the world”. Part of this bias stems from the fact that the key pioneer in the study of civil religion in the sociology of religion was Robert Bellah (1967, 1970, 1975), who focused on the example of the United States. He describes civil religion in the following way:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion. (Bellah 1967, p. 1)

In his identification of the nature of American civil religion, Bellah examined, among others, national symbols, ceremonies, national heroes, and “national shrines”, as well as the contents of the presidential inaugural addresses. According to Bellah, American civil religion includes the belief in the United States as God’s chosen nation, the glorification of American history and shared values, e.g., the “American Way of Life”, the attribution of sacred meanings to national symbols such as the flag and national anthem, emphasis on individualism and personal achievement, and belief that a higher morality lies beneath civil laws (Kim 2005, p. 118; see Richey and Jones 1974; Bellah and Hammond 1980; Gehrig 1981). Bellah also argued that presidential inaugurations and national holidays such as Memorial Day, Independence Day (aka “the Fourth of July”), and Thanksgiving comprise an important part of American civil religion, as they all reinforce national values and unity. There are also “sacred places,” e.g., war monuments, national cemeteries, monuments and memorials at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and the birthplaces of prominent presidents, to which Americans make “pilgrimages”. There are also “saints” in American civil religion who are deeply revered by Americans—particularly, such renowned presidents as Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

What these studies of American civil religion imply is that it can serve as a nonsectarian quasi-religious system that can facilitate the cohesion and unity of a nation. That is, in a religiously plural society, as is the case in many societies, no single religion can serve the cohesive functions Durkheim envisioned. A new meaning system must serve as a foundation for social consensus and integration, providing a sense of identity and belonging. The new meaning system that serves as the moral foundation of modern society is civil religion.

Central to the concept of civil religion is that it is an element in what can be termed “nation building” (McGuire 2002, pp. 205–6). In contrast to “state building,” which pertains to “developing an authoritative, utilitarian organization for expediently conducting a
country’s internal and external business”, nation building refers to “developing a country’s sense of solidarity and identity as people” (McGuire 2002, p. 205). Civil religion in the nation-building process can “shape a national vision and goal, and can be actually used to mobilize support for the attainment of national goals”; civil religion can also “sacralize the ideals and destiny of a nation, while rendering a religious quality to national identity and solidarity” (Kim 2005, p. 119).

However, there is a continuing debate regarding the origin of this sense of solidarity and identity. Is it naturally occurring or something constructed? As Cristi and Dawson (2007, p. 276) argued, there are two variants of civil religion: the Durkheimian view of civil religion as “culture” and the Rousseauan political approach to civil religion as “ideology”. The view of civil religion as culture emphasizes “shared values as the bond of society and focuses on the use of civil religion to promote the non-coercive integration of society” (Cristi and Dawson 2007, p. 276). The approach of civil religion as an ideology accentuates “domination within society and focuses on the manipulation of civil religion in the context of power imbalances and the political interests of different groups in society” (Cristi and Dawson 2007, p. 276; see Beiner 1993). Civil religion in this regard is “a premeditated political ideology, constructed by the state and/or its political leaders, and used as a political resource” (Cristi and Dawson 2007, p. 276).

Civil religion as a culture is a noncoercive faith. It is supposed to be anchored in mutually meaningful rituals and symbols that cement a national or group unity. Civil authorities have no power to enforce its doctrine. Allegiance is voluntary, and expressions of loyalty are voluntarily given . . . In Durkheimian terms, the core of civil religion is the celebration of the collectivity. By contrast, Rousseau’s view of civil religion has little to do with a grassroots consensus. Rather it involves a state-led ideology imposed with various degrees of coercion. When civil religion manifests as an ideology, the state has the authority to compel belief and national unity. In its most extreme form, there is little or no freedom as to what individuals can say or do, membership and participation are compulsory, and expressions of loyalty are regularly expected. (Cristi and Dawson 2007, pp. 276–77)

It can be said that civil religion exists in all societies, although different varieties may exist in them. Even within the same society, different varieties of civil religion may exist at different times throughout its history (Cristi and Dawson 2007, p. 277). Additionally, both the Durkheimian and Rousseauan aspects of civil religion are likely to exist in the same society. Thus, the classification of civil religions is rarely an either-or situation; rather, most fall somewhere along a spectrum. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two is important, because an ideological civil religion constructed by elites often takes more overtly nationalistic and exclusive overtones than the ones based on a bottom-up societal value consensus. Indeed, the concept of “political religion” is often used to describe the most extreme forms of these civil religions (Weiss and Bungert 2019). The deliberate sacralization of the nation and its past by elites acts as a scaffolding for more secular forms of nationalism and serves to highlight the close relationship between spatially orientated imagined communities (nationalistic formations) and temporally orientated imagined communities (religious formations) (see Webb 2018).

While there has been a wide array of studies on civil religion in many national contexts, e.g., Kim (1993), Braswell (1979), Markoff and Regan (1981), Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983), Moraska (1986), Seneviratne (1984), Turner (1986), Davie (2001), Okuyama (2012), and Weiss and Bungert (2019), only scant scholarly attention has been devoted to Korean civil religion. The questions addressed by this article are: What are the characteristics of civil religion in South Korea? What makes the Korean example unique? When did its civil religion start, and how successful has it been at fostering unity? Finally, any investigation into the origins of a country’s civil religion also requires addressing the ideology versus culture debate. Is Korean civil religion a natural outgrowth of culture or constructed by political elites?
This paper argues that a strong civil religion indeed exists in the country and that it has been an important part of the “nation-building” process since the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948. This paper highlights how a succession of authoritarian regimes (1948–1987) is needed to mobilize a strong civil religion for political purposes. The resulting top-down civil religion has targeted economic growth in pursuit of the national goal to overcome poverty and strengthen sovereignty, focused on the country’s ethnic and cultural homogeneity to boost national confidence and pride, exalted Confucian beliefs and practices, especially their emphasis on filial piety and ancestor rites, as an important repository of Korean traditional culture, and rendered sacred meanings to national symbols such as the flag and national anthem. It will also be shown that, even after democratization, Korean civil religion remains largely ideological, as the Korean government is heavily involved in framing, planning, sponsoring, and promoting the country’s civil religion. Nevertheless, Korea’s civil religion is, today, entering a period of crisis due to political fragmentation among the elites and deeply rooted cultural and societal changes. This article concludes that top-down constructions of the nation are losing their relevance and that the rituals and myths of Korea need to become more adaptive and participatory to meet the new challenges facing the Korean people.

2. Core Doctrines of Korean Civil Religion: Ideals about the Country’s Destiny

The formation of Korean civil religion is closely related to the modern political history of the Republic of Korea. The country, which was under Japanese colonial rule for much of the first half of the 20th century (1910–1945), regained its sovereignty in 1945. Although the Korean peninsula has a long history of political continuity, the experience of colonization resulted in the country suffering a painful “disconnected” or “severed” history that weakened the people’s sense of identity. Compounding this, the division of the peninsula into two states right after liberation (the northern half of the peninsula became the communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 1948) and the subsequent Korean War (1950–1953) meant that Korean elites worried that the people’s sense of national identity and unity were weak and underdeveloped. The state, therefore, needed to establish not only “a cultural and moral foundation for strong and sustainable social integration” but, also, “a community of people who have shared values, who are united by emotional bonds, and who share a grand vision for the future of the nation” (Kang 2019a, p. 15; see Kang 2014, 2016). In other words, a strong civil religion was necessary for the young nation’s survival.

Bellah’s account of the evolution of US civil religion emphasized the importance of the major wars—namely, the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and Vietnam War. In contrast, the periodization of South Korea’s civil religion revolves around several key shifts in how the country’s sovereignty was envisioned and organized. These include the pre-independence period (pre-1945), the postliberation period (especially the rise of authoritarian governments after the Korean War), and the democratic period (1987–today). Although the focus of this paper is on describing the core doctrines of the civil religion created by authoritarian governments in the postliberation period and the subsequent crisis of this belief system in the post-democratic transition period, it is important to note that many of the basic elements of the republic’s civil religion were derived from the symbols, ideas, and rituals created by the Korean independence movement, as well as the work of nationalist intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.1

From the postliberation period to the 1990s, the survival strategy of South Korean elites revolved around the construction of a persuasive civil religion. External security threats, the country’s poverty, and Korean elites’ reliance on foreign partners were its basic doctrinal

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1 Due to limitations of space, this article cannot provide a detailed historical reconstruction or intellectual history of the evolution of Korea’s civil religion. Rather, the objectives of this paper are more modest in that it provides an overview of the major contours of Korea’s civil religion in the postliberation period and its contemporary crisis. Similarly, although a detailed examination of the civil religion of North Korea is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that many of these pre-independence symbols and ideas were also influential in North Korea (see Pai 2000, p. 12), and an intellectual history of the evolution of North Korea’s civil religion would be equally rewarding.
parameters. In its broadest contours, as argued by In Cheol Kang (2017, p. 134), the Korean civil religion is composed of five basic beliefs, “doctrines”, or values: nationalism (i.e., identification with, and support for, one’s own nation and its interests), developmentalism (or economic growth), anticommunism (or anti-North Korean sentiment), liberal democracy, and pro-Americanism. As for his inclusion of anticommunism and pro-Americanism as basic doctrines of the Korean civil religion, Kang argues that the division of the country following the liberation and the Korean War (1950–1953), which resulted in millions of South Korean casualties, served to engender strong anticommunism and pro-Americanism, as the United States was perceived as playing a critical role in thwarting North Korea from seizing the whole peninsula.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, however, the doctrines of anticommunism and industrialization were far more prominent than the respect for liberal democracy. In fact, the turning point in the modern political history of Korea was the military coup in 1961. Park Chung-hee, who led the coup, believed that economic development was necessary to bring about political stability, carry out reforms, rebuild the country, and improve the lives of Koreans (see Park 1971). The military regime was especially concerned about a lack of legitimacy, so it enthusiastically promoted the formation of a top-down Korean civil religion. This civil religion specified a national destiny, vision, and purpose that was amenable to elite interests, particularly focusing on the need to strengthen the country through industrialization, emphasizing the achievement of prosperity as the key to overcoming various social ills, including starvation and poverty, improving the living standard, improving public services such as education and health, and strengthening the country’s sovereignty, including a better defense against North Korea (Kim 2005, pp. 121–22).

Accordingly, industrialization, as well as modernization, was advanced as a national task for the Korean people in the 1960s, and the Park Chung-hee regime initiated a series of ambitious economic plans to realize this “national construction”. The Park regime understood that an active participation on the part of the people was necessary. However, this participation was initially unpopular, because it entailed heavy self-sacrifice, such as long working hours, unsafe conditions, and poor pay. Therefore, to encourage self-sacrifice on behalf of the nation, the Korean government mobilized various slogans emphasizing the importance of enhancing the strength of the nation, and the improvement of the living standard, through industrialization. These slogans particularly targeted the workers, most of whom were adjusting to the rigor of the factory regime, complete with long hours of work under poor working conditions. For example, the following catchphrases were used to stress the need for workers to work hard: work hard for _kukwi sŏnyang_ (“enhancing national prestige”), _such’ul chindae_ (“export growth”), and _minjok chunghŭng_ (“regenerating the nation”) (Kim 1986, p. 43). Other slogans that served as rallying words included _hamyŏndaenda_ (“If you put effort into it, it can be done”), _sosin_ (“firm conviction”), _kangnyŏkh’an ch’ujin_ (“strong effort”), and _kyŏltan_ (“determination”) (Kim 1986, p. 43), as well as _chalsara boja_ (“Let us work for a better life”) and a popular motto “The better the economy is, the better the life is for everyone” (Kim 2005, p. 122).

A stronger nation was also celebrated as a safer nation. Anticommunism was effectively utilized by the South Korean government to promote industrialization. Until the late 1990s, North Korea was labeled as the “external” enemy against which South Korea had to compete against economically, as well as militarily (Kim 2005, p. 123). Government propaganda used the heavy casualties and devastation inflicted by the North’s invasion, as well as anxieties of future aggression, to persuade South Koreans to work diligently for the country’s rapid industrialization. South Korean elites constantly reiterated that citizens must work diligently to achieve rapid economic development and to equip their country’s armed forces with the most advanced weaponry to thwart North Korean aggres-
sion. Another idea that was “sponsored” by the government was that their country’s rapid industrialization would prove to the world that their “democratic” and capitalistic society was better than their northern counterpart’s.

Signs and posters containing these ideas were found on the walls of offices and factories, as well as in elevators. These slogans were also found on billboards and on banners donning the streets and intersections. These ideologies were also thoroughly advanced by the mass media, schools, and even churches during sermons. Koreans consented to the idea of strengthening the nation through economic development because of their experiences with past social ills, such as starvation and poverty, and repeated national defeats. Similarly, the government utilized intense anti-Japanese sentiments among the public to motivate Korean workers to work hard. Popular slogans included “Let’s Catch Up with Japan”, “Let’s Beat Japan”, and “Let’s Surpass Japan” (Kim 2005, p. 123). The view of Japan as an archenemy and a “living memory” of the Japanese atrocities did not happen naturally but, rather, was shaped through invention, reinvention, and manipulation by government authorities. In this way, and which is still true to a certain extent, even today, Japan was constructed by the elites as an “archrival” or “archenemy” against which Koreans were encouraged to match or outdo its achievements, including its economic ones.

Consequently, Korean civil religion was largely shaped by the government to target rapid industrialization as the national goal and destiny. The government also sought to instill in Koreans a sense of purpose and pride by contrasting its selective portrayals of the past—including centuries of national hardships such as the Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and poverty—with a future where Koreans’ sense of dignity would be recovered by the accomplishment of the national task of economic development (Kim 2005, p. 123). This was intended to provide the Korean people with “a tremendous hunger for economic progress” by persuading them that rapid economic development would strengthen the country’s sovereignty and overcome various social and economic ills, particularly starvation and poverty. Moreover, this government-sponsored vision of a strong, safe, and rich nation was also embedded with a promise that there would be a fair sharing of the benefits of their economic progress in the future. As we will see, today, there is a growing sense that this promise has gone unfulfilled, contributing to a crisis in Korea’s civil religion.

It is also important to note that this celebration of national strength, a hatred of North Korea, and promises of future economic prosperity were only part of the equation. The Park regime also realized that the best way to promote people’s support for, and their voluntary participation in, the national construction was to reaffirm their identity and pride as Koreans and to reaffirm a strong sense of unity. As we will see in the next section, the future-looking promises of economic prosperity and national strength were skillfully supported by a multilayered ethnonationalist narrative about the Korean race and its past.

3. Defining the Nation: Confucianism and Ethnic and Linguistic Homogeneity

As we have seen, the civil religion of the young Republic of Korea emphasized industrialization as the national destiny, in conjunction with strong elements of anticommunism. With a clear national vision firmly in place, it was next necessary to encourage the masses to empathize and actively participate in the national goal by strengthening their identity as Koreans and their sense of belonging to the national community. Accordingly, Korean civil religion artificially highlighted Korea’s Confucian heritage and ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, as well as geographical continuity.

3.1. Korean Civil Religion and Confucianism

In contrast to the United States, where their civil religion is thoroughly Christian in beliefs, symbols, and rituals, the religious composition of Korea is rather complex, with no majority religious group and around 46 percent of the population having no religious affiliation. The major religious groupings consist of Buddhists (25.3 percent), Protestants (19.8 percent), and Catholics (7.4 percent) (Baker 2018, p. 3). Moreover, there is
also an important but often understated shamanistic legacy within the country’s religious landscape (Horak and Yang 2018, p. 3). While it is undeniable that Christian elites have played a key role in the contemporary history of South Korea, with many Korean presidents identifying themselves as Christian, the country itself is highly syncretic, and its civil religion does not openly exhibit ties to any mainstream religious traditions. This diversity is a unique characteristic of Korean society, with Chongsuh Kim (2010, p. 26) observing that the Korean approach to religion is “essentially pluralistic, manifesting one’s inherent religiosity or religious mind in many different experiences”.

However, rather than a syncretism of Christian and Buddhist symbols, as one might expect, South Korea’s civil religion is heavily influenced by Confucian values and rituals. According to Seong-Hwan Cha (2000, p. 207), the Korean civil religion was “developed from Neo-Confucianism, which has dominated Chos˘on society as a state religion for 500 years”. As traditionally understood, Confucianism is an ancient tradition and a quintessential system of ethics for Koreans. It is seen as exerting a pervasive influence in not only prescribing rules of conduct and ideal social behaviors but also shaping the characteristics of the family and the community. Family harmony and distinctions of statuses (based on age and gender) are viewed as the basis for upholding harmony in the community and society. Thus, in distinguishing Korean society from the United States, Cha (2000, p. 206) argues that the former has a completely different tradition, with Neo-Confucianism permeating practically every aspect of culture.

In fact, the influence of Confucian ideas runs deep in Korea, perhaps even more so than China, where the socio-ethical philosophy arose. Surveys by Gallup Korea (1984, 1998, 2004, 2015) consistently show that Koreans strongly embrace Confucian values, such as filial piety and respect for the elderly, and that a large proportion of the population observe such basic Confucian rituals as burial rites and ancestor rites. For example, in 1985, Gallup Korea conducted a survey to assess the level of Koreans’ “adherence” to Confucianism under the two broad categories of “conviction”—belief in such Confucian values as filial piety, loyalty, and self-cultivation—and “practice”—performing such Confucian practices as filial piety, seniority deference, and ancestral rituals (see Koh 1996). The survey classified the respondents as “active”, “normal”, “marginal”, or “outside” in their level of commitment to the two categories of Confucianism, and the results showed that more than 91 percent of the respondents were found to be at least “marginal” adherents of Confucianism (Koh 1996, p. 199). The extent of the cultural influence of Confucianism in Korea is revealed by the fact that a large majority of Buddhists and Christians were also found to be at least “marginal” devotees of the socio-ethical system.3

Indeed, standard accounts often treat Confucianism as an intrinsic or natural feature of Korean society. For example, a recent study observed that “Confucianism has functioned as an underlying cultural norm in Korean society, regulating interaction between individuals and society” (Kim and Kim 2020, p. 686). However, it is a mistake to understand Confucianism merely as a bottom-up cultural phenomenon, because it risks overlooking the role of elites in articulating what Confucianism means and how it functions. In truth, Confucianism has always functioned more like a state cult rather than a popular religion. As pointed out by Paramore (2015, p. 271), it has “deep political valency and . . . close association with states”. This is consistent with John Duncan’s (1997, p. 53) observation that Korea has a “long tradition of official inculcation of Confucian values for political purposes”. Especially in the Chos˘on Dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism became the de facto state religion, as the elite embraced it as the ruling ideology. Confucianism can be said to be a ruling ideology par excellence, as its key precepts include the virtues of loyalty towards the king and groups, submission to authorities, giving precedence to hierarchy, and filial piety.

3 Despite this apparent pervasiveness of Confucian beliefs, only 0.3 percent of the Korean population officially identify themselves as Confucians (Baker 2018, p. 3).
Thus, authoritarian governments in the post-independence period saw great utility in promoting a modernized version of this religio-ethical system as a source of cultural identity for Koreans. This means that the apparent continuity of Confucian beliefs and behaviors between the pre-independence and post-independence periods was not a timeless or intrinsic attribute of Korean culture; rather, it was actively produced by elite attempts to (re)define the nation. Such efforts accelerated with the Park Chung-hee regime (1962–1979), as it wanted to inspire people’s loyalty and dedication to the nation by promoting Confucian social ethics as the foundation of the Korean national character. That is why numerous books and articles on the virtues of loyalty and filial piety were published in the 1970s and 1980s, many of which were published by government-subsidized research centers, including the renamed Academy of Korean Studies (see Kim 1976; Han 1977; I.-s. Kim 1977; Y. H. Kim 1977; Lee and Hwang 1982).

To motivate Koreans to empathize with the national goal of economic development—and work diligently for the sake of the nation—the Korean government advanced the notion that their country was akin to a big family, with the president as the family head (see Kim and Park 2003). The Confucian ideal of ch’ung or loyalty to the leader was given a renewed emphasis, reminding the masses that the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the nation, i.e., work hard for the national goal of rapid economic development, was “consistent with the Confucian ideal of citizenship” and that any opposition to the national goal was a violation of Confucian ethics and a repudiation of Korean identity. Indeed, diligence was regarded as a patriotic and moral duty, which supported the nationalistic narrative that the self-sacrifice of individuals would strengthen the country and its economy.

Confucian ethics were also evident in the saemaul undong or the New Village Movement, which was launched in 1971 to invigorate the rural economy and improve the quality of life in rural areas. The campaign was centered on ideas of “diligence, self-help, and cooperation” (Choi 2017, p. 457). Accompanying the campaign was a philosophy of saejôngshin undong or the New Spirit Movement, which exalted the Confucian values of filial piety and loyalty, among others.

The Korean government also mobilized education to promote loyalty to the nation. Korean education was overhauled in the early 1970s under the campaign of “education with a national identity”, and Confucian virtues of filial piety and loyalty were advanced as the ideals of good citizenship. As observed by Seungsook Moon (1998, pp. 39–40), the architects involved in revamping Korea’s ethics education during this period “consciously or unwittingly select[ed] various elements concerning Korean history, traditional thinking, and ethics, as well as images of a ‘desirable’ (paramjik han) Korean from the complex of Korea’s past”. To this day, a subject related to “ethics” comprises an important part of curricula in primary and secondary education in Korea, with the actual names of the subject ranging from “Good Citizenship” to “Righteous Living” and “Citizen Ethics”. These courses are intended as means for instilling ethical values into the minds of Korean children and youths. A perusal of the textbook used in these courses, entitled Kungmin yulli or National Ethics, reveals that it contains, among others, contents related to the ethical traditions of Korea. In this way, students learn that Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety are social obligations and duty.

The focus of Korea’s civil religion on Confucianism not only strengthened the state, but it also sought to provide privileges to subsidiary groups in society, especially men, the elderly, and the educated. The virtues of loyalty and filial piety, which are central to Confucianism, imply that individuals must prioritize the interests of the group, be it the family, company, or state, over those of a personal nature. Therefore, Korean government elites were enthusiastic supporters of Confucian familial norms not only because they created stability (by equating the state and corporations with the family) but, also, because they put the burden of welfare spending on families themselves rather than the state (Sung 2003; Goodman et al. 1998). At the individual level, meanwhile, men were accorded a privileged position in society, resulting in unfair distributions of the housework
and decision-making power. This was because, of all the relations and accompanying virtues, the one between father and son (or of parent and child) and its associated virtue, i.e., filial piety, is the most important in Confucianism, as it is viewed as the source of all virtues. Indeed, Koreans are ideally obliged to perform filial acts at three levels in their lifetime: look after their parents with devotion in their old age, hold an elaborate funeral when they die, and conduct ancestral rites on a regular basis, especially on their death anniversaries and during culturally significant holidays such as Ch’usŏk (Korean Thanksgiving) and Sŏllal (Lunar New Year’s Day).

Even today, the sentiments of filial piety, as well as family loyalty, are reinforced through ancestral rituals. Ancestor rites, perhaps the most significant feature of Korean customs, is a “ritualization” of the moral significance of the virtue of filial piety. A large majority of the Korean population, including Buddhists and Christians, continue to perform ancestral rites to this day. The extent to which Koreans perform ancestral rituals is evident during Ch’usŏk and Sŏllal, when more than a half of the total population reportedly make a “pilgrimage” to their place of birth to conduct ancestral rituals, causing heavy traffic congestions on practically all the highways of the country:

By taking part in the pilgrimages, people enter into the imaginary world of their ancestors, create their own past, and through the process of sacred ritual come to identify with their ancestors. Moreover, pilgrimages provide an experience for constructing a conceptual map of their own world beyond the limits of time and space. By visiting these sacred places, people renew their historical consciousness and expand their historical community beyond local boundaries. Through these activities they reconstruct or solidify the social network of communication. (Kim 1996, pp. 215–16)

Thus, as idealized in Korea’s civil religion, ancestor rites have been “a cultural mechanism through which people learn about their history and cultural distinctiveness” (Kim 1996, p. 213). Moreover, the devotion of individuals to ancestral rituals not only reinforces their connections to their ancestors and kin but, also, by extension, their ties to their immediate community and to the larger society, the nation, complete with a sense of national identity and belonging. In this idealized world, by being dutiful offspring and in performing ancestral rituals, Koreans are collectively reaffirming their commitment to their common cultural heritage and shared tradition.

However, does this idealized world of filial piety and loyalty correspond with reality? All civil religions are aspirational, what Webb (2018, p. 74) described as “other-worldly orders”. Thus, Korea’s civil religion in the post-independence period consciously drew upon the Confucian legacies of the Chosŏn Dynasty in its effort to create a strong sense of nationhood while also empowering the elites in other corporatist bodies, such as households and corporations. The success of this project in influencing citizens’ behaviors can be seen in the annual pilgrimages of millions of people to participate in ancestral rites but, also, in the micropolitics of family life (for example, see Kim 2020; Yokotani and Yu 2020). However, as will be shown later in this paper, there is a growing resentment that this idealized world is deeply unfair or unattainable and that people are actually living in “Hell Chosŏn”.

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4 Indeed, the possibility that civil religion serves to conceal or even justify unequal distributions of power between genders and ethnic groups within a society has been a common criticism of Bellah’s idea (see Danielson 2019).

5 Korean Catholics freely practice ancestor rites, as the church allows the practice as a cultural act. Their Protestant counterparts, on the other hand, are prohibited from performing ancestral rituals, as the church views it as an act of idolatry. However, a considerable proportion of Korean Protestants reportedly practice it. For example, one study shows that up to two-thirds of Korean Protestants conduct ancestral rites (Ryu 1987, p. 200).
3.2. Ethnic Identity and Language

Central to the Korean sense of “peoplehood” and comprising a significant part of Korean civil religion is the country’s myth of ethnic homogeneity. During the nation-building process, the Korean government has promoted the idea that Koreans are united from time immemorial and ethnically homogeneous. Yet, this ethnic homogeneity is “imagined” or “culturally constructed” rather than a historical fact. Moreover, this emphasis on the purity of bloodlines was an ideological legacy of the Japanese colonial period that became a key belief in both North and South Korea (see Myers 2011). Far from an isolated case, this borrowing from Japanese models was indicative of the South’s overall cultural policy, as observed by Sang Mi Park (2010, p. 76): “It is ironic that the South Korean public was asked to identify with the nation through a sense of a uniquely shared past which was largely constructed and presented to the Korean public via state-cultural policies modeled on Japanese government cultural projects.”

As part of this policy, the Korean government instilled in Koreans an ideological belief that they are descendants from a common ancestor, thus forming a consanguineous community. In this way, there is just one symbol of the Korean peoplehood: one Korea comprising people who share the same “blood” and the same ancestors. Central to such symbolic construction of ethnic homogeneity is the country’s founding myth or one original ancestor myth—namely, the Tan’gun myth (Lee 2004; Kim 1999). The myth explains how Tan’gun, the “grandson of heaven”, became the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom, and the myth has been used by the Korean government to advance the ideology that Koreans are his descendants, thus sharing the same ethnic heritage (see Grayson 1997; Lee 1986, 1990). In this way, the Tan’gun myth strongly expressed the essence of Korean peoplehood and was said to be the spiritual root of the Korean people. As argued by Kyung-Koo Han (2007, p. 12), the myth was also used to inculcate a “profound sense of cultural distinctiveness and superiority”. This founding myth also became congruent with Korean terms for referring to the Korean people and their country. For example, the following express Korean ethnicity in consanguineous terms: minjok (literally meaning “people”), minjok kukka (“nation”), minjok kongdong ch’e (“national community”), kyore (“people of the same blood”), and tongpo’o (“the offspring from one mother”) (Roh 1992). Additionally, the Korean term for “country” (kukka) is expressed in a familial way, as the term is comprised of two characters, with the first character “kuk” meaning a “country” and the second character “ka” meaning a “family”. In this way, the country was portrayed as being like a large family.

Although the myth was only popularized in the late nineteenth century by nationalist journalists and writers (Schmid 2002, pp. 171–98), the South Korean government’s tourist website still proudly informs visitors:

Koreans accept and interpret the Tan’gun legend to be more than a mythical story. Just as the story of the Fall of Troy had been accepted by the world as a vague mythical story until remains were discovered, Koreans believe that the Tan’gun legend could be a trace of the foundation story of the first ancient kingdom on the Korean peninsula. Based on the Tan’gun legend, Korean historians date the origin of Korea’s legitimate history back to some 50,000 years ago (Korea Tourism

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6 The Korean concept of peoplehood, known as minjok, was a legacy of nationalist writers and historians of the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries who, in response to Social Darwinist ideas, as well as foreign encroachment, reconceptualized the Korean nation as a distinct and even sacred race (see Schmid 2002; Pai 2000). Additionally, in discussing the Korean “peoplehood”, the work of Son Jint’ae is important, especially because he was one of the first ethnographers and folklorists in Korea who used the idea of minjok chu˘ui (or ethnic nationalism) as the main focus of his research. He also served as the country’s first Vice Minister for Education in 1948, being tasked with a revision of the school textbooks. However, his greatest achievement can be said to have been his research in folklore studies, as he became one of the pioneers in the field to collect primary sources to delineate the characteristics and essence of Korean national culture (see Jeon 2010). Indeed, his research in Korean folk tales, folk beliefs, and shamanism laid the foundation for later research in related fields and became an important source for understanding Korean cultural identity and their sense of peoplehood.

7 Indeed, modern genomic studies have identified large genetic components in the Korean population originating from East Siberia and Southeast Asia (Pan and Xu 2020).
This founding myth is taught in Korean schools as virtually a historical fact. For example, since 1988, history textbooks in both primary and secondary schools have affirmed the legend of Tan’gun as reflecting a historical fact (see Seth 2002, pp. 192–223). It is also worth noting that a philosophy from the Tan’gun myth has been one of the most important educational principles in Korea since the founding of the First Republic in 1948. According to the myth, Tan’gun’s father, Hwanung, came down to Earth to bring benefits to humankind, and the accompanying ideal of ḥongik in’gan, which means “to work for the benefit of humanity”, has become an unofficial national motto of the country. As an educational principle, the ideal called on Koreans, as well as Korean students, to further develop their abilities to improve their performance for the progress of the country (Jeong 2008, pp. 181–82).

Central to the Korean sense of “peoplehood” and comprising yet another significant element in the civil religion propagated by elites both before and after the democratic transition is a deep pride in cultural continuity. Koreans are taught to take great pride in the fact that their country has been able to maintain cultural uniqueness and continuity, despite frequent invasions and numerous foreign occupations throughout its history. Central to such pride is linguistic homogeneity. In particular, Han’gŭl, the Korean writing system, is exalted as one of the simplest and yet most sophisticated writing systems in the world, complete with just 24 letters. Koreans learn that Han’gŭl is one of the easiest scripts to learn to write, that it is logical and is the most “scientific” system of writing, that it is best-suited for the expression of sounds in practically all languages, and the spoken words mostly sound exactly as they appear in writing. Such pride in Han’gŭl is further expressed in the way Koreans celebrate Han’gŭl Day (October 9) as a national holiday. As such, the Korean language—but, especially, its writing system—has played an important role in promoting a spirit of national uniformity and unity. The official website of the National Institute of Korean Language (2020), for example, asserts that:

All Korean people need a commemoration day to remember the intention of King Sejong and the scientific excellence of Han’gŭl. It is said that a linguist in the United States throw a party every year to commemorate the day on which the greatest character in the world was invented. Not only on Han’gŭl Day, but sometimes we need to be grateful to Han’gŭl for allowing us to live more comfortable lives (Hangeul in the original changed to Han’gŭl, according to the McCune-Reischauer Romanization System).

The importance of this script is further demonstrated by the fact that the Korean government even seeks to ensure that other countries’ history textbooks are accurate when describing Han’gŭl (see Ministry of Education 2007).

4. Elements of Korean Civil Religion: National Symbols and Saints

The civil religion supported by the Korean government is additionally strengthened through the deliberate association of the nation with key political, cultural, and historical symbols. Koreans are taught to be very proud of their civilization, which is reportedly older than 5000 years and which is depicted as having survived thousands of years of invasions and external aggressions from neighboring countries. History, thus, has been an important means whereby the national elites promote ethnonational cohesion and seek consensus on the vision of a Korean people as a single community with shared historical experiences, heritages, and identity. An important component of this project was seeking to create a common interpretation of, and rendering a sacred quality to, important events and figures in premodern Korean history. Therefore, many events in

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8 Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that this is a highly selective portrayal of Korean history that exaggerates the country’s victimization while simultaneously overlooking its own acts of aggression.
Korean history are interpreted positively, including the two dynasties of the Koryô Dynasty (918–1392) and the Chosôn Dynasty (1392–1910), emphasizing how long the country remained unified for each dynasty. Likewise, this civil religion celebrates how Koreans were able to endure and overcome destructive invasions and foreign occupations, such as the Mongol invasion (1231–1273), the Japanese invasion of Korea (1592–1598), and the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), while preserving their cultural and ethnic identity and continuity. For example, the commemoration of the March 1st independence movement of 1919 and the liberation from Japanese colonial rule (August 15) consciously seeks to remind citizens of the importance of national independence and sovereignty. In celebrating past achievements, Korean inventions are also glorified, e.g., thick, hard paper that can facilitate printing on both sides (1145–1188), the world’s first metal type to print books (around 1234), and the armored turtle ships of the 1590s, among others.

Government-sponsored interpretations of the country’s ancient history are nearly universally accepted by the general population, although there are critical discussions and differing interpretations among scholars. Therefore, the ancient traditions of Korea have formed the basis of a strong civil religion, with the nation’s 5000 years of history used as a common refrain in school textbooks and museums. Interestingly, the main conflicts over ancient symbols in Korea are not domestic but with neighboring countries, especially China, North Korea, and Japan, over how to demarcate their respective histories. A key point of contention arises from attempts to nationalize ancient kingdoms that existed on both sides of modern-day borders (see Wang 2020; Song 2004). Although these international disputes are outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted that this contestation with foreigners has doubtlessly contributed to the Korean government’s heavy emphasis on elucidating a “correct” interpretation of the past. Moreover, these historical myths, although popularized by authoritarian governments, are still an integral part of how democratic Korean governments portray the nation. For example, while giving a short speech in Sweden, President Jae-in Moon (2019a) twice mentioned Korea’s 5000 years of history, including the false claim that “over its long history of 5000 years, Korea has never invaded other countries”.

4.1. National Symbols

The name of a country can be said to be its most important symbol. Koreans take their country’s name Taehan Min’guk or the Republic of Korea for granted, but at the time of the liberation, several names were proposed by the political factions, and there was a heated debate and political wrangling to ultimately determine the name of the country. The preference for the name of the nation differed depending on the political orientation of the proponents, with “Korea”, “The People’s Republic of Korea”, and “The Republic of Korea” leading the field. In addition, there were those who supported the names of Saehan, literally meaning “New Korea”, and Taejin, literally meaning “Great Korea” (Kim 1997, p. 96). The naming of the country was engulfed in controversy until the very moment when the Provisional Government Establishment Committee decided on Taehan Min’guk (The Republic of Korea) as the country’s name in time for the establishment of the republic on 15 August 1948. This example highlights the arbitrary nature of many of the symbols chosen to represent the Korean people but, also, the importance of drawing upon pre-existing symbols, because the term Taehan referred to the short-lived Empire of Korea and was used by the provisional government during the Japanese colonial period (Lim 1993, pp. 44–45). It is worth noting that there was also a strong support for putting “Chosôn” in the country’s name, since the term has long been used as a name for Korea, or for putting in “Koryô”, as the term was viewed as being relatively free from controversy in comparison to Taehan and Chosôn and was deemed readily relevant to the English term for the country, Korea (Lim 1993, pp. 44–45). Even though South Korean leaders did not choose Chosôn as the name of their new country, it is noteworthy that their counterparts in North Korea did so, naming their republic Chosôn Minju Chu’i Inmin Konghwaguk.
After the name of the country itself, the next things that were highlighted in the process of the formation of the Korean civil religion were the symbols of the nation, including the flag, national anthem, and national flower (Kang 2019b, p. 113). National symbols play “a central role in establishing the identity of a country and national unity as official representations of a country” and include not only the national flag, national anthem, and national flower but, also, “national coat of arms, the seal of the state, name of the country, flags and emblems of government agencies, Presidential seal and Prime Minister seal” (see Compilation Committee of Korea 1999, pp. 1–50). The national symbols are confirmed in the process of the establishment of modern states and are an “official formulation” of the identity and future direction of the state and the people (Jo 2003, pp. 194–95). The representative national symbols of Korea include the national flag, also known as T’aegukki, the national anthem, and the national flower, mugunghwa (hibiscus).

The flag, the most important national symbol, represents the sovereignty, national unity, and integration of a country, as well as the nation’s ideology and national spirit (Choi 1990, pp. 4, 20). In particular, the Korean flag has been used as an important symbol for uniting Koreans. Until recently, a new week at school, from elementary to high school, began with everyone gathering on the schoolyard saluting to the flag and singing the national anthem. Koreans are taught that the white background of the Korean flag is a symbol of the purity (pureness) and the peace-loving nature of Koreans (Koreans are taught to be proud that they have never invaded other countries in their long history). Therefore, T’aegukki is considered, as advanced by the government authorities, to symbolize the ideal of the Korean people who are in harmony with nature. Moreover, the yin-yang symbol in the center of the flag is a Confucian symbol, an important reminder of the significance of this socio-ethical philosophy in Korea’s civil religion (Yoo 1988).

Interestingly, there were many variations of the flag after the liberation, which was why the textbooks published by the US Military Government in 1946 included instructions on how to properly draw the national flag (Lee 2013, pp. 132, 146; Kim 1997, pp. 102–4). In fact, it was not until 1949 that a National Flag Correction Committee established an authoritative flag for the nation (Ministry of the Interior and Safety 2020).

The national anthem, composed by Ahn Ikt’ae11, contains a spirit of love for the country and suggests that God is protecting the country. As is common in other countries, the national anthem is sung or played at all official events of the government. Additionally, various public events, including sports games, both professional and amateur, begin with the civic religious ritual of saluting the national flag and singing the national anthem. The national flag and the national anthem play a central role in inspiring a sense of unity and togetherness, especially at ceremonies organized by the government, such as those for the National Foundation Day of Korea, March 1st Independence Movement Day, Memorial Day, and the National Liberation Day.

The mugunghwa was recognized as a de facto national flower as early as 1946 by the US Military Government when the rank of high-ranking police officers was marked with mugunghwa emblems on their uniforms, a practice that continues to this day (Kang 2019b, p. 116). The name means “a flower of immortality”, symbolizing persistence and resilience. One of the cherished characteristics of the flower is that, after it blooms in the morning and withers or falls in the evening, a new flower blooms the next morning. This characteristic is said to resemble the strength of Koreans, who, despite having collectively endured so many hardships, especially foreign invasions, were able to overcome these

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9 It can be said that the meanings of the Korean flag have been “invented” or “reinvented” by government authorities during the nation-building process after the founding of the republic in 1948.

10 While a full examination of the meanings of T’aegukki is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the four trigrams in each corner of the flag surrounding the T’aeguk in the center combine to symbolize the principle of harmony, as each trigram means the four seasons; four directions (east, west, south, and north); and four values (benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, and intelligence). While each trigram carries a distinct meaning, the four trigrams together depict a balanced view of the world, as well as the interconnectedness of all things.

11 Ahn is mired in controversy as a Japanese collaborator, i.e., someone in a position of influence who collaborated actively with the Japanese authorities, especially in carrying out policies and deeds against Koreans during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945).
adversities and persevere. As a result, this flower is mentioned in the national anthem, decorates the wall behind the desk of the presidential office of the Blue House, and was the official government insignia from 1949 until 2015. However, in 2015, the Park Geun-hye administration, in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of National Liberation Day, introduced a new logo with a T'aegûk pattern for all the government ministries and agencies. The new logo was said to better convey the “dynamism and enthusiasm of Korea” than the older insignia (Chang 2016). This top-down revision of the nation’s symbology is yet another reminder that the rituals and symbols embedded in a country’s civil religion are not naturally determined by the country’s culture or history but involve a process of careful (yet arbitrary) selection by elites.

4.2. National Heroes

Although flags, anthems, and national symbols and heroes are common ritualized markers of identity and national sovereignty in today’s international community, the sacralization of these symbols is especially noteworthy in the Korean case. Nothing demonstrates this more than the veneration of national heroes. The Korean civil religion glorifies the lives of its national heroes as “saints” who arouse the people’s awe and respect. To create or recreate the heroes of the nation, the government deployed various means to praise and commemorate their achievements. Historical figures were “nationalized” as their achievements were glorified in various textbooks that were authorized by the state. The nationalization of their heroes was also achieved through various commemorative projects organized by the state (Kang 2019b, p. 197). For example, the birthplaces of the heroes have become places of pilgrimage, and in the cases of certain heroes, annual memorials or performances are held to commemorate their acts of heroism in places where they were active (Kang 2019b, p. 198). In addition, the heroes are often described as “martyrs” who gave their lives for the sake of the nation, whose lives were made great by their deaths, and are enshrined in the “national pantheon” (Kang 2019b, p. 197). This sacralization even extends to the creation of shrines and memorial halls commemorating these heroes or their accomplishments. Indeed, the Korean government takes great pride in its unbroken observation of memorial rituals for the dead Chosôn rulers, using them to link the contemporary state with its ancient heroes: “In the Confucian cultural sphere, Korea is the only country where a royal ancestral shrine is perfectly preserved and veneration rites continue to be conducted in the authentic manner” (Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea 2015, p. 43; see also Korea Culture and Information Service 2013, p. 66).

The historical figures who are considered Korea’s top “national heroes” are, by far, King Sejong and Admiral Yi Sun-sin. Both figures are regarded as saints who transcend the national hero status, as King Sejong is recognized as “the Great King” and Admiral Yi Sun-sin is recognized as a “Sacred Hero” (Kang 2019b, p. 199). In downtown Seoul, streets are named after these two great heroes, as in “Sejong-ro” and “Ch’ungmu-ro”. In Kwanghwamun, in the very center of the capital, two statues honoring these two men can be found. In addition to naming streets after these two men and erecting statues, the “heroization” of King Sejong and Admiral Yi also includes annual commemorative ceremonies, detailed descriptions of their achievements in textbooks, monuments, biographies, and documentaries.

King Sejong is a representative of “linguistic nationalism” (Kang 2019b, p. 208). King Sejong is recognized as the one who made the integrated language community possible for Koreans. The most magnificent celebration of King Sejong’s achievements is Han’gul Day, which is celebrated as a national holiday on October 9th, which was first created by the US Military Government in 1946. A portrait of King Sejong has appeared on stamps several times and appears on the 10,000 won bill. The reason for putting historically important figures on bills, as is the case in practically all countries, is that it can reinforce the authority of, and people’s trust of, the currency and show the identity of a specific country. King Sejong is also honored by the King Sejong Institutes, which are Korean culture and language centers established in many countries around the world with the support of the Ministry of
As of 2017, there were 89 Sejong Institutes in 23 countries in Asia, followed by 18 such institutes in 10 countries in America, 28 in 17 countries in Europe, 5 in 5 countries in Africa, and 4 in 2 countries in Oceania. Other achievements of King Sejong that are glorified also include his contributions to the revival of Korean traditional music and to science and technology, such as astronomy (Kang 2019b, pp. 208–9).

Admiral Yi Sun-sin is another “national hero” who was subjected to hero worship right after the liberation. In fact, the heroization of Admiral Yi has a much longer history, for he was honored as a national hero during the Chosŏn Dynasty as well. A key reason for this was the desire of elites to maintain the existence of strong “anti-Japanese nationalism”, past and present. In particular, Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s heroic battle against larger Japanese fleets has been depicted in great detail on a regular basis in textbooks from as early as the 1950s. At the time, in the immediate aftermath of the chaos of the liberation in 1945 and devastation of the Korean War, textbooks dealt with many issues pertaining to national hardships and suffering. Several figures from Korean history appeared as heroes who overcame national sufferings, and the most representative character in this regard was Admiral Yi Sun-sin. The work of deifying Admiral Yi and creating a nationalistic tradition centering on the ideologies of loyalty and filial piety was effective in making the masses subordinate themselves to the state (Oh 2016, p. 121). This commemoration of Yi Sun-sin is also evident at the level of popular culture, especially the 2014 movie Myeong-ryang (The Admiral: Roaring Currents), a heroic and highly sensational depiction of Yi’s struggle against Japanese imperialism. According to the Korean Film Council (2020), the film still holds the record as the highest grossing domestic movie in the Korean box office, a strong reminder of the widespread popularity of Yi as a symbol of the nation.

There are more than a dozen sites in many parts of Korea that have been preserved or built to commemorate Yi (see S. R. Lee 2005). The most notable one is the Hyŏnch’ungsa Shrine, which was built in 1706 in Asan, Ch’ungch’ŏngnamdo in commemoration of the Admiral’s achievements. PRESERVED within the shrine is the old house where Yi spent his childhood and youth, and the shrine displays many of Yi’s artefacts, including the Namjun Ilgi (War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-sin) and Imjin Changch’o (Yi’s War Report). Another notable “sacred place” dedicated to Yi is the Ch’ungyŏlsa Shrine in T’ongyŏng, Kyŏngsangnamdo. Built in 1606 to honor Yi’s achievements, succeeding Naval Commander-in-Chiefs conducted sacrificial rites in the spring and fall every year. In addition to the monument of Yi, the shrine houses 29 gravestones of successive naval commanders. Currently, the people of Pusan, the country’s second-largest city on the southeastern coast, organize a sacrificial rite in memory of the spirits of these naval commanders on May 25th every year. A couple of historical sites in Yŏsŏ, Chŏllanamdo also deserve mention. The Yŏch’ŏn sŏnso is a dockyard in Yŏsŏ where the famous turtle ships (Kŏbukson) were built, which was designated as a historical site in 1995. The other historical sites dedicated to Yi are typically those that commemorate his victories in battles.

In addition to King Sejong and Admiral Yi Sun-sin, efforts were made to glorify or shed new light on the achievements of other national heroes. For example, some streets in downtown Seoul were named after General Ulchimundŏk, i.e., Ulchi-ro, and T’oegeye Yi-hwang, i.e., T’oegeye-ro, as early as 1946. Even to this day, a ceremony is hosted by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs on November 17th every year to commemorate the “patriotic martyrs for the country”. Representative figures among the heroes of the independence movement are An Chunggūn, Yun Ponggil, Yu Kwan-sun, and Kim Ku. The case of An Chunggūn is especially noteworthy, because in 1909, he assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the former colonial Resident-General of Korea, and was executed by the Japanese authorities as a common criminal. There is a memorial hall for him in Seoul, and in 2013, President Park Geun-hye requested that the Chinese government open a memorial for him in Harbin, triggering Japanese complaints about the commemoration of an assassin. When the Chinese memorial hall was opened, the Korean government celebrated in a press release that now “people can look out at the site of the patriotic deed by Patriot An” and described him as
“one of those most revered by the peoples of the ROK and China” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).12

Although the sacralization of pre-independence Korean heroes has continued, since the country’s democratization and government-led commemoration remains influential, it is important to note the growing importance of nonstate commemorative practices.13 Sometimes these nonstate groups support Korea’s traditional civil religion, such as the Association for Commemoration of Patriotic Martyr An Chung-gûn, but others have revisionist goals or seek to broaden how the nation is imagined and commemorated. Especially, the democracy movement that overthrew the country’s authoritarian governments is a rich source of alternative heroes but also creates the threat of a schism. As observed by Stevens (2020, p. 1334), “public commemoration of the 1980s democracy movement itself has, however, been relatively slow in beginning and had less broad political support, partly because it involves events where many living Koreans still have personal memories and opposing viewpoints”. However, as will be shown below, the growing salience of bottom-up commemorative practices in the post-democratization period is one of the factors contributing to a crisis in Korea’s civil religion, critically exposing many of the legacies from the authoritarian period.

5. Discussion: The Past and Future of Korean Civil Religion

This investigation of the civil religion of Korea not only provides an important non-Western case study to the corpus of existing works on the phenomenon but also strongly supports the ideological interpretation of the origins of civil religions versus the cultural interpretation. The Korean governments since the founding of the republic have constructed a civil religion that portrays the nation as harmonious, pure, and successful. Although it was imposed from above, the Korean civil religion was arguably successful at integrating a divided nation and ushering it through an accelerated period of industrialization. However, will this success continue? The ideological civil religion uses culture, society, and history as its resources, but deep transformations of the underlying source material can expose cracks in the edifice.

5.1. Korean Civil Religion as an Ideology

The civil religion of Korea was deliberately engineered by the state and elite groups to foster national unity and facilitate the industrialization of one of the world’s poorest societies. As we have seen above, the creation of the key elements of this civil religion, such as the national flag and holidays, began as early as the late 1940s by the US military government, but the major architect was President Park Chung-hee, who ruled the country for nearly eighteen years after a successful coup in 1961. He consciously created a civil religion designed to foster national unity and support his policy agenda. In fact, in the president’s To Build a Nation, a book written for foreign audiences at the height of his power, he offered a striking confession of his creative process:

I realized that our revolution [his coup] would be successful only if it were a revolution that took root in the minds and hearts of the people . . . I took it as my main task, as the leader of the nation during this period, to inspire the confidence and courage of the people to achieve these national goals in a spirit of unity. In assuming this task I found it necessary to reflect deeply on the history of our nation, on the characteristics of our culture and traditions, and on the capabilities of our people. I found in my reflections, and share with you in this book, what I

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12 In addition to the these famous national heroes, there are sacred places that have been built to commemorate the sacrifice of patriotic martyrs, including Seoul National Cemetery, which is reserved for Korean veterans who died in the Korean Independence Movement, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War; small-scale cemeteries for the war dead that are found in many parts of the country; Ch’ung’hont’ap and Hyônch’ung’t’ap, which are memorial towers erected in commemoration of the war dead; and the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul. Koreans also pay homage at the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Korea, which is located in Pusan and is a burial ground for some 2300 casualties from 10 countries who died fighting in the Korean War (1950–1953) (see Ha 2014).

13 For more on the rise of nonstate memory apparatuses and their clashes with the state frameworks of commemoration, see Soh and Connolly (2014).
feel are the common threads and the unique national spirit that link our past, our present, and our future. (Park 1971, pp. 14–16)

In other words, the civil religion that Park Chung-hee and his government created was an imaginative bricolage of cultural, ethnic, and historical elements that amounted to a top-down reinterpretation of the Korean nation.

However, Park Chung-hee was not operating on a blank canvas. As noted by Cheng (1990), the formation of a government–business alliance strengthened the regime but also made economic development a key component of its legitimacy. Therefore, the civil religion that emerged was a fusion of the authoritarian government’s interests with that of the country’s business class. This was exemplified by the strong emphasis on anticommunism; social cohesion; respect for hierarchical structures (which included the state, corporations, and the family); and a singular focus on self-sacrifice for economic development. However, the victims of this civil religion should not be ignored. As an elite construct, self-sacrifice was not universal but fell more heavily on some parts of the population than others. In particular, the Korean working class, rural villagers, and women were asked to submit to poor working conditions, literally sacrificing their lives for the sake of the nation. For example, as discussed by Hyung-A Kim (2004, pp. 100, 101), Park Chung-hee sent hundreds of thousands of South Korean soldiers to fight in Vietnam in exchange for US payments that amounted to 2.8 percent of Korea’s GDP in 1968. By 1970, these payments totaled almost a billion US dollars. Human sacrifice is no longer a religious norm, but this concept lurks inside many civil religions (see Marvin and Ingle 1999). Do top-down or ideological civil religions embed the idea of self-sacrifice into their rituals and symbolism more than bottom-up cultural-based civil religions?

The Korean civil religion was also strengthened by how it sought to naturalize its artificiality beneath a veneer of timelessness. The young republic is only seventy-two years old but projects itself backwards in time to premodern dynasties and, in the example of the Korean Tourism Organization mentioned earlier, even makes grandiose claims of the country’s civilization reaching as far as 50,000 years into the past. Timelessness and permanence are similarly used to describe the Korean culture, language, and values. This highlights one of the key challenges for scholars studying the ideology versus culture debate in civil religion—ideological constructions work best if they conceal the interests and power involved in their construction. Put another way, ideologically constructed civil religions imposed from above do their best to appear as natural bottom-up expressions by selectively borrowing from, and carefully masking as, the national culture.

Yet, this is a facade. There was nothing natural or inevitable about the shape or content of South Korea’s civil religion, even though it is taught as if it were. This civil religion was created using cultural, historical, and linguistic elements, but it was not determined by them. Rather, elite groups were the primary authors. This process, already described above, is additionally exemplified by the trajectory taken by North Korea after the division of the peninsula in 1945. The ruling elite of North Korea, desiring to create a similar sense of national unity and self-sacrifice that the southern rulers were seeking, but operating from a different ideological perspective, created their own bricolage of cultural, ethnic, and historical elements to define the nation. Although working from the same source material, especially the symbols of colonial era nationalist movements, their interpretation of the nation diverged sharply from the civil religion of South Korea, resulting in a dynamic but bizarre political religion strongly centered on what Armstrong (2005, p. 385) calls a “family romance” of the extended Kim family. Even though some of the same basic elements appear—such as Confucianism, Tan’gun, and historical figures from ancient Korean history—they are put together in unique ways and support a very different vision of the nation, ultimately resulting in one of the world’s most pervasive cults of personality (Lim

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14 Additionally, note the observation by Kahn (2011, p. 7): “political violence has been and remains a form of sacrifice. This is not hidden but celebrated in our ordinary political rhetoric.”

15 It should be noted, of course, that they are the primary authors only because they suppress alternative or subaltern visions of the nation.
Although both North Korea and South Korea see themselves as the true defenders of Korean cultural heritage, and even portray themselves as victims of great power aggression (see Pai 2000, pp. 10–11), they also accuse each other of being a perversion. The result is a “fierce recognition game” between the two representatives of the Korean nation (E. J. R. Cho 2017, p. 596). The truth is that both states have creatively reconfigured elements of the Korean past and culture to serve their own purposes. Although a comparison of the civil religions of the two states is outside the scope of this paper, it would be a fruitful avenue for future research to trace how specific Korean symbols, historical figures, or ancient events were embedded into different contexts and thereby given different meanings in the two civil religious systems. Such a study would underscore the observation of Guenter (2010, p. 1) that the study of political symbols needs to consider how the combination of symbols “can achieve a far greater or more significant effect than either of those symbols working alone”. In essence, North and South Korea have many of the same symbols, but they are purposely arrayed in different constellations of meaning.

Finally, the strength of South Korea’s civil religion is demonstrated by its continuation after democratization. The postwar authoritarian government’s depiction of the Korean nation as an ancient and ethnically pure culture destined for economic development was still largely planned, supported, sponsored, and promoted by the democratic governments. In fact, successive Korean governments have exhibited what can be described as a “misionizing zeal” to convince foreigners to participate in these rituals and symbols of the nation. This is marked by extensive government-led language and culture promotional activities, as well as support for Hallyu (Korean Wave) cultural exports (Oh and Lee 2014, pp. 83–85). Another example of this is the Hunmin Ch’ŏngŭm Society, an association of Korean intellectuals dedicated to encouraging the speakers of nonliterate languages in developing countries to adopt Han’gŭl. In 2009, they captured headlines when they persuaded the Cia-Cia people of Indonesia to adopt the Korean script to save their dying language (Yamaguchi 2014). Some commentators described this export of the Korean language as though it was a civilizing mission, with the first Korean teacher dispatched to the region later reporting enthusiastically: “I feel most satisfied when children that I’ve taught come back after days of practice, fully capable of reading and speaking Han’gŭl. It’s like seeing a baby take their first steps” (as quoted in J.-h. Kim 2019). This popular desire to globalize the symbols of the Korean nation raises the intriguing possibility that the literature on missionary work, typically studied in the context of religions, could be broadened to include the ways that civil religion itself is promoted and disseminated to foreign or diaspora populations.¹⁶

5.2. Korean Civil Religion in Crisis

It is undeniable that the Korean civil religion played an important integrative role and assisted in the country’s development. Nothing demonstrates this better than citizens’ responses to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis of 1997, which wreaked havoc on the country’s economy. The state-run Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Housing and Commercial Bank held a gold-collecting campaign between January and March 1998 in an effort to minimize the import of gold, which would drain away much-needed foreign capital, and to pay back the nation’s huge foreign debt. Additionally known as the “Save the Nation Drive”, the nation-wide campaign raised 225 tons of gold, of which a vast majority (196.3 tons) was exported, bringing in $1.82 billion. Korea’s export of the precious metal totaled $698 million in January 1998 alone, making it the country’s second-largest export item for the month. The participation rate is also noteworthy. Over 3.5 million Koreans, or nearly one-fourth of the country’s 15 million households, partook in the campaign by donating or selling their wedding rings, jewelry, and other items. Another nation-wide campaign that showcased the strong civil religion in Korea was the popular response to

¹⁶ A good place to start is H.-y. Kim’s (2018, p. 191) exploration of the blurred relationship between Christian missionaries from Korea and their government’s overseas interests in Southeast Asia, which notes how religion is packaged as “an icon of Korean hypermodernity”.

blood donation drives. The campaign was launched not because of the shortage of blood in the country but because of the high cost of importing plasma.

However, the IMF crisis was also the highwater mark for the Korean civil religion, which is now experiencing a crisis. This crisis is occurring along two fracture lines. On the one hand, the continued democratization of Korean society, including nonstate forms of commemoration and ritualization, is fueling growing contestation between groups of elites over who should have responsibility for defining the nation and its destiny. On the other hand, these elite struggles over the ownership of the country’s civil religion are transpiring alongside structural shifts in Korea’s society and economy. Together these transformations and the intra-elite conflict are resulting in a growing mismatch between the daily lives of many citizens and the civil religion’s core elements, such as anticommunism, Confucianism, and ethnic purity.

The first component to weaken was anticommunism in the 1990s as democratization permitted the rise of new elites espousing the more progressive views of North Korea. As pointed out by S.-J. Lee (2005), the subsequent competition between the Korean elites resulted in a widening ideological fault line between progressives and conservatives. This ideological divide is sharpest when it comes to questions of policy involving North Korea and the US alliance, with progressives generally favoring a more friendly relationship with the North. This crack in monolithic anticommunism has created space for innovative approaches to North Korea, such as Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy and Moon Jae-in’s recent attempt to create a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. However, these moves are fiercely resisted by conservative elites who accuse progressive politicians of being North Korean spies or communist sympathizers and endangering national security. As a result, the national school curriculum has experienced “constant change” due to the elite’s “political competitions to dictate history and define South Korea’s relationship to North Korea as either familiar or adversarial” (Won and Huntington 2020, p. 4). Interestingly, another divergence is also evident in Korean elites’ attitudes towards Japan, with progressive leaders criticizing or even repudiating the agreements made by earlier conservative administrations, such as Park Chung-hee’s 1965 normalization treaty with Japan or Park Geun-hye’s 2015 agreement to irreversibly resolve the issue of Korean girls taken as sexual slaves by the Japanese military in World War II. This fragmentation continues today: “The Moon government contains a strong anti-Japanese and nationalist orientation, conservative intellectuals keep a moderate, cooperative stance toward Japan” (C. H. Park 2020, p. 172).

The second source of crisis stems from deep structural changes in Korea’s society and economy. While it is undeniable that Korea has been successfully industrialized—current figures indicate that Korea’s GDP is tenth in the world (IMF 2020)—this progress has come at immense cost. In particular, the IMF crisis acted as a key turning point, because the neoliberal restructuring of the Korean economy caused growing polarization and disillusionment (J. Kim 2019, p. 103). Today’s young Koreans find themselves struggling to succeed in hypercompetitive education, labor, and even marriage markets. For example, one study targeting youths found that “study participants felt that they could not lead a humane life in Korean society due to its structural problems” (Lee 2019, pp. 46–47). Unlike the case in other advanced economies, where suicide rates are in decline, Korea’s suicide rate is the highest in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Kim 2020). Even President Jae-in Moon (2019b) has described his people as “worn out by excessive competition”. Moreover, there is a growing sense that this fierce competition is structurally unfair for the poor or powerless, giving rise to the widely used expression “Hell Choson”, which compares a contemporary life with “an infernal feudal kingdom stuck in the nineteenth century” (Koo 2015; see also M. Y. Cho 2017). Linked to this concept is the popular neologism kapchil, which refers to the widespread abuse of subordinates by their social superiors, a behavior that some researchers argue is rooted in Korea’s hierarchical culture (Cho and Yoon 2017). This inequality, and the anger it generates, has raised important concerns about the long-term viability of Korean society: “Can Korean
society stick together or is it already made up of different segments that are increasingly disconnected from each other?“ (Y. Kim 2018, p. 2).

This struggle to survive in a highly competitive society, and the adaptations made by individuals, such as marrying late or having fewer children, have progressively widened the gulf between how the civil religion imagines the Korean nation and how people experience the nation. For example, although Confucian norms are still highly embedded in daily life, especially social hierarchies, the family itself is undergoing unprecedented changes. The biggest challenge revolves around a declining birthrate, often attributed to a worsening of the work–life balance and the changing attitudes of Korean women (E. H. Park 2020). Another development is the breakdown of multigenerational families and a spectacular increase in the number of single-person households, which are predicted to become the most common type of family unit by 2047 (Statistics Korea 2019). The rapid increase in single-person households has serious implications for the elderly, who are increasingly vulnerable to poverty, a lack of adequate care, psychological distress, self-harm, and various forms of mistreatment (see Park et al. 2020; Song et al. 2020). This divergence between an idealized Confucian Korea that respects and honors its elderly and the stark reality of contemporary Korean society is exemplified by the fact that the country’s suicide rate for the elderly is almost thirteen times higher than the suicide rate for teenagers, the largest difference among the developing nations (OECD 2019, p. 116).

Associated with the above changes, the growing numbers of international marriages and migration into the country have challenged the very bedrock of the Korean civil religion, the myth of ethnical purity. As argued in one study of the country’s changing demographics, “South Korean democracy, born of relative homogeneity in the late 20th century, will have to accommodate growing heterogeneity in the 21st century” (Moon 2016, p. 1). Even the Korean language is perceived to be under threat due to the exigencies of modern life, with newspaper editorials frequently worrying that the language is being corrupted by users of social media, as well as multicultural families: “The destruction of Han’g˘ul is taking place every moment, as seen in myriad unidentified words and weird expressions used in daily conversations” (JoongAng Ilbo 2015). This identity crisis is exacerbated by North Korea, which criticizes the South for losing its racial purity and becoming a mongrelized society (Moon 2016, p. 21). At the same time, many people in the South are starting to wonder if reunification with the North is even necessary, a complex series of debates involving questions of ethnic identity, security, national destiny, and economic feasibility. Although a detailed survey of these debates is outside the scope of this paper, it is noticeable that the people’s attitudes towards unification have cooled, with M. Lee (2020, p. 467) observing that “the percentage of people who have no particular opinion of unification or feel it is unnecessary is 46.2 percent, or nearly half the population”17. Ultimately, these societal transformations have raised important doubts about the proper destiny of the Korean nation and its relationship with the rest of the world.

By the 2010s, these cultural changes and the growing competition between the elite groups were converging to create an unprecedented dissonance in Korea’s civil religion. On the surface, the sacredness of the Korean national holidays, the celebration of the country’s ancient history, and the effusive praise of Han’g˘ul continue. However, the commemoration of the country’s post-liberation history is increasingly fraught with disagreements caused by the growing polarization between the elites and a growing separation between the elites and the rest of society. One of the most important developments is the growing use of nonstate rituals and commemorative strategies such as candlelight vigils, which are peaceful and ritualistic mass protests that take place in politically and culturally significant locations in downtown Seoul, especially Kwanghwamun and Seoul City Hall Plaza, described by Jiyeon Kang (2012, p. 335) as a sacred space that “represents the imagined nation-state and its sovereignty”. These mass events were pioneered by progressive groups in the

17 For a recent survey touching on some of these themes, see C. M. Lee (2020).
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2000s to commemorate tragic events or protest government policies. A key theme of these oppositional movements has been criticisms of the state’s inability or unwillingness to protect its own people. For example, in 2002, there were widespread protests over the death of two schoolgirls in an accident involving US military vehicles, and in 2008, there were the so-called “Mad Cow” protests over the importation of what was perceived as unsafe US beef, and from 2014 to 2016, various vigils were used to mourn the deaths of hundreds of schoolchildren in the sinking of the Sewol ferry, a disaster exacerbated by a bungled government response. These protest movements created symbols and rituals that directly challenged the top-down construction of the Korean civil religion. The best example of this was the emergence of the yellow ribbon, a symbol to commemorate the victims of the Sewol disaster. These ribbons, which eventually adorned a large memorial altar in Seoul City Hall Plaza and were widely worn by protestors, were part of a broader reassessment of the nation. As described by Nan Kim (2017, p. 10), the protestors provocatively repudiated the traditional visions of a harmonious nation by asking: “’Ige naranya?’ which translates to ‘Is this a country?’ or ‘How can you call this a country?’”.

The mass protests in 2016 helped fuel a sweeping electoral victory for the progressive politicians, who co-opted the yellow ribbon for their own campaigns, but the so-called candlelight revolution has faced growing pushback by conservative groups who have also adopted the candlelight vigil as their vehicle of protest. These protests, called the T’aegeukki rallies, also question the state’s willingness to protect the people but focuses on different threats—principally, North Korea and the health of the economy. Interestingly, these vigils are timed to overlap with key national holidays, such as Han’gul Day (2019) and Liberation Day (2020), but they draw upon a different repertoire of symbols from their progressive counterparts, especially US flags and Korean flags waved in unison, military uniforms, anticommunist propaganda, and pictures of Park Geun-hye, an impeached former president. In particular, this fervent conservative sacralization of the ex-president and her father, Park Chung-hee, who is celebrated as the mastermind behind Korea’s industrialization, is in stark contrast with their demonization by the progressive groups.

Thus, as Korea enters the 2020s, an interesting paradox is emerging. Progressive and conservative elites are staging rallies in the shadows of monuments to ancient Confucian kings, warriors, and a writing system that they all venerate. However, the actual history of the Republic of Korea and its presidents are being fiercely contested. Ultimately, there are two different strands of civil religion emerging, championed by two different segments of elites, and each contains starkly different visions of the country’s recent past, its heroes and villains, and the future. As observed by Watson (2010, p. 341), “there are competing national narratives of what it means to be Korean”.

6. Conclusions

The Korean civil religion analyzed in this paper is consistent with the claim that civil religion exists in all modern countries. In religiously pluralistic societies, and in increasingly secularized societies, civil religion plays a functionally equal role with religion in defining the value of a society and promoting social cohesion. Civil religion gives religious meaning to a national identity by expressing the unity of the nation.

This paper argues that the Korean civil religion has played an important role in the nation-building process of the country. This has been particularly true given the country’s chaotic circumstances, both internal and external, i.e., a young republic established in 1948 following a 35-year long colonization by Japan, division of the country and the subsequent Korean War (1950–1953), continual tensions with a belligerent North Korea during the Cold War (1947–1991), and the rapid industrialization. The main doctrine of the Korean civil religion has been the idea that the country has a purpose or destiny of achieving industrialization in order to strengthen its sovereignty and to overcome all social ills, such as poverty. This has included a promise that individual sacrifices will be rewarded with prosperity and improved living conditions. The government also encouraged Koreans’ pride in their supposed ethnic homogeneity, which is bolstered by the original ancestor
myth, as well as their linguistic homogeneity and cultural continuity despite countless invasions from their powerful neighbors. Finally, the government gave religious meaning to national symbols, heroes, and national rituals, as well as the vision of the state to form national unity.

As demonstrated in this paper, the authoritarian governments in the post-independence period played a key role in defining the Korean nation, consciously creating a bricolage from earlier national and political symbols, and that the broad contours of this vision of the nation have persisted after democratization. However, this civil religion also had a dark side, especially its monolithic conceptions of the nation, the salience of elite interests, and the unequal requirements for self-sacrifice. Therefore, this Korean case study lends strong support to the argument that civil religions are elite-driven ideological constructs rather than an expression of a pre-existing cultural consensus. In other words, the Korean civil religion is not a reflection of the nation, it created the nation. If so, one might ask, what is the difference between civil religion and nationalism? This question strikes at the heart of the debates over the concept of civil religion—with some scholars dismissing it outright as a mask for nationalism (Danielson 2019), while others prefer to view nationalism itself as a religious phenomenon (Marvin and Ingle 1999), and still yet, others see them as comingled or produced by historically contingent boundary work (Webb 2018; Cavanaugh 2009).

This paper, by highlighting the elite-driven and ideological nature of Korea’s civil religion, certainly lends credence to those skeptical of claims that a civil religion is an expression of the apolitical essence of a nation, but it stops short of viewing nationalism and civil religion as synonymous. Rather, civil religion’s emphasis on sacralization, ritualism, and transcendence acts as a foundation upon which secular descriptions of a nation are built.

In other words, if nationalism imagines the nation, civil religion imagines the universe in which this nation acts and flourishes.

Today, however, the Korean civil religion is in crisis. Although there is a broad consensus regarding the national symbols and holidays from the ancient past, the interpretations of contemporary history are diverging because of polarization among the elites. This has resulted in contestation surrounding key doctrinal elements of Korea’s civil religion—namely, anticomunism and views of the US–Korean alliance—but, also, fierce clashes over how to commemorate the modern history of the country, especially Park Chung-hee and his authoritarian legacy. Best exemplified by the proliferation of candlelight vigils in the 2000s, including the adoption of this ritualistic protest repertoire by conservative groups during the progressive administration of Moon Jae-in, it is evident that the government-sponsored visions of the nation face growing ideological resistance by rival elites with different visions of the nation’s destiny. Compounding this problem is the fact that the elite visions of the nation (which continue to celebrate its ethnic purity, cultural continuity, and Confucian harmony) appear increasingly out of touch with Korean society, which is transforming due to changes in the family structure, declining birthrates, an increasingly multicultural population, and deepening inequality. These challenges underscore the need for Korea’s civil religion to creatively update itself to stay relevant. However, in an era of elite deadlock, the top-down construction of the nation has stalled, so it seems possible that the required changes will only occur if the construction of Korea’s civil religion becomes more flexible and participatory.

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