

Article

The Characteristics of Changes in State-Church Relations in Korea's COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the Korean government announced restrictions on religious activities such as worship services and small group gatherings. Unlike their Buddhist and Catholic counterparts, who responded relatively pliantly to the government's quarantine guidelines, Protestants were divided in their responses: some churches actively complied with the government's instructions, while other churches voiced opposition. This study analyzes the cases of two churches that responded differently to the government's quarantine restrictions. The goal is to analyze the characteristics of changes in Korea's 'state-religion' relationship in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first characteristic of the changing state-religious relationship is that the state-church relationship can no longer be divided into a progressive or conservative dichotomy like before but rather is individualized for each church. The second is that the state-church relationship differs by issue and that regional variables play a bigger role than before. Local churches, in particular, are more likely to become influenced by their region in their relationship with the government than those in Seoul and other metropolitan areas. This is because these churches are able to exert more influence in the region with their human and material resources. The local church's response to the COVID-19 quarantine guidelines showed how the church could either bond with or confront the government in dealing with natural and social disasters, as well as local problems. The changes and characteristics of the state-church relationship in the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea provide insight into future analyses of state-religious relations.

Keywords: COVID-19; Korean government; quarantine guidelines; state-church relations; church



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1. Introduction: COVID-19 and the State-Church

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the Korean government announced restrictions on religious activities such as worship services and small group gatherings. Protestant churches with large congregations, in particular, became targets of crackdowns. Unlike their Buddhist and Catholic counterparts, who responded relatively pliantly to the government's quarantine guidelines, Protestants were divided in their responses: some churches actively complied with the government's directives, while other churches voiced opposition.

Existing studies attribute such differences to doctrine or inclusive cultures among Catholics, Buddhists, and Protestants. No studies, however, address the disparity observed within Protestant denominations, i.e., among those who share the same theological background. Some existing studies trace the Protestant churches' opposition back to an extreme right-wing ideology, characterizing the actions¹ of pastor Kwang-Hoon Jeon of Sarang First Church against the government's COVID-19 restrictions as a political act of the religious right. These cases are still inadequate in representing the current Korean Protestant church scene.

This study examines the changes in the relationship between Korea's state and religion from a historical point of view by examining two churches' (Daejeon and Busan) responses to the government's COVID-19 regulations. The Protestant churches' varied responses showed how differently many churches defined themselves and their relationship with the government. Their responses also clearly highlighted the changes and characteristics

of the relationship between the church and the state in current Korean society. This study explains how the state-church relationship in Korean society has changed since the Korean War and outlines how the shift that occurred after the 1990s was specifically revealed in the current context of COVID-19.

How has the state-church relationship been changing up until the COVID-19 outbreak? How has the government developed COVID-19 quarantine guidelines for religious facilities? In what different ways have Protestant churches responded to the government's quarantine directions and why? How did the conflict between the church and government during the pandemic shape the church-state relationship in Korean society?

2. Korea's State-Church Relations before the COVID-19 Pandemic

The changes in the state-church relationship in Korean society after the Korean War can be divided into three periods: (1) the 1960s, when the Protestant church in Korea expanded rapidly; (2) the 1970s and 1980s, when the Protestant church both actively cooperated with and also confronted the government; (3) the 1990s, when such direct interactions with the state became rarer and the church saw a general movement towards depoliticization and conservatism; and (4) the 2000s, when the state-church conflicts that centered on conservative Protestants resurfaced.

2.1. *The 1970s and 1980s: The Dichotomy of Protestant Religious Politics*

The military regime in Korea in the 1960s promoted state-led economic development as well as urban development. The dominant ideologies in Korea then were growth, development, and anti-communism. Protestantism in Korea was growing rapidly, and the number of churches and members grew exponentially. From the 1970s to the 1980s, the state-church relationship in Korea was distinctly divided into two: harmony and conflict.

First, during the period of military dictatorship, Korea saw the integration of Protestantism based on an anti-communist ideology. Following the Korean War, anti-communist ideology became a key mechanism for the state to promote unity. The military regime secured legitimacy by antagonizing communist forces, symbolized by North Korea and the Soviet Union. Anti-communism, however, had also established itself as a dominant ideology not only in the state but also in the church (Kang 2007): through sermons and meetings, the church had defined communism as the axis of evil that persecuted and oppressed religion. The union of the state and the church based on an anti-communist ideology was clearly demonstrated through the various gatherings of Protestants and the government held at the time.

The Protestant church in Korea, which was growing rapidly during this period, held several large-scale rallies that drew the world's attention. The rallies in Yoido Plaza in Seoul drew a record number of people each time. In 1973, the renowned pastor Billy Graham visited the same Korean Evangelism Conference. Later, when the square held the Korea Evangelism Conference, which lasted for five days from May 30 to June 3, in the same year, over three million people flocked there. This was the highest recorded number in the history of Korean rallies. The same square was used to host the World Christian Evangelization Conference in 1974, the National Evangelization Crusade in 1977, the World Evangelization Crusade in 1980, and the Protestant 100th Anniversary Mission Conference in 1984.²

What is worth mentioning is that the same Yoido Place was used for various anti-communist events during the same period as well. Since 1971, the venue has been used for Armed Forces Day (held every year on October 1), anti-communist gatherings, as well as national veterans events, mainly hosted by the 'Korea Anti-Communist League'. Large crowds between one million and two million attended each anti-communist gathering. Religious rallies and national assemblies in the same Yoido Square clearly highlighted the shared interests of the church and the state in the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, this period also saw the church's active political resistance against the country's dictatorship. As a matter of fact, Protestantism played a critical role in mobilizing

college students in Korea's democratization movement. Christian University student organizations such as KSCF (Korea Student Christian Federation) and EYC (Ecumenical Youth Council in Korea) gathered at Myeongdong Cathedral and Protestant churches and facilities to protest against the country's dictatorship. Priests, nuns, pastors, and university students gathered in churches and cathedrals and held various demonstrations for democracy, prayer meetings, public addresses, and debates. The core of the state-church relationship during this period was heavily political; the anti-communist agenda brought the church and government together, while the dictatorship and efforts to democratize the country set them apart.

2.2. 1990s: Depoliticization of Religion and Changes in the Church Market

After the institutional democratization of Korea in 1987, the political landscape and social movements began to shift significantly during the 1990s. The 'democratization movement', which became the center of all social movements, separated into various types of movements through the 1990s (Kang 2012, p. 229). In fact, the protests that appeared in the 1990s went beyond the political sphere and focused on advocating for the interests and rights of various groups. There were active protests by various trade unions and other professional groups, in which Catholics and Protestants no longer participated. As a result, the state-church relationship also changed. Cathedrals and churches were no longer the gathering places of social movements. The religious politics of the church, which had been associated with university students, gradually disappeared, and the church gradually moved away from direct political involvement. After the country's democratization in 1987, Christian social movements tried to find their own religious identity while distancing themselves from general social movements. Despite such efforts, the non-religious groups that had joined forces for the country's democratization movement broke away, and the remaining Christian social movements largely failed to set new agendas and secure resources. As a result, the scope of Christian social movements began to shrink.

On the other hand, NCCK (the National Council of Churches in Korea), a prominent progressive Protestant organization, began to experience financial problems in earnest as aid from foreign churches decreased. Additionally, as a solution to this, NCCK allowed more denominations to join. Previously, the NCCK had six denominations: the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Tonghap), the Korean Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, the Salvation Army Korea Territory, the Anglican Church of Korea, and the Korea Evangelical Church. In 1996, the Korean Orthodox Church and the Korean Christian Assemblies of God joined as new members. As a result, NCCK's progressive character faded. As a matter of fact, the overall distinction between Christian progressives and conservatives started to fade.

At the same time, a conservative Protestant church association emerged in the 1990s. Founded in 1989, the Christian Council of Korea (CCK) grew as more and more denominations joined. This growth was especially sped up as the country saw a blooming of megachurches in the 1990s, which earned South Korea the title of having the highest concentration of megachurches in the world.

By the 1990s, Protestantism was much larger than Catholicism and Buddhism in Korea, forming a greater marketplace than any other faith. The stratification of Korean society and unique lifestyles also gave birth to large-scale churches with diverse characters. Megachurches, in turn, adopted different religious identities and subcultures. The sermons, educational programs, activities, etc., of each church had naturally become conjoined with the daily lives of their congregants (Yi 2019, p. 211).

In the 1990s, shifts in Korean politics and social movements and the phenomenon of large-scale church gatherings resulted in changes in the existing state-religion relationship. In terms of state-religious relations, the distinct dichotomy of union and conflict that existed earlier had more or less faded. In both progressive and conservative camps, important agendas in state-church relations were mainly limited to areas such as the country's North Korea policies and peaceful reunification.

2.3. Post 2000s: The Re-Politicalization of Religion and Vitalization of Conservative Rallies

If the state-church relationship had been relatively calm in the 1990s, it took a dramatic turn in the 2000s. This period saw a culture of demonstrations voluntarily led by ordinary citizens, with various rallies and demonstrations springing up in squares. This deviation has been noticeable since the 2002 World Cup street cheering. In 2002, South Korea and Japan co-hosted the World Cup, and cheering in the streets became a common phenomenon throughout the country. The number of people who flooded the streets to cheer for the Korean national team exceeded 25 million, which was half the population at the time. This kind of cheering culture naturally led to various street festivals, after which the spatial character of public squares changed.

Since the early 2000s, the square has become a place of so-called democratic civic politics. It all started in earnest on 13 June 2002, when two junior high school girls were killed after being run over by an armored vehicle of the US Army stationed in Korea. Citizens poured out into Gwanghwamun Square with candles to urge the US military to take responsibility. Subsequently, the public held anti-war rallies against the US following its attack on Iraq in 2003, and there were also protests against sending Korean troops to support US operations in Iraq in 2004. In November 2005, a memorial rally was held for a deceased farmer who died due to brutal force while the police were handling a farmers' demonstration. In 2006, there was a rally against the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement; in 2008, there was a rally against importing US-grown beef for suspicions of mad cow disease; and in 2011, there was a rally for college students calling to halve expensive college tuition fees. Later, there were a series of rallies demanding the resignation of former President Park Geun-hye following the presidential scandal of 2016. From October 2016 to March 2017, more than 2 million people attended a total of 20 candlelight rallies, which led to the eventual impeachment of the president Park.

However, during this period, conservative Protestant groups also took to the streets and raised their voices. At the center of it was CCK, who opposed the withdrawal of US forces stationed in South Korea and the abolition of the National Security Law while protesting North Korea's nuclear program and human rights issues. In the 2000s, conservative Protestant crowds gathered in the square and actively held "national salvation services" and rallies. Following these services, the same crowd formed conservative "Taegukgi (Korean national flag) groups", which proceeded to host other conservative rallies. They opposed the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye and held national salvation prayers. Holding both the Korean and US flags, the attendees chanted "Long live the Republic of Korea", while voicing their opposition to communism. Conflict between the church and the state materialized again in the 2000s, but this time it was activated mainly by conservative Protestant groups. Since 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, this state-church relationship has seen new changes.

3. The Impact of COVID-19 on Religion and the State-Church Conflict in Korea

3.1. The Pandemic Situation and Religion

By the end of 2019, the COVID-19 virus that formed in China had begun to spread around the world. With the rapid spread of the virus and growing number of deaths, WHO defined COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Each religion reacted differently to the pandemic. Some medical theories about the disease have been rejected. Some religious believers refused to be tested for COVID-19 because of their religious teachings or stigma (Tan et al. 2021, p. 6), whereas some refused to be vaccinated, attaching religious significance to the COVID-19 vaccine (Kanozia and Arya 2021, p. 315). With the pandemic, religions have also had to cope with structural changes in the market. In particular, church leaders and believers were required to find a way to continue religious services and congregations virtually, as the government prohibited in-person gatherings (Kühle and Larsen 2021).

Religions were faced with a need to make various changes. Research by Joseph O. Baker et al. suggests five major possibilities for change in religions due to COVID-

19 (Baker et al. 2020, p. 363): the privatization of religiosity, asynchronous religious rituals, transformation into a technology-friendly religious environment, civic participation of religious organizations in the community, and religious conflicts with governments and communities.

In particular, once it was found that the virus spread through face-to-face contact, religions that regularly hold group gatherings indoors came under direct regulation. The church faced a crisis, ceasing worship services, which was unprecedented in history. These changes raised fundamental questions about secularization, sanctity, and religious rites (Ganiel 2021). The transition to online worship was seen as a necessary change and an opportunity to meet the changes of the new era. Yet, on the contrary, it was also interpreted as a serious identity crisis for religion. Above all else, the restrictions on religious institutions and the cessation of face-to-face worship served as a background to spark conflict between the state and religion. Especially in the case of Korea, most early outbreaks occurred in Christian places of worship (Bert et al. 2022). And the most striking phenomenon in the COVID-19 pandemic and religion was the government's quarantine measures against religious facilities and the resulting conflict with Protestant churches.

3.2. Quarantine in Korea and State-Church Conflict

In January 2020, South Korea raised its COVID-19 level from "Caution" to "Warning". COVID-19 cases were springing up in South Korea, and the news was reporting on newly confirmed positive cases daily, creating a state of tension. The incident that had a decisive impact on the South Korean government's decision on religious facilities was the mass infection in February 2020 of a religious group called "Shincheonji". In the initial quarantine guidelines for COVID-19 in 2020, the South Korean government published both the contact tracing information of all newly-positive patients and the people they had come into contact with (Yi and Lee 2020, p. 449). With the 31st positive-tested patient being identified as a "Shincheonji" cult member, the religious group was blamed for the mass-infection of the entire Daegu city area. The media reports were also quick to disclose this, and all "Shincheonji" branches and attendees throughout the country effectively became public enemies. This trend only worsened as the same religious cult refused to comply with the government's quarantine directives, and when the public discovered that the group was a Christian "cult", it was labeled a "dangerous" group (Singh 2020, p. 296; Jung 2021, p. 68).

After the Shincheonji outbreak in Daegu in February, the government raised its COVID-19 level to "Serious", and in March recommended that all religious facilities, nightlife facilities, and indoor sports facilities suspend operations. All religious facilities have been prioritized for sanctions under the government's quarantine instructions (Bhang 2021, p. 16; Ko 2021). The government further tightened regulations on group facilities, with new regulations requiring religious facilities to switch to online worship from July 2020 and cancel all gatherings and in-person events. Any violation would incur a fine for the person in charge, as well as anyone involved, and a ban on any type of in-person gathering. The government also set stages for its COVID-19 restriction levels for all religious facilities: level 1 (must leave one empty seat between people), level 1.5 (seats to be used at 30% capacity), level 2 (at 20% capacity), level 2.5 (switch to virtual services with fewer than 20 people present in person), and level 3 (virtual service with only one person hosting the service)³.

Despite these government regulations, on 15 August 2020 (Korean Liberation Day), Pastor Jeon Gwang-hoon of Sarang Jeil Church, who was the head of CCK, broke the quarantine restrictions and held an anti-government rally at Gwanghwamun Square. As the Shincheonji-begun epidemic continued until the Protestant anti-government rally, the need for control over other Protestants became more important matter. The COVID-19 status reports published daily by the government began to prioritize and highlight new positive cases at religious facilities (mainly churches).

The protests held by right-wing Protestant groups and the tension between the state and the church were not triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak alone. In the 2000s, conservative Christian rallies and political activities became more common, and Rev. Jeon

Kwang-hoon even established a Christian political party in August 2011. Rev. Jeon continued to make controversial political statements while arguing that “the church in Korea should save the country”. He led a full-scale anti-government rally during the last government (the Moon Jae-in administration). When the government imposed a ban on gatherings amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it faced a rather direct confrontation with the Protestant right wing.

As the COVID-19 situation worsened, on 8 July 2020, the government banned all gatherings at churches, such as retreats, prayer meetings, revival meetings, community services, Bible studies, choir meetings, etc., as well as loud singing and speaking during services. The church attendees were required to wear masks even while singing praise. Churches were also mandated to install an electronic entry system that tracked those who entered the facility. As the government tightened sanctions on religious activities, Protestant churches, unlike Buddhist and Catholic institutions, began to voice their opposition. Church associations, namely the UCCK (The United Christian Churches of Korea) and the CCIK (The Communion of Churches in Korea)⁴ announced their opposition immediately, calling the government’s restrictions excessive.

The churches’ resistance to the quarantine guidelines had been mainly attributed to financial challenges from decreased offerings by banning in-person services (Seong 2021, pp. 116–17) as well as technological challenges in hosting virtual services. Nonetheless, such resistance to a general transition to virtual services cannot be explained just by a need to survive financially, by the difficulty of setting up remote services, or by reduced attendance, especially when megachurches are concerned. As a matter of fact, once there was an outbreak, Korea’s megachurches simply harnessed the tools they were already used to employing. These colossal churches also had no financial problem switching to virtual services, as attendees still steadily contributed to the church. How then can we interpret the churches’ resistance to the government’s COVID-19 regulations?

This study proposes to scrutinize the fact that, above all, the Protestant church in South Korea had internally conflicting perspectives in its relationship with the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also emphasizes that this internal heterogeneity is not simply due to political or denominational tendencies. Rather, it is fundamentally the result of shifts in the state-church relationship in Korea in various aspects.

4. The Government’s COVID-19 Quarantine Guidelines and the Church’s Response

This study analyzes the cases of churches in two regions that showed conflicting responses to the government’s quarantine rules in the COVID-19 situation. These two churches cannot represent the state-church relationship for the entire Korean peninsula by any means. Their cases, however, should provide us with a clue as to capturing the shift in state-church relations that has occurred in Korean society.

4.1. The Difference between the Two Churches: “Autonomous Church vs. Exemplary Church”

The response to the government’s quarantine guidelines varied greatly by church, despite sharing the same denomination and a similar size. The two churches studied here showed distinctly varying reactions, even with the same number of attendees at 10,000 people. As Table 1 shows, both of these churches are in the same GAPCK (General Assembly of Presbyterian Church in Korea) denomination and have similar theological backgrounds and doctrinal norms. Additionally, they showed contrasting attitudes towards the government’s COVID-19 restrictions.

The two churches disagree in their attitudes towards the government’s quarantine orders: One argues that the church has a special right to act autonomously, while the other advocates a responsible church model that complies with the law. Saeronam Church in Daejeon emphasizes the constitutional value of the separation of church and state, accusing the government of undermining the autonomy of the church by regulating its worship services. Saeronam Church stoutly claims its identity as an autonomous church.

Table 1. The differences in the responses of the two churches to government restrictions.

	Saeronam Community Church	Hosanna Church
Area	Daejeon	Busan
Church size	Approx. 10,000 attendees	Approx. 10,000 attendees
Denomination	Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hapdong)	Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hapdong)
Doctrine	Evangelicalism, disciple development	Evangelicalism, disciple development
Internal response	Interpretation of COVID-19	Renewal of the church and means of refinement, a new opportunity
	Quarantine measures	Renewal of the church and means of refinement, a new opportunity
External response	Joint church activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An assault and curse stemming from sin—however it can be reversed through hope - Social-distancing, vaccination, compliance with government guidelines, operating a church-quarantine response team
	Activities in the region/community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activities with the “Free Citizens’ Solidarity for the Restoration of Worship (Yejayeon)” - Activities in Future Pastoral Forum
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Held a campaign for COVID-19 patients/80 attendees donated blood - Supported dependent churches in the region - Made a COVID-19 relief donation of approximately KRW 20 million (approx. USD 16,000) to the regional Kyeongbuk, Kyeongnam presbytery and 40 churches in Busan presbytery
Perception of on-line services	Incomplete form of worship	Preparing for a virtual, contactless era
Relationship with the state	Autonomous church	Exemplary church

While still following all the quarantine directives, Saeronam Church continued its protest against the government with other local churches beginning in July 2020. Together with other pastors, the head pastor formed “Yejayeon” (the ‘Free Citizens’ Solidarity for the Restoration of Worship), which publicly condemned biased government announcements and media reports that targeted Protestant churches. In a statement, the senior pastor claimed: “Historically, no power or ruler was able to interfere with worship services”.

The foundation of Saeronam Church’s logic in resisting the quarantine guidelines is that “the church is an equal entity to the state”, and that “the church maintains a partner-like relationship with the government”. The following excerpt is part of an article published by the same pastor in the ‘Future Ministry Forum Statement’ on 9 July 2020.⁵

“The Church will continue to be a cooperative partner of the State. The Korean church has taken the lead in sharing the pain and suffering of every national crisis there has been as the light and salt of society. In particular, it has been responsible for more than 70% of the social welfare sector in Korea and has played the role of a cooperative partner of the state in charity and compassion. And yet, the

government's misrepresentation of the church as the epicenter of an epidemic is an outright betrayal of trust. Threatening to fine not only the church officials but also its attendees for violating quarantine restrictions can only be seen as a break of both trust and partnership with the church.

We must all join forces to fight the current COVID-19 pandemic. Just as the government does its best to keep the public safe, the church will work with the government to do everything possible to prevent the spread of the virus. The government should first apologize to the church for this to happen. If the church is recognized as an object of cooperation, rather than an object of oppression, COVID-19 will surely come to an early end. We will keep a close watch on the government's decision whether to cooperate with the church or hamper our joint efforts!"

As seen in the above excerpt, the senior pastor of Saeronam Church argues for an "equal, partner-like church with the government". He further emphasizes that the government should treat the church as an equal ally instead of a subject for oppression. Saeronam Church's perspective proclaims an autonomous entity that can choose to either cooperate with or oppose the state.

On the other hand, Hosanna Church in Busan actively complied with the government instructions. In fact, the church did not simply follow the government's directions, but also preemptively implement its own quarantine guidelines. When the quarantine directives were published, the church formed its own quarantine response team centered around medical experts among its congregants. The church was thus able to more effectively manage and implement stricter controls sooner than the published directives. The church contact-traced all the movements of its attendees while implementing social distancing. The senior pastor of Hosanna Church posted the following on his social media account as the government announced stronger restrictions on churches.⁶

"What should we do? Do we have to fight against the government's directives calling them persecution and spiritual repression? Or should we just comply unconditionally while abandoning our cherished Christian values? This was a serious dilemma, and I had to pray. What came to my mind while I was praying, was to be like Daniel. He was the kind of person who defended his cherished values of faith without directly resisting that order. It is clear that the government's guidance is problematic and has crossed the spiritual line, but we should not become anti-social, and be emotionally opposed to it. Rather, we must follow the government's guidance as much as possible while keeping things that are dear to us"

Hosanna Church placed emphasis on becoming an "exemplary church" in the region, focusing on being a primary example of following the quarantine guidelines as a megachurch. As we can see from his post, the senior pastor highlighted that the church must ensure that it maintains its identity without becoming an anti-social body. Hosanna Church had preemptively turned to virtual services even when the government was still allowing services at 20% capacity.

Explaining that online services were essential in transitioning to a contactless era, the senior pastor asserted the importance of leading a life of faith that is suitable for the time.⁷ In Hosanna Church's model of church-state, the church is an entity that belongs to a state and thus has the obligation to follow its policies. This disparity we observe reveals how differently the two churches define their relationship with the government.

The "Yejayeon" is the most prominent example of a church association that formed in opposition to the government's COVID-19 restrictions. Yejayeon, which started its activities in earnest at the end of 2020, allows anyone to join, regardless of denomination (as long as they are affiliated with some denomination). They continued to hold press conferences while protesting the government's ban on in-person worship and filed lawsuits to retract the announced restrictions on worship services in Seoul, Daejeon, and Busan. Their main

argument was that the government violated Article 20 of the Constitution, which states that “all citizens have freedom of religion, and politics and religion are separate”. Thirty-one churches belonging to Yejayeon have so far won the first trial in the administrative lawsuit against the city of Seoul for the ban on in-person worship services, but the lawsuits filed by the two churches in Busan against the city of Busan and the lawsuits filed by 10 churches in Daejeon against the city of Daejeon have been dismissed.

In addition, through a press conference, the same churches protested against the government’s restrictions on praise and prayer practices in worship services, on small group activities, and the ban on eating in churches (without banning other dining facilities), demanding that local leaders respect local church leaders. They claimed that the South Korean government was maliciously producing false news based on unsubstantiated COVID-19 statistics, taking away religious freedom, and oppressing churches.⁸ In addition, they pointed out the government’s coercion to vaccinate and its discrimination against those who refuse the vaccine. The group further criticized megachurches and the United Christian Churches of Korea (UCCK), an existing association of churches, for following the quarantine guidelines without resistance. According to this group, more than 10,000 churches in Korea disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the megachurches simply followed the government guidelines like docile animals.⁹ This conflict shows that the perceptions and responses of the churches regarding the government’s COVID-19 restrictions were greatly varied. The COVID-19 pandemic required that churches transform their ways of thinking and being churches today (Pillay 2020, p. 267), but the response was different from church to church.

4.2. Characteristics of Changes in State-Church Relations

Protestants’ response to COVID-19 can be witnessed in three distinct groups: far-right groups that ignored the government’s quarantine guidelines and held protests in public squares; groups that faithfully adhered to the quarantine instructions; and groups that protested and voiced opposition to the quarantine restrictions. Some churches even criticized each other for their approach to the published regulations (Choi 2021, p. 74). In other words, the state-church relationship has been internally divided, and each church has had different opinions and ideas regarding the matter. This is related to the identity of each church, the values of their church leaders, church culture, and political inclinations. It is also related to their characteristic interpretation of the pandemic crisis.

The state-church relationship that was observed from studying the two churches is as follows. First, the church’s mixed responses to the COVID-19 quarantine guidelines show that the church’s attitude towards the government cannot be assumed simply by the church’s political leaning. It will be difficult to predict state-church relations based on denomination or political orientation, as each church evidently has its own individualized characteristics. As we could see how differently each church responded to the COVID-19 restrictions, it is clear that the state-church relationship cannot be explained by a simple variable such as denomination, size, or region. This is quite unlike the churches we have seen before, whose relationships with the government largely depended on their ideology.

Conflicts between the church and state in Korean society had been mainly political; confrontations revolving around substantive interests were rare. In the 1970s and 1980s, social ideologies such as communism, dictatorship, and democratization existed and were at the center of both state-church union and conflict. In the future, however, the state-church relationship is much more likely to be distinct for each issue, rather than based on macroscopic beliefs or ideology. In Religion, ‘private’ relationships are redefined and religion is renormalizing economic and political areas (Bader 2007, p. 18). Likewise, the church’s relationship with the government and its reception of its policies would also largely vary. This represents a change in the state-church relationship in Korea, where individual churches are separate entities rather than federated institutions as before.

Individual churches, not union groups, became prominent in the change in the state-church relationship because of the growth and diversification of the church market. Among

the religious population in Korea that saw substantial growth following the Korean War, Protestants had the most remarkable expansion in a short amount of time. Early Protestantism flourished in friendly relations with the state based on pro-American and anti-communist political ideologies. Pro-Americanism and anti-communism were the main ideologies of Korean society and the fundamental foundation of Korean Protestantism. As a matter of fact, until the 1980s, the union of nationalism and religion could easily be identified in the churches that were the most prominent then in Korea. However, from the 1990s, after the institutional democratization of Korea, a full-fledged church market was formed in which salvation goods and salvation needs (Weber 1968) interacted in terms of supply and demand based on religious economic theory. In particular, the Korean church market showed a situation of religious oligopoly (Yoo 2012, p. 187), and among them, Protestantism, which had the upper hand, saw intensified internal competition. Local stratification, which started with urbanization, further intensified competition among various churches and led to the formation of individual church identities and religious subcultures. This is also related to the qualitative differentiation of classes in Korea in the 1990s and the formation of distinct cultures of everyday life for each class (Yi 2019, p. 214). In other words, it became important for the church to successfully develop salvation goods to grow.

Churches have become increasingly diversified, and they have accordingly provided a variety of products to meet the needs of their consumers (Iannaccone 1991, 1992, 1995; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Salvation goods can be defined as both a means of salvation through religious rituals, good works, mystical or ascetic self-fulfillment, the sacrament, or faith, as well as the goal of salvation (Stolz 2006). Therefore, salvation goods in modern society need to be understood much more broadly. In particular, the salvation goods provided by the church are not only related to the afterlife, but also include all the resources and political activities that the church can mobilize in this world. In the process of clarifying its color and identity, the church may adhere to or act on certain political positions.

Daejeon Saeronam Church, mentioned in this study, continues to voice its opposition to the recent national debate on the enactment of the anti-discrimination law, claiming it is a dangerous law that not only allows but promotes false sexual views, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender individuals. Members of this church are also participating in protests against the enactment of the anti-discrimination law. However, not all churches that belong to the same denomination display the same kind of defiance on the same issue. Just as a new coalition organization was formed to respond to quarantine guidelines in the pandemic, churches can form yet another group to support the anti-discrimination law. In this way, each church can express different opinions on each subject, and form a new temporary cooperative relationship with the government as it sees fit, regardless of its denomination or size. The formation of a new organization called “Yejayeon” rather than the NCKK or CCK, which are the existing progressive and conservative organizations around COVID-19, reflects this shift in perspective.

Second, the state-church relationship now depends on each case and issue, with more church-government interactions likely to be influenced by the ‘region’ than before. In particular, local churches in areas outside the Seoul metropolitan area are more likely to be influenced by the specific locality in their relationship with the government. This is because these churches are able to exert more influence in the region with their human and material resources (Ellingson 2009, p. 27). Church-specific responses to COVID-19 quarantine regulations showed how the church could either confront or cooperate with the government when faced with natural and social disasters, as well as local problems.

However, the key part of today’s church-state relationship is finances. Despite the fact that the two churches covered in this study responded in different ways to the government’s quarantine guidelines, what the two churches had in common during the pandemic was that they carried out volunteer and charity work to help the community. Saeronam Church donated KRW 200 million (approximately USD 150,000) to the local government (Daejeon City) for COVID-19 relief and KRW 100 million (approximately USD 120,000) to help local churches in need.¹⁰ Hosanna Church, on the other hand, held a blood drive for COVID-19

patients in the Busan area, with 80 of its attendees giving blood¹¹. In addition, it donated a total of KRW 20 million to 40 dependent churches and donated more for COVID-19 relief.¹²

This shows that both churches are actively involved in a variety of ways in their communities, mainly through financial support. Community services and donations were some of the ways the church connected with the country through the region. Churches in local cities are either directly or indirectly involved in local politics by participating in volunteer activities related to various social issues in the region and, above all, by providing financial support. This is also related to the problem of how the local church secures its legitimacy, rights, and voice in the local area. In particular, as the human and material resources of Korean Protestant churches grew, it has become an increasingly critical issue for municipal governments to link and cooperate with their local churches. This is also a matter of the method of cooperation that shows how the resources of religion are utilized in local autonomy in a cooperative, state-church relationship.

If a major way the churches cooperated with the state was by contributing to the local community, the method of expressing the conflict with the government now is more likely going to be a legal action against it rather than a collective protest like in the past. As with many secular groups in society, churches must now also consider legitimacy, evidence, and public opinion when confronting the government.

5. Conclusions

This study analyzes the changes in the state-church relationship in Korea in the context of COVID-19. As already mentioned, the cases of the two churches examined in this study cannot fully represent the change in the state-church relationship in Korean society. However, the characteristics of the two churches that emerged in the course of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic provide implications for exploring the shifts in the state-church relationship in Korea. To further understand this relationship, we will have to conduct more case studies.

The study of the state-church relationship is a central theme in the sociology of religion. This topic is related to several important questions, such as the meaning of religion in the age of secularization, religion's social function, and religious transformation. A further study of state-church relationships will help us understand how religions still secure their legitimacy and function socially in the age of secularization.

Additionally, the state-church relationship is a significant issue in local autonomy and local politics. Regarding the transformation of religion, the subject of 'religious governance' shows how religion maintains its relationship with the government and secures its legitimacy. We may ask: Can religion be cooperatively combined with the government? What local practices can religions engage in with or against governments? How can the material and human resources of religion be utilized in forming governance? What are the possibilities and risks of forming religious governance? Through these discussions, we need to understand how the church will build its identity and justify and realize its beliefs and interests in the future. Ultimately, through these studies, we should be able to construct a new paradigm for state-religion relationships.

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Notes

¹ In 2020 (during the Moon Jae-in administration), Pastor Kwang-Hoon Jeon of Sarang Jeil Church (who was the head of the Korean Christian Federation) continued to hold anti-government rallies in public squares and churches, violating the government's COVID-19 quarantine restrictions.

² Kyunghyang Shinmun. 4 June 1973.

³ Ministry of Health and Welfare. 2 November 2020.

- 4 UCCK (The United Christian Churches of Korea) is a denominational association established in 2017, and CCIK (The Communion of Churches in Korea) is a denominational association that split from the Christian Council of Korea (CCK) in 2012.
- 5 C-Herald. 9 July 2020. <http://www.c-herald.co.kr> (accessed on 27 September 2022).
- 6 https://m.facebook.com/HosannaChurch.21/posts/1122509844802448/?locale=ar_AR&_rdr (accessed on 5 August 2022).
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