Public Theology and the Korean War:

Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited through Ham Seok-heon

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Introduction

From Seoul, I read the swashbuckling threats hurled across the Pacific. "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea," President Trump declared before the United Nations in 2017.[1] "Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime." Three days later, Chairman Kim Jong-un riposted in style: "I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire."[2] *The Wall Street Journal* published op-eds by the national security advisor John Bolton advocating for an American first strike against North Korea, while *The New York Times* published an op-ed by South Korean novelist Han Kang: "We are afraid of a gradually escalating war of words becoming war in reality."[3] Largely absent in the public discourse was Christian rhetoric, although about a third of Koreans and two-thirds of Americans identify as Christians and they have been formidable political forces in both nations on both sides of the aisle.[4] To explore a proper space for a public Christian theology of peace and reconciliation across the U.S. and the two Koreas, this thesis juxtaposes two towering theologians of the 20th century on the fulcrum of the Korean War.

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[1] Peter Baker and Rick Gladstone, "With Combative Style and Epithets, Trump Takes America First to the U.N." *The New York Times*, September 19 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/world/trump-un-north-korea-iran.html
[2] "'Mentally Deranged.' Read Kim Jong Un's Entire Response to Donald Trump," *Time Magazine,* September 22 2017 https://time.com/4953210/north-korea-kim-jong-un-speech-donald-trump/
[3] Han Kang, "While the U.S. Talks of War, South Korea Shudders," *The New York Times*, October 7 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/07/opinion/sunday/south-korea-trump-war.html
John Bolton, "The Military Options for North Korea," *The Wall Street Journal,* Aug 2, 2017 https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-military-options-for-north-korea-1501718189
John Bolton, "The Legal Case for Striking North Korea First," *The Wall Street Journal,* Feb 28, 2018 https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-legal-case-for-striking-north-korea-first-1519862374
[4] Phillip Connor, 6 facts about South Korea's growing Christian population, *Pew Research Center,* August 12, 2014 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/
https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/

Two years before the first hot war of the Cold War erupted in Korea, Reinhold Niebuhr graced a 1948 cover of TIME Magazine. Behind the momentous portrait of the pensive theologian was a diminutive white cross in a desolate swirling landscape of army green and black, and etched below his name was the caption: "men's story is not a success story." Niebuhr was at the zenith of his political influence then, as his friends and admirers included the State Department's architects of the postwar world order— Dean Acheson, J. F. Dulles and George Kennan who called Niebuhr "the father of us all."[5] Niebuhr's ideas have weathered the test of time, through what *The Atlantic* called "promiscuous invocations"[6] by politicians ranging from Jimmy Carter, Madeline Albright, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and James Comey to Barack Obama who lauded Niebuhr as one of his "favorite philosophers." Thinkers ranging from Felix Frankfurter, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and David Brooks to Cornel West have paid tributes to Niebuhr, who died in 1971.[7]

During his three decades at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Niebuhr was a prolific writer and preacher who weighed in on the major issues of his day. In 1950, he argued passionately for the American intervention to escalate the civil war in Korea. Through the numerous articles he penned in the early 1950s and *The Irony of American History* (1952), I will examine conceptions of war and history that undergirded his political theology. While Niebuhr's early pacifism, advocacy for the American involvement in World War II, and his denunciation of

[5] Alden Whitman, "Reinhold Niebuhr Is Dead; Protestant Theologian, 78," *The New York Times*, June 2 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/02/archives/reinhold-niebuhr-is-dead-protestant-theologian-78-reinhold-niebuhr.html
[6] Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *The Atlantic*, November 2007 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/a-man-for-all-reasons/306337/
[7] David Brooks, Obama, Gospel and Verse David Brooks, *The New York Times,* April 26, 2007 https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html

the Vietnam War have been widely documented, his relationship to the Korean War has received scant attention. In a similar vein, while his views on Blacks and Jews have been studied in depth, his views on Asians and especially Koreans have been seldom studied. This thesis contributes to these two gaps in Niebuhr scholarship.

Born in the northern part of the unified Korean kingdom of Joseon nine years after Niebuhr, Ham Seok-heon migrated southward after the Soviet occupation of northern Korea in 1945 and became a leading activist for peace and democracy. He was raised a Presbyterian, turned to Uchimura Kanzō's non-church Christian movement while studying in Japan, and eventually became a Quaker. Between his birth in 1901 and death in 1989, which spanned 35 years of Japanese colonization, 3 years of the Korean War, and three decades of dictatorship, he never enjoyed access to the corridors of power and was frequently in prison.

Ham Seok-heon nevertheless remained a tireless writer and preacher, and collaborated with eminent intellectuals and activists of his age. His friends and admirers included Kim Young-sam and Nobel Peace Laureate Kim Dae-jung, both of whom became presidents of South Korea after Ham's death, as well as *minjung* theologian Ahn Byung-mu, Buddhist monk Bopjong, publisher Chang Chun-ha, and poet Ko Un. Catholic President Kim Dae-jung heralded Ham as the "Gandhi of Korea," an exemplary Christian of his age, and Ham was also often compared to John the Baptist for his sustained critiques of dictatorships.[8] The U.S. State

[8] Kim Dae-jung, *Remembering Teacher Ham Seok-heon*, (다시 그리워지는 함석헌 선생님) (Seoul: Hangil 2001) 38-40

Department invited Ham for a tour of America in 1962, and the American Friends Service Committee nominated him twice for the Nobel Peace Prize.[9]

The foundational text to analyze Ham's ideas of the Korean War and history will be *Korean History Seen through a Will* (1950) published four months before the Korean War. This book anthologized his essays that he originally serialized as *Korean History Seen through a Biblical Perspective* in the 1930s, and he revised it in 1963 with an additional chapter on the Korean War. Ham also published in the 1950s essays in magazines including *Seongseo Yeongu* (*Bible Research*) and Chang Chun-ha's *Sasanggye* (*The World of Ideas*), which was the flagship dissident publication. As few of Ham's works have been translated into English and most of the Ham scholarship can be read only in Korean, this thesis contributes to the introduction of Ham's ideas to American theology.

The first chapter of this thesis will compare how Niebuhr and Ham responded journalistically to the Korean War during and after the war years. The second chapter will contrast their conceptions of national histories in their two major books. While the first chapter will flow chronologically, the second chapter will be organized thematically around irony, suffering, national history, imperialism, and war. The conclusion will highlight their divergence to illustrate how theology from the margins can inform and rectify theology at the heart of empire, and reflect on another contemporary Christian who strived for peace in Korea.

The impetus for this thesis stems from Niebuhr's shortcomings on racial and ideological

[9] Cho Han-seon, *Ham Seok-heon, A Beautiful Thinker who Loved Peace,* (평화를 사랑한 아름다운 사상가) Seoul: Jageun Ssial, 2007) 233, 236

fronts that theologian James Cone and historian Paul Merkley have already raised— his condescension towards people of color and his complacency in American righteousness. Cone concluded that Niebuhr was "no prophet on race" since he saw racial injustice but failed to combat it.[10] Merkley assessed that Niebuhr was "perilously close to becoming a Cold War ideologue" in his championing of American exceptionalism.[11] Ham provides a corrective to Niebuhr on both accounts. Though naive about foreign affairs, Ham was attuned to the suffering on the ground and vividly deployed biblical symbols to heal his nation. Niebuhr was astute about the necessity of intervention in World War II, but he could not empathize with the war-torn wastelands nor could he adapt adroitly to the complexities of a new world order.

In his book *The Vietnam War and the Theologies of Memory* (2010), Jonathan Tran laments the disappearance of theological speech in public discourse about war and peace. He writes: "Not since Reinhold Niebuhr has there been any substantive public theology in the course of U.S. foreign policy."[12] The danger Tran identifies is that as Christian theology is sidelined under the myth of the separation of church and state, policymakers colonize religious rhetoric to wage war with Christian blessing. The neoconservative appropriation of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) to legitimate Washington's military adventures in the Middle East illustrates the hazards of history without theology. In the wake of the 2020 election and the invocation of God and St. Augustine in President Biden's inauguration speech, the recent Niebuhrian renaissance offers a possibility that theology can return to the public arena to

[10] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* (New York: Orbis Books 2011) 61
[11] Paul Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975) 193
[12] Jonathan Tran, *The Vietnam War and the Theologies of Memory,* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell 2010) 5

inspire, unite, and shed light on the underbelly of American empire. Guided by Niebuhr's call for humility in power, this thesis attempts to bridge the gulf between the hegemonic theology propelling the empire and the subaltern theology stitching the fissure at the interstice of empires.

As America's global hegemony and Christians' American hegemony wane, a more dispassionate calculus of the virtues and vices of the American Century and the Christian legacy in foreign policy will become feasible. Just as the lynching tree became a potent symbol of Christ's death in America, the horizontal bullets and vertical bombs that America unleashed in Asia may haunt us as crosses from afar. This project aims to contribute to the reckoning of American violence in Asia, in hopes that the ghosts of the war-dead can rest in peace with the solace that we will do our utmost to preempt unjust wars. From the paradoxical position of both a beneficiary and a victim of American firepower, Ham can help enrich Niebuhrian ethics for a more judicious exercise of our power.

Chapter I: The Korean War

During the Korean War, Niebuhr was one of the world's most renowned theologian whereas Ham was an obscure refugee. To place the two thinkers in conversation, the first chapter consists of four sections. The first section sketches a brief history of Korean-American relations and the Korean War to provide historical and ethical contexts. Niebuhr's activities and writings during the Korean War will be examined, with a focus on the biweekly journal *Christianity and Crisis* that Niebuhr founded in 1941 and chaired until 1966.[13] The transition to Ham will be facilitated by Cone and Merkley's critiques of Niebuhr, as Ham offers viable responses to their criticisms. The third section outlines a trajectory of the life and writing of Ham around the Korean War. The last section concludes this chapter and introduces the next.

Although more than 300,000 U.S. soldiers served in it, the Korean War is often glossed as the "Forgotten War" in the U.S. Even for those who directed it from Washington, it was a transitional stalemate between the triumph of World War II and the debacle of the Vietnam War.[14] For Koreans, however, the war was a fratricidal catastrophe that consumed over two million lives and decimated the Peninsula.[15] The U.S. carpet-bombed and dropped "oceans of napalm" on North Korea without concern for civilian casualties, which resulted in urban destruction greater than in Germany and Japan during World War II.[16]

[13] The publication reached a circulation of about 17,000 by 1966.
Merkley 151
[14] Liam Stack, "Korean War, a 'Forgotten' Conflict That Shaped the Modern World," *The New York Times*, Jan. 1 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/world/asia/korean-war-history.html
[15] Allan R. Millett, "The Korean War," *Britannica* https://www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War
[16] Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History,* (New York: Modern Library, 2011) 149, 152, 159

While often heralded as the defender of freedom and democracy in Korea, America had contributed to the instability which exploded in a war five years after the Korean independence. In the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905, Washington condoned the Japanese annexation of Korea in exchange for Tokyo's recognition of the American annexation of the Philippines. President Theodore Roosevelt admired the "virility" of the Japanese, whom he believed would shepherd Korea into modernity.[17] Without consulting any Koreans in 1945, young American officer Dean Rusk successfully proposed to Moscow the division of Korea along the 38th parallel.[18] The U.S. then established a U.S. Army government in Seoul that reappointed Koreans who had collaborated with Japan and brooked no dissent during its three-year rule.[19]

Whereas the aggressor was divided in Europe, the victim was divided in Asia. After the U.S. left South Korea out of its proclaimed defense perimeter in early 1950, Kim Il-sung visited Moscow and Beijing for their imprimatur to ignite a war. Within two weeks of the North Korean invasion, the U.S. military intervened to rescue South Korea. After recapturing Seoul, the U.S. forces marched towards Pyongyang, which catalyzed a Chinese dispatch of over a million troops including Mao Zedong's oldest son who died in Korea.[20] The war persisted for three years, to end where it began.

Political theorist Michael Walzer labels the Korean War a "miscarried war," since Washington's initial aim of a "police action" to restore the antebellum border escalated to

[17] Cumings xvi
[18] Cumings 104
[19] Cumings 104
[20] Cumings 22

reunification by invasion against the enemy leader who was closer to Bismarck than Hitler.[21] Historian Bruce Cumings concludes: "The true tragedy was not the war itself, for a civil conflict purely among Koreans might have resolved the extraordinary tensions generated by colonialism, national division, and foreign intervention. The tragedy was that the war solved nothing."[22]

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At the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, the secretary general of the South Korean National Council of Churches sought help from the World Council of Churches (WCC). The director of the WCC's Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) sent a letter to the secretary general of the U.N. on June 26, stating that "the CCIA, in seeking world peace and justice, emphasizes the duty of Christians to support negotiation rather than primary reliance upon arms as an instrument of policy."[23] Within a week, however, the CCIA reversed its position at its executive committee meeting in Toronto under the influence of Niebuhr, who insisted on the necessity of a "police measure" in Korea.[24] Although Niebuhr did not advocate for an assault on Pyongyang beyond reclaiming Seoul, he published an article by the Yale Divinity School Dean Liston Pope in the July 1950 issue of *Christianity and Crisis* that clamored for an invasion of North Korea to secure South Korea.[25]

[21] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*. (New York: Basic Books 1977) 122
[22] Cumings 35
[23] Pauline Kollontai and Sebastian Kim, *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity*, (Farnham: Ashgate 2013) 116
[24] Kollontai and Kim 116
[25] Liston Pope, *Christianity and Crisis* July 24, 1950 "The Shift in American Policy" http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990001291200203941/catalog

A week after its executive committee meeting, the central committee of the WCC appointed Niebuhr and German theologian Martin Niemöller to revise the statement published as *The Korean Situation and the World Order*.[26] This statement declared: "We therefore commend the U.N., an instrument of world order, for its prompt decision to meet this aggression and for authorizing a police measure which every member nation should support."[27] Although the statement lamented "the enforced division of a people in Korea" as "a bitter result of the divided world," it did not discuss American and Soviet roles in the division. The statement censured "irresponsible fatalism," and brimmed with optimism that "the Korean situation" would not escalate into a "general war." It instead framed the conflict as "judgments and warnings of God" which ought to prompt Christians to "redeem the time,"[28] thereby illustrating the dangers of deploying theology to legitimate political and military stances. Writing in an August 1950 issue of *Christianity and Crisis* below the WCC statement, Niebuhr praised the realism of the statement while rejecting the proposal by American pacifists that Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru broker a peace treaty in Korea. Niebuhr concluded: "If we strive for political peace too desperately, we deliver the world into the hands of those who have no scruples."[29]

Niebuhr was backed in his hawkish stance by diplomat J. F. Dulles, a son of a minister and a grandson of a missionary, who visited Toronto after his tour of Korea and delivered speeches to steer the council towards war.[30] The WCC statement was met with resistance from

[26] Kollontai and Kim 116
[27] A statement by the WCC, *Christianity and Crisis*, Aug 7 1950, 105
[28] A statement by the WCC, *Christianity and Crisis*, Aug 7 1950, 105
[29] Ibid. 108
[30] Kollontai and Kim 120

some delegates, however, and Chinese theologian T. C. Chao resigned from his post as one of the WCC's inaugural presidents with a jab that the statement "sounds too much like the voice of Wall Street."[31] Chao bristled at Niebuhr's brashness towards war, as Niebuhr celebrated prematurely in an October 1950 issue of *Christianity and Crisis*: "The bitter fighting in Korea is nearing its end with a complete victory for the U.N. forces. The struggle, which the timid regarded as almost certain to lead to a general war, has on the contrary increased the possibility of avoiding a general war."[32] Three days later, Chinese troops flooded into North Korea to deny America a triumph. Niebuhr also demonstrated his patronizing attitude towards Koreans in this article, as he deemed Koreans incapable of independent democratic government and hence in need of a U.N. trusteeship.

Although Niebuhr was an adamant supporter of American military interventions, he also provided room for dissenting voices in *Christianity and Crisis*. Writing in a November 1950 issue, Czech theologian Josef Hromádka condemned "the American aggression" in North Korea for "all the raids and destroying of the lives of civilian population," as well as "the stubbornness with which the Security Council under the guidance of the representatives of the U.S.A. opposes all efforts for peaceful solution of the Korean crisis."[33] Similarly in the arts, Pablo Picasso decried the atrocities of American G.I.s and foregrounded the suffering of Korean women and children in his 1951 painting *Massacre in Korea*. Blinded by his focus on repelling

[31] Kollontai and Kim 117
[32] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis* October 16, 1950, 130
[33] J. L Hromadka, *Christianity and Crisis*. November 1950, 160

communism, however, Niebuhr was deaf to the cries of Koreans and never wrote about civilian casualties or the general destruction in Korea.

By the Christmas issue of *Christianity and Crisis* in 1950, Niebuhr had sobered up about the prospects for an American victory in Korea. He wrote in the editorial notes: "The military disaster in Korea faces our nation and the U.N. with the gravest peril of modern history."[34] As the war deepened in Korea, Niebuhr also worried that a protracted conflict there would leave Europe vulnerable to communism. He deplored the lack of moral authority in the Truman administration to take responsibility for the American defeat, as well as the moral embarrassment of combatting Asian rather than Soviet communism. He wrote:

> "This is a time when the churches should speak, to warn against the folly which comes from pride, to insist that, whatever we do, must be done in loyal comradeship with the inchoate world community of the U.N. and to remind the nation that, though military might is necessary in a sinful world, it is intolerable to plan strategy in terms of military might alone."[35]

After riding roughshod over dissenting voices half a year ago, Niebuhr seemed repentant.

In the tenth anniversary issue of *Christianity and Crisis* in 1951, Niebuhr returned to his prophetic critique of American complacency. He attributed Washington's limited success in wooing allies in Asia to "the idolatrous self-worship" of the American media, which created "a ridiculous exaltation of the 'American way of life' as a kind of final norm of human existence."[36] He denounced containing communism through the military as counterproductive in Asia, as

[34] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis* December 25, 1950, p. 170
[35] Ibid p. 170
[36] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis,* February 1951, p. 3

such force only sharpened Asians' "fears, prejudices and resentments" against Americans.[37] He nevertheless also retained his paternalism, as he held that Asians lacked the "spiritual and the socio-economic presuppositions" for democratic freedom.[38] For Niebuhr, communism was the worst idolatry of his age more formidable than Nazism. Mapping isolationism and interventionism to the Christian concepts of sloth and pride, he urged charting a middle course with the hubris of power tempered by recourse to divine judgment.[39]

When Republican Dwight Eisenhower won the presidential election by landslide the following year, lifelong Democrat Niebuhr wrote in *Christianity and Crisis*: "The pains and frustrations of [the Korean] war were a part of the price which America was forced to pay for its position of world leadership."[40] Although Niebuhr acknowledged that the Korean War made America unpopular and cost Democrats the presidency, he still regarded the war as just. In *The Irony of American History*, he ascribed to American soldiers in Korea what Lincoln called "the solemn joy that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."[41] Niebuhr did not write about the Korean War again in *Christianity and Crisis* after 1952 despite the armistice in 1953, and Korea did not appear more in *The Irony of American History*.

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In his book *America, Russia, and the Cold War* (2006), historian Walter LaFeber notes that Niebuhr's foreign policy underwent a "change of tone" between 1951 and 1952.[42] No longer was

[37] Niebuhr 3
[38] Niebuhr 2
[39] Niebuhr 3
[40] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis,* 153
[41] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis,* 61
[42] Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-2006,* (McGraw-Hill Publisher 2006) 52, 140

Niebuhr gung-ho about guarding the far-flung battle lines. Instead, he cautioned against getting embroiled in wars of attrition across the world and especially in Asia. Building on LaFeber's work, Merkley paints Niebuhr as a doctrinaire who hewed to American exceptionalism even after the Korean War. Merkley remarks that unlike Niebuhr, Niebuhr's friend Hans Morgenthau foresaw correctly that the U.S.S.R. would have limited success in attracting allies due to its abrasive atheism and heavy-handed governance.[43] Niebuhr nevertheless could not imagine the denouement of the bipolar world, and he rallied for Americans to replace the French colonialists in South Vietnam in the mid-1950s. Only in the mid-1960s would Niebuhr grow disillusioned with the American imbroglio in Vietnam.[44]

One of the most eloquent critics of Niebuhr was James H. Cone, who dedicated a chapter to Niebuhr in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011). Cone argued that because Niebuhr identified more with white moderates than Black victims, he embraced gradualism and prioritized class solidarity over racial justice.[45] While Niebuhr often commented on race in America, Africa, and Asia, race was never his central theological or political concern. Cone concluded: "Niebuhr had 'eyes to see' black suffering, but I believe he lacked the 'heart to feel' it as his own."[46] Niebuhr also never mentioned Black intellectuals in his writings, and one of his only public dialogues with a Black thinker Cone lifted up was with writer James Baldwin.[47] Although Niebuhr wrote favorably about Jews and relished a lifelong friendship with Rabbi

[43] Merkley 192
[44] Merkley 189
[45] Cone 39
[46] Cone 41
[47] Cone 42

Heschel, Niebuhr often buttressed colonialism in his writing on people of color.[48] Niebuhr's depictions of Koreans was closer to his depictions of Blacks than of Jews, as he did not name any Koreans in his writing and Koreans seemed to him disposable pawns of the Cold War.

Niebuhr's reluctance to recalibrate his views on communism and to see the humanity of Koreans are troubling, as his theological construction of communist evil appears to have numbed his empathy and blunted his ability to evolve with the vicissitudes of geopolitics. Niebuhr rose to prominence as a champion of military intervention against the Nazis, and it was difficult for him to envision a morally ambiguous and delicately balanced bipolar world in which the U.S. held neither the prerogative nor the power to resolve global crises. Niebuhr was sanguine about the prospects of an American victory in Korea. If he were humbled by the stalemate, he did not feel compunction sufficient to change his mind on Vietnam. Having abandoned love as a viable political aim in his earlier works, Niebuhr also jettisoned justice in the heat of the Korean War. This war chastised Niebuhr's view of America, but he remained distant from his Korean allies and enemies.

In addition to the absence of Asian voices, Niebuhr also failed to mention any presence of Christians in Korea. *Christianity and Crisis* had a section titled "The World Church: News and Notes," which occasionally published news about Korea. In its June 1953 issue a month before the armistice, this section ran an article titled "Church World Service Aids Korea's Needy" syndicated by the National Council of Churches (NCC) in New York. The article quoted Dr. Arnold Vaught, head of the NCC's Asian relief programs: "The world's most acutely distressed

[48] Cone 52

area today is Korea," he said, mentioning "the tragic status of the wives and children of more than 400 Korean Christian pastors killed or kidnapped by the communists since the war began."[49] Their deaths, however did not surface in Niebuhr's columns.

During the 1950s, the number of Christians in Korea snowballed to more than a million, and the number of churches in Seoul multiplied tenfold from 40 in 1941 to 400 by 1958.[50] When liberation befell Korea "like a thief" in Ham's words, Christians north of the dividing 38th parallel numbered about 200,000 and northern Korea was the epicenter of Korean Christianity.[51] Presbyterians alone had 2,000 churches including the churches that nurtured Ham and Kim Il-sung, and Pyongyang was called the "Jerusalem of the East" with more than a hundred foreign missionaries including the parents of Billy Graham's wife Ruth.[52] The Pyongyang Revival of 1907 spawned revivals across Korea, and Christian institutions in Pyongyang included the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the Union Christian Hospital, and Soongsil College.[53] Niebuhr could have consulted former missionaries in Korea, including Samuel H. Moffett who grew up in Pyongyang and received in 1945 a doctorate in religion from Yale where Niebuhr's brother H. Richard taught theology and ethics.[54] Perhaps because Reinhold's heart lay across the Atlantic rather than the Pacific, however, it was hardened to Asia.

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[49] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Crisis,* June 1953, 88
[50] Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 188-9
[51] Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-50,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) 117-9
[52] Don Clark, *Living Dangerously in Korea*, (Norwalk, CT: Eastbridge, 2003) 121-3
[53] Clark 121-3
[54] Walter F. Naedele, "Samuel H. Moffett, 98, missionary and seminary professor," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* Feb 17 2015 https://www.inquirer.com/philly/obituaries/20150217_Samuel_H__Moffett__98__missionary_and_seminary_professor.html

Between the emancipation from Japan in 1945 and the establishment of the separate Korean governments in 1948, some 800,000 Koreans north of the 38th parallel fled south while 25,000 Koreans from the south migrated north.[55] Ham was among the refugees, as Christians and dissidents were increasingly persecuted by the Soviets and the fledgling North Korean regime. Ham left his aging mother with his two oldest children, and escaped to Seoul with his wife and younger children in 1947.[56] He would never see again his family in his hometown.

In November 1945, several hundred middle school pupils gathered in front of the government complex in Sinuiju, the capital of Korea's northwestern province where Ham was employed in the Ministry of Education.[57] While the ostensible cause of the protest was the reinstatement of the middle school principal removed by a communist-dominated people's committee, the underlying tensions stemmed from the Soviet meddling in Korean affairs. Against this non-violent student protest, Korean security forces and the Soviet army opened fire to massacre over twenty students and injure several hundred.[58] Ham recalled this tragedy:

> "When we approached the students, three were knocked down. They were wearing black school uniforms and hats. I embraced one and lifted him up. But he was dead! The yard was filled with Soviet soldiers, and one began to give a speech that seemed to suggest that I instigated the protest. Then the Soviet soldiers turned towards me. When over a dozen pistols and swords pointed at my chest, I kept my gaze afar. I harbored no hatred towards them. I still thought of God, faith, and ethics. What I learned and kept all my life remained alive in my heart.[59]

[55] Robert Scalapino and Lee Chong-Sik, *Communism in Korea*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1973) 380

[56] Ham Seok-heon, *Re-reading Ham Seok-heon* (함석헌 다시 읽기), "Liberation I encountered" (1973.8.), (Seoul: 인간과 자연사 2004) 315

[57] Armstrong 62

[58] Armstrong 63

[59] Ham, "Sinuiju Student Incident I encountered" in *Re-reading Ham Seok-heon* (함석헌 다시 읽기), (1971.11.), 331-34

Ham was beaten by Korean communists, then jailed for fifty days, followed by another month in jail the following year.[60] As Ham had taught history at the Osan School, the death of students shook Ham to his bones. Despite encounters with communist brutality, however, he did not condemn communists as absolute evil as Niebuhr did.

Just as young Niebuhr had taught at the YMCA, Ham taught at the YMCA on Sundays after he escaped to Seoul. On the Sunday morning of the North Korean invasion, he preached on Isaiah 30 that salvation requires serenity and stillness. After his sermon, however, Ham and his family fled to the port city of Busan at the southeastern tip of Korea while many Christian leaders remained in Seoul with their congregation who could not leave readily. Ham continued to lecture at the YMCA, Yonsei University, and Yumkwang Church in Busan, and published several essays and poems.[61]

During the Korea War, Ham was not a prominent voice. His first public writing was in the 1956 issue of Chang's *World of Ideas* three years after the armistice. Before then, his writing had been confined to Christian publications such as *Bible Korea* whose circulation hovered around 200.[62] The *World of Ideas*, in contrast, had a circulation more than 10,000. South Korean president Kim Young-sam later acclaimed Ham's essays in this publication during the 1950s as gems that limned the possibilities of freedom in a dark era of dictatorship.[63]

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[60] Ham, "Liberation I encountered" 315

[61] Lee Chi-seok, *Ssial Ham Seok-heon Biography* (씨알 함석헌 평전), (Seoul: Sidaeeu Chang, 2015) 200
Cho Han-seon, 137-8

[62] Ham Seok-heon, "What will Korean Christianity Do?" in *Sound of Seeds* (1971-8) 167

[63] Kim Young-sam, *Remembering Teacher Ham Seok-heon*, 46
Noh Myung-sik, "Korea's Historian Ham Seok-heon" in *The Nation's Great Thinker Ham Seok-heon,* (민족의 큰 사상가 함석헌 선생) (Seoul: Hangil 2004) 302

In his first published writing during the war titled "God of a New Era" in the August 1951 issue of *Bible Research*, Ham captured the chaos of the Korean War without naming it. A tornado had swept through Korea, and he urged his readers to cling to the eye of the storm, where sat the throne of the God of the new era.[64] Ham wrote that God is found in "the trash heaps of history" just as Jesus became friends with tax collectors and prostitutes. Ham exhorted Christians to build a new house to worship God anew. His short essay concluded: "This tornado will take away everything from us until nothing remains. But there will be holiness, joy, and peace in the new house. This religion of the new age will also encompass atheists."[65]

Five years later, his debut piece for the magazine *World of Ideas* catapulted Ham to national renown. In his essay published three years after the Korean War when the country was mired in abject poverty of per capita GDP below $100, he criticized the factionalism, materialism, and otherworldliness of Korean Christians.[66] For Ham, Christianity was Korea's new religion of the people. Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism had been the state-sponsored religions of Korea's past two dynasties, but they no longer served as truth systems that exercised authority over the public conscience as both had aligned itself with the elites.[67]

Given America's inordinate influence on South Korea, the salient activism of Christians for independence, and the pro-Christian policies of South Korean President Rhee Syngman, a

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[64] Ham Seok-heon, "God of a New Era" (새 시대의 하나님), *Bible Research* August 1951, 292

[65] Ibid 297

[66] Oh Kongdan, "Korea's Path from Poverty to Philanthropy," Brookings Institution, June 14, 2010 https://www.brookings.edu/articles/koreas-path-from-poverty-to-philanthropy/

[67] Ham Seok-heon, "What Korean Christianity is doing" (한국의 기독교는 무엇을 하는가), *The World of Ideas* 1956, 105

Methodist leader, Ham was not exaggerating the Christian influence in Korea. Since Christianity did not legitimate colonialism in Korea where the imposed imperial religion was Shintoism, Ham could assert confidently that Christianity could reform his nation. He nevertheless also deplored that Korean churches had become "withering trees" and "lukewarm ashes," as they failed to provide the salvation that the society in turmoil demanded.[68]

Unlike Niebuhr who vehemently railed against communism, Ham considered communism and Christianity to be twin fetuses who shared the common adversary of Japanese colonialism. Ham asked: "Then on the day of liberation, the twins came out and began competing for inheritance. Who will become Esau, and who Jacob?"[69] Ham argued that while the church was justified in regarding communism as a competitor, it was wrong to view the conflict through the lens of fatalism and politics rather than morality. He then lambasted Korean Christians for being less conscionable than non-believers, and for flocking to American aid while neglecting the plight of the workers. Ham was also cynical towards American aid, which he deemed more self-interested than charitable. He looked forward to the day when American dominance would give way to a more just nation.[70]

By the fifth anniversary of the armistice, Ham discussed the war openly in a 1958 essay on its historic lessons. He wrote that the tragedy of division was on par with that of colonization, as families like his could no longer live under one roof and compatriots could not visit each other freely as they used to under Japanese rule. Ham lamented that Koreans had not yet processed the

[68] Ham 105
[69] Ham 108
[70] Ham 116-7

war, which he compared to a noose around the neck and a fireball in the throat that did not let Koreans breathe, speak, nor eat.[71] For Ham, discerning the war's meaning required a whole-hearted struggle to swallow the fireball and remove the noose. He called the war a pandemonium in which the brothers stabbed each other while other nations inflamed the whirling tornado of blood and fire. Incisively articulating the moral ambiguity of division, he wrote: "As the South calls the North a puppet of the Soviet Union while the North calls the South a puppet of America, we only have puppets and no nations in Korea."[72] Citing a Korean proverb, he compared Korea to a shrimp whose back was burst in a tussle of whales. Alluding to Lamentations 1:1, he called Korea a queen of suffering ruing her humiliation, perhaps also in reference to the Korean women who became wartime sex slaves to Japanese soldiers as "comfort women" and to the Korean Queen Min assassinated by Japanese in 1895.[73]

As for the immediate cause of the Korean War, Ham attributed it to the drawing of the 38th parallel without blaming Americans for their role: "The 38th parallel is the waistline of an emaciated goat sundered while the eagle of the Rocky Mountains and the bear of the Arctic Sea bit and pulled their bait at the end of World War II."[74] After discussing the external causes of the war, Ham turned inward and inquired how Korea had become a feeble hunchback shrimp. He insisted that the Neo-Confucian *yangban* governors of a unified Korea from 1392 to 1910 were more oppressive than rulers of other nations. He blamed Korea's servitude and division on these elites' evisceration of the Korean people. Ham wrote: "The internal cause of the Korean War does

[71] Ham 101
[72] Ham 104
[73] Ham 102
[74] Ham 103

not lie with Stalin, Kim Il-sung or Roosevelt, but with Yi Seong-gye who drew a line at the 38th parallel when he ostracized the northerners as vulgar."[75] Ham was invoking the founder of Joseon Dynasty in Yi. As Ham was born in the north in the twilight years of Joseon, he understood their marginalization.

In addition to oppressive rulers, Ham regarded Korea's lack of a great religion and its poverty of thought to be the causes of its downfall, as religion precipitated the rise and fall of nations. Regurgitating the common racist trope of the 20th century, he pointed to Koreans' Mongolian ethnicity for their failure to develop deep religious roots.[76] Thus the historic imperative from the Korean War was for Koreans to sire a more profound religion with distinct national hallmarks and to nurture a more robust faith. Ham observed that religious organizations and especially churches were dismal during the war, as they jostled for membership growth without concerns for society at large. Meanwhile, no churches were persecuted for embracing North Korean enemies or for demanding justice from Korean politicians. Ham asserted that the fracturing of Korea signaled a state of vacuum in national consciousness. Truly liberated Koreans would have resisted pressures from the Soviets and Americans to remain united as one nation.[77]

Ham was imprisoned for 20 days for this article's criticism of the South Korean president Rhee. Two months later, Ham elaborated on the relationship between religion and politics in his addendum to this article.[78] Ham argued that when Jesus proclaimed his kingship, he was making a spiritual statement as the king of truth. Religion and politics had a multi-dimensional and

[75] Ham 106
[76] Ham 110
[77] Ham 113-4
[78] Lee 230

organic relationship, and the two could reinvigorate each other. Ham reassured readers that his political criticism did not indicate a desire for power, and that his faith did not undermine his patriotism. He concluded: "I can only support this nation built on democracy in the spirit of the United Nations, and I will fight its opponents as my foe."[79] After declaring his allegiance to the Republic of Korea, he presented his Biblical pacifism:

> "If your soul is not able to love the enemy, then fighting courageously for the nation and dying is more moral than running away or surrendering in cowardice. But you will not find true triumph or peace that way. Peace will only arise through self-sacrificial love that bears the burden of sin on your body."[80]

Ham prophesied the advent of peace ensuing from the liberation of souls, and urged conquering communism not through force but through spiritual purification: "To combat communism and reclaim our brothers, we need to reach their conscience…. which can only be reached by self-sacrifice."[81] Unlike Niebuhr who did not regard Christian love of *agape* to be viable in politics, Ham harbored hopes that Christian love would resurrect the Cold War's sacrificial lamb.[82]

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At the onset of the Korean War, Niebuhr pronounced the duty of Christians to support the war. Once the illusions of American omnipotence were unveiled, he admonished the nation to check its passions. His change of heart was belated, however, as more than 30,000 Americans,

[79] Ham, "Illuminating the article 'People Need to Think'," (생각하는 백성이라야 산다"를 풀어 밝힌다) *The World of Ideas* October 1958, 118-120
[80] Ham 124
[81] Ham 125
[82] Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Cornell University Press: 1985) 201, 238

500,000 Chinese, and 2 million Koreans perished in a war whose omega as its alpha.[83] The World Council of Churches where Niebuhr met Christians from China and other parts of Asia could have been a locus of reconciliation, but he alienated Christians from the Communist Bloc by goading the Council to bless the American war.

In contrast to Ham who envisaged a new world order based on peace and justice, Niebuhr held in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1943) that: "the problem of history is the impotence of the good against evil forces in history… vicarious love remains defeated and tragic in history."[84] Niebuhr censured liberal Christians for believing naively that love can overcome evil, and argued that the true meaning of Christ who became incarnate is the suffering servant. Niebuhr dismissed the possibilities of global peace as utopian in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and regarded nations and social classes as incapable of self-sacrificial Christian love that individuals could enact.

Similarly to Ham who spelled out a God of history who sides with the weak and renews the old, Niebuhr also showed a preferential option for the powerless by arguing that Christian actions cannot scale from the level of individuals to groups led by the powerful. While Niebuhr did not emphasize the Christian values of love and forgiveness that Ham did, Niebuhr did accent the Christian values of moderation and humility as well as the necessity of nations to humble themselves before divine judgment. Niebuhr acknowledged during the quandary in Korea that

[83] CNN Editorial Research, "Korean War Fast Facts", *CNN,* December 8, 2020 https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/28/world/asia/korean-war-fast-facts/index.html
[84] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Scribner: 1943) 19, 45

American power may be prone to misuse, but still considered the American "police action" in Korea as his nation's cross to bear.

Once TIME Magazine crowned Niebuhr as the "Establishment theologian" after his prescient call to defy the Nazis,[85] he struggled to pivot to a bipolar world in which the nemesis presented a more chronic and diffuse threat. Although Niebuhr criticized American imperialism and spotlighted the plight of the disenfranchised in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* where he showed sympathy for the colonized Koreans and Filipinos, these sentiments had vanished by his writings on the Korean War. Ham was not immune from racism as he denigrated Mongolians, but Ham's bigotry did not carry the gravitas to influence policy that Niebuhr's did.

Niebuhr might have also been desensitized as an armchair theologian, as he never witnessed violence and war first-hand. Ham suffered personally from communists and faced existential threats in the ongoing Cold War, yet he showed more empathy towards his enemies. If Niebuhr had a Korean or a Chinese interlocutor, he could have been more restrained in his support for the misguided escalation of the Korean War. Although Niebuhr's view of the tragic nature of history could condone warmongering, his view of the moral blind spots of the mighty could have set a precedent for a disciplined pacifism that could hold sway in Washington.

The next chapter compares Niebuhr and Ham's constructions of their national histories to investigate how their historic horizons influenced their responses to the Korean War. While this chapter perused magazine articles from the 1950s, the next chapter probes two books of the 1950s

[85] Fox, 201, 238

that have become classics in their respective countries. Whereas suffering as a crucible for spiritual renewal was Ham's leitmotif for Korean history, irony pervaded Niebuhr's portrayal of American history. Even if history were predestined to be tragic and a theologian were free to proclaim this truth, the danger of Niebuhr's foregrounding of irony was that its tinge of fatalism could expiate the bloody hands of the architects of war. Ham's emphasis on the national trauma of the innocent can help recalibrate the ethics of war, as Korea suffered disproportionately in a war that pitted America against China. While Ham's historiography robed naked annihilation of Korea in spiritual garbs, Niebuhr's historiography veiled stark militarism of America in fatalism. The second chapter attempts to reconcile these two historiographies that collided in Korea.

Chapter II: Irony and Suffering

When Niebuhr preached in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary in 1952 at the beginning of spring semester, he seemed fatigued. He meditated on Jesus' words that the rain falls equally on the just and unjust. Niebuhr proclaimed that there was no "special providence" to guarantee reward for the virtuous, and concluded that: "The prayers that many a mother with a boy in Korea must pray were futile if they asked for special protection."[86] That Friday afternoon, Niebuhr suffered a spasm in his limbs on the left side. He did not have a heart attack as he had suspected, but his stroke impaired his speech, paralyzed his left side, and left him prone to bouts of depression.[87]

Political theorist Peter Josephson and theologian R. Ward Holder evaluate that after he suffered a stroke, Niebuhr did not write another major work with the stature of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and *The Irony of American History*."[88] Theologian Ronald Stone, Niebuhr's last graduate assistant, also regard these three books and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) as Niebuhr's "greatest works."[89] Niebuhr's *Faith and History* (1949) was met with "widespread apathy and disappointment" according to historian Richard Fox.[90] Niebuhr continued to write into the 1960s books such as *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959) which was based on the course he co-taught in 1950 at Union Seminary called "Christianity and Communism." But his influenced had waned by then, and he retired from

[86] Fox 248
[87] Fox 248
[88] Josephson and Holder 32
[89] Stone 323
[90] Fox 237

Union in 1960 before passing away in 1971 at the age of 78. *The Irony of American History* would be his last great work.[91]

In South Korea, *Korean History seen through a Will* has been the most widely read of Ham's oeuvre which spans some 20 volumes. While working as a history teacher at a pro-independence private school called Osan in colonized Korea, Ham initially serialized this work in the 1930s as *Korean History seen through a Biblical Perspective*. These essays were compiled and published as a book in March 1950 three months before the Korean War, and again in 1965 a dozen years after the armistice with a new chapter on the Korean War. This thesis is based on the 1965 edition of the book.[92]

In his 1950 preface, Ham wrote that his editors had suggested removing the reference to the Bible in the title to make the book more palatable to the public. Ham nevertheless kept the title as he saw removing it as akin to cutting the antler of a deer, since he deemed the Bible to provide the only valid philosophy of history.[93] In his 1965 preface, however, he wrote that he changed the title as he could no longer parrot the religious ideas of his teachers.[94] After a year in a prison in Seoul for his activism, Ham wrote that he began to see the unity underlying all religions. Thus he spent a month at a Korean Buddhist temple in the mountains to excise sectarian and dogmatic passages from his book, and renamed the book so that it would be accessible also to atheists.[95] While Ham's choice of the word "will" seems like a bow to

[91] Josephson and Holder 29
[92] Ham Seok-heon, "Korean History seen through a Will" (Hangil Publisher 2009) 95
[93] Ham Seok-heon, "Korean History seen through a Will" 15
[94] Ham Seok-heon, "Korean History seen through a Will" 20
[95] Ham Seok-heon, "Korean History seen through a Will" 21-23

Schopenhauer, the Korean word "will" in Ham's book title differs from the Korean word "will" in the Korean translation of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1819).

In many passages of the 1965 edition of *Korean History seen through a Will*, however, the Bible remained foundational for Ham's philosophy of history. He lamented that while every nation brought a gift to God, poverty and hardship were the only gifts that Korea could bring. He wrote: "But the Bible revealed the truth to me, and it was faith that saved me. This suffering was the crown of thorns that Korea must wear… the persecuted servant turned out to be the queen."[96] Similarly, Niebuhr also grounded his philosophy of history in the Bible. He wrote: "The Biblical interpretation of the human situation is ironic, rather than tragic or pathetic, because of its unique formulation of the problem of human freedom."[97] Humans fell into irony, as they often forgot they are creatures in addition to being creators. Niebuhr also pointed out that a tragic view of life is not Christian, as Christianity does not regard tragedy as the final word on existence, which is a divine word.

The first section of the second chapter will explore Niebuhr's ideas of irony, tragedy, and pathos as well as their manifestation in American history. Ham's ideas of suffering and their manifestation in Korean history will follow. The ensuing section will turn the tables to examine how Ham viewed the cultures of the West and Niebuhr viewed the cultures of Asia with a focus on imperialism. The next section will trace how each made sense of their national entanglements in the war of 1950. Although both Niebuhr and Ham readily acknowledged that

[96] Ham Seok-heon, "Korean History seen through a Will" 97
[97] Niebuhr 155

they were not professional historians, they underlined theology underlying history which in turn shaped shakers of history in both nations.[98]

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In his preface to *The Irony of American History* dated January 1952 a month before his stroke, Niebuhr elevated irony above tragedy and pathos.[99] He wrote: "Irony consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous."[100] Thus irony contained an element of comedy stemming from incongruity, and this comedy could morph into irony if the incongruity revealed hidden relations. Irony differed from pathos in the agency of the parties involved, and from tragedy in their responsibility rising from unconscious weakness rather than from conscious resolution.

A common example of irony for individuals and nations was a fall from grace caused by pride in power, and Niebuhr argued that irony could be overcome with the awareness of the latent vanity or pretension which had transformed comedy into irony. This realization could either mitigate pride through repentance, or exacerbate pride and degenerate irony into "pure evil."[101] Although he viewed Christianity as extending beyond the limits of irony in its conception of redemption from evil, he still regarded Christian interpretation of the evil in history to be ironic. Niebuhr warned that unless a nation is moved by a religious sense of

[98] Niebuhr xxv, Ham 19
[99] Niebuhr 2
[100] Niebuhr xxiv
[101] Niebuhr xxiv

ultimate judgment against the pretensions of its own greatness, cognizance of irony could dissolve it towards despair and hatred rather than contrition and humility.[102]

For Niebuhr, World War II and the onset of the Cold War presented multiple levels of ironies for America.[103] He wrote: "Our modern liberal culture, of which American civilization is such an unalloyed exemplar, is involved in many ironic refutations of its original pretensions of virtue, wisdom, and power."[104] The disillusionments included the possibility of nuclear annihilation from developments in technology that ought to prolong life, failure to preserve peace and advance justice as willed, and the necessity of incurring guilt to resist communism. Niebuhr concluded: "Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy."[105] While he identified a more malignant irony in the Soviet Union's failure to materialize its stated ideals of justice and egalitarianism, he also found in America "the milder forms of the same pretension" that plagued communist nations.[106]

Niebuhr argued that America was susceptible to illusions that spawned irony as it saw itself as a divinely sanctioned "city upon a hill." Both Calvinists of Massachusetts and Jeffersonians of Virginia saw America as a new Israel called to fashion a new humanity from the vices of Europe.[107] Since bourgeois ideology that underestimated the perniciousness of power in human relations predominated in America, America expanded without guilt or hesitation.

[102] Niebuhr 155, 168-9
[103] Niebuhr 2
[104] Niebuhr xxiv
[105] Niebuhr 3
[106] Niebuhr 22
[107] Niebuhr 24

Niebuhr wrote: "The surge of our infant strength over a continent, which claimed Oregon, California, Florida, and Texas against any sovereignty which may have stood in our way, was not innocent."[108] The bourgeois society's misguided belief that its economic power is more innocuous than political and military power also contributed to America's blissful neglect of the harms it caused in its ascent.[109]

Just as irony was the leitmotif of American history for Niebuhr, suffering was the leitmotif of Korean history for Ham. Ham argued that during the five millennia of Korean history, Korea never knew an era of peace. Wars that erupted in Korea numbered more than 100 in his estimate, and foreign invasions more than 50.[110] Somewhat hyperbolically as Koreans often take pride in the history of its kingdom of Goguryeo ruling Manchuria, Ham asserted that Koreans were a people of peace who never invaded another nation. [111] He concluded that Korea's location was responsible for half of her woes, as Korea was surrounded by expansionist powers such as Japan, Mongolia, and China, as well as Russia and America in modern times.[112]

Ham lamented what he called the "deficient spirit of brooding" among Koreans, which deprived Koreans of philosophy or religion.[113] Ham classified Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity prevalent in Korea as foreign religions. Shamanism was Korea's indigenous religion that Ham celebrated, but it was corrupted in his view because Koreans failed to transfigure it to a lofty religion with systematic philosophy and practice. Ham speculated that

[108] Niebuhr 35
[109] Niebuhr 36
[110] Ham 444
[111] Ham 121
[112] Ham 100
[113] Ham 128

because Koreans were unable to think deeply, they could not indigenize foreign religions which resulted in the failures of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity to provide salvation for the Korean people.[114] In the meantime, Koreans often turned to fatalism which Ham called the philosophy of the oppressed that robs them of their past and future.[115] The silver lining was that fatalism shared the same origin with providence, which could lift Koreans to a higher faith.[116] Ham concluded: "This nation is a homeless maiden on the street. She is the queen of suffering whose basket of flowers has been taken away… [she is] scoffed and exhausted… but the king will come as her bridegroom."[117]

For Ham, suffering deepened life, and purified history.[118] Quoting Gandhi, Ham argued that peace through suffering is an eternal principle that every nation must follow. He added that Korean history had been a history of suffering because *agape* gave birth to history. To dispel the paralyzing superstition of fatalism and beget a new religion, Ham believed that Korea needed to undergo more tribulations, which sounds tone-deaf against millions of lives already disfigured and displaced in 20th century Korea. Through suffering, however, life could evolve. Ham declared: "In the face of suffering, people become either a foe of Satan or a friend of God."[119] Ham then generalized that suffering was not confined to Korea, as the path of humanity was paved with tears and blood.[120]

[114] Ham 129
[115] Ham 431
[116] Ham 433
[117] Ham 111
[118] Ham 131
[119] Ham 477
[120] Ham 446

A comparison of Niebuhr with Ham reveals that despite the faint horizon of a nuclear holocaust, the existential survival of a nation that preoccupied Ham was not an urgent consideration for Niebuhr whose primary concern was containing communism. Irony was a luxury of the mighty, as there was no "comic incongruity" between the Koreans' desire for peaceful sovereignty and the ceaseless wars that enveloped them. Within Niebuhr's framework, Ham's articulation of suffering can be read as an attempt to transpose the key of Korean history from pathos to tragedy. Niebuhr wrote:

> "A tragic choice is purest when it is deliberate. But pathos is constituted as essentially meaningless cross-purposes in life, of capricious confusions of fortune and painful frustrations. Pathos, as such, yields no fruit of nobility, though it is possible to transmute pathos into beauty by the patience with which pain is borne or by a vicarious effort to share the burdens of another. Thus, the situation in a displaced persons camp may be essentially pathetic; but it may be shot through with both tragedy and grace, through the nobility of victims of a common inhumanity in bearing each other's sorrows."[121]

As tragedy elicited admiration and pity for the heroes willing to risk their lives for the greater good, Ham turned the pathos of Koreans into tragedy, which reverberated with the traditional Korean emotion of *han* whose semantic field covers sorrow, regret, and resentment. Ham rued that Korea's past millennium of suffering had crushed its people's spirit, which enervated its arts and religion from its heyday in the Three Kingdoms period when Korean philosophies and artworks were grand, elegant, and vivacious.[122] In response, Ham aestheticized Korean history by comparing it to the French sculptor Auguste Rodin's *The Old Courtesan* (1910). Ham wrote:

> "Dear old courtesan, you took on the cruelty and hypocrisy of society on your delicate body… Thus you lost your virginity and humanity, and your youth was eaten away. Thanks to you, the gentlemen could flaunt their dignity and the ladies their purity.

[121] Ham 166
[122] Ham 430

> Society must apologize and respect you…. Dear Readers, we must be like Rodin… we must bow our head before this queen of suffering in sadness and reverence."[123]

Through embracing the tragedy and pathos of suffering, Ham imbued Korea's national suffering with dignity and redemptive hope.

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In addition to different emphases on the leitmotifs of their national histories, Niebuhr and Ham had divergent views of the other's national and cultural histories. While Niebuhr denigrated Asian cultures as lacking the historical dynamism that animates Christianity, Ham assigned complementary roles for the Asian and European cultures.[124] Imperialism for Niebuhr was a natural manifestation of power differentials in global affairs, and its impact not as deleterious as Ham's poignant depiction of it.[125] Niebuhr struggled to transcend his contemporary clichés about Asia, and he failed to detect the waves of industrialization and democratization sweeping East Asia.

Niebuhr argued that ancient Asian cultures could be classified as either humanistic and collectivist such as Confucianism and Shintoism, or mystical and pantheist such as Hinduism and Buddhism.[126] He then expounded upon the centrality of family in Confucianism, which he deemed to undermine national cohesion. Niebuhr concluded: "There is thus no spiritual basis in the Orient for what we know as the 'dignity of the individual.'"[127] He argued that the "sleeping cultures" of Asia and their meager socio-economic foundations made them unfit for democracy,

[123] Ham 441
[124] Niebuhr 118
[125] Niebuhr 112
[126] Niebuhr 124
[127] Niebuhr 125

and he also conjectured democracy to be illegible to Asian societies. The only exceptions to the Niebuhr's construction of the inscrutable Orient was the Philippines and Japan with whom American enjoyed "genuine spiritual and moral affinities."[128] As the Philippines was an American colony and the U.S. Army ruled Japan from 1945, the only two Asian nations Niebuhr regarded as potential partners had been molded in the image of America.

Absent from *The Irony of American History* were discussions of the American annexation of the Philippines and the Japanese annexation of Korea and Taiwan, as Niebuhr condoned imperialism in an era of decolonization. Consonant with his stress on original sin and the corruptibility of groups, he wrote that: "Imperialism is a perennial problem of human existence; for powerful nations and individuals inevitably tend to use the weak as instruments of their purposes."[129] While Niebuhr conceded that colonialists were not as "purely paternal" as they pretend to be, they were not as "purely exploitative" as Marxists portrayed them to be.[130]

More controversially, Niebuhr asserted that spiritual dimensions of imperialism were more harmful than its economic impact, and that recently liberated nations suffered more economically after emancipation than they did politically under colonization.[131] In a tone that seems to blame the victim, Niebuhr wrote: "One of the real spiritual evils of imperialism is that it obsesses a nation held in tutelage with the idea that all of its ill flow from the imperial occupation. This is never the case, particularly not if the colonial nation is deficient in capacities

[128] Niebuhr 127
[129] Niebuhr 113
[130] Niebuhr 113
[131] Niebuhr 114

for self-government."[132] Given the widespread agrarian poverty exacerbated by its stagnant culture, Asia could benefit from imperialism's promulgation of technology and education in Niebuhr's estimate. Niebuhr believed that the economic gulf between Asia and the West were due to "disparities in natural resources and in productive efficiency," and criticized Marxists for attributing inequality to colonialism and exploitation.[133] While he argued that communism can be resisted in the agrarian world only by "telescoping developments which required four centuries in European history," he did not think a century would be enough for Asia to reach the socio-economic levels of the West.[134] He concluded: "Communism is a historically dynamic religion which comes to the hopeless people of the Orient as the harbinger of a great hope."[135]

Across the Pacific, Niebuhr argued that America was less guilty than other colonialists since American imperialism was of a covert economic form rather than an overt military and political form. For Niebuhr, America had difficulty appreciating the grievances of Asia as it was the most bourgeois of the nations. Without mentioning the subjugation of Native Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics, he argued that America's vast resources obviated the need for imperial ventures.[136] In 1952, Niebuhr defended the American support of "a discredited French colonialism" in Vietnam as a "strategic necessity" against communism.[137] He concluded: "the whole of the West, and more particularly the American hegemonic power, is held responsible for the post-imperial ills of the non-technical cultures far beyond our deserts."[138]

[132] Niebuhr 115
[133] Niebuhr 110, 118
[134] Niebuhr 116, 118
[135] Niebuhr 120
[136] Niebuhr 113
[137] Niebuhr 115
[138] Niebuhr 115

In *The United States and Imperialism* (2001), historian Frank Ninkovich defended Niebuhr's ideas of imperialism, as Ninkovich wrote that: "in some cases, imperialism can clearly be a good thing."[139] Although the jury is still out on the American empire according to Ninkovich, the empires of Rome, Austria-Hungary, and the Great Britain brought "many advantages to their subjects" such as "stability and progress."[140] While Ninkovich conceded that the imposition of alien rule could be cruel, he maintained that the ethical obligations of historians required him to cleave to "impartiality." Abdicating professional responsibility which may provide openings for theologians to comment on the ethics of history, Ninkovich concluded: "I am aware of nothing in my professional training that certifies me to pronounce with any authority on the issue of whether imperialism was, in the long run, good or evil."[141]

Although Ninkovich shared Niebuhr's ambivalence towards imperialism, he castigated the epitome of American imperialism— the Philippines— as "pure imperialism."[142] After misleading Filipino revolutionaries against the Spanish rule, America gained control of the Philippines from Spain in the 1898 Treaty of Paris. Hearing of the Filipino resistance to annexation, President Grover Cleveland remarked that: "our imperialistic enthusiasm should not be checked by the prospective necessity of destroying a few thousand or a few hundred thousand Filipinos."[143] True to his words, 70,000 U.S. soldiers massacred around half a million

[139] Frank Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism* (Wiley-Blackwell: 2001) 7
[140] Ninkovich 5, 7
[141] Ninkovich 7
[142] Ninkovich 8
[143] Ninkovich 51

Filipino civilians in addition to 16,000 insurgents.[144] The U.S. defrayed some $600 million to "pacify" the Philippines, which exceeded the total cost of the Spanish-American War.[145]

Ninkovich argued that although their colonial experiment in the Philippines disabused Americans of the notion that their imperialism could be noble, political prestige at stake for the Republican Party sustained Washington's "decision for empire."[146] Although the U.S. granted the Philippines independence on July 4, 1946, the islands remained a de-facto protectorate of the U.S. with 23 military bases stationed as Cold War outposts.[147] In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr had named the struggles of "Filipinos against America" and "Koreans against Japan" as eliciting "a special measure of sympathy."[148] Niebuhr had also pilloried the Spanish-America War as "the most striking illustrations of the hypocrisy of governments as well as of the self-deception of intellectuals."[149] After the onset of the Cold War, however, Niebuhr reneged on justice for the colonized. If Niebuhr were an astute student of history, he could have foreseen from the Philippines how futile other American military engagements in Asia could be.

In addition to exposing American imperialism in the Philippines, Ninkovich also elucidated how America often ended up on the wrong side of colonial controversies following World War II.[150] As Franklin D. Roosevelt did not anticipate the fallout with the Soviet Union, the U.S. was not prepared for the Cold War. As securing European allies became its priority,

[144] Ninkovich 51
[145] Ninkovich 51
[146] Ninkovich 53-4
[147] Ninkovich 80
[148] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, (Scribner: 1932) 236
[149] Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* 99
[150] Ninkovich 236

America often countenanced Europe's obdurate imperial ambitions and backed the Dutch against the Indonesians and the French against the Vietnamese.[151] Ninkovich writes:

> "The Cold War challenged the progressive and Wilsonian thesis that conflict over peripheral regions bred even nastier great power confrontations. Actually, it inverted that logic. Great power military conflict, when it occurred at all, took places on the periphery in places like Korea and Indochina in large measure because they were considered unimportant in themselves."[152]

Rather than prophetically challenging the foreign policy paradigm of what Ninkovich calls the "intellectually numbing Cold War consensus"[153] that prevailed in the 1950s, Niebuhr gave his blessing to the wars in periphery.

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Ham Seok-heon was nine when Japan annexed Korea, and 44 when the U.S. military replaced Japanese in Seoul. He wrote: "Although colonization was 36 years, it felt longer than 360 years… the suffering was severe, and it seemed we would never break free its yoke."[154] Ham added that liberation was a gift from heaven that felt like a dream, 12,771 days after a nation of 20 million was swallowed up.[155] On the economic ramifications of imperialism, Ham wrote that Japan's efforts to pave roads, build railways, improve farmlands, quarry mines, establish banks, and spur industry initially appeared to boost Korean economy.

Nevertheless, these external developments turned out to be "a road to ruin," as Japanese wrested control of the Korean economy.[156] Economic marginalization was followed by cultural

[151] Ninkovich 236-7
[152] Ninkovich 239
[153] Ninkovich 240
[154] Ham 382
[155] Ham 383-7
[156] Ham 391

marginalization, as Korean clothes, customs, and language were banned.[157] With the outbreak of the Pacific War, Korea was thrust into Japan's total mobilization which plunged the colonized in war. Many Korean men were drafted to battle fields and mines, while some Korean women were drafted to war brothels. Ham concluded: "As military autocrats knew their fate would wind up in the trash heap of history, they committed their final atrocity."[158]

In addition to imperialism, Ham diverged from Niebuhr in his view of Asian cultures. While Niebuhr's portrayal of Asian cultures highlighted their backwardness vis-à-vis the West, Ham assigned a complementary role for Asia. Although his ideas were limited by reductionist essentialism, Ham characterized the East positively as meditative and synthetic, while the West was active and analytic. Echoing the Meiji modernization slogan of "Japanese spirit and Western technology," Ham wrote that the East focused on the mind, while the West focused on the matter. Major themes in the history of Asia included unification and repetition, while the history of the West was marked by resistance and development. History for Ham originated in the East, and matured in the West.

Without naming Hegel, Ham argued that the East and the West could elevate each other in their opposition just as the two legs propel the body forward.[159] Ham then censured the West for disciplining Asia with force so that Asia would learn the value of freedom and progress. He wrote: "The detriments of today's Western civilization have reached its climax. Now the East must work to save the West."[160] Earlier Niebuhr might have agreed with Ham, as Niebuhr

[157] Ham 393
[158] Ham 392
[159] Ham 80
[160] Ham 81

wrote in 1932: "it is no accident of history that the spirit of non-violence has been introduced into contemporary politics by a religious leader of the orient. The occident may be incapable of this kind of non-violent social conflict, because the white man is a fiercer beast of prey than the orient."[161] By 1952, however, Niebuhr seemed no longer interested in learning from Asia.

While Niebuhr sifted Asian cultures for their susceptibility to communism, Ham envisioned a future for Asia that would transcend capitalism and communism. Ham saw the historic imperatives of both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. to be cleansing the slate of outmoded thoughts. He wrote: "Capitalism has blossomed, while communism has frosted. Neither will last forever, but ripening in them are new seeds."[162] Ham argued that true democracy could only emerge if both superpowers faded, and the inexorable laws of history crumbled old institutions with self-contradiction. Ham concluded: "True triumph is in leading the enemy to salvation, not destruction. There are no winners and losers in the cosmic theater of almighty God. Both must lose, so that a higher third power can arise."[163] For Korea, following this ideal middle path meant embracing pacifism and internationalism.[164]

To situate Ham's ideas in context and examine Korea as a case study for Niebuhr's ideas on imperialism, tracing the history of Christianity and colonialism in Korea is illuminating. In 1910, American mission boards of the two largest denominations in Korea— Presbyterians and Methodists— welcomed the annexation of Korea as Washington recognized Tokyo's

[161] Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 255
[162] Ham 420
[163] Ham 421
[164] Ham 421

prerogative in East Asia.[165] Once they witnessed the violent crackdown during the 1919 March 1st protests that peacefully mobilized some two million Koreans nationwide for independence, however, many missionaries supported Koreans claiming "no neutrality for brutality."[166] Missionaries published statements on Korea, and informed the U.S. politicians of the oppression in Korea. Nevertheless, the U.S. churches remained unresponsive. They had greater mission presence in Japan, and did not want to alienate Japanese in America.[167] Niebuhr had written in 1932 that: "non-violence is a particular strategic instrument for an oppressed group," but non-violence seemed toothless for Koreans oppressed by Japan and neglected by the West.[168]

Dismayed at the Western apathy towards Korean independence, many Korean nationalists, including Christians, turned to socialism. After the Western nations refused to hear the representatives of the Korean government in exile at the Treaty of Versailles, Princeton-educated Christian Kim Gyu-sik attended the 1922 Congress of Far Eastern Nations in Moscow with Presbyterian minister Yeo Un-hyeong.[169] In the 1920s, the YMCA in Seoul facilitated dialogues between Christians and socialists, while the YMCA journal introduced socialist ideas and described the Jesus movement as a kind of socialism.[170] Meanwhile, the Japanese authorities blamed Western missionaries for the disunity of the Korean church, and exhorted Koreans to unite and forge their own "Oriental Christianity."[171] The journal *Bible Korea*, which serialized the

[165] Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 110
[166] Kim 122
[167] Kim 123
[168] Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 252
[169] Kim 133
[170] Kim 134
[171] Kim 111

first drafts of Ham's essays on Korean history, was founded by Koreans in the 1920s to pioneer a "Korean Christianity" distinct from Japanese and Western influence.[172]

After the U.S. forces entered Seoul in 1945, General John Hodge ruled for three years. Hodge disbanded the Korean People's Republic's grassroots people's committees as Soviet-orchestrated, and staffed most of his administration with Korean collaborators to the chagrin of the public.[173] The collapse of the colonial economy during these years led to rampant inflation, which deepened the dependence of Korean economy on American aid. Strikes and popular uprisings were repressed by Hodge and South Korea's inaugural president Rhee Syngman, who did not shy away from assassinating left-leaning politicians and massacring his opponents.

Theologians Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim write: "By 1949, public opinion in South Korea was overwhelmingly in favor of socialism yet the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches were firmly associated with the right-wing and oppressive policies of government and accused of hindering unification."[174] When Ham criticized the South Korean president Rhee and embraced North Koreans as brethren, he was a minority Christian voice in Korea. In the 1950s, Ham harkened back to the 1920s when Christians and socialists collaborated for independence. Although Korea experienced the Cold War more viscerally than any other nation in the 1950s, Ham still envisaged a synthesis between the two competing civilizations.

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[172] Kim 133
[173] Kim 168
[174] Kim and Kim 180

In the 1920s, the decimation of Europe during World War I converted Niebuhr to pacifism. In the 1950s, the deaths of American soldiers in a stalemate tempered Niebuhr's bellicosity. During the second year of the Korean War, he cautioned against the allure of first strike in *The Irony of American History*: "We might be tempted to bring the whole of modern history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty effort to overcome its frustrations. The political term for such an effort is 'preventive war.'"[175] Although a preventive war was not an "immediate temptation," he forecasted it could become so within a decade or two. Although he naively believed that democracies cannot engage in preventive wars, he warned that a military leadership could make them inevitable.[176] He judged that whereas Europe was too eager to avoid war, America was too keen to win a war. Echoing Hegel, Niebuhr hoped for a "creative synthesis of complementary viewpoints" across the Atlantic, but not across the Pacific.[177]

In Niebuhr's view, American hegemony stemmed from its military, which drew on its economy. Because America was a young commercial nation inexperienced in arbitrating power struggles across ethnic and national lines, he warned that: "We would fain move in one direct leap from the use of economic to the use of military power."[178] For America, whose hegemony Niebuhr predicted would perdure for decades, to navigate world politics, he urged establishing a global community through the United Nations. Perhaps learning from his fallout with Asian theologians at the WCC two years ago, he also supported a larger role for Asian nations in the

[175] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (The University of Chicago Press: 1952) 146
[176] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 146
[177] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 138
[178] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 76

U.N. He wrote: "It is also to be hoped that Asian world will gain sufficient voice in the councils of the free nations to correct the inevitable bias of western nations in the same manner."[179]

In his final chapter, Niebuhr turned to Christian humility to transcend the irony that could trap America. His imperialism became measured, as he wrote: "that other unique community is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand."[180] Despite his sustained condemnation of communism, he also highlighted the resonances of vanities across nations. He wrote: "Even the most 'Christian' civilization and even the most pious church must be reminded that the true God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes."[181] He concluded the book with a prediction that America was more likely to unravel by its own vainglory than by the ruthlessness of its rivals.[182]

Ham argued that wars erupted because of disobedience to God, and compared wars to waves that break behind the wake of God. He wrote: "When humanity grasps the meaning of history and refrains from resisting God's will, we will have the day of eternal peace and freedom … the Korean War was the trumpet announcing the beginning of that era."[183] Ham argued that Franklin D. Roosevelt had claimed half of Korea to secure Japan and the Philippines from communism.[184] Unlike Niebuhr who was wary of America overextending its power, Ham believed that America's misguided pacifism caving to the public pressure led to the fall of

[179] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 137
[180] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 139
[181] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 173
[182] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* 174
[183] Ham 411
[184] Ham 412

China and the fracture of Korea. Ham wrote: "If Roosevelt had not negotiated with Stalin but held his ground to save the world by hanging America's national destiny on it, the Soviet Union could not have withstood."[185] Although Ham had converted to Quakerism and despite the military fiasco in his motherland, he wanted America to project its power more in the Cold War.

Although Ham called the Korean War the most heart-wrenching tragedy in Korean history, he believed the war could also nurture Korea with growth and knowledge. He wrote in the aftermath of the Korean War: "Just as a tree grows with wounds, we became citizens of a new era after receiving a blow and dividing."[186] Similarly to Niebuhr, he also extolled the U.N. forces' deployment as an unprecedented act of global cooperation. Korea was now a tomb of the world, and an altar of humanity for a new nation and a new humanity. Ham concluded paradoxically: "The Korean War was a cry of labor from the old courtesan, the queen of suffering to give birth to the king of a new era. But she lacks strength. O woman who lacks strength, both you and your child will die."[187] Ham ended his book with a string of rhetorical questions from the last chapter of Isaiah on whether God would open the womb.

Just as Niebuhr predicted in 1952 that Washington may find itself too eager for war within decades, America hurtled headlong into the jungles of Vietnam, then into the deserts of the Middle East. Three score and nine years after *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr has been vindicated on the continued hegemony of America. The communism that Niebuhr decried has been reduced to a shadow of its heyday, and China which succeeded the Soviet Union is

[185] Ham 412
[186] Ham 416
[187] Ham 426

communist more in name than in form. A decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain, terrorist barbarity where Niebuhr once lived catalyzed Washington to embark upon a preventive war to seize the elusive weapons of mass destruction. The invasion of Iraq also spurred a Niebuhrian revival, as pundits invoked him to chastise the pride of George W. Bush in attempting to mold the Middle East in its image. The Trump presidency has also given credence to Niebuhr's prognosis that America's undoing will be in its own hands rather than the hands of its foes.

Although Ham imbued the Korean War with historic and cosmic significance, it remains unclear what the unconcluded war has contributed to Korea and the world. The rapprochement in Korea that began with the first inter-Korean summit of 2000 has demonstrated that the will of Koreans alone will not harbinger reconciliation as Ham claimed, since China, Japan, and America all hold strategic interests in a divided Korea. South Korea has demonstrated that a war-ravaged nation can industrialize and democratize within a generation through sheer industry and sacrifice. Nevertheless, South Korea also suffers from one of the highest rates of suicide and depression in the world as well as from a myriad of environmental problems. Although Korean popular culture has circled the globe, it remains unclear whether Korea has given birth to a new era that Ham hoped would be the gift of Korea's suffering to the world.

Conclusion

This project was engendered by my sense of Korea's geopolitical powerlessness. As a Korean native recently naturalized in America, I avoided two years of mandatory military that the division still imposes on Korean men. My grandfather died from the Korean War, and my great uncle narrowly escaped death in Vietnam after the U.S. dragged South Korea into its war. While the poetry and piety of Niebuhr and Ham drew me to them, I perused them to deploy their theology for the peace and reconciliation of the Korean peninsula. Niebuhr's politics was progressive yet steeped in white supremacy and imperialism, while Ham's politics was also progressive yet limited by idealism and impotence. Ham's writings still inspire endeavors for peaceful reunification in Korea, but the realism of Niebuhr's political theology that American leaders frequently invoke seems impervious to the suffering and hopes of Korea and other nations that kowtow to American empire.

In many ways, I am dissatisfied with my thesis. I had naively believed that by placing an influential American public theologian in dialogue with his Korean counterpart, I could concoct theological solutions to help untangle the knot of feudalism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, war, revolution, dictatorship, and imperialism that still strangles Koreans. Unearthing the racism of Niebuhr against Asians was not news given the historic marginalization of Asians in black and white America, and I knew as a liminal immigrant that America's circle of moral concern vanishes precipitously beyond its borders. This thesis has nevertheless deepened my

conviction that American theologians must incorporate voices from overseas to check our military imperialism, as the U.S. still maintains some 700 military bases in some 70 territories.[188]

After my master of divinity of which this thesis is its academic culmination, I feel more acutely that only Christ can cut the Gordian knot in Korea. Thus more so than erudite Niebuhr, I believe farm boy Billy Graham contributed more to the détente in Korea and across the Iron Curtain. Compared to Niebuhr whose access to the pointy-heads of the State Department lasted a few years, Graham had the ears of every U.S. president in the second half of the 20th century and was especially chummy with Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush Sr.[189] Compared to Niebuhr whose foreign travels were confined to Europe, Graham partnered with local churches worldwide and preached in-person to some 200 million people in some 100 countries.[190] Graham's 1973 five-day rally in Seoul drew three million attendees, including my father.[191] As Graham's wife Ruth was born in China and raised in Pyongyang as a daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, Graham also preached in China and Pyongyang where he met Kim Il-sung.

Graham certainly fell short in many ways. Mainline Protestants including Niebuhr criticized him for flattening the gospel to personal salvation and ignoring the complexities of social problems like racism. Niebuhr declined Graham's invitation to meet in New York City just as Niebuhr was hesitant about supporting Martin Luther King Jr., while Graham collaborated with King.[192] Graham was slow to distance himself from disgraced Nixon, and

[188] David Vine, "Where in the World Is the U.S. Military?" *Politico Magazine*, July/August 2015 https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/us-military-bases-around-the-world-119321/
[189] Laurie Goodstein, "Billy Graham, 99, Dies; Pastor Filled Stadiums and Counseled Presidents," *The New York Times* Feb. 21, 2018 https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/21/obituaries/billy-graham-dead.html
[190] Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2014) 21
[191] Wacker 21
[192] "Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr," Pew Research Center May 4, 2009

audiotapes of his anti-Semitic comments to Nixon surfaced in 2002. Graham accepted Bush Sr.'s invitation to the White House the night before the U.S. began bombing Iraq, but he irked the Reagan administration when he advocated for a universal nuclear disarmament after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1982.[193] Eventually, Graham became an icon who could transcend politics to reconcile enemies. He proclaimed: "When I go abroad, I don't go as the ambassador of the United States. I go as the ambassador of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords."[194]

As an aspiring pastor-theologian, I am leaning more towards Graham than Niebuhr in my model of ministry. Niebuhr's political influence stemmed from his political philosophy severed from theology, but Graham's political clout arose from the souls he touched through his wholehearted devotion to the Gospel. As historian Jon Meacham notes, Graham was "neither liberal nor fundamentalist but evangelical… preaching salvation through Jesus."[195] I believe the call of a minister is to follow Christ before politics, and both Niebuhr and Ham may have elevated politics over Christ. My doctoral dissertation building on this thesis will probably pivot from theology to the history of Christian peace and reconciliation endeavors in Korea and America, as I have become more skeptical about the political impact of theological rhetoric.

Graham would have passed the critique that theologian Stanley Hauerwas mounted against Niebuhr, that: "Niebuhr's God is not a God capable of offering salvation in any material

https://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/04/obamas-favorite-theologian-a-short-course-on-reinhold-niebuhr/#18
Kate Shellnutt, What Is Billy Graham's Friendship with Martin Luther King Jr. Worth?, *Christianity Today*, February 23, 2018 https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/february/billy-graham-martin-luther-king-jr-friendship-civil-rights.html
[193] Goodstein
[194] Goodstein
[195] Meacham

sense.[196] In his 2001 Gifford Lectures which Niebuhr delivered in 1938, Hauerwas evaluated that although Niebuhr's enmeshment with Washington did not compromise his convictions, Niebuhr's ethics became more secular from the 1940s. Embracing the Christo-centrism of Karl Barth and decrying Niebuhr's absence of ecclesiology, Hauerwas concluded: "Niebuhr's theology reflects the loss of truthful Christian speech and, hence, of faithful Christian practice."[197] I judge Hauerwas to be too harsh on Niebuhr regarding Korea as Niebuhr invoked God in warning against pride, but Niebuhr failed to speak the love of Christ and consider the lives of Korean Christians. Ham strived to offer hope by preaching that the internecine war was a part of God's plan for salvation and renewal of Korea using the Book of Lamentations and the books of the prophets, but Christ was a mere murmur in his writings on the Korean War.

In addition to Graham, another comparison could be drawn between Niebuhr and Cone, who wrote that his theology was influenced significantly by his encounters with Asian theologians of the fledging Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in 1976.[198] Although nascent World Council of Churches presented an analogous opportunity for Niebuhr, he alienated theologians from Asia and Eastern Europe with his dogmatic condemnation of communism. As Ham's voice was a minority voice within Korean Christianity which was marginal to Japanese Christianity, his voice would not have reached white theologians like Niebuhr especially before the advent of liberation theology. Niebuhr's celebrated friendship with Rabbi Heschel also raises the question of why Niebuhr could not extend his moral concern

[196] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Baker academic, 2013) 138
[197] Hauerwas 140
[198] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Orbis Books, 1975) xiii-xiv

from Jews to Blacks and Asians. Perhaps Niebuhr's guilt at his German heritage was a factor, as he was a second generation German.

Niebuhr helped America understand its meteoric rise to the stewardship of global history after its presumed age of innocence, while Ham helped Korea understand its traumatic integration into global history after its presumed age of innocence. Despite the gratuitous bloodshed in Asia resulting from America's impetuous ignorance, studying the West alone and conjecturing on the rest of the world as Niebuhr did was sufficient when America's nemeses were Germany and the Soviet Union. As China emerges as America's archrival in this century, America will need to understand Asia more deeply. I hope that Christians that number some ten million in Asian America, ten million in Korea, hundred million in China, and two hundred million in America would help mediate tensions across the Pacific. Remembering the irony of American history can help us temper our ambitions abroad. Remembering the suffering of Asians that America inflicted can help us atone for our national sins so that we may avert another military tragedy.

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