



# The Social Violence of Evangelical Churches against Sexual Minorities in South Korea

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## Resumen

Este artículo argumenta que las iglesias Protestantes en Corea del Sur han sido influenciadas por el fundamentalismo religioso ocasionando resistencia tanto en el ámbito social como el político a la hora del debate acerca de los derechos humanos de las comunidades LGBTIQ. Recientemente, grupos Cristianos Evangélicos se han resistido a votar cualquier ley anti-discriminatoria a menos que la discriminación por orientación sexual fuese eliminada. Este artículo se refiere a dicho fenómeno como «violencia pública» con el fin de evidenciar el conflicto y tensiones entre las iglesias Protestantes, el gobierno Surcoreano y la sociedad civil. Asimismo, pone de manifiesto el impacto de las iglesias Evangélicas — en la toma de decisiones del gobierno. Finalmente, examina el desarrollo del Cristianismo en Corea del Sur enfocándose en el facultamiento político de las iglesias cristianas y sus efectos sobre la igualdad y la dignidad de las comunidades LGBTIQ.

**Palabras claves:** Iglesias Evangélicas Coreanas, poder político de las iglesias evangélicas, retórica anti-homosexual, fundamentalismo, cambio social.

## Abstract

This article argues that Protestant churches in Korea have been historically influenced by religious fundamentalism generating resistance over the debate on human rights for the LGBTIQ communities in both popular and political arenas. Evangelical groups have recently refused to support any anti-discrimination legislation unless the sexual orientation aspect was removed. This article refers to this phenomenon as «social violence» to show the conflict and tensions between the Evangelical churches, the South Korean government and civil society. Furthermore, it reveals the impact of Evangelical churches in government decision making. Finally, this article examines the development of Christianity in South Korea with a focus on the political empowerment of the Christian churches and its effects on equality and dignity LGBTIQ communities.

**Keywords:** Korean Evangelical Churches, political power of Evangelical churches, anti-homosexual rhetoric, fundamentalism, social change.



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## Resumo

Este artigo argumenta que as Igrejas Protestantes na Coreia do Sul são influenciadas por um fundamentalismo religioso gerando resistência no debate sobre os direitos humanos das comunidades LGBTIQ, tanto no âmbito social como no político. Recentemente, grupos cristãos se recusaram a apoiar qualquer lei antidiscriminatória a menos que o aspecto de orientação sexual fosse eliminado. Este artigo refere-se, então, a este fenômeno considerado «violência pública» com o intuito de destacar o conflito e as tensões entre as Igrejas Protestantes, o governo coreano e a sociedade civil. Além disso, ele revela o impacto das igrejas Evangélicas na tomada de decisões do governo. Finalmente, o artigo analisa o desenvolvimento do Cristianismo na Coreia do Sul focando no empoderamento político das igrejas cristãs e seus efeitos sobre a igualdade e a dignidade das comunidades LGBTIQ.

**Palavras-chave:** Igrejas Evangélicas Coreanas, poder político das igrejas evangélicas, retórica anti-homossexual, fundamentalismo, mudança social.

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## Introduction

We need... a broad public education effort to help people overcome hate and fear and accept one another for who they are.

Ban Ki-moon (2012)

Why is the actual Korean democracy — built upon struggles for getting fundamentals rights— influenced by Protestant Christianity — especially the Evangelical churches —<sup>1</sup> when LGBTIQ<sup>2</sup> communities demand to become politically visible? Historically, Koreans have fought against foreign domination, against oppression and in favour of liberty. Considering the late Joseon<sup>3</sup> dynasty until the establishment of democracy — four decades after the liberation from Japanese colonialism — Koreans have found themselves in a series of different uprisings. In some cases, against foreign countries and governments, in others against dictatorial governments. After the liberation from Japanese colonialism and the North-South division of the Korean Peninsula (1945), South Korea faced one war (1950-1953)<sup>4</sup> and had two strong

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<sup>1</sup> Although aware of the diversity amidst Protestantism in South Korea, throughout this article I use the terms «Evangelical churches,» «Evangelical Christianity» and «Evangelicals» to refer to conservative and fundamentalist churches.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, the pan-sexual acronym «LGBTIQ» refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer individuals and communities. For sake of brevity, I sometimes also use the terms «sexual minorities» or «gay communities» to interchangeably designate those same individuals and communities.

<sup>3</sup> In order to respect textual quotes of different authors throughout this article *Joseon*, *Chosun*, and *Chuson* refers at the same dynasty which extended from 1392 to 1910 CE.

<sup>4</sup> This war is called the Korean War which «[...] did not officially end but was rather put on hold with the Armistice Agreement. The result greatly affected the modern history of Korea in all dimensions of society including politics, economy, society, culture, and ideology» (Baek, 2011: 241).



governments<sup>5</sup> who suppressed opposition groups in the name of anti-communism (Baek, 2011: 242, 247). During three decades Korea «[...] was put under the absolute control of one party and oppression by the government» (Baek, 2011: 244).<sup>6</sup> However, conforming to the country's economic development, there was a clear national groundswell to bring a democratic government where basic human rights were honored, expressed, and addressed.

Currently, most of the developed countries with high levels of democratic participation are opening up public spaces for sexual minorities while leaving aside religious ideologies that condemn consensual adult same-sex love relationships. Therefore, the question suggested is significant. Historically, freedom, equality, and fraternity have been the most important values to any country that incorporates the democratic ideals of government in its legislation since the influence of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, the United States of America's independence and the French Revolution (Barber, 2003: xxxv). South Korea has inscribed its democratic values in that historical tradition. However, the coexistence of these principles may seem to engender tension in South Korea where Confucianism and Protestant Christianity have strongly influenced political ideals (Kim, 2002: 31).

Striking the right balance between both conservative and liberal ideals has become a major challenge for the South Korean government. This fact leads us to the following intriguing question: Why is that in South Korea, unlike other developed countries<sup>7</sup>, there is not only a very great resistance from Korean Evangelical churches to the equality in human rights and anti-discrimination laws that benefit sexual minorities, but also its position has influence in formulating public policies in favor of minorities that

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<sup>5</sup> I refer to the governments of Rhee Syng-man (1948-1960) and Park Chung-hee (1963-1979).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed explanation on the Rhee Syng-man and Park Chung-hee governments see the work of Baek (2011).

<sup>7</sup> South Korea — as member of OECD — is compared with the remaining thirty-three OECD countries that recognize legally same-sex relationships or ban all anti-gay discrimination («LGBT Rights by Country or Territory,» 2014).



would prevent marginalization? The consequences of this upheaval have to do with equity, struggle for power, and human rights entitlement. In sum, it has to do with discriminating people whenever they decide to express their preferences in public. In a recent newspaper article, Kim Young-jin<sup>8</sup> and Kim Tong-hyung (2013), narrate the following real story:

For Lee, a 38-year old Korean man, life in the closet had reached a dangerous boiling point. Born to a religious family –his father was a Presbyterian pastor- Lee felt he couldn't reveal that he was gay, because people around him viewed homosexuality as a sin. When he lived in Vancouver, a city with a large gay population, Lee refrained from dating, fearing repercussions in Korea – where sexual minority rights are ignored. He believed 'coming out' would jeopardize his career as an English instructor and that people would discredit his work in the church. 'I often thought of committing suicide,' he said. 'There were so many things on my mind – my father (pressure for) marriage, fear of living in isolation. There was no one to talk to and there were no answers coming (2013).

Lee is not alone in his experience; sexual minorities in Korea have problems if they try to come out in every area of social interaction, from education to work; from family to church. One of the worst fears of most people that I have encountered during my research is to reveal – purposely or accidentally – their sexual orientation. As Kim Young-gwan and Hahn Sook-ja (2006) point out:

Korean people's understanding and knowledge of [...] homosexuality is ambiguous and limited. In the absence of knowledge and open communication, most Korean people imagine that [...] homosexuality is an abnormal and impure modern phenomenon (59).

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the article, Korean names are given using the traditional format of «last name –first name.»



Concurrently, individuals tend to think that homosexuality threatens their contemporary cultural imaginary. Agreeing with Han Ga-ram, a lawyer and member of Korean Lawyers for Public Interest in Human Rights group, «[Korea] is still a society where sexual minorities have to shoulder enormous risk to express their sexual orientation and a lot of problems stem from it» (Kim and Kim, 2013).

My thesis is that the Korean Evangelical churches historically played an important role in the early days of formation of South Korean democracy<sup>9</sup> whereas now hinder the endeavors to provide adequate legal protection against the current discrimination of sexual minorities. As analyzed farther in this article, at the start of 2013 there were three drafts of anti-discrimination laws submitted to the National Assembly, penned by lawmakers from Democratic United Party and Unified Progressive Party (Um, 2013a), in order to,

[...] outlaw discrimination in employment and other social interactions on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, faith, and, most notably, sexual orientation [...] [however] Christian groups vowed not to support any anti-discrimination legislation unless the homosexuality aspect was dropped [and] threatened that any political efforts to push equality for gays and lesbians would have repercussions (T. Kim, 2013).

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<sup>9</sup> When Protestantism was first introduced into Korea in 1884,

[...] started by concentrating on offering practical knowledge on health, medicine, and general education to the poorer segments of the general public. Preaching followed. The protestant belief of equality and freedom directly confronted traditional Confucianism, and became, as it spread, the foundation of a democratic movement (Yi, 2004: 948).

Min (2005) states that, «[...] under the Japanese domination the Churches had been the seedbed of democracy, the training center of patriots, training camp for the warriors of freedom, and the machine of education for the future national leaders» (571). For more details about the history of Christian churches in Korea and its political role see Min (2005).



My analysis tracks the harsh reality about religious discursive violence in South Korea promoted by Evangelicals churches, particularly by focusing on the inflammatory rhetoric against the disempowered Korean gay minority. Since I take up the antigay arguments from powerful church groups who reject any attempt to guarantee equality for gay and lesbians, in this article I am particularly interested, not only in political consequences, but also in the effects at the personal level of women and men who have a life, a history, a family, and a job, who dwell among us and who are part of our society.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to examine the political role played by Evangelical Christianity in the ongoing discursive violation of the sexual minorities' fundamental rights in South Korea. The first part of the article explores briefly the ancient history of the practice of male homosexuality, and portrays the historical background of Korean society as a basis to understand that homosexuality is a not «a new phenomenon» in Korea. The second part, through a historical analysis, discusses the relationship between homosexuality and religion, and particularly the role of Confucianism in the formation of Korean societal values. Finally, this article examines the current rhetoric of Korean Evangelicals churches and their “crusade” on gay legislation where churches all-out to block political efforts to introduce new anti-discrimination legislation.

## **Homosexuality in South Korea: A Brief Historical Overview**

Different Korean scholars point out that homosexuality is mentioned in Korean ancient literature and traditional accounts. Two examples of ancient homosexual groups in Korea were the *hwarang* and the *namsadang*. The *hwarang*:



[...] were leaders of a military group in the Shilla dynasty (B.C. 57 - A.D. 935), chosen from the sons of the nobility by popular election. Hundreds of men reportedly belonged to *hwarang* bands. Their major role was to fight a common enemy or to advance the common welfare by increasing national power [...]. [They also had a] penchant for sexual intercourse with same-sex partners. In colloquial usage the term *hwarang* has given rise to modern derivations such as *hwallyangi* or even *hwangangnom*, meaning a playboy and a lazy good-for-nothing, and [...] a slut or prostitute (Kim, 2006: 61-62).

According to the same author «modern *hwarang* or ‘players’ are also perceived of as a homosexuality oriented group» (Kim and Hahn, 2006: 62).

For authors Kim Young-gwan, and Hahn, Sook-ja (2006), the term *namsadang*:

[...] especially was used in relation to theatrical or dramatic performers whose most important purpose was to make money by means of homosexual prostitution. Traveling male prostitutes were a feature of rural Korean life from the middle of the Chosun Dynasty onwards (62).

Throughout Korean history, there are examples of well-known royalty engaged in homosexual activities. For instance, Cho Min-ah in her article *The Other Side of their Zeal* (2011) remarks that:

[...] homosexuality was mentioned in Korean ancient literature [...] the earliest example include Hyekong, the thirty-six king of the Shilla dynasty (BC 57-AD 918), whose behaviour was known to be ‘girlish’, according to the record, and historians describe him as ‘a man by appearance but a woman by nature’ (307 note 30).

Furthermore, Yi (2004) states that, «[...] he was killed at the age of 22 in April 780 AD by his subordinates because they could not accept his ‘femininity’» (947).





Another example is Wonsung (785-789 AD), the thirty-eight king of the Shilla dynasty, who, according to Cho (2011) was said to be involved in same sex relationship with a «young Buddhist monk,» while Kongmin, the thirty-first king of the Koryo dynasty (918-1392) — who reign 1330-1374 AD — was described as a man who fell in love with «young boys» (307 note 30). Furthermore, this author also informs that a family member of one of the most important persons in the Korean history, King Sejong, was involved in a lesbian relationship. Cho (2011) states:

The palace chronicle from Chuson dynasty (1392-1897 AD) tells a story about [...] King Sejong (1397-1450)'s daughter-in-law 'slept with' her maidservants and she was expelled from the palace after the rumor spread widely (307 note 30).

Although there is very little description, homosexuality in Korea was mentioned in ancient history. Therefore, it is impossible to ignore the existence of sexual minorities in the midst of a traditional society, in spite of the efforts and strong influence from Confucianism in the late sixteenth century and Christianity in the late nineteenth century. However, «[...] in modern Korean society, homosexuality is often described as a disease, a mental disorder, and a sin [...] because of insufficient knowledge about both the causes and variety of forms of homosexual expression» (Kim and Hahn, 2006: 62, 63). This brings us to a second element of analysis: What has been the role of Confucianism and Christianity in shaping Korean societal values which tabooed the accounts of homosexuality?

## Homosexuality and Religion in South Korean Society

Because of their nature, all religious communities help to establish a series of worldviews and value systems in society. Traditionally, four main religions have shaped South Korean's way of life: Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity (Choi *et al*,



2011: 91-94).<sup>10</sup> Although these are not the only religions which have influenced South Korea, the spectrum of the country's consciousness can be understood through the expression of these beliefs. In addition, it may be said that Confucianism and Christianity are often the main influences on human behavior in South Korea. On one side, «Koreans tend to subscribe [...] Confucianism in interactions with others in everyday life [and] operates as an omnipresent code of ethics and conduct in the social life of all Koreans» (Choi, 2010: 12). While on the other hand, «[...] apart from the Philippines and East Timor – both ex-colonies of Christian Western countries – South Korea is now the most Christian country in Asia by percentage of the population who subscribe to it» (Tudor, 2012: 54).

Even though, the spread and influence of Christianity does not mean the inexistence of other traditional and contemporaneous religious phenomena, Confucianism and Christianity have played an important and active role in the development of social awareness and criteria about sexual minorities. I will focus on analyzing how both religions have had negative influences on the struggle for human rights for LGBTIQ communities in South Korea.

### *The role of Confucianism in the formation of South Korean societal values*

The historical status of Korean women and men must be examined on the basis of Confucian legacies. Although Confucianism is not considered a religion, but «[...] a system of moral philosophy that originated in China in the teachings of Kong Fuzi (558-471 BC)» (Tudor, 2012: 42), Confucianism is a part of all Koreans. For «[...] about three hundred years after establishment of the Joseon Dynasty, Confucianism had permeated deep into every sector and class of society» (Choi, 2010: 15). In everyday life, to borrow Choi's phrase, «Koreans nowadays accept Confucianism not as religion, but as an ethical standard» (2010: 192). That is why even in the

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<sup>10</sup> In spite of authors consider Confucianism is a religion, the people does not accept it as a religion, but as ethical standard (Choi, 2010: 192).



twenty-first century, in all social interactions, Confucianism principles influence daily life whether Korean people realize or not. These principles originally were manifested during the Joseon dynasty in the institutionalization of a patriarchal system, the exclusion of women to a secondary role, and the emphasis on filial piety. On the basis of these three elements arise the notion of a concept called *[hetero-patriarchal] familial collectivism* which means «the group's interest always have priority over those of the individual [and] an individual finds his or her existential meaning only as a member of any number of groups he or she belongs to» (Choi, 2010: 15, 18, 19, 23). How was this concept developed historically? And how is it related to sexual minorities?

First, the hetero-patriarchal system and the exclusion of women are two elements fully interconnected. Confucianism emphasizes hetero-patriarchal principles through «filial piety and brotherly love... [only] between father and son, or between elder brother and younger brother» (Choi, 2010: 197). On the contrary, the historical status of Korean women «was legally subordinated to men in accordance with the prevalent Confucian ethic» (Kim, 1976: 89). That meant that the father held control over the children, social class, rights, and inheritance. This hetero-patriarchal system was emphasized during the Joseon dynasty and gradually deprived women of their rights:

For example, up to the early Joseon period, a daughter could inherit her father's estate or other properties and keep them for life. She was also able to choose a heir in her will. Such privileges for women, however, had disappeared by the mid-seventeenth century when Confucian patriarchal system was institutionalized [...] [Gradually] women's status had been relegated to a secondary role in virtually every aspect (Choi, 2010: 15-16).

Once Confucianism had established the family-oriented hierarchy of relationships between father and son and between younger son and elder son, the next step was directed towards all social relationships. The reason behind this move resides in the common assumption that «[...] society is believed to be a mere extension of the family» (Choi, 2010: 20). If the concept of *family*



is thought of from a hierarchy basis — privileging age or positions —, and extended to social interactions, before long that move «[...] led Koreans to develop authoritarianism by which the opinions of the older people have the final say in virtually all matters» (Choi, 2010: 21). Even though South Koreans have seen changes in that long tradition of *[hetero-patriarchal] familial collectivism*, recently the society still moves according to hetero-patriarchal principles.

In my daily contacts with South Koreans of different ages I realize that language reflects the age hierarchy established by Confucianism. As my social interactions living in South Korea are in Korean and English, I have found that among the student population who speak English, they show a more relaxed and free attitude if we start a conversation in English instead of Korean, because «[...] Korean has different levels of speech, based on the degree of respect required for different situations» (Tudor, 2012: 49). It all depends, essentially, to whom one is talking to. In Korean grammar there are more than three different grammatical expressions to talk with others according to age, position and level of intimacy. On the contrary, English has only one level of speech to refer to the others (*you*). Taking this into consideration, the way of establishing relationships between South Koreans (who speak English) and Western foreigners are different whether one uses English or Korean. In other words, one may interpret how even the use of Korean language and its grammatical structure have an important historical load that reflects the basic principles of Confucianism.

Second, how are Confucianism principles related to sexual minorities? Surprisingly, Cho (2011) states that:

[...] contrary to the common misunderstanding [...] the canonical scriptures of Confucianism do not list [male] same-sex desire as moral decay [...] unless they interfere with their filial responsibility to prosper and maintain family lineage [...] [however] showed no tolerance towards lesbian relationship, because they ‘violate’ women’s ‘natural duty’ to procreate (301).



According to this principle, apparently, male homosexuality is not totally rejected; as long as the individual ensures his or her social function of creating a traditional family.

In short, on one hand, Confucianism has historically influenced society in order to maintain relationships with total dependence and subordination between father and son; in addition, the sense of life and existence depend upon belonging to the family unit. Furthermore, filial duty to forming a family becomes the height of existence. Seen from Confucianism's point of view, sexual minorities break the traditional pathway, and create tension, social dilemmas, and sometimes feelings of guilt for not following the dictums of families' wishes.

### *The impact of Christianity amidst South Korean society*

The year 1884 marks the formal introduction of Protestantism in Korea<sup>11</sup> with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church and the Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church who arranged mission bodies to be sent to Korea (Kim, 2001: 267). The Korean geopolitical situation, poverty and oppressive officialdom created the necessary conditions for common people – impoverished in extreme – to «[...] embrace a new value system offering them hope and a way out of their misery» (Kim, 2001: 268). Subsequently, during the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) Christianity suffered severe oppression from Japanese authorities; afterwards, the Korean War (1950–1953) devastated the country and claimed millions of lives (Kim, 2000: 118). Historically, decades of oppression, poverty, economic insecurity, social marginality, and political instability made a deep impression in Korean society. As Kim Andrew Eungi (2001) states:

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<sup>11</sup> However, for a long time China-based missionaries field trips were conducted to Korea (Kim, 2001: 267). Furthermore, there are records of protestant Western people who landed in Korea since 1627 (Kyoung, 2005, 100).



The imported Christian ‘alternative’, with its promise of eternal life and worldly success, thus became the salvation ethos for personal and national empowerment for growing numbers of Koreans burdened by a troubled past and uncertain in a world of rapid change (268).

The missionaries’ involvement with social services and their interest for helping the socially deprived segment of population «left a strong impression on the minds of many Koreans» (Kim, 2001: 276). In what way Christianity integrates into Korean society?

Like any new ideology, Christianity faced resistance and persecutions, but in general the Korean government allowed facilities to spread its influence, especially if we consider the way of missionaries, the United States of America and the South Korean government were interwoven.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that some years before the Japanese occupation of South Korea, as Min Kyong-bae (2005) enunciates:

Christianity proved to be accompanying with the Koreans in their most crucial moments of national crisis...standing together with Koreans in confronting with the Japanese aggression in every concrete occasion. [Furthermore] in their anti-Japanese national movement, the Korean Churches had been functioning as the only channel to mobilise the national energy and to express their national indignation (95-96).

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<sup>12</sup> At late of nineteenth century the relationship between the missionaries and the Korean monarchy was very amiable, as Kim (2001) describes:

In public proclamation and in conferred rank, the missionaries were identified as persons of privileged standing, akin to that of high-ranking government officials [and] there were other expressions of official approval, including the government assignment of a guard to each missionaries and official recognition of the mission schools, all of which strengthened the status of missionaries and their religion in the eyes of the Korean people (273).



As a result of these and more efforts, the missionaries have been part of the social and political Korean landscape. At the same time, missionaries offered concrete and practical benefits, started the process of evangelization, and spread the new religion. The expansion of Christianity was not promoted by a monolithic structure mission body, but resulted from a variety of denominational churches<sup>13</sup> that implanted the Christian Gospel in South Korea. Basically, they teach a type of faith that includes:

[...] a deep conviction of the authority and value of the Bible, the deep and abiding sense of the grievousness of sin, earnest propagation of faith, revival spirit, thorough training of the meaning of the Christian life through catechetical institute, Christian stewardship of self-support, tithing and liberal offering, bearing of persecution, prayer in personal life, and true missionary ardour (Kyoung, 2005: 153).

All of these beliefs had a common denominator: theologically they were strongly conservative (Kyoung, 2005: 99) and they appeared in a land without strong religious structure. According to Kim (2001) «[...] the weakness of traditional religions, in combination with mounting disaffection with rigid Confucianism, engendered a religious vacuum» (274) which provided the opportunity to embrace the new faith. In other words, as aforementioned, although Confucianism was strongly ingrained in Korean culture, by lacking the status of “religion,” Christianity was able to build a religious character upon moral and philosophical Confucian precepts.

Several factors influenced the emergence of strong Christianity in South Korea and there are different theoretical explanations on which is the best model for interpreting that fact.<sup>14</sup> However, my

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<sup>13</sup> Among those denominations we find several churches such as Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Holiness, Salvation Army, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Russian Orthodox (See Kyoung, 2005: 123).

<sup>14</sup> James Grayson’s theory of emplantation asserts that the growth and development of a missionary religion in a host society is contingent upon five sets of related factors: (a) resolutions of contradictions, (b) tolerance of the faith, (c) overcoming linguistic obstacles, (d) resolution of conflicts, and (e) comprehension of political circumstances (See Kim, 2001: 269).



purpose in this article is to highlight first, how the early missionaries consolidated their position in the South Korean religious market through empowered Korean Confucian-minded individuals, especially in regard to moral, ethic, and family values (Kim, 2001: 279). Second, how early church leaders placed great importance on educating and support vulnerable groups, such as «[...] commoners [...] female entertainers, butchers, professional funeral pall bearers, and servants» (Kim, 2001: 276), all of them social outcasts who needed improve their living conditions. And third, following Kim (2001), how after gaining the trust of the Korean monarch and providing the,

tools of modernization, such as western medical science, modern education and technology [...], Christian churches assumed a key role in the political and social modernization of Korea. [In fact] its provision of various social services and promotion of human rights and equality strengthened the appeal of the Christian faith among Koreans (2001: 278).

It was in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s when Protestantism in South Korea experienced rapid growth (Kim, 2000: 117). At the same time, these three decades «[...] coincided with the country's economic development and rapid urbanization» (Kim, 2000: 118, note 2). Lee Won-gue in his study entitled *A Sociological Study on the Factors of Church Growth and Decline in Korea* (1999) provides a detailed analysis and factors underlying the decline and growth of Protestant church in South Korea.

In sum, Lee explains that «[...] the growth rate of the Korean church peaked during the 1960s and 1970s, and gradually declined in the 1980s, and finally dropped sharply in the 1990s» (239).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It must be noted that the primary aim of this article is to examine the attitude of fundamentalist Protestant churches against sexual minorities, rather than attempting to offer a comprehensive analysis on the evolution of Christianity in South Korea. I will just mention some of the factors and conclusions which could help to understand these phenomena. To see tables, statistics and a detailed explanation about the factors of growth and decline of the church in Korea refer to the work of Lee (1999).





Cultural, ecclesiastical,<sup>16</sup> and contextual factors (political, economic and urbanization) contributed to the development and growth of Korean churches prior to 1990 (Lee, 1999: 243). I am interested in highlighting the last three contextual factors because during the aforementioned three decades the harsh «[...] political, economic, and social problems of the past contributed to church growth» (Lee, 1999: 264) empowering Protestant churches.

In contrast, during the 1990s the improving of political, economic, and social features (among other factors) was responsible not only for the decline of church growth (Lee, 1999: 256), but also for the social and political visibility of sexual minorities. It's not until the 1990s that South Korea saw the emergence of both the Christian Council of Korea (hereinafter cited as CCK)<sup>17</sup> and the *gay rights* movement (Cho, 2011: 299). This brings us to review what social and political conditions contributed to provide impetus, visibility, and coverage to LGBTIQ communities. Concurrently, we should pay attention to the ideological basis of the anti-gay rhetoric which has evolved over a number of years.

## **The case of anti-discrimination laws in South Korean judicial system**

The last section of this article does not involve reiterating and focusing on a dogmatic theological question. Given that every individual may be at a different place when dealing with the topic of sexual minorities, I would like to draw the attention to how we should understand concepts such as citizenship, human rights and social justice. I am rather interested in understanding how dogmatic universal truths hinder new ways to organize our society.

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<sup>16</sup> Some cultural and ecclesiastical factor are proactivity; emphasis on emotion and passion; high level of compromise; miracles and blessing-oriented beliefs; revival rallies; vigorous church programs; self-dependency and competition; and ideology of church growth, among others (Lee, 1999: 243-247).

<sup>17</sup> This is Korea's biggest church lobby that represent Christian fundamentalist organizations which groups close to 45,000 churches (Nam, 2013).



In this sense, the topic of homosexuality challenges us to see this minority group as part of our society but at the same time rejected, marginalized, and sometimes criminalized.

First, I am interested in reviewing political and social factors that contributed to making the gay community publicly visible in the middle of 1990s. Second, I explain how Protestant churches were able to acquire as much political power and influence in order to impose their dogmatic assertions about homosexuality up to the point of having social and political implications. Lastly, I focus on how the anti-gay discourse was constructed to oppose the anti-discrimination laws for condemning all public visibility of social status of South Korean gay communities.

As we see above, during the 1990s the Protestant church membership dropped sharply because, among other factors, Korean political, economic and social conditions improved considerably. According to Lee Won-gue, during the 1990s South Korea experienced a remarkable democratic development compared to the 1970s and 1980s; economic conditions improved; the participation of women in the labor market increased; and the industry of entertainment flourished (Lee, 1999: 253-259). According to Lee (1999):

Under improving economic conditions, people can now afford to pick up various kinds of hobbies and leisure activities and form voluntary associations to share matters of concern and interest. Participation in these associations create new identities, a sense of communion or belonging, and moreover, it helps to reaffirm their social status to gain social recognition (258).

Therefore, whereas the Christian churches lost positions of power and influence, the civil society gained spaces for dialogue and collective actions. How can this be traced to the modern gay community of today? How is the so-called concept of *gay pride*<sup>18</sup> used nowadays? Today there are several LGBTIQ civic groups, but

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<sup>18</sup> For gay pride I refer to the positive stance against discrimination and violence toward LGBTIQ communities to promote their self-affirmation, equality rights, and increase their visibility as a social group.



it was not always so. Yi (2004) in writing for *The Continuum Complete International Encyclopedia of Sexuality* records that,

[...] in the 1970s, around 120 lesbians and gay men held a monthly social gathering at a Chinese restaurant. But the social group did not survive to connect with the current gay community» (948).

Political and social conditions did not allow the emergence of a strong and permanent gay community. The people of more than 50 years of age that I have encountered during my research have told me that during their youth they used to repress their “inappropriate” desires or met people furtively. Some of them are married today and have children and grandsons. They are a generation that is not familiar with the *gay pride* concept, and most of the times wish to remain anonymous.

According to Yi (2004), early efforts to organize a gay group:

[...] emerged with Sappho, the first Korean lesbian group, organized by an American lesbian soldier [...] [who] decided to organize a group for lesbians and placed an advertisement for her lesbian group in English newspapers (948).

The group was launched in November 1991 and even though the target of this group was foreigners, it led lesbian Korean-speaking women to express themselves in a unique friendship circle including both Korean and international women. In December 1993, «[...] a Korean-American gay man visited Korea and organized the first Korean gay and lesbian co-gendered group [...] the first authentically Korean lesbian and gay men’s support group» (Yi, 2004: 948). From this point onwards the public visibility of LGBTIQ community lead to the organization of the first Seoul Queer Film Festival (1997), the publication of the first gay magazine (1998), the coming out of Hong Seok-chon, the first famous actor who revealed his homosexuality on TV (2000); the emergence of different organizations supporting gay human rights such as Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea (1997), Korean Gay’s Men Human Rights Group Chingusai (1994), and Rainbow



Movement Against Discrimination of Sexual Minorities, among other activities and organizations.

Certainly, a democratic government, social mobility, the increase of foreigner residents, the rapid growth of the leisure industry, and economic well-being were some factors that contributed to reaffirming the *gay pride* social status in South Korea. From the debut in 2001 of Harisu, a transgender woman, to the first South Korean public symbolic gay wedding in 2013<sup>19</sup> the LGBTIQ community has increased its presence in the media. Nevertheless, there is other element that begins awareness as much policy-makers as general gay community: pain and suffering.

The suicide of several gay teenagers symbolized in a tragic manner the despair of a rejected minority who lived on the margins of a society they belonged to. On the tenth anniversary of the suicide of Yoon, the gay community still is seeking for an end to discrimination against sexual minorities. Um (2013b) reminds us of the circumstances of Yoon's suicide:

On April 25, 2003, the boy – identified only by his surname [Yoon] – ended his life when he was just 19-years-old. He hanged himself [because] he could no longer stay at the same school after it became known the he was gay.

Furthermore, his suicide is a direct result of the violence of religious discourses, as (Oh, 2014) informs us:

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<sup>19</sup> Last September 2013 director Kim Jho Kwang-soo and Kim Seung-hwan held the first public and symbolic same-sex wedding on a bridge in Seoul. According to Borowiec (2014):

The ceremony carried no legal weight – same-sex unions are not recognized in South Korea – but the couple and their legal advisers are now moving forward with a legal challenge that they hope will put South Korea in the vanguard of same-sex equality in Asia.



‘How cruel and anti-biblical it is to discriminate against sexual minorities’, Yook<sup>20</sup> wrote [in his suicide note]. ‘After death, I can proudly say that I am gay, with no need to suffer, no need to hide myself anymore.’

Um Yi-won (2013b) reports that three weeks before Yoon committed suicide,

[...] the Christian Council of Korea (CCK) declared that gay people should be ‘judged by the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah.’ The statement came in response to a National Human Rights Commission recommend[ing] the removal of homophobic language in the Youth Protection Act.

In the same vein, Lee June-young, a South Korean activist for the Queer Korean Alliance and leader of translation team at Open Doors Metropolitan Community Church (hereinafter cited as ODMCC) – the only fully bilingual, LGBTQ inclusive Christian church in Seoul – shared his experience when he saw a post on his Facebook page from a member of ODMCC:

[...] the gay teen said that he was feeling depressed and was thinking about killing himself. He shared a picture of himself holding up a handful of pills [...]. The youth overdosed on anti-depressants that night, but called the paramedics before he passed out, and was rushed to the hospital. The youth’s mother came to see him that night. He was awake and told his mother that he would be all right, and that she could go home [...]. The fact that he called 9-1-1 already proves that he wasn’t really in a state to commit suicide,” said Lee. “He was asking for help, he was desperate, and he was afraid” (Oh, 2014).

While the Protestant churches have begun to stagnate in recent years due to internal factors such as church member dropouts and a negative image (Lee, 1999: 260, 262), many people are seeking a space to be protected from hate, discrimination and shame. Lee explains that the teenager who committed suicide used to,

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<sup>20</sup> While Um (2013b) spells the last name as «Yoon,» Oh (2014) spells it as «Yook.»



[...] attend services at both his home church and at ODMCC [however] his church shamed [him] for going to gay clubs and made him marginalized [...]. To be shunned from a church you have grown up in is huge. It means you are socially discriminated from a certain sector of your life (Oh, 2014).

How have the Evangelical churches reacted to the bill proposals that would have led to sexual minorities to enjoy social interactions without fear to discrimination and being marginalized? Why do the Evangelical churches still have a strong power? How is it used on the context of democratic coexistence?

According to the 2005 census, Protestant Church membership decreased 1.4%. That means in a population of approximately 50 million, nearly 9 million follow Protestantism (Kim, 2012: 65), and among them there is a minority which corresponds to a liberal-leaning. Needless to say, the influence of conservative groups in anti-discrimination policies cannot be explained in function of its number of members, but in function of cultural and political weight. Evaluating the influence of Protestant churches — including its Evangelical denominations — could be partially explained because «[...] the Korean Protestant Church was one of the most important political actors during the formation of the modern state. It played a formative social role as it would in a Christian state [...]» (Kim, 2012: 79). Furthermore, in a country deeply influenced by the United States, the churches' anti-Communist discourse and also the political alliances between Evangelical churches and far-right conservatism increase its social capital and underpinned most social action in civil society.

I suggest that on such a sensitive issue as homosexuality, in the midst of a culture where submission to authority is also an important part of South Korean society, it is not easy to confirm clearly and honestly if the churchgoers are opposed to anti-discrimination laws. On one hand, biblically, people have to obey the pastors; and culturally, should obey, respect, and not cause offence to the elders and authorities (most of the time above personal desires). In the case of churchgoers, agreeing to support anti-discrimination laws, they do not have freedom to express themselves inside their communities and perhaps hesitate saying



anything at all for fear of rejection. According with Eunai Shrake (2009), «[...] some people argue that Korean Christianity is basically a 'Confucian-Christianity' [where] Confucian hierarchy is intertwined with the fundamentalist theological leaning [...]» (150). This Confucian structural influence explains why the ecclesiastical authority can silence the congregation.

On the other hand, South Korean Protestantism has been unable to properly respond to social changes. «Consequently, a large number of reformist and critical Christians either left the church or became discouraged and relegated themselves to the periphery of the church» (Kim, 2012: 71). This has become a real challenge because in spite of Protestant membership — between 1995 and 2005 — decreasing, the leaders are more «[...] preoccupied with church expansion rather than the pursuit of truth, it has lost its own mission and does not provide an answer to the problems confronting its members» (Lee, 1999: 263). In its attempts to socialize and nationalize Christian philosophy, «[...] promoting laws based on Christian ethics as well as gathering political forces that advocated anti-North Korean policies» (Kim, 2012: 83) they forgot the pain and suffering of excluded groups and minorities. Lee Won-gue (1999) expresses clearly that, «[...] churches are under strong accusations that they have become slaves to money and the increase of church members» (266).

The motivations behind the anti-discrimination bill and fierce anti-gay rhetoric could be linked with the Evangelical groups «[...] aspiration to enforce their hegemony in Korean society [and] their attempt to build up their bases of support» (Cho, 2011: 299). In other words, there are «[...] significant political factors behind the fundamentalist anti-gay movement» (Cho, 2011: 302). As Rev. Hong Jae-chul, CCK's chairman, referring to the issue of anti-discrimination laws, stated:

The spread of homosexuality would bring chaos to society. Isn't obvious who would benefit from that? Any disruption in politics, society and culture will play to North Korea's favor. The leftists have always been doing things like this and this is why the CCK exists: to stop them (T. Kim, 2013).





In light of these statements it is possible to observe how CCK exploits this sensitive political situation for creating fear, mobilizing recruits and taking the leadership role among evangelicals. With large numbers of churchgoers who feel threatened by an anti-discrimination bill — that Conservative Christian groups describe as «satanic» (J. Kim, 2013) — it is easy to combine homophobia with two classic fundamentalist ideologies effective in Korean society: nationalism/patriotism and anticommunism (Cho, 2011: 299). In other words, although the reality of today's society is different, evangelical nationalism and anticommunism combined with an anti-gay rhetoric are mechanisms for transforming faith into [no inclusive and equitable] political ideology (Cho, 2011: 311).

Regarding the topic of discrimination against sexual minorities the line taken by many of the Korean political representatives is of a total subordination to the conservative agenda. The Democratic United Party lawmakers stated that, «they would not move on without the blessing of church groups» (T. Kim, 2013). There is no single explanation for understanding such Evangelical political empowerment. First, the conservative alliances are capable of inducing macro-mobilization in a specific situation because they are not limited to the Evangelical coalitions, but extend to with non-religious groups who share ideological similarities (Kim, 2012: 82). The political parties do not want to lose votes. Second, even «[...] values of freedom, equality and toleration are best preserved if religion is removed from public affairs [...]» (Bader, 1999: 598). This case shows that separation between religious beliefs and public policy is not clear among believers with political vocation. It looks like the interests of lawmakers are mixed with their religious principles clearly being driven by a conservative agenda that wants to impose by law religious beliefs in a multicultural and multi-religious country.

South Korea has witnessed rapid economic development, but it must produce evidence of its worry for minorities, not only in social welfare, but also on human rights. The recent cultural and social diversity — little known few decades ago — face Korean society with a new landscape. However, the Evangelicals have built a movement against everything that has to be not only with gay





human rights, but against everything related to the topic of gender diversity. Following I highlight two examples where we can clearly recognize the fiercety of such a discourse.

The first example is the 2010 South Korean television drama *Insaengeun Areumdawo* [life is beautiful].<sup>21</sup> The series is about a traditional family's life where the eldest son is a doctor who is in a relationship with another man, a photographer from a very socially and economically prestigious family. Even though the series is notable for its sensitive portrayal of a loving, mature, and openly gay couple, it does not focus solely on them. Rather, Kim Soo-hyun, a famous veteran soap opera writer, reflects some of the complexities in the traditional family structure. As a Western foreigner living in South Korea, after I watched the series I could understand several Korean customs to which I have been witness.

What was the reaction of evangelicals? In the edition of September 29, 2010 of one of the most important Korean newspapers — *Chosun Ilbo* — appeared an advertisement — paid by several Evangelical organizations — criticizing the series. According to these Evangelicals organizations, *Insaengeun Areumdawo* promotes «AIDS,» «lust of flesh,» «pornography,» «orgies,» and «an unnatural behavior» (2010: A35). However, if one watches all the series episodes, one can realize how conservative the images are reflecting the traditional model of «Korean [heterosexual and monogamous] family.» Even the writer was often criticized because of «[...] her overly conservative depictions of the Korean family. The families she writes about are often of the traditional variety, with grandma living with mom, dad and the kids» (Yang, 2010).

The second example, lead us to a detailed analysis of the interview in April 2013 with Rev. Hong Jae-chul, CCK's chairman, by reporters Nam Jon-young and Choi Woo-ri, subsequently translated partially into English by Kim Tong-hyung (2013). The whole interview had 18 questions related with the official position

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<sup>21</sup> *Insaengeun Areumdawo* (Jung, 2010) was transmitted on Saturdays and Sundays at 10:00 pm on SBS broadcasting during 2010. The writer Kim Soo-hyun said that her «[...] goal is to make homosexuality a subject that is no longer taboo» (Yang, 2010).



of CCK about the anti-discrimination bill. Following I transcribe at large several statements by Rev. Hong remarked by T. Kim (2013) in his English translation:

- «We will launch an all-out Christianity movement against the anti-discrimination law.»
- «We are already doing a petition campaign that is expected to be sign by 10 million... the phones at lawmakers will be on fire.»
- «The gay right sympathizers in politics are leftist because they weaken society by causing disorder and eventually benefit the North Koreans threatening the democratic South.»
- «Christians had been called for people to wake up and get their minds straight.»
- «We wouldn't be able to say anything without being hit with a 30 million won fine.»

Interestingly enough, Kim Tong-hyung (2013) does not reproduce other homophobic declarations by Rev. Hong appearing in the Korean original interview, which I reproduce at large below:

- «Gay people are licentious, degenerate and had a mental illness. They need a spiritual medical treatment for healing their mind and soul; they should go to the church.»
- «I am filled with disgust if I see a gay relationship between two men.»
- «We have to take them (gay people) from their unnatural behavior» (Nam and Choi, 2013).

The original interview to Rev. Hong published in Korean evidently displays the homophobic religious discourse and the hostility supported by many Korean Evangelicals just because someone is different. It also clearly shows their fear of being fined in their exercise of their «freedom of speech.» Nevertheless, it seems that Evangelical churches are looking for a legal license to discriminate, hate and marginalize individuals whom they do not think are like them or are entitled to the same dignity.



What are the consequences in South Korea when disclosing the sexual preference in public? I want to use these two examples to demonstrate how gay people of all ages must live in fear and possibly suffer depression if they think their homosexuality is disclosed. On September 2000 Hong Seok-chon one of Korea's hottest young comic actors, and also host of a popular children's show, decided to be honest with himself and his audience. When asked by a talk-show about the rumor that he was gay, Mr. Hong decided to come out and confirm his sexual preferences. Since then, «Hong was all but declared a public pariah, was fired from the television station airing the children's show he hosted, and saw outstanding offers for other roles quickly revoked» (Prusher, 2001). Mr. Hong decided to take a risk, rather than continuing to lead a double-life. However, he explained that:

The most powerful force against homosexuality, say many here, are Confucian beliefs which stress ancestor worship and the continuity of family membership along blood lines, making even basic child adoptions unpopular. “Everyone back home keeps asking my parents, ‘Is it true? But what will happen? He will have no son and no one to carry on the family line’” (Prusher, 2001).

Mr. Hong decided to come out in front of the television cameras and cope with the risks of his actions. On the contrary, others prefer to leave the country and cope with that particular situation. In the absence of any legal recourse for LGBTIQ individuals in South Korea, such as anti-discrimination laws or legislation against homophobic crimes, several LGBTIQ individuals have decided to seek asylum abroad. For example, Park (2013) reports that, «[i]n 2008 [...] [Korean] LGBT individuals were granted refugee status [...]» in Australia and other countries. In migration and queer studies, these types of asylums are called «sexile» in order to highlight «[...] the exile of those who have had to leave their nations of origin on account of their sexual orientation» (Guzman 1997: 227, note 2). Sexile is another example that discrimination and marginalization is not beneficial for keeping a healthy and unified society in South Korea.



## Conclusion

Admittedly, it appears that Evangelical fundamentalist churches in South Korea seek political power to legally apply their biblical interpretations in order to transform society by excluding and attacking people who do not think like they do. In religious terms, they pursue the «sanctification» of society. Their anti-gay rhetoric combined with principles subtly taken from Confucianism ingrained in South Korean culture still remain in the collective mind. Moreover, their economic power has enabled them to acquire a strong influence amidst South Korean society in order to bar laws which could favor sexual minorities.

In the current situation, many members of the LGBTIQ communities become victims of the anti-gay rhetoric from both civil society as well as religious organizations. This has tremendous consequences beyond the personal entourage. In a society where the concept of traditional [heterosexual] family extends to all areas of social life, it is difficult to separate the individual wishes from the views and decisions of the peer-groups. In as much as existence and personal satisfaction would depend on belonging to a peer-group (family, co-workers, etc.) and feel accepted by them, many resigned themselves to support and enforce the status quo. However, this may generate a clash between the desired personal lifestyle and the social norms endorsed for the fulfilment of the expected social roles.

While social minorities in many societies are identified at first glance because of their distinguishing characteristics, such as colour of skin or phenotype, this is not the case with the LGBTIQ individuals and communities in South Korea. LGBTIQ individuals may not be identifiable amidst society — or even inside the Christian churches — because they certainly tend to be overlooked. Notwithstanding, rather than being an «amorphous mass,» sexual minorities are most of all human beings whose lives share with other individuals in society the duties at a particular job, personal aspirations, and economic concerns, among many other features. However, often, LGBTIQ individuals live in fear, not for their lifestyle, but for the perceived impending social rejection and marginalization. As a Christian educated in fundamentalist



Evangelical principles and having shared a lot of stories with this minority, I have witnessed the internal struggles in order to survive both fronts. Many authors already addressed this issue from the political, religious or moral point of view. Notwithstanding, throughout this article I have highlighted the human face and the material consequences of religious discursive violence and the denial of protecting civil liberties.

Many of the LGBTIQ individuals that I have met in my research would affirm that the gay communities are tired of hiding in their social interactions and seek to begin a societal constructive dialogue. This could be the foundation for a harmonious coexistence which would be acceptable to all and would respect the identity of sexual minorities. However, this goal is hindered by the fear of religious organizations such as the Evangelical churches analyzed in this article. In the past, Christianity has faced other fears — abolition of slavery, interracial marriages, women's voting rights and the like. The social framework has not collapsed because of these issues. This could be the case for an anti-discrimination law in South Korea. My research cannot foresee how society would look if such a law were enacted, although I have shown that historically LGBTIQ individuals have been present in South Korean society without destroying it.

On the other hand, my research is limited by the lack of official statistics related to sexual minorities' issues. After all, one way to ignore an issue is its invisibilization from the public discourse as well as the mechanisms of demographic data representation. However, in daily life, individuals often engage in homosexual behaviors. For example, some of them maybe parents, grandparents, or even religious leaders, who also seek companionship with individuals of their same gender. Conforming and adjusting to more conventional schemes of gender-role expectations and the hetero-patriarchal sexual division of labor, these individuals resort to anonymity in order to pursue this aspect of their life. Certainly in my ongoing research I have found many individuals who incarnate this situation. Without a doubt there is space for future research which would take into account the particular experiences of the LGBTIQ community in South Korea, namely, the more fluid understanding of identity politics; queer



issues in the military forces; different forms of violence such as physical assault to lesbian individuals, gay-bashing, or transgender vilification; the stigmatization to individuals living with HIV-AIDS, as well as the seemingly «invisibilizing» of these communities amidst civil society and religious organizations.

This article has shown how religious violence carried out through the anti-gay rhetoric of fundamentalist Evangelical churches in South Korea – besides invading individuals' personal lives – diminishes the social public awareness of the situations and experiences of the LGBTIQ individuals and communities. Rather than consolidating co-existence and fellowship, religious discursive violence further instills hatred and division amidst the broader society. Ultimately, it is not possible to legally enforce the Christian principle of «you shall love your neighbor as yourself» (Mt 19.19 NRSV) while condemning that «neighbor» for not readily fitting into the particular vision of religious organizations.

Society is indeed a compound of diverse ideologies, beliefs and worldviews that ought to respect and interact with each other in order to guarantee the health of the social contract. In the case analyzed we clearly observe that behind each legislation submitted for the consideration of the nations's representatives, there is not only political power entailed, but also individual and collective particular interests, aspirations and demands towards building the country's common future. Accordingly, in light of the case of religious violence towards the LGBTIQ communities in South Korea and the ban of the anti-discrimination law, the democratic government must carefully guarantee all individuals their basic human rights. Religious organizations are not impervious to abiding to that democratic mandate.

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