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Covid-19 and Korean Buddhism: Assessing the Impact of South Korea's Coronavirus Epidemic on the Future of Its Buddhist Community

Cheonghwan Park  and Kyungrae Kim 

Department of Buddhist Studies, Dongguk University, Seoul 04620, Korea; avadana@dongguk.edu

* Correspondence: wizkyung@dongguk.edu

Abstract: While the Covid-19 pandemic has altered many aspects of life in South Korea over 2020, its impact on South Korea's religious landscape has been enormous as the country's three major religions (Catholicism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity) have suffered considerable losses in both their income and membership. Despite these challenges, however, Buddhism's public image has actually improved since the start of the epidemic due to the rapid and proactive responses of the nation's largest Buddhist organization, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (K. Daehan bulgyo jogyejong). This article critically examines the Jogye Order's response to the epidemic and its impact on the order thus far, along with discussions regarding the order's future. In particular it will examine the results of three conferences held by the order in response to the epidemic and the resulting recommendations on how Korean Buddhism should adapt to effectively address the many challenges brought by the pandemic. These recommendations include establishing an online Buddhist education system, further engaging the order's lay supporters through various social media platforms, upgrading the current lay education program with virtual learning options that directly address problems faced by the general public during the pandemic, and distributing virtual meditation classes world-wide for those who remain in quarantine or social isolation. By adopting these changes, the Jogye Order will be able to play a crucial role in promoting mental stability and the cultivation of positive emotions among the many suffering from anxiety, social isolation and financial difficulties during the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; Jogye Order; Korean religions; Buddhist education; Jogye Order's response



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1. Introduction

Since almost the start of Covid-19 epidemic in the Republic of Korea (hereafter "South Korea"), religion has remained in the Korean media's spotlight. Beginning with the outbreak at the *Shincheonji* Church of Jesus in Daegu in late February, 2020, which infected over 4500 church members and launched the country's "first wave" of the epidemic, government efforts to quell the virus's spread have been pitted against the interests of the nation's distinctively devout Protestant community. While the South Korean government won praise for its relatively successful efforts through most of 2020 to control the pandemic through large-scale testing, high-tech contact tracing, and the mandatory quarantine of possibly exposed individuals, church services held by the nation's diverse Protestant community have remained a vector for spreading the virus owing to attendees' exposure to the "Three Cs" (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings). Then, in late August a second wave of the epidemic was sparked a large anti-government protest in Seoul was led by conservative Protestant organizations, while at least another 600 cases were traced to the Evangelical BTJ (aka "Back to Jerusalem") Mission organization later in the year. With the country currently in the grips of its third and most deadly wave of the

epidemic in the winter of 2021, the government has promised free widespread vaccination against Covid-19 to begin in February in hopes of establishing herd-immunity by the fall.

Described in government reports as a “religious supermarket”, South Korea maintains one of the most religiously pluralistic societies in the world while remaining an almost entirely mono-ethnic nation (Baker 2016, p. 8).¹ A democratic country of approximately 52 million citizens, as of 2015 roughly 15% of South Korea’s population identified as Buddhist (K. *bulgyo*), 19% as Protestant Christians (K. *gidokgyo*) and 8% as Catholic (K. *cheonjungyo*).² However, even before the Covid-19 epidemic, South Korea’s population has been growing increasingly agnostic, with those claiming no religious affiliation increasing from approximately 47% of the population in 2005 to 56% ten years later.³ While there are few aspects of life in South Korea that have not been altered by the pandemic, its effects on the country’s religious landscape have been enormous. Not only has Protestant Christianity suffered a major decline in public confidence, all three of the country’s major religions have lost a significant amount of donations due to temporary closures and social distancing measures mandated by the government. While the pandemic’s final impact on South Korean religion remains to be seen, it will likely speed the institutional weakening of the country’s major religions with long-term financial hardship leading many smaller churches and temples to close permanently.

While the country’s Buddhist community has suffered significant financial losses thus far, Korean Buddhism’s public image has actually improved since the start of the epidemic due rapid and proactive response of the Jogye Order (K. *Daehan bulgyo jogyejeong*, hereafter “JO” or “the order”), the largest of Korea’s Buddhist orders, and increased public interest on Buddhism’s holistic approach to mental and physical health. Not only have JO authorities actively supported government efforts to control the spread of the virus, they have been proactive in planning for Buddhism’s role in South Korean society during and after the epidemic. It should be noted that, according to the results of the investigation of the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, there were no confirmed cases in the Buddhist temples of the Jogye Order until 31 August 2020 (Kwon 2020). This paper will provide a cursory examination of the JO’s response to the epidemic in 2020 and its impact on the order thus far, along with discussions regarding its future. It will begin in Section 2 with a survey of South Korea’s Covid-19 epidemic so far, followed in Section 3 by a brief discussion of its impact on the nation’s Protestant and Catholic communities for comparison purposes. Section 4 will examine the epidemic’s impact on Korea’s Buddhist community along with JO responses, while Section 5 will explore discussions within a conference of Buddhist civic organizations held on 31 March 2020, along with two additional conferences hosted by Dongguk University in October and December. The paper will conclude with recommendations regarding adaptations the Korean Buddhist community should make to adequately address the inevitable social changes brought by the pandemic.

While South Korean society maintains a wide degree of religious diversity, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity remain the nation’s three largest organized religions and, thus, are the focus of this paper. Furthermore, as of publication they have been the only religions to publicly release statistics regarding the impact of the coronavirus epidemic, and as of writing, South Korea’s coronavirus epidemic remains on-going and few academically-vetted sources concerning the epidemic’s impact have thus far been published. As such the discussions within this paper rely primarily on mainstream media reports and press releases from various religious organizations published online.

¹ Approximately 98% of the country’s residents are ethnically Korean. See also: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/data/UN_MigrantStockTotal_2019.xlsx (accessed on 18 February 2021).

² Population by Gender, Age, and Religion - City/Country]. Korean Statistical Information Service (in Korean). 2015. https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1PM1502&conn_path=I2 (accessed on 18 February 2021).

³ https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1IN0505&conn_path=I2 (accessed on 18 February 2021).

2. South Korea's Covid-19 Epidemic

The South Korean government's overall management of the nation's Covid-19 epidemic through the last year has earned commendations from the World Health Organization and news agencies around the globe. In comparison to the United States, which has suffered a Covid-19 related fatality rate of over 1200 per million residents, South Korea's remains as low as 26 deaths per million, having lost a total of just over 1300 people to the virus as of mid-January 2021.⁴ Furthermore, the country has thus far managed to maintain a relatively low fatality rate without wide-spread business closures or "lockdowns". This so-called "Korean approach" has been to work to slow the virus's spread to a manageable rate, allowing the country's society and economy to continue functioning as normally as possible, which has been accomplished by deploying widespread testing, extensive contract tracing relying on cellphone data collection, and mandatory quarantine for all potentially exposed individuals. These rapid and robust responses were enabled by legal changes and the overhaul of the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency following a 2015 outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (aka MERS) in South Korea that left 38 dead, and the then conservative-led government open to widespread criticism for both its slow response and lack of transparency.⁵

Since almost the start of South Korea's Covid-19 epidemic, the virus's spread has been linked in the national media with the country's notably fervent culture of Evangelical Protestantism. Not only have a significant number of outbreaks originated within South Korean churches, both of the country's first and second waves of the epidemic have been directly attributed to large-scale religious gatherings. While South Korea's first Covid-19 case was confirmed on January 20, new cases averaged little over one a day for the following month. However, in late February an outbreak occurred the *Shincheonji* Church of Jesus in Daegu, a large, yet secretive religious sect described by the media and mainstream Protestants as a "cult". Traceable to the infamous "patient 31", who had attended church services prior to her diagnosis, over almost 4500 *Shincheonji* members would become infected Covid-19, triggering the country's "first wave" of the epidemic centered around the city of Daegu.⁶ As new cases rapidly spiked, averaging around 500 a day through February and early March, KDCA authorities acted quickly, mandating two weeks of quarantine for all 9000 people who had recently visited the sect's facilities and, controversially, demanding that the church submit a complete list of its members; a request originally resisted by *Shincheonji* leadership for fear of persecution and reprisals. By mid-March, the government had deployed over a quarter-million Covid-19 tests through hundreds of newly established testing centers around the nation, including innovative drive-through testing centers.⁷

By the end of March new Covid-19 cases were down to around 200 a day. However, new clusters of infection continued arising sporadically throughout the country, often via church gatherings, many of which remained opened despite government calls for limiting church activities and self-imposed closures. Financial hardship and political opposition to the current liberal-leaning government administration drove growing resistance among many conservative Protestant churches through the spring and early summer,⁸ culminating in an anti-government protest in Seoul attended by over 10,000 on August 15.⁹ Led by the controversial Reverend Kwang-hoon Jun, head of the *Sarang Jeil* Presbyterian Church and vocal critic of South Korean President Jae-in Moon, the protest led to an outbreak of 1100 cases, or a third of the entire cases in Seoul, by mid-September.¹⁰ Regardless

⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data-explorer?tab=table&zoomToSelection=true&country=KOR~USA®ion=World&deathsMetric=true&interval=total&perCapita=true&smoothing=0&pickerMetric=location&pickerSort=asc> (accessed on 13 February 2021).

⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2020-south-korea-covid-strategy/> (accessed on 18 February 2021).

⁶ <https://news.4mat.com/article/23724705> (accessed on 13 February 2021).

⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2020-south-korea-covid-strategy> (accessed on 14 February 2021).

⁸ www.koreaherald.com/common/newsprint.php?ud=202008200000638 (accessed on 15 January 2021).

⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/s-korea-faces-new-outbreak-churches-again-concern> (accessed on 18 February 2021).

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN25Z1MU> (accessed on 22 January 2021).

of whether the protest directly led to the epidemic's second wave, as charged by the government, or was instead a politically motivated scape-goat, as alleged by Rev. Jun and his supporters, the nation's Protestant community is facing a "backlash" of criticism and negative public opinion. Many Protestant organizations have since distanced themselves from *Sarang Jaeil* leader, who was subsequently rearrested after the protest for violating the terms of his bail on an earlier arrest for illegal campaigning and libel.

After two weeks of targeted closures and added restrictions in early September, the second wave was under control and, for most of the fall, South Korea's infection rate hovered around 100 new cases a day. However, in late November the country began experiencing another surge and by December the country's third and most deadly wave of the epidemic was underway, averaging over 1000 new cases a day by Christmas. Different from the previous two waves, the third surge in new infections could not be attributed to single outbreak, but was driven by smaller-scale social gatherings and longer time spent in-doors during the country's colder months. While the Moon administration has blamed this current wave on citizens letting their "guards down" and the "carelessness and irresponsibility" of a small minority, others have attributed the rise in infections to the government's loosening of social distancing restrictions earlier in the fall. Regardless, the Moon administration's approval ratings are at an all-time low, even as the government has pledged free vaccinations for all citizens to begin in February, with a goal of establishing national herd-immunity by fall 2021.¹¹

3. The Epidemic's Impact on Korean Christianity

3.1. Korean Catholicism

Introduced to Korea in the late 18th century, Catholicism was suppressed almost immediately upon arrival as a perceived threat to the Joseon Dynasty's Neo-Confucian ideology. However, despite reoccurring persecutions, the religion continued to grow steadily over the following century and a half, with Korean Catholics largely isolating themselves from wider society until after the Korean War (1950–1953). Catholicism has since become South Korea's third largest religion and, despite the growth of agnosticism within South Korean society over the last decade, the church's membership has continued to expand. According to the church's own 2019 statistics, 5,914,669 South Koreans, or approximately 11.1% of nation's total population, had been baptized as Catholics, with over a million regularly attending mass each Sunday prior to the pandemic.¹² Organized into three archdioceses and thirteen additional dioceses, the Korean Catholic Church is coordinated through the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (hereafter CBCK), established in the mid-19th century.

Given its centralized organization, the Korean Catholicism acted swiftly in support of the government's efforts to contain the Coronavirus epidemic. Following the outbreak at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, on February 23rd all dioceses in South Korea suspended mass for the first time in the nation's history. Instead, services were streamed online and broadcasting through the Catholic Peace Broadcasting Corporation (CPBC) as parishioners were encouraged "to participate Mass in spirit". With the Daegu outbreak under control, on March 26th the CBCK issued its "Guideline for Parish (sic.) to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19" to all Korean dioceses, along with additional guidelines issued by the individual diocese, themselves, providing detailed instructions on restarting in-person services while adhering the government's social distancing and safety regulations. Such guidelines included limiting seating at mass and prioritizing attendance for those judged to be in most need, providing hand sanitizer at each door, and ensuring that all attendees wear masks, among others. Individual parishes have also been actively providing additional media broadcasts, livestreams and online materials to their members while participating in

¹¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/01/952626084/south-korea-faces-third-wave-of-coronavirus>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/15/south-korea-how-early-covid-competence-gave-way-to-a-second-wave> (accessed on 11 January 2021).

¹² <https://cbck.or.kr/en/News/20200821?page=2> (accessed on 22 January 2021).

fund-raising efforts to benefit those suffering from Covid-19 along with donating materials such as masks and vitamins to medical centers in need.¹³

As the nation's Coronavirus epidemic remains ongoing, its final impact on the Korean Catholic Church has yet to be determined. However, a recent study by the Catholic Uijeongbu Diocese Institute examined the effects of the epidemic on eight individual parishes between February and October 2020. According to the findings of the "2020 Parish's Corona 19 (sic.) Response Status Report", after restarting in-person services regular attendance had dropped between roughly 35% and 64%, while income had similarly dropped between approximately 20% and 37% in the parishes surveyed. An even wider range in the drop in the number of lay volunteers was reported over the same period. While most of the parishioners surveyed had expressed that they felt their faith had been strengthened during the course of the pandemic, many elderly church members also reported experiencing difficulties accessing the digital resources and live-streamed services provided by various churches, leaving them feeling isolated.¹⁴ However, in a separate survey also conducted by the Diocese of Uijeongbu in late May, slightly over half of the respondents replied that their remote experience with live-streaming mass was awkward at first, but gradually improved, while slightly less than half reporting that their enthusiasm for mass had actually increased. Encouragingly for the church, only approximately 9% of those surveyed felt they no longer needed to attend mass in person.¹⁵ Lay support and participation in the Korean Catholic Church has been significantly disrupted by the Covid-19 epidemic. However, preliminary surveys, along with the Korean Catholic community's centralized organization and history of resilience, tentatively suggest that the church will likely recover in the long-term.

3.2. Korean Protestantism

Arriving almost a century after Catholicism, western Protestant missionaries faced little opposition from the failing Joseon Government who, in fact, welcomed them as bearers of foreign technology and knowledge. Described by Daniel Adams as "men and women of Puritanical zeal and Wesleyan fervor" (Adams 1995, p. 18), the missionaries' religious enthusiasm was matched by Koreans seeking alternatives to the Neo-Confucianism ideology of the collapsing Joseon Dynasty along with salvation from wide-spread poverty and the political instability. As observed by scholar Jae-Buhm Hwang, these early missionaries imparted the "intense Biblicism", "fundamentalist leanings", and conservative theology for which Korean Protestantism is known (Hwang 2008, p. 113). In the decades following the Korean War, South Korean Protestantism aligned itself with the anti-communist dictatorships governing the South and, though a series of government-sanctioned large-scale "crusades", the religion experienced exponential growth, rising from 600,000 adherents in 1950 to almost six and half million in 1985. By the early 1990s, South Korea had hosted some of the largest evangelical gatherings ever recorded, numbering in the millions in attendance, and had become home to twenty-three of the fifty largest churches in the world, including the largest: Yoido Full Gospel Church (T. S. Lee 2010, pp. 85–86). While Protestantism has been in gradual decline since the 1990s, it remains South Korea's largest religion, claiming almost 10 million adherents as of 2015, or about 19.7% of the country's population.¹⁶

Despite its wide-spread social and political influence, Protestantism has faced considerable challenges during South Korea's coronavirus epidemic. Unlike the Catholic Church, Korea's Protestants are not centrally organized, but are comprised of various mainline denominations, including Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, along with hundreds, if not thousands, of smaller sects and independent churches. As noted by Jin-ho Kim,

¹³ <https://cbck.or.kr/en/News/20200822#> (accessed on 3 February 2021).

¹⁴ <http://www.catholicnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=31198> (accessed on 10 January 2021).

¹⁵ For more details on this, see (Huh 2020).

¹⁶ Population by Gender, Age, and Religion—City/Country]. Korean Statistical Information Service (in Korean). 2015. https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1PM1502&conn_path=I2 (accessed on 18 February 2021).

pastor and researcher with the Seoul-based Christian Institute for the Third Era, most small and independent churches depend on weekly lay donations for their continued financial survival. Thus, government mandated social-distancing measures and closures create an acute “economic burden” causing them to “strongly resist” government interference.¹⁷ A spokesperson for the National Council of Churches in Korea, one of Korea’s four major Protestant umbrella organizations, similarly comments that a church’s financial stability and long-term viability directly depends on how effectively it builds community. Thus with “greater membership base comes a larger amount raised as offerings during regular worship services”. However, such community-building efforts and donation collections have become “very difficult” over the course of the pandemic.¹⁸

With such dispersed ecclesiastical organization and frequent lack of long-term financial stability, both denominations and individual churches have varied widely in their adherence to government mandates and guidelines. Since a minority of Protestant churches have evaded government guidelines or violated them in protest, as the case with Rev. Kwang-hoon Jun’s Sarang Jeil church in Seoul, leading directly to virus outbreaks, other mainline Protestants have called for a unified, theologically acceptable approach to be agreed upon and practiced by all the nation’s Protestant churches (Bae 2020). While 7616 cases between January and September have been traced to services held by Protestant sects, including Sincheonji (Kwon 2020), Protestant leaders point out that less than 9% of the country’s coronavirus cases were contracted through religious services, arguing that the government is unfairly scapegoating the Protestant community for the virus’s spread and is limiting religious freedom without sufficient justification (Ha 2021). Nevertheless, long-term damage to Korean Protestantism’s public image has already been done. In a survey conducted in late June, the majority of the respondents expressed generally positive opinions of Buddhism and Catholicism, but held negative views of Protestantism, with over 32% saying they wanted to avoid the religion and another 29% stating that they felt the religion was a “fraud”.¹⁹ While the pandemic’s long-term effects on Korean Protestantism remain unknown, it is likely many smaller churches will close permanently due to financial insolvency should the pandemic continue much longer while the epidemic’s negative impact on the Protestantism’s public image will accelerate the religion’s decline in membership.

4. The Epidemic’s Impact on Korean Buddhism

Introduced to the Korean Peninsula in the fourth century CE, Buddhism flourished for over a millennium as the state religion patronized by a succession of kingdoms practicing forms of “national-protection” Buddhism (K. *hoguk bulgyo*). However, with the ascendance of the Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), Buddhism was progressively stripped of its wealth and position and, for the following 500 years, the religion was practically banished to the countryside surviving through the support of Korea’s impoverished peasantry. While this official suppression was finally lifted in 1895, subsequent efforts to modernize Korean Buddhism coincided with the growing Japanese influence on the peninsula, leading a majority of Korean monastics to marry. Following the Korean War, the remaining minority of celibate monastics launched the decade-long “Purification Movement” (K. *Jeonghwaundong*) to expel the married clergy, prompting a series of protests, legal battles, and physical confrontations between the two factions. Finally, in 1961 intervention by the newly-established military government of President Chung-hee Park (in office 1962–1979) granted control of the Korean *Sangha* to the celibate Jogye Order who was awarded almost all of the country’s major Buddhist properties (Buswell 1992, p. 32; Park 2006, pp. 208–11).

Overcoming sectarian infighting and geographical isolation of the 1960s and 1970s, the JO has since grown to become the largest of Korea’s Buddhist orders, maintaining more than

¹⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/15/912682401/the-volatile-mix-of-a-south-korean-church-politics-and-the-coronavirus> (accessed on 19 February 2021).

¹⁸ <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200820000638> (accessed on 19 February 2021).

¹⁹ For more details on this, see (Huh 2020).

3000 temples organized within 25 districts overseen by the JO's central administration in Seoul. JO temples are staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics (K. *bigu*), almost half of whom are female (K. *biguni*), who vow to follow the precepts of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya as well as the "Pure Rules" (K. *Baijang jingguet*) of Chinese master Baizhang Huaihai (720–814). A legacy of Joseon-era Buddhism, the JO's activities focus on its temples and resident monastics, while its political culture remains largely male-dominated and hierarchical, granting monastics authority over the order's lay supporters. However, beginning with various reform movements in the 1980s, the JO has worked to increase its social activism, media presence, and engagement with secular Korean society. As of the 2005 census approximately 22.8% of South Koreans identified themselves as Buddhists, while the JO, itself, currently claims around seven million registered lay members (Park and Kim 2019).

However, as discussed in previous articles (Park and Kim 2019), the Jogye Order, and Korean Buddhism as a whole, have been facing a growing crisis over recent decades. According to South Korea's 2015 census only 15.5% of the nation described themselves as Buddhist, a loss of over 7% of the country's total population, or approximately three and half million adherents, from a decade earlier. The number of annual JO monastic recruits has similarly declined over recent decades, dropping from 510 postulants in 1993 to only 151 in 2017. This crisis has been compounded by a growing loss of confidence among the laity in the order's monastic leadership following a succession of corruption scandals and sectarian infighting.²⁰ Even prior to the nation's Covid-19 epidemic, Buddhism was struggling to remain relevant in South Korea's increasingly agnostic society and, unless the JO reverses these trends, the order faces the real possibility of extinction by the middle of this century.

However, despite enduring significant financial losses, Buddhism's public image has actually improved since the start of the epidemic. According to a survey conducted in November by Korea Research (K. 한국리서치), a South Korean public opinion polling institute, Buddhism was perceived the most positively of five major world religions among respondents, with Catholicism ranking a close second. Sociology professor Eung-cheol Kim of Joong-Ang Sangha University attributes this trend to the Jogye Order's rapid and proactive response to the epidemic along with positive public perceptions of Buddhism's wholistic approach to mental and physical health (Noh 2020).²¹ The JO's reacted quickly following the confirmation of South Korea's first case of Covid-19 on January 20, announcing emergency measures and issuing guidelines to be implemented at temples and JO facilitates nationwide by February 20. The Most Venerable Won Haeng, current President of the Jogye Order, issued a statement on March 6th regarding the outbreak urging all citizens to actively cooperate with the government's measures to prevent the spread of infections and promising the order's active support for medical staff and other quarantine officials. Won Haeng further announced a suspension of all the order's religious events and public services to help stop the virus's spread in order to "save ourselves, our neighbors and the world" (Jogye Order 2020). For the first time in 40 years, the JO canceled its annual Lotus Lantern Festival, the large-scale religious festival, listed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2020, held in temples across the nation celebrating Buddha's Birthday (K. *Bucheonim osinnal*, aka *Vesākha*) scheduled for April 30th. Regularly-scheduled temple gatherings and ceremonies were converted to remote events accessible online or via Buddhist media outlets. In-person services for Buddha's Birthday were finally held a month later, on May 30, with government-recommended social distancing and safety guidelines in place. However, Jogyesa Temple, the order's headquarters in Seoul, welcomed 1000

²⁰ In 2012 a video depicting several high-ranking members of the order's leadership drinking alcohol and gambling with millions of won in lay donations made national news, while in 2018 the newly-elected supreme patriarch of the order resigned following allegations of embezzlement and illicitly fathering a child.

²¹ <http://www.hyunbulnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=305121> (accessed on 22 January 2021).

attendees for the celebration; just a fraction of the 15,000 attending the previous year,²² with Won Haeng expressing gratitude to the nation's healthcare workers, government and citizens for their efforts in suppressing the virus, thus allowing the ceremony to finally be held.²³

The JO additionally took a number of practical actions to aid efforts to quell the epidemic. During the initial outbreak in March, Buddhist leaders visited areas where coronavirus cases were rising to deliver quarantine supplies to medical staff, while an additional 5000 monks donated all of their emergency disaster aid to those in quarantine. Boxed lunches were also provided to front-line medical staff as well as socially vulnerable members of the general public. The Jogye Order distributed individual prayer manuals to encourage both monastics and lay Buddhists to pray for spiritual aid in overcoming the coronavirus, along with government guidelines for virus prevention among its temples. As the second wave of the epidemic was spreading through the country in late summer, on September 1 the JO announced that all its temples and facilities would again pause all in-person services for two weeks to help suppress the spread of the virus.²⁴ At a luncheon on September 19th held at the invitation of the country's Buddhist leaders, South Korean President Jae-In Moon commended the spirit of coexistence and compassion of Buddhist community, which he praised for being "[...] at the forefront of efforts to practice epidemic prevention and control guidelines from the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak". Moon additionally commented that, while fighting the epidemic, he realized "that we are all linked to one another" which is "[...] no different from the teaching of Buddhism, 'Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick.'" (J. Lee 2020, pp. 45–69; Shin 2020a, 2020b). Despite such praise, however, the pandemic has put a serious financial strain on South Korea's Buddhist community due to a significant loss of in-person donations during Buddha's Birthday and regular temples services, along with fees for temple-stay programs and admission to Buddhist cultural assets, all of which Buddhist temples had previously depended on as sources of income (Huh 2020).

5. Korean Buddhism Plans for Changes

Instead of simply reacting to epidemic, however, many within JO's monastic and lay communities have also been proactive in anticipating the changes the Covid-19 epidemic would bring to both to Korean Buddhism and South Korean society as a whole. This section will examine such discussion at an "emergency" conference held on March 31 by a conglomerate of Buddhist civic organization as well as a series of conferences held in October and December by Dongguk University.

5.1. The "Korean Buddhism, before and after Covid-19" Conference

Just a month after the *Sincheonji* outbreak in Daegu, Buddhist civic groups gathered to discuss the potential changes the epidemic would bring to Korean Buddhism and plan the community's reactions. Participating organizations included the Korean Buddhist University Federation (K. 대불련 총동문회), the Korean Youth Buddhist Association of Buddhism (K. 대한불교청년회), the Institute for Buddhist Social Affairs (K. 불교사회연구소), the Buddhist Environment Union (K. 불교환경연대), the Jogye Order Labor Union (K. 조계종 민주노조), and the Justice and Peace Buddhist Solidarity (K. 정의평화불교연대). In the course of the conference, attendees identified the causes of the epidemic as fourfold, namely globalization and subsequent increase in international travel, the widespread urbanization of human society, environmental destruction and subsequent climate change, and a neo-liberal capitalist order driven by "endless greed and competition". They additionally examined the responses of the South Korea's major religions to the epidemic thus far, observing that, while Buddhist and Catholic authorities were quick to implement

²² <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/head-of-the-jogye-order-of-korean-buddhism-blames-human-greed-avarice-for-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed on 18 January 2021).

²³ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200530002100325> (accessed on 16 February 2021).

²⁴ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200901009300315> (accessed on 1 February 2021).

the government's social distancing and virus protection guidelines, pausing in-person services during the first and second, a significant number of Protestant churches, including those of the United Christian Churches of Korea (K. 한국교회총연합), protested against implementing the government's social distancing measures and closures, with some openly defying government attempts at regulation. Regarding the epidemic's long-term impact on Korean Buddhism, the conference report anticipates that "economic difficulties will intensify" causing "severe" and potentially long-lasting financial difficulties for individual temples. Furthermore, social-distancing measures would accelerate the increasing secularization of Korean society, especially among the youth, warning that the JO should anticipate a "sharp decline in membership" alongside more a general shift towards more individualistic religious practice within Korean society at large. Among numerous calls for action during and after the epidemic, the report recommends that the "Buddhist World" promote "life-centered-values", "comfort those suffering", "focus on strengthening social values and protecting the socially underprivileged", and provided support and counseling for those experiencing mental and emotional distress ([Neo Mahayana Network 2020a](#)).

The conference report concludes that, despite recent improvements in Buddhism's public image, economic losses to the order's temples are inevitable and will negatively impact their functioning as the majority of temple's social and religious activities will remain disrupted for the length of the pandemic. With temple services now limited primarily to resident monastics at the exclusion of their lay supporters, lay Buddhists will likely refocus on individual, private religious practices instead of group activities. The report, therefore recommends the creation of new, virtual Buddhist events to support economically disadvantaged temples while also developing and expanding programs to support lay Buddhists practicing in private ([Neo Mahayana Network 2020a](#), [2020b](#)).

5.2. *Conferences Hosted by Dongguk University's Institute for the Study of the Jogye Order of Korea Buddhism*

In October and again in December 2020 the Dongguk University's Institute for the Study of the Jogye Order of Korea Buddhism (K. 동국대학교불교학술원 중학연구소, hereafter "the Institute") hosted two separate but related academic conferences (hereafter "the conferences"), to specifically discuss Korean Buddhism's response to the epidemic, its impact on Korean Buddhism, and the changes Buddhism faces in a post-epidemic society. These discussions centered around three general topics, namely Buddhism's role in Korean society, temple management, and Buddhist education.

5.2.1. *Buddhism's Role and Responsibilities in Korean Society*

A subject of repeated discussion at the conferences was Korean Buddhism's role and responsibilities within Korean society. Historically, under the practice of "nation-protecting Buddhism" Korean Buddhism has responded to epidemics and other national tragedies. During the Three-Kingdoms, Unified Silla, and Goryeo Dynasty Periods, Buddhist authorities lead rituals such as the "Assembly of the Eight Vows" (K. *Palkwanhoe*) and "100 Seat Assembly" (K. *Baekkojwa ganghoe*) to bring blessings and spiritual protection to the nation, particularly in times of war or national suffering. Furthermore, there are many documented instances during the Goryeo Dynasty Buddhist temples providing practical aid during epidemics and times of famine, becoming centers for distributing food or housing the sick ([Im 2016](#)). Even during Buddhism's suppression under the Joseon Dynasty's, Korean Buddhist monks organized defensive "righteous armies" to protect the peasantry during the Imjin Invasions led by Japanese Warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi in the 1590s. These soldier-monks (K. 승군, 僧軍) played a decisive role in repelling the Japanese forces, continuing Korean Buddhism's tradition of protecting the nation from calamities ([Encyclopedia of Korean Culture 2020](#)).

By issuing a special prayer for overcoming the epidemic, supporting the government in its efforts to control the spread of the virus, and engaging in volunteer and relief activities, the JO is continuing Buddhism's historical practice of working to protect the nation ([J. Lee 2020](#), pp. 61–62). Reflecting on this tradition of patriotism and providing both

spiritual and practical aid during national crises, Venerable Inkyung (Hyung-rok Kim), a professor at Dongbang Culture University, gave a presentation on the social role of Korean Buddhism's during the Covid-19 epidemic. Inkyung criticized the Protestant churches that had conducted large-scale religious events in defiance of the government's guidelines, leading to the re-proliferation of virus in a second wave in late summer, pointing out that, not only did such churches have religious and financial motivations for defying the guidelines, but also political reasons as they were vocally aligned with a political coalition of right-wing opposition parties. Criticizing such inappropriate social behavior for putting Korean society at risk, Inkyung discussed how Buddhism should continue to engage in constructive social participation during and after the epidemic. Due to the proliferation of social alienation and financial pressure among the general populace in the course of the epidemic, Inkyung encouraged Buddhism to adopt new social roles that actively promote in-home meditation and facilitate physical healing ([Institute Report 2020a](#), pp. 53–72; [Inkyung 2020](#), pp. 26–44). As anxiety and depression are on the rise as the epidemic continues, so too is the demand for products and services offering mental healing. Korean Buddhism is uniquely positioned to contribute to this rise in so-called "healing culture" in contemporary Korean society, as *Seon* (J. Zen) Buddhism asks practitioners to pause their social relationships and focus on meditation for extended periods of time. While social-distancing is not necessary for successful *Seon* practice, Buddhist meditation provides an effective remedy to the anxiety and depression brought by social isolation and financial hardship during lengthy periods of quarantine and social-distancing. However, popularizing *Seon* meditation during and after the pandemic would require Buddhist meditation instructors to deviate from traditional method and devise new pedagogies more suited to socially-distanced practice and online instruction. In doing so, Buddhism would have the potential to help alleviate widespread mental and emotional suffering during the epidemic.

5.2.2. Buddhist Temple Management

In fact, Buddhism is in the most difficult situation among the three major religions in Korea. Most of religious gatherings, and Lotus Lantern Festival were canceled and cultural heritage fees were reduced. The admission fee for cultural assets operated by the Jogye Order was reduced by 30%, and the profit from religious events was reduced by more than half ([Huh 2020](#)).

Since in-person religious gatherings now risk the wide-spread transmission of the virus, the topics of temple management and religious services were frequently raised during the conferences. While the JO's swift implementation of the government's social distancing guidelines and voluntarily closures of its temples during both the first and second surges have bolstered the order's public image, the epidemic has left most of Korea's Buddhist temples suffering from severe financial difficulties. With the cancellation of holiday celebrations along with regular services, JO temples have seen their donations fall by as much as 90%. While the order has no plans to discontinue its compliance with the government's social-distancing guidelines, fiscal collapse remains a serious threat for many temples should the pandemic continue for much longer.

Kiryong Cho, a temple management specialist, suggested several innovative solutions to these problems currently facing the order's temples ([Institute Report 2020b](#), pp. 17–31). First, Cho proposed that Korean Buddhist temples cultivate their on-line presence and more actively engage in religious cyber-culture via new technologies. While the need for these adaptations was present prior to the epidemic, social-distancing measures have made them all the more urgent. However, few practical measures and methods have thus far been introduced by JO temples, despite the widespread use of social media for communication by Korean "netizens", particularly among the nation's increasingly-agnostic younger generations. In order to survive in post-pandemic society, the Korean Buddhist community must develop online content of interest to the public that, not only addresses the fears and anxieties brought on by the epidemic itself, but also the wider problems of modern

life in general. Thus, the JO should pivot from its traditional focus on in-person religious services at temples and introduce new online events, webcast dharma talks, and cyber-Buddhist universities incorporating new technologies and social media platforms. Already, there have been several successful initiatives in Buddhist media via Youtube established before the pandemic, including channels created by JO *biguni* Ven. Muyeon²⁵ and Dongguk University Professor Soonil Hwang²⁶ along with the Jogyesa Youth Association (K. 조계사청년회)²⁷ and the Korea Buddhist University Federation (K. 한국대학불교연합회).²⁸ (Sin 2020).

Secondly, as the biggest cause of financial difficulties for temples during the pandemic was the loss of in-person financial donations, Cho proposed that alms-giving (K. 보시, Ch. 布施) should be organized online. Even when the current pandemic passes, another could arise at any time, so the JO should establish systems allowing lay Buddhists to make financial contributions without having to visit Buddhist temples in person.²⁹ Furthermore, Cho proposes that temples could additionally follow the model of Korean Protestant churches by establishing a system of membership and charging annual dues, which would not only stabilize temple finances but also promote the sense of belonging and ownership for a temples' lay supporters. As the primary reason why many Korean Protestant Churches defied the government restrictions was the loss of donations, establishing annual membership dues and enabling online alms-giving could free temples from financial burdens, allowing them to prioritize public interests over their own financial needs.

5.2.3. Buddhist Religious Education

As covered in a previous article, even prior to the country's coronavirus outbreak, the JO was struggling to provide religious education programs that adequately met the intellectual and emotional needs of the order's lay supporters. While the educational levels of the JO laity have steadily increased over recent decades, the order's monastic hierarchy has continued emphasizing traditional teaching methods and texts which define lay Buddhists as little more than financial supporters and protectors of the order's monastics (For further discussion, see Park and Kim 2019). However, following government-mandated social-distancing measures and voluntary temple closures during the pandemic, this in-person lay education system has become unsustainable. Thus, reinventing its system of lay education has become a priority for JO authorities and this issue was addressed several times during the conferences. As the demand for virtual education has increased among Buddhist lay practitioners during the pandemic, the order needs to more effectively utilize social media platforms, such as YouTube, in its lay education, in addition to already-established print and broadcast media outlets. However, in doing so it also faces practical difficulties as a significant portion of the order's monastics and laity are elderly and reluctant to adopt new technologies.

At the conference Prof. Eung-cheol Kim proposed a number of strategies for promoting Buddhist missionary work during the epidemic. In Kim's assessment the order should first identify human resources with both its monastic and lay communities, then provide systematic education to develop their missionary capabilities and nurture their talents. Secondly, the JO needs to highlight its currently positive public image which it can leverage into effective Buddhist promotional campaigns. Thirdly, the order should build a foundation for its propagation efforts utilizing cutting-edge information technology and social media platforms, which can then easily distribute content to the public and used for missionary work. Fourthly, as global interest in meditation has increased significantly during the pandemic, the JO should establish an online or virtual meditation education

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCm3Uz2ft8DVre7C8Zb1iE6g> (accessed on 8 February 2021).

²⁶ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjtKGbgY5BN_D0Bu4mVqEdw (accessed on 11 February 2021).

²⁷ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCM0ZXSr_aACwvMUMxa0uAuQ/featured (accessed on 10 February 2021).

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/kbuf108/featured> (accessed on 18 February 2021).

²⁹ Indeed, Jogyesa, the most representative temple of Jogye Order, recently introduced an unmanned system to receive donations in a non-face-to-face manner. For more details on this, see (Yun 2021).

system to meet this need. Finally, Buddhist social welfare facilities, volunteer organizations, and civic institutions should be actively supported through the course of the epidemic to maintain a secure social support base. The JO operates various facilities through its Social Welfare Foundation, which could be organically linked to encourage the participation of the general public ([Institute Report 2020b](#), pp. 33–45).

In the author's opinion, Professors Kim's proposals are constructive, but remain too theoretical. Nor would the end of the pandemic significantly alter the need for updating Buddhist missionary methodologies to utilize various techniques and media platforms while responding to recent social changes. In the author's opinion, the JO's previously established test and doctrine-based lay education program will have little place in South Korea's post-epidemic society. Instead, a living education system is needed to address the various problems faced in everyday life based on Buddhist perspectives and principles, for example, the introduction of professional lay managers to the temples, and involving the laity in the creation and production of their own textbooks and curriculum, and treating the laity as equal partners (for further discussion, see [Park and Kim 2019](#)).

6. Conclusions

While the Covid-19 pandemic has altered almost every aspect of life in South Korea over the last year, its impact on South Korea's religious landscape has been enormous. All three of the country's major religions have suffered significant losses in both income and membership, accelerating institutional religion's already-decreasing influence within Korean society. However, thus far, Korea's Catholic Church shows the most potential for eventual recovery due to its centralized organization, history of resilience, and positive image among the general population. Korean Protestantism, in contrast, has sustained potentially irrevocable losses. Owing to the diverse number of denominations and independent churches, Protestantism's overall response to the pandemic has been inconsistent, with some churches protesting or even defying government mandates for fear of losing donations. In addition, continued opposition to government guidelines among a small, but vocal, minority, coupled with media attention surrounding repeated outbreaks originating in its churches, have done considerable damage to Protestantism's public image. Thus, while the religion will undoubtedly maintain a considerable amount of social and political influence for some time, many Protestant churches, particularly smaller, independent ones, could be forced to close while Protestantism's numbers will continue to decline, even after the pandemic.

Korean Buddhism has likewise suffered considerable financial losses thus far from the pandemic, causing considerable stress on individual temples and potentially leading to the permanent temple closures. However, as with the Catholic Church, the Jogye Order's centralized organization lends it a higher degree of resiliency along with the ability to provide added support for the order's temples. Furthermore, unlike Korean Protestantism, public perceptions of Korean Buddhism have improved over the course of the epidemic owing to the JO's swift and practical responses along with the perceived mental and emotional benefits of Buddhist practice ([Noh 2020](#)). While it is inevitable the JO temples will experience long-term hardships due to the Covid epidemic, the order is also in a unique position to pivot from its traditional roles in Korean society to meet the mental and emotional needs of those currently experiencing emotional distress and suffering during the pandemic, thus fulfilling its historical "nation-protecting" responsibility. As discussed in the emergency conference held on March 31 as well as those hosted by Dongguk University in October and December, in order to survive the pandemic JO temples must actively cultivate a larger on-line presence, provide meaningful interactions with lay Buddhists through a variety of social media platforms, create virtual religious events, and enable the gifting of donations online or via annual membership dues. Furthermore, the JO must reevaluate its current text and doctrine-based lay education system taught through in-person instruction, and instead provide virtual learning options that address the problems facing lay practitioners during the pandemic and in daily life in general. Finally,

the JO should leverage its positive public image to launch and distribute virtual meditation classes freely around the globe for those in quarantine or enduring social isolation during the course of the pandemic. By adopting such changes, the JO would not only maintain Buddhism's social relevance thus ensuring its long-term survival, and, as advocated by Prof. Eung-cheol Kim, play a crucial role in promoting mental stability and “inspiring positive emotions” among those enduring the pandemic (Noh 2020). In doing so, the JO would be adapting the timeless teachings of the Buddha to the meet the needs and challenges of 21st century life.

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