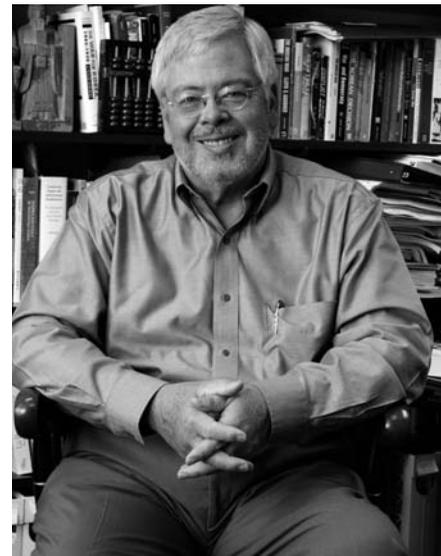


American and European Missionaries in East Asia

An Interview with Professor Donald Clark

Donald Clark is the Murchison Professor of History and Co-Director of East Asian Studies at Trinity University. He also serves as Director of Trinity's International Studies Program. He teaches courses on China, Japan, Korea, and the history of American foreign relations with a research focus on Korea, where he spent much of his life as the son of missionaries. In addition to writing books and journal articles on a variety of East Asian topics, Professor Clark has also published two works that focus upon Western missionaries in Korea—Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience 1900–1950 (2003) and Missionary Photography in Korea: Encountering the West through Christianity (2009). Professor Clark's latest publication is a Key Issues in Asian Studies booklet for survey-level university and advanced high school students titled Korea in World History. In the interview that follows, Professor Clark discusses nineteenth-century American and Western missionaries and their profound effects on East Asia.



Lucien: *Don, most of our readers are aware that Christianity had a much earlier history in Asia before Americans became missionaries. When did American missionaries first become involved in Northeast Asia, and how were they received initially?*

Donald Clark: The first Protestant missionary to China was Robert Morrison (1782–1834), a Presbyterian from Scotland who arrived in Macao in 1807 via the United States, but we can't call him an American because he was a Scot. The first actual American missionary was Elijah Bridgman of Belchertown, Massachusetts, who arrived on “the field,” as they called it, in 1830. Bridgman represented the Boston-based American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a consortium of churches that sent missionaries all over the world.

Morrison represented the main British mission, the London Missionary Society, and his first job was to translate the Bible into Chinese, something that had been done before by Catholics. He employed Chinese scholars to help him, and he was assisted by other missionaries as well, but the story is that, after twenty-five years, when he finally finished translating the Book of Revelation, the whole enterprise had only yielded ten converts up to that point, a slow start for Christianity in China.

We don't see real increases in Chinese Christians until the latter half of the 1800s, when greater numbers of missionaries were sent, and they did new kinds of work, notably education. Many Protestant missionary educators, for example, Young J. Allen in Shanghai, founded schools like the Anglo-Chinese Academy (later College), one of a chain of famous modern institutions of higher learning. Christian colleges in China produced many of the leaders of modern China, including a number of senior people in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, such as the famous foreign minister Huang Hua, who was a graduate of the missionary-founded Yenching University.

In Japan, things were much quicker getting started. After Commodore Perry's visit in the early 1850s and the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the Japanese displayed a voracious appetite for modern education, including learning English. As a result, missionary educators in particular were welcomed warmly in Japan,

The established elites in all three countries—Chinese Confucian *literati*, Japanese samurai, and Korean *yangban* aristocrats—tended to regard missionaries as an annoyance and even a threat.

and some of their institutions, like Dōshisha University in Kyoto, still exist. Christianity in Japan also advanced because people like Jō Nijijima at Dōshisha and Tsuda Umeko at an educational institution that later became Tokyo Women's College could model what it meant to be simultaneously Japanese and Christian. In the Meiji period, educators with strong Christian beliefs, like William S. Clark, who the Japanese government hired to develop the agricultural college on Hokkaidō because he had founded the Massachusetts Agricultural College, also spread the faith. When Clark completed his work in Japan and was boarding the train to return to the US, he turned and called out to his students, “Boys, be ambitious in the service of the Lord.” This was quickly condensed to just “Boys, be ambitious,” which became a kind of slogan of the whole Meiji period.

Lucien: *Although there seem to be commonalities in the reactions of the three major Northeast Asian cultures to nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries, differences exist as well. Please compare and contrast how missionaries were received in China, Japan, and Korea.*

Donald Clark: Koreans famously responded to the Christian message more enthusiastically—based upon the percent of the population that became Christians—than Japanese or Chinese. The established elites in all three countries—Chinese Confucian *literati*, Japanese samurai, and Korean *yangban* aristocrats—tended to regard missionaries as an annoyance and even a threat. Commoners in the three cultures also reacted negatively to a certain extent because of rumors about what kind of trouble accompanied the missionaries; for example, the “baby riots,” which were attacks on the gentle missionaries running

orphanages because of rumors that the children were actually being kidnapped, and their body parts being used for strange Western medicines by the missionary doctors.

In Korea, though, Protestant missions got a boost when the very first ones ingratiated themselves with the Korean royal family and were given permission to commence educational work. Less than twenty years after the bloodiest massacre of Catholic Christians in Korean history, Korea opened itself up to missionary work, even allowing teaching of the Gospel.

In Japan, modern elites during the Meiji era, particularly people who had studied abroad and returned to teach in the modern schools that happened often to be mission-founded, became Christians themselves. So, we always say that while the number and percentage of Christians in Japan wasn't ever very large, it mattered *who* became Christian and where they stood in Japanese society.

In China, too, leaders like Sun Yatsen identified themselves as Christians. His successor, Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), converted to Christianity and became a Methodist at the time of his marriage to Soong Mei-ling, who was the daughter of one of Shanghai's most prominent Christian families. Christian institutions like the YMCA represented modern ideas in China and were part of the revolution that created the Republic and, as mentioned, even influenced some communists.

Korea's case was different. The spiritual collapse in Korea that coincided with the Japanese colonial takeover in 1910 left people grasping for a future, alarmed at their inability to resist outside domination and needing some kind of a modern alternative to Japanese colonial oppression.

There is an ongoing discussion of the connection between the rise of modern Korean nationalism and the rise of modern Korean Christianity. For example, the Japanese started a few schools for Koreans, but Japanese retained control. Christian mission schools for many years were conducted in Korean. So Christianity, centering on church congregations that multiplied and where Korean was spoken in large assemblies took on an association with "being Korean."

Education—Soongsil College in Pyongyang and Chōsen Christian College (now Yonsei University) in Seoul, for example—were two of the best-regarded schools in Korea, where elite families could send their children, actually *sons*, at the time, to get a higher education without having to send them to Japan. This changed a little in the 1920s when Korea got two secular Korean colleges, but Christian schools still set much of the pace for modern thought in colonial Korea—until the Japanese closed those schools down in the late 1930s. Western medical education—Korea's first medical and nursing schools—came from Protestant missions as well. Science combined with Christianity made the latter seem all the more "modern" to Koreans, who were interested in Western science and technology.

But, I don't want to make it sound too easy. In the big YMCA meetings in China, Christianity was criticized by many of the students where religion was being dropped in favor of "Mr. Democracy," "Mr. Science," socialism, and the like. In Japan, Christianity ran afoul of Shinto, the more-or-less national religion, and in order to survive in the 1930s, Christians had to suspend the First Commandment and worship the emperor. Since Korea was a Japanese colony, the same conflict between the state and Christianity tore the church apart, as some chose to obey Japanese law and others stayed "pure" by resisting orders to bow at Shinto shrines. The resisters often went to jail and even paid with their lives.

Lucien: *You've written elsewhere that Protestant missionaries in Northeast Asia had a triad of objectives: evangelism, education, and medicine. In the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, how effective were Protestant missionaries in achieving these objectives in, respectively, China and Japan?*

Donald Clark: You can see this triad of objectives in the first generation of Protestant missionaries in China: Robert Morrison and Elijah Bridgman were ordained ministers, as was Peter Parker, an ordained Presbyterian who was also

an ophthalmologist. Parker is regarded as the founder of medical missions in China, arriving in Canton in 1834. The missionary educators and their schools came later, especially in the 1860s and after.

The results of missionary work in education and medicine in China linger on everywhere, visible in the campuses and institutions that were left behind even after the 1949 Chinese Communist victory. For example, Peking University, China's elite institution of higher learning, exists today on the campus of the former Christian Yenching University, whose famous pagoda-shaped water tower still stands as a symbol of the missionaries' interest in blending Chinese style and Western function.

For a while, though, it was tough to find a church—or certainly a functioning church congregation—in China. Only recently has Christianity started spreading again in surprisingly high numbers.

Korea—that is, today's South Korea—is where Christianity is so ubiquitous that it cries out for some kind of cultural or spiritual explanation. The missionary legacy is visible in the campuses and hospitals there too, but the churches with their red neon crosses at night, dotting the landscape in every city and town, bespeak an industrial-scale organization of community-based Christian congregations that make it a Korean phenomenon.

Lucien: *The Republic of Korea is by far the Northeast Asian culture where Christianity made the greatest inroads since it appears that currently about 50 percent of all Koreans who profess any religion are Christian, with the majority belonging to various Protestant denominations. What are the major factors in the latter nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries that caused Christianity to make such substantial inroads in Korea?*

Donald Clark: The much-noticed prevalence of Christianity in South Korea is a result of a confluence of historical and social forces in the mid and late twentieth century. It is related to missions, but one quickly sees that it is a home-grown Korean variant of Christianity, and that its spread comes from the energy of its own people.

First, around 1900, Korea was open to new ideas, including spiritual ones. The collapse of their monarchy, and Korea's reduction to colony status, were deeply humiliating and generated a huge appetite for deliverance. During that time, people liked to compare the Koreans with the children of Israel who were held captive in Egypt, looking forward to deliverance by God.

Second, Christianity spread best in the area that was most accustomed to new ideas, the northwestern provinces near the Chinese border, whose heart is the city of Pyongyang. This is an area that has gotten the short end of the stick historically in Korea. The land is not good for farming: landholdings are small instead of the vast estates of the south with their conservative aristocratic owners and attendant peasants. Economic life in the northwest consisted of people selling their own labor for wages for work in mining, logging, or in trade with Chinese.

It is inaccurate to categorize northwesterners as aspiring "middle class," but their social system was certainly susceptible to Christianity. One example: the missionaries embraced the Korean *han'gŭl* alphabet because it was easy to read compared to the written Chinese characters that educated elites utilized. They translated the scriptures into han'gŭl and taught common people in churches how to read the alphabet. This gift of literacy for ordinary people was a powerful draw. It made educated people out of the supposed "riff raff" of North Korea, who had been taking abuse from educated noblemen for generations.

Moreover, churches were places with many roles for leaders. They conferred social status. A person could be somebody with a title: an honorable pastor, an honorable elder, or an honorable deacon. Most powerful of all, the churches encouraged women—women!—to read and be leaders. Imagine the power of being told, maybe for the first time, that she was not just a baby machine, or a beast of burden, or her mother-in-law's slave, but a teacher, or maybe an "honorable deaconess."¹

Those factors were in play all over Korea at the time, and not just in the north.

Another reason for the spread of Korean Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, was the way it ran in families. If the dad converted, the family was thenceforth a Christian family, but also to a lesser degree if the mom converted.

Finally, to this preliminary list, add the “mechanisms of belief” that seem to be innate in Koreans. These are demonstrated in their love of music—and of which the church offers a great deal—and a Confucian trait or two, like their passion for ritual and their respect for authority in the person of the pastor.

These elements of the story are hard to arrange into a hierarchy of importance. In the period after the war, new elements have arranged themselves in the picture. One would be anti-Communism in the years around the purging of Christianity in North Korea. Related to this would be a tendency in conservative churches to look upon America as a “Christian nation,” hence an example to push South Korea’s anti-communist alliance with Japan and other regional states. And there’s more, as you know.

Lucien: *Although Catholicism became somewhat more successful in Korea in our lifetimes, why did Protestant Christianity enjoy impressive growth in Korea beginning in the latter nineteenth century while Catholicism, by contrast, lagged behind?*

Donald Clark: “Christianity” in Korea, as in many societies, excludes “Catholicism” in the public understanding, and people regard them as different faiths. There was a Catholic faith community for nearly a century before the arrival of Protestant believers and missionaries, but during that century, roughly 1784 to 1884, Korean Catholics suffered persecution, numerous purges, and massacres. The problem was the “rites controversy”—the abandonment of Confucian ancestral rites by new Catholics, violating the central value of filial piety in Confucianism. Catholics had to hide out and risk their lives for their faith. With the opening of Korea to the outside world in the 1880s, the royal government started practicing toleration for Catholics and Protestants, and many Catholic families in Korea had escaped the great persecutions. However, foreign—mainly French—missionary numbers and resources paled in comparison with those of the Protestants. Korean Catholics like to say that there was no way to compete with the elaborate compounds and buildings of the Protestant missions and the appeal to ordinary Koreans to convert to, say, Methodism or Presbyterianism.

Also, the Catholic Church had a number of things that kept it weak in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was isolated by language—the mass was offered in Latin, usually by foreign priests. The head of the church was in Rome, and the archbishop was in Japan; and Korean leaders, who were largely foreign missionaries themselves, had little church authority. The various foreign missions (French, German, Irish, and American) did not have a functional federation. In the 1930s, when it came to deciding whether or not to obey Japanese law and worship at the Shinto shrines, the Catholics decreed that people should obey, thus identifying themselves as Japanese collaborators.

Everything changed in the 1960s when South Korea got a cardinal, and the church was allowed to use Korean in place of Latin. During the decades of military dictatorship, the cardinal, Stephen Souhwan Kim, and a number of other highly visible Catholic figures were leaders in the movement for less dictatorship and better living standards. The reputation of the Catholic Church came to transcend the tragic past and has since enjoyed better days. Cardinal Kim’s headquarters church, the great cathedral in Myong-dong, Seoul, actually served as a sanctuary for anti-government demonstrators during the height of the movement for political reform in South Korea.

Lucien: *I realize that there were a number of significant American missionaries in Northeast Asia in the latter nineteenth century, but John L. Nevius seems to have had an impact in both China and Korea. Could you elaborate upon his role in each of these cultures?*

Donald Clark: The name of the China missionary John L. Nevius is attached to two things. First, people credit the Presbyterian Mission in Shandong Province in the 1890s with the plan to wean the Chinese church off foreign

missionary support and leadership in order to ensure its survival and growth. The mission, and John Nevius, saw dependence on foreign money and leadership as a crippling weakness of many Chinese churches. The idea was to foster “self-government, self-support, and self-propagation” among Chinese churches as soon as possible, and early results suggested that this was much more effective than direct missionary leadership.

John Nevius journeyed to Korea in the 1890s to be the speaker at a Presbyterian mission strategic conference for evangelizing Korea. His proposal for a version of the “three self” idea (meaning self-government, self-support, and self-propagation) in Korea became the basis for Presbyterian mission work on the peninsula, where it earned the name “Nevius Plan.” The Presbyterian Church in Korea is the biggest single denomination of Protestants, and it has long been self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Presbyterians think the “Nevius Plan” is the reason their denomination is so large and healthy. However, one imagines that the strategy is basically common sense.

In the PRC, the “Three Self Patriotic Movement” under the Chinese Communists after 1949 was a version of this idea. In the early days of the People’s Republic, the government decreed the consolidation of all Protestant churches and organizations under one state-supervised umbrella and ordered that it remain uncorrupted by foreign ties. The “three self” rule still governs Chinese Christianity.

Lucien: *As you are well aware, many educated Western elites in the nineteenth century believed in racial hierarchies and in the special role for white people in “civilizing the heathen.” How did these beliefs impact American missionary interactions with Northeast Asians?*

Donald Clark: I find it difficult to convey to students and audiences today how powerful the missionary-sending impulse was in the United States in the late 1800s. It was a long time ago, the age of unabashed imperialism. White supremacist attitudes were strong, as you say. “Darker peoples” were curiosities in the public mind. “Orientals” were actively excluded and hurt in America under blatantly racist laws grounded in the notion that Asians were simply in-

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capable of rising to the level of white people—an attitude long held regarding African slaves and their descendants. People thought in terms of domination, colonization, and improvement of the lost and heathen, but certainly not in terms of intermingling and even less in learning anything from them. Rarely did it occur to many in the West that there might be something to learn, say, about law or ethics from Confucian Chinese.

America's churches supported America's becoming an imperial power, rationalizing domination abroad by talk of spreading the Gospel. There was constant reference to the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 to preach the Gospel to every creature. There was also a genre of evangelists who believed that the Second Coming of Christ would occur once the whole world had been notified of the Christian Gospel. With such a grand purpose in mind, even the use of military force seemed justified in hurrying things along.

The power of this appeal to Christian youth in America might take some effort for some contemporary readers to imagine. Churches had youth groups, and the youth were constantly being challenged to dedicate their lives to this vast task of preaching the Gospel across the world. They loaded up on missionary sermons and encouraged each other with pats on the back from the adults in their home congregations. To some young people, career missionary service was made to seem like the highest possible calling.

In my case, just to give an example, all of my grandparents—on father's and mother's side both—were caught up in the 1890s in the "Student Volunteer Movement," which had as its slogan "The Evangelization of the World in *This Generation!*" Originating in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Philadelphia, they shortly found themselves in the muddy towns of Korea, never having met a Korean, heard a word of Korean, or eaten a single morsel of *kimchi* before they got there. But they went intending to spend the rest of their working lives in Korea. Among the four of them, they racked up 139 years of service there before World War II. The last one to leave, my Grandfather Clark, had to be deported by the Japanese on the eve of Pearl Harbor.

Whatever the ethos of cultural imperialism that may have propelled them to Korea in the first place, they soon developed work patterns that established friendships with Korean Christian colleagues and a certain appreciation of things Korean, however primitive and dangerous the place sometimes was. I wrote about this in my book *Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience, 1900–1950*. The book is not just about missionaries, but about what Korea was like at the time, for example, as a Japanese colony. Having grown up as an expat kid myself, I'm struck by the way Westerners became mentally at home in their "fields" of work and spent their whole lives there carving out a kind of imaginary native place, without ever actually belonging either there or in their homelands, where they had largely been forgotten after decades abroad.

That said, there always seemed to be a taboo against intermarriage between missionaries and local people, which says to me that things were rigged to be unequal. I mention intermarriage because I think that's where the crunch comes when people are trying to accept each other across national, religious, or racial lines. There were other indications of continuing white superiority in attitudes as well. But, I also should say that people were aware of this, and many missionaries fought hard to overcome their own prejudices, or at least to suppress them.

Lucien: Don, thanks for the excellent interview!

Donald Clark: Thanks for inviting me. ■

NOTE

1. Kim Il-sung's mother, Kang Ban-sok, was a Presbyterian deaconess in the Pyongyang suburb of Chilgol. A church in Chilgol that Kim Il-sung built in her honor is one of two Protestant churches in the city today. Kim and his father dropped out, but his mother and her family stayed with it. Her brother Kang Yang'uk served the Kim regime for many years as the director/custodian of the Korean Christian League, a state church that supervises and controls all Protestant property and activity in the country.