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# The Christian Right and Refugee Rights

## The Border Politics of Anti-communism and Anti-discrimination in South Korea

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article examines how the language and logics of the Christian Right in South Korea contributed to the propagation of anti-asylum sentiment during the Yemeni refugee crisis in 2018. By analyzing the Christian Right's historical origins in anti-communism and its moral opposition to anti-discrimination law, it shows how the anti-asylum movement owed much of its support to a conservative Protestant view of international refugee rights, seen through the lens of minority rights at home. Ultimately, it argues that overlaps between religious and national ideologies of anti-communism activate conservative Protestant linkages between moral boundaries and border security.

■ **KEYWORDS:** anti-communism, anti-discrimination, borders, Christian Right, human rights, Islamophobia, persecution, refugees, South Korea

“The main organizers behind the protests,” said bewildered NGO director Eun-Kyoung Koh, “are the two biggest churches on the island.”<sup>1</sup> In April and May 2018, over 500 Yemenis landed in the airport of South Korea's Jeju Island, a popular resort destination known for its white sand beaches and volcanic landscape. Throughout that summer, thousands of protestors belted out slogans like “Kungmin Mönjōda!” (Nation First!) and “Katcha Nanmin Out!” (Fake Refugees Out!) that reverberated between the island and the mainland. A Buddhist and a Jeju native, Koh had not quite grasped the political clout of Christian conservatives until she saw them engineer South Korea's first organized anti-asylum movement nationwide.

By late September 2018, my fellow anthropologist Nathalie Peutz and I were interviewing Koh in her office while a group of Yemenis wrapped up their Korean lessons behind us. Nathalie, a seasoned fieldworker in Yemen and Yemeni refugee camps in the Horn of Africa, sought to learn more about the Yemenis who had traveled east, first to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and then to Jeju.<sup>2</sup> Koh's NGO, Inner Global Peace, was the ideal hub for meeting them since it worked closely with Jeju's Catholic diocese—“the *good* Christians,” as Koh called them—to provide Yemenis with temporary housing, translation assistance, and small work opportunities.



When Koh revealed that Christian conservatives were the architects of the anti-asylum movement, I was not surprised. That summer, I had begun research on evangelical Protestant networks in Seoul, and I was already familiar with their lobbying prowess and legendary public expressions of right-wing nationalism. What did surprise me, however, was how they poured significant resources into opposing such a relatively small cluster of foreign migrants stranded on an island at a distance from the nation's political nucleus in Seoul. The influx of 500 Yemenis, in fact, was a mere sliver of the more than 30,000 foreign migrants concurrently seeking asylum on the mainland (H. Kim 2018; Udor 2019).<sup>3</sup> Christian conservatives, moreover, while known for demonizing sexual minority rights and reconciliation overtures to North Korea, had never before made refugees a target of their opprobrium. By the end of that summer, the Christian Right's sustained activism, via protests and petitions, resulted in the South Korean Ministry of Justice's staggering decision to indefinitely close its borders to Yemenis and deny all but two of the Yemeni asylum applications.

In this article, I examine how the language and logics of the Christian Right drove the rapid propagation of anti-asylum sentiment during the Jeju refugee crisis of 2018. When the 500 Yemeni refugees landed on the Korean Peninsula's southwest coast, their mere presence incited heated debates around questions of migration, human rights, and border control. South Korea's general climate of xenophobia—and, more specifically, Islamophobia—far exceeded the Christian conservative base; indeed, it resembled much of the anti-migrant hostility in 'fortress Europe' that had surged from the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015. Yet in the case of South Korea, it was the Christian Right that proved uniquely effective in tapping into a whole host of anxieties triggered by the figure of 'the refugee', swiftly mass mobilizing them toward the goal of fencing off their borders. Inspired by this empirical observation, I would additionally argue that it is the Christian Right that provides key clues into what is specifically South Korean about Islamophobia and anti-asylum sentiment during this refugee crisis, despite all the superficial similarities across xenophobic rhetoric currently in global circulation. Histories of wars, rights, and security issues specific to Korea, in other words, shaped how the anti-asylum movement that unfolded in Jeju spread to the mainland as well. The outsized influence of South Korea's far-right Christians reveals what those histories are.

Although they comprise no more than 20 percent of the national population, South Korean Protestants have historically played a significant role in political affairs through their organizational networks and international allies. Christian conservatives, in particular, began increasing their political visibility in the 1990s, the decade of South Korea's formal transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in a new post-Cold War world order. During this critical period, the democratization process strengthened the legal protection of civil and human rights and favored more diplomatic and cooperative engagement with North Korea. Much in reaction to these political reforms, the Christian Right in South Korea quickly rose into a leading voice in the conservative opposition movement. Its popular appeal as a social movement was driven by its overriding doctrine of anti-communism and, more specifically, its prioritization of anti-North militarism above the development of civil society and human rights. In this way, the post-Cold War resurgence of the Christian Right, what has also been referred to as 'the New Christian Right' (Suh 2017), played on a generative tension between human rights and national security internal to South Korea's political history.<sup>4</sup>

I want to suggest that the Yemenis' arrival in Jeju triggered this long-standing tension, thus priming the Christian Right to take the lead in the anti-asylum movement in South Korea. The tiny trickle of Yemeni refugees in the summer of 2018 happened to coincide with large, recurrent, and widespread demonstrations linked to the contentious proposal of an anti-discrimination bill (*ch'abyölgümjiböp*). After the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in December

2016, and the subsequent election of President Moon Jae-in in May 2017, activists had been anticipating a wave of changes under the new progressive administration. Arguably the most critical issue at hand was a comprehensive anti-discrimination bill that would bar discrimination in employment and education on the bases of over 20 protected characteristics. The main source of opposition came from Christian conservatives who perceived the anti-discrimination bill to be an anti-Christian infringement on their religious freedom to condemn deviant sexual practices and moral values. Up until the writing of this article, no such bill has been passed in the National Assembly despite multiple attempts since the mid-2000s.

The anti-asylum movement, then, owed much of its support to a conservative Christian view of international refugee rights through the lens of minority rights at home. As asylum-seekers from abroad, Jeju's Yemenis served as a proxy for an already and still present tension between national security and human rights at the heart of the South Korean democratic struggle. At one end of the tension is the impulse to police the southwest border between Jeju Island and the mainland for the sake of national security. This impulse, as I will show, partially originates in an older, Cold War anti-communist preoccupation with militarizing the North-South border. At the other end is the liberal-secular commitment to human rights, from the universal rights claimed by refugees seeking asylum to the legal protections due to cultural, religious, and sexual minorities within the framework of the nation-state. This commitment to human rights is also embedded in the proposed anti-discrimination bill, to the extent that the bill specifies causes and categories of social persecution and minoritarian discrimination. Consequently, any appeal to refugee rights that intersected with the anti-discrimination framework of South Korean law—such as that made by the Yemeni refugees in 2018—was liable to activate pre-existing scripts available in the Christian Right's arsenal of rhetorical weapons. It was thus the Christian Right's long-standing anti-communist identity and their vitriolic opposition to anti-discrimination rights that positioned them at the forefront of anti-asylum politics.

This article builds on my fieldwork in Jeju, carried out in September and December 2018, which involved interviews with refugees, activists, and local residents in addition to a collection of primary sources including government reports and protest paraphernalia. To contextualize these materials, I also draw on South Korean news coverage of the Yemeni migrant crisis for both what it reports about anti-refugee sentiment and what it demonstrates about national media representations of the broader controversy. In what follows, I analyze the Christian Right's opposition to refugee rights in order to explain the border politics of anti-communism and anti-discrimination in three parts. First, I argue that the 'refugee' imaginary in South Korea must be understood in relation to its historical birth in the Korean War and the Cold War. By describing how Jeju's Yemeni guests departed from preconceived ideas of what a refugee looks like, I examine the racial and gendered logics of distinguishing 'fake refugees' from 'real refugees'. Second, I delve into the Christian Right's foundation in anti-communism in order to show how anti-communist tropes shape ideologies of border control and security. More specifically, I examine how conservative Protestant symbols of religious persecution and freedom draw anti-North and Islamophobic rhetoric into the same anti-communist figuration of anti-Christian enemies. Third, I turn to the Christian Right's encounter with anti-discrimination legislation and their strategic efforts to link border insecurity with sexual and religious minorities. These linkages, I aim to show, demonstrate the ways in which Jeju's Yemenis and refugee rights ultimately work as proxies for anti-discrimination debates in the larger context of extant anti-communism and active North-South militarization. Finally, by way of conclusion, I offer reflections on how the Jeju migrant crisis exemplifies the overlap between religious and state anti-communism—one that deeply shapes the Christian Right's orientation toward border security and moral boundaries.

## “Fake Refugees Out”

Following the Jeju Migrant Center’s report released in September 2018, over 90 percent of the 500 Yemeni applicants for refugee status were men with an average age of 28 years. Compared to the many Yemeni families, women, and children seeking asylum in the Horn of Africa, the disproportionately young and male character of the Yemenis who landed in South Korea was remarkable (Peutz 2019).<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of them, moreover, were skilled, middle-class professionals who sported Nikes and smart phones (ibid.) and arrived via non-stop flights from Kuala Lumpur. Some of them even pointed out how their middle-class appearance troubled conventional notions of what a refugee looks like in South Korea. For instance, when one Jeju hostel owner had asked him why, if he was a refugee, he was able to dress so well, a 22-year-old from Sanaa recounted to an audience of Jeju residents: “I was shocked. Being a refugee doesn’t mean that I have to be poor. I was working in Malaysia for two years, so I bought these shoes with my own money.”<sup>6</sup>

According to various news outlets, rampant protest slogans like “Fake Refugees Out” and “Nation First” transmitted widespread impressions that the Yemenis were imposters feigning persecuted status to procure jobs illegally or, worse, that they were parasites aiming to sap the country of its resources and opportunities (Cho 2018). The fact that they were young Arab men from the Muslim Middle East also prompted racist and Islamophobic accusations that the Yemenis were rapists, criminals, and terrorists (Söng-u Pak 2018; Su-jin Pak 2018). Other protestors emphasized their right to express their fears about who the Yemenis were and what they were bringing with them by invoking the authoritarian trope of national security: “It is not about hate [*hyömo*]. We want safety [*anjön*]” (Choe 2018).

Mass imaginaries of the ‘fake refugee’ amplified xenophobic anxieties about the porous state of South Korea’s borders. The idea of the ‘fake refugee’ ostensibly recognizes a model of refugee rights based on universal human rights, but denies that universal human rights applies in the particular case at hand since the refugees are ‘fake’. As the anti-migrant slogans best captured it, opposing rapists, criminals, and terrorists is not about ‘hate’ but about ‘safety’. The ‘fake refugee’ trope, furthermore, is typical of far-right nationalist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic propaganda in global circulation elsewhere, for example, in Europe and the United States.

What distinguishes the South Korean variation on the ‘fake refugee’ claim are ethnic and racial images of the ‘real refugee’ that further drive xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments. The Cold War territorial division of the Korean Peninsula led to early ‘war refugee’ (*p’inanmin*) border crossings between the mid-1940s and early 1950s. After the Korean War reached an armistice, a disproportionately high percentage of Protestant Christians in the South ended up as displaced migrants of North Korean origin to the extent that the term *wöllum p’inanmin* (war refugee crossers to the South) became synonymous with ‘Christians’ and ‘anti-communists’ (Chung 2008). By 1992, when South Korea adopted the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,<sup>7</sup> it was the specific figure of the *North Korean* refugee who was imagined and addressed as the subject of protection and sometimes religious salvation. Within a couple of decades, the South Korean government had granted asylum to over 30,000 North Korean migrants, 70 percent of whom were women and over 80 percent of whom sought resettlement support from churches and Christian organizations (Chee 2015; Jung 2015).

Thus, notwithstanding its legal roots in ‘universal’ human rights discourse, the South Korean profile of the ‘refugee’ presumes ethno-nationalist and gendered ideas of what a ‘real refugee’ looks like. This profile is also shaped by popular perceptions of North Korean and Vietnamese impoverished women and children escaping communism via boat or overland (N. H. Kim 2021).<sup>8</sup> To be sure, aspects of this image of the ideal refugee are far from Korean-specific; rather, they are embedded in a larger, international liberal human rights discourse centered around

passive victims in need of aid (Malkki 1996). Yet for South Korean evangelicals, this history of refugee aid rendered the ‘real refugee’ not only destitute and feminized, but also distinctly anti-communist and Christian.

Majority male and middle-class, the Yemeni refugees acquired the ‘fake refugee’ label precisely because they departed from a universally feminized and destitute portrait of the ‘refugee’. According to Jeju-based activist Gayoon Baek, the refugee crisis prompted the South Korean public to challenge their understanding of refugee rights to include not only humanitarian concerns but also the legal domain of human rights at the heart of which are “the concepts of autonomy and self-determination.”<sup>9</sup> By seeking asylum on the grounds of universal human rights, the Yemeni refugees in Jeju disrupted the framework of refugee rights narrowly predicated on humanitarian aid (e.g., food assistance, sanitation and hygiene, emergency medical care, etc.). Indeed, some of the refugees I interviewed were themselves not comfortable with being identified as ‘refugees’ because of their own pre-conceived notions of asylum-seekers as choiceless victims and passive recipients. They were simply looking for work in a safe place so they could send money back to their families trapped in a war zone.<sup>10</sup>

What the ‘fake refugee’ idea further enabled was a gendered appeal to national security, civilian safety, and border control. The image of the ‘real refugee’, together with globally common Islamophobic portrayals of young Muslim men as presumptive terrorists, allowed for the anti-asylum campaign to appeal to safety. The gendered nature of Islamophobia was especially magnified in light of the overwhelmingly male and Muslim caricature of the Yemeni refugees in public discourse (Kim et al. 2020). Ironically, a number of Yemenis whom we interviewed self-identified as ‘atheist’ and recounted experiences of persecution back home in Yemen due to their *disavowal* of Islam. Feminists highlighted Yemen’s poor women’s rights record and the fact that only male refugees had made it to South Korea’s shores.<sup>11</sup> Others charged the Yemenis with morally deviant hypersexual qualities, equating Islam with sexual violence against women and sexual violence with border control (Koo 2018; cf. Ticktin 2008). False conflation like these ended up contributing to what Nami Kim (2018) has referred to as a ‘dangerous solidarity’ (*wihömhān yōndaē*) among Christian conservatives, ethno-nationalists, and feminists in the anti-asylum campaign (cf. N. Kim 2016).

Figural threats at the border therefore turned on the gendered, ethno-racial, and socio-economic terms of marking ‘fake refugees’ and distinguishing them from ‘real refugees’. As soon as Islamophobic tropes began entering the larger xenophobic imagination, evangelical Christians acquired a powerful platform for pronouncing the distinctly religious and moral threat of Muslims to national security. More specifically, it was the Christian Right’s ability to harness pre-existing anti-communist scripts of anti-Christian persecution that enabled conservatives to effectively propagate Islamophobic symbols to the public writ large.

### The Christian Right’s Origins in Anti-Communism

In 2006, Jeju was granted special autonomous status to run an independent visa policy and promote tourism development, leading to an influx of migrant mainland and Chinese settlers. Before the 1990s, Jeju was among the poorer South Korean provinces, isolated from the country’s leading cities and tainted with the political stigma of communist uprisings and civilian upheaval. Decades later, the Yemenis entered into a densely layered island enveloping histories of migration with contending imaginaries of persecution, violence, and war.

Shortly after the Yemenis’ arrival, Korean missionaries hailing from Jeju’s two megachurches—Youngnak Presbyterian Church and Seongahn Presbyterian Church (mentioned by

Koh)—descended on them.<sup>12</sup> Some of them were missionaries-in-training or Christians planning to build churches in specifically Muslim societies, or in the Middle East more generally. As reported in one Korean Evangelical daily newspaper, a South Korean missionary referred to the Yemenis' first three to six months in Jeju as "the golden time" for Christians to help them and ultimately prevent them from becoming "extremist Muslims" (Hwang and Ahn-Park 2018). A few Yemenis bristled at the proselytizing efforts of these evangelists. As one self-professed atheist and architect from Saada summed up with exasperation: "We fled from *da'wa* [invitation to Islam] to arrive in a place where there is also *da'wa* [invitation to Christianity]."

That the missionizing energies of Korean evangelicals were directed at the Yemeni foreigners is a partial outcome of pre-existing migrant histories and persecution tropes. Since the 1990s, Korean evangelical missionaries have traveled to post-communist and Muslim-majority countries because they are perceived to be critical geographic zones unreached by Christianity (Han 2010). The case of Jeju's Yemenis additionally reveals how the globalization of Korean Christianity has resulted in a specific style of mission encounter with the foreigner migrant inside the nation's borders: the 'Muslim' from an 'Arab' and 'Islamic' country. Imagined as dangerous rather than pristine, the post-communist and Islamic regions further signify the global persecution of Christians in contexts hostile to Christianity.

Nowhere else in Jeju better depicts this convergence of global evangelism and persecution images from the Arab Muslim world than the missionary memorial at Youngnak Church. In the megachurch's front courtyard, a stone monument honors Reverend Bae Hyung-Gyu (1965–2007), one of two Korean missionaries killed in Taliban captivity. In the summer of 2007, 23 South Korean missionary aid workers were kidnapped in Afghanistan and held hostage for ransom from the South Korean government. At that time, all 23 were members of a megachurch in Seoul, but Bae was also a Jeju native who had spent his childhood and adolescence in Jeju Youngnak Church. Engraved in his memorial, Bae's epitaph highlights the death of one whose commitment "ultimately led him to Afghanistan where he died as a martyr [*sun'gyo*] for Christ with dignity and grace."

Mission and martyrdom are foundational themes entwined in origin narratives of the Korean Christian Right. In the early years of nation building after the Korean War, a small circle of Protestants devoted themselves to mass evangelism and church building, eventually giving rise to conversion waves by the 1970s and spawning the most prominent megachurches throughout South Korea. These Protestants, moreover, were staunchly anti-communist, supplying the religious images and theological lenses for anti-communist nationalism during the Cold War's zenith. As Korean church historians have argued, their religious reproduction of anti-communism significantly relied on collective imaginaries of martyrdom, persecution, suffering, and oppression at the hands of the North (Choi 2012; Yoon 2017). In the 1950s, and then again in the 1980s, the Presbyterian Church of Korea generated a roster of roughly 400 Christians killed by the communist army during the Korean War, sanctifying them as 'martyrs'.<sup>13</sup> The evangelical mission of converting South Korea into a 'Christian nation' was further bolstered by anti-communist imaginaries of persecution and violence from the civil war to the Cold War.

It was hardly a coincidence, moreover, that the missionary-martyr Bae Hyung-Gyu had been spiritually cultivated in Jeju's Youngnak Church. With its original founding headquarters in Seoul, Youngnak Church, which includes its various regional and international branches, remains the flagship institution for perpetuating martyrs on behalf of the Christian faith. It is widely known that Youngnak served as one of the central post-war churches for North Korean refugees (*wöllamin*) (In-Cheol Kang 2004; Rivé-Lasan 2013; Yoon 2017). Initially aided by the US military government, Youngnak gained both admiration and notoriety as a Cold War institution of extreme anti-communism. Its pastoral leadership and congregational constituencies

are those Christians originating from the northwest region of Korea and who self-identify as ‘war refugees’ and ‘escapees’ from the communist forces of North Korea. Younknak, in a word, is a major institution in Korean Protestantism, unique for its distinctive emphasis on refugees from religious persecution and martyrs for anti-communism.

Anti-communism casts an especially dark, repressive shadow over the history of Jeju Island. Whereas the Christian Right commemorates hundreds of victims of the North Korean army, generations of Jeju natives suffer from gruesome memories of joint South Korean-American military violence. Regarded as the deadliest civilian mass killing in modern Korean history, the April 3 Massacre of 1948 involved the military slaughter of thousands suspected to be ‘leftists’ and ‘reds.’ By the Korean War’s outbreak, churches had grown and developed due to their anti-communist spirit led by the 30,000 displaced refugees from North Korea who ended up settling in Jeju. In 1952, when Younknak established its Jeju branch where Bae’s memorial currently stands, Jeju locals recognized its youth members to be leaders of the Northwest Youth League (Söbukchöngnyöndan). The League was a right-wing paramilitary group that had aided local police and military in rooting out communists during the April 3 Massacre, what one Jeju local and scholar refers to as “the first *persecution* of communists in Cold War Asia-Pacific history” (Gwon 2015: 97; emphasis added). The origin of the Christian Right in Jeju progressed from the evangelistic conversion of Korean nationals to an anti-communist brand of faith. Its mission hinged on acts of violence understood to be acts of defense against communist invasion and associated threats of persecution.

Christian conservatism in Jeju therefore necessarily raises questions about which agents and victims of violence are privileged in the making of memory. The figure of the ‘refugee’ is central to this moral and political construction of the past, and Protestant commemorations of martyrdom have been crucial for maintaining the historically hegemonic narrative of anti-communist persecution. Yet the elevation of the missionary-martyr was not inevitable; other grids of commemoration and genealogies of displacement are present in Jeju’s history. For example, historians of Korean refugee movement, from the American occupation and throughout the Korean War, have noted how Jeju served as a maritime borderland for “boat people” escaping violence to Japan’s ports (Morris-Suzuki 2011). Similarly, anthropologists of religion have analyzed the shamanic lamentation rituals and ancestral grave burials held for victims of the April 3 Massacre (S. N. Kim 2019; Kwon 2009). Against the backdrop of Jeju’s history, Younknak Church’s hegemonic narratives of Christians persecuted by communist North Korea or, later, in post-Soviet and Islamic-majority sites of missionization did politically contentious work in the field of collective memory. Images of religious persecution granted the Christian Right a new lease on life after democratization, during a new national era of peace and healing when the South Korean public was reckoning with the atrocities of the authoritarian and anti-communist state.

Anti-communist martyrs and North Korean refugees, in other words, are selectively highlighted elements from layered histories of fugitivity and civil war that generated a spectrum of victims and asylum-seekers. When the Yemeni refugees landed in South Korea’s outermost maritime periphery, they became a flash point for the Christian Right’s reclamation of persecution politics in a place notorious for its horrific history of anti-communist violence. Fleeing brutal conditions of civil war, many with the scars of atheists and Muslims who did not meet the criterion for either Houthi loyalty or Wahhabi piety, these Yemenis encountered yet another geographic zone of internal division and mass civilian displacement in Jeju.

It was from within this fraught encounter between two historical locations of civil war that religious imaginaries of mission and martyrdom mobilized evangelism after the arrival of unexpected ‘Muslim’ guests. Commemorative sites of martyrdom, such as Younknak’s Bae Hyung-Gyu memorial, resurrect the notion of ‘Christianity’s enemies’ by invoking Islamic terrorism in a site

historically known for honoring victims of communist terrorism. The anti-communist function of the communist persecutor is thus taken over by the imaginary figure of the Muslim persecutor. The common thread in this figuration is Christian ‘safety’, secured, if necessary, by violence.

## Equating Anti-discrimination with Refugee Rights

Persecution, then, is a key concept for aligning Protestant Christianity with the nation and thus for producing rhetorical claims to safety. The archetypal ‘real refugee’ (North Korean, feminine) is imagined not only as persecuted, but as persecuted for Christianity—archetypally by communism, but increasingly also by Islam, atheism, and LGBTQ-friendly secular humanism. Even as the Christian Right exerts significant influence in South Korean politics, its self-definition through narratives of Christian martyrdom and persecution persist to the degree that the status of the persecuted is viewed as ‘Christian’ by default. Safeguarding Korea’s Christian elements has therefore translated into advancing Christian conservative ideologies of global evangelism and martyrdom on one front, while warding off the liberalizing incursion of human rights on another.

In this section, I argue that conservative Christian frames shape the South Korean national imaginary by mobilizing anti-communist discourses to align the image of the democratic nation with the protection of specifically conservative Christian practices and beliefs. This alignment is effectively illustrated in the Christian Right’s rhetoric when protesting against the nation’s protection of religious and sexual minorities. During my visit to the Bae Hyung-Gyu memorial, I discovered a stack of flyers in Youngnak Church’s foyer encouraging church members to participate in anti-refugee protests. A possible source of the flyer is the Jeju Island Christian Council Association (Chejudo Kidokkyogyodanhgyöbühoe), a consortium of Jeju’s evangelicals with active ties to conservative organizations such as the Christian Council of Korea on the mainland (Byön 2018).

The flyer exhorted members to protest Jeju’s Second Annual Queer Festival, scheduled for that September in Sinsan Park, one of the island’s public spaces for protecting the homeless. Although the protest was directed at an ostensibly domestic and local LGBTQ event, the flyer is infused with the language of border security:

Heaven for homosexuals and refugees, Korea!!  
Visa-free Jeju Island is in danger!!  
“Protect homosexuality and recognize refugee claims related to sexual orientation”—  
UNHCR, November 2008  
Korean refugee recognition: Pakistani homosexual refugee (January 2010) and Ugandan  
bisexual refugee (July 2017)  
Muslims and homosexual refugees will come after hearing visa-free rumors!!  
What’s next? Anti-Discrimination Act!\*

\*Anti-Discrimination Act: An evil law that punishes you when you are against a minority (homosexuality, Islam, refugees, etc.)<sup>14</sup>

The flyer exemplifies how conservative Protestant political activism mapped domestic debates about anti-discrimination law to the Yemeni refugee crisis, so that “homosexuals and refugees” and “Muslims and homosexual refugees” appear as unified categories posing a “danger” to Jeju Island. Insecure borders, in the form of Jeju’s visa-free policy, are imagined as conducive to a domestic threat in the form of anti-discrimination legislation: “What’s next? Anti-Discrimination Act!” The already planned Second Annual Queer Festival is the target of the protest, yet the



flyer describes foreign refugees as frighteningly present, while domestic gay rights are “What’s next.” Thus, the Yemeni refugees are framed as instigators of domestic anti-discrimination legislation and therefore as persecutors engendering a law that “punishes you,” that is, the religious subject, who is enjoined by the flyer to protest the Queer Festival. The flyer rhetorically externalizes the origins of the movement for anti-discrimination legislation and aligns the safety of the nation with the protection of anti-gay conservative Christian beliefs and practices.

This move also echoes previous rhetorical tactics of the right-wing Protestant Christian Liberal Party’s slogan: “No to homosexuality, no to Islam, no to anti-Christianity” (Han 2016). The endpoint of LGBTQ rights and acceptance of putatively Muslim refugees, this language proposes, is ‘anti-Christianity’, or the persecution of Christians.<sup>15</sup> This imaginary telos of anti-Christianity, moreover, is expressive of far-right Christian ideologies belonging to a subset of Christian conservatives irreducible to Youngnak’s constituents or even the Jeju Island Christian Council Association.

The proposed anti-discrimination bill of 2017 addressed the rights of primarily Korean citizens, yet conservative Christian rhetoric successfully tied the proposed legislation to the Yemeni refugee crisis and an imagined Muslim refugee. This link was made plausible by the refugees’ appeal to a discourse of universal human rights, which allied refugee rights with the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities, as signaled by the quotation of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) on the anti-Queer Festival protest flyer. While the liberal language of human rights specifically seeks protection for gay Muslims who might require asylum (from other Muslims), the flyer ‘queers’ Islam by construing the UNHCR statement as calling for the protection of a conflated category of Muslims and homosexuals.

This configuration—which, on the one hand, suppresses the existence of actual gay Muslims and the specific politics in which they might be embedded in their home countries and, on the other hand, casts all Muslim border crossers as potential sexually deviant ‘terrorist’ figures—is familiar in the context of homonationalism in the US (Puar 2017). Yet its manifestation in the South Korean context produces an imagined threat to national security on significantly different terms. This is nowhere more evident than in the figure of the *jongbuk gai*, or ‘gay follower of North Korea’ (Chee 2015; Han 2016; N. Kim 2016; In-Cheol Kang 2018). *Jongbuk* (follower of North Korea) is a red-baiting term used by the South Korean right to associate various political opponents with communism and warrant surveillance and other forms of state intervention in the name of national security. The figure of the *jongbuk gai* is thus notable because it is not immediately obvious what the LGBTQ status might have to do with North Korea, which is not particularly known for its queer-friendliness. Sarah Eunkyung Chee (2015: 251) explains the connection in familiar biopolitical terms: “Both are threats to the nation . . . Not only were gays having sex, but they were having ‘unproductive’ sex; that is, sex that would not result in the reproduction of the nation. Thus, homosexuality was weakening South Korean society.”

Several scholars have rightly explored the generalized connotations of various potential threats to population growth that emerge in the rhetoric of conservative Protestantism, roughly in line with the biopolitical logic that Chee unfolds (Han 2016; N. Kim 2016). Building on this work, I suggest that we can trace an even more specific border imaginary in the association of these threats to life with North Korean communism in particular. As Nami Kim (2016: 106) usefully summarizes: “The Protestant Right’s ‘new enemy’ is LGBT persons and their allies, but this ‘new enemy’ does not replace the perpetual enemy, that is, communists, pro-North sympathizers, or leftists.” Indeed, this ‘new enemy’ often serves as a proxy for the communist perpetual enemy. Moreover, as the Yemeni refugee crisis revealed, through their common appeal to human rights, the LGBTQ ‘new enemy’ could serve as the unlikely conceptual link between Yemeni asylum-seekers and communism. The Yemeni refugees’ appeal to human rights language was seen to

open the door to anti-discrimination legislation that drew on the same concepts and thus to gay rights. Crucially, in the path from foreign refugee to gay South Korean to communist North Korea, the biopolitical threat to population life (i.e., national security) was produced as identical to threats to conservative Christian beliefs (i.e., the threat of persecution).

Such (putative) threats ultimately gain traction at the highly charged North-South border. The militarized border is a privileged site of imagined national security, as evidenced in the high social value placed on men's compulsory military service in South Korea: "Military service is seen as a necessary act of loyalty and the price of membership to the nation of South Korea" (Chee 2015: 263). As discussed in the previous section, an anti-communism premised on the rescue of persecuted or martyred Protestant Christians from atheist communism is pivotal in understanding conservative Christian identification with the nation. The figure of the *jongbuk gai* derives its logic not only from a general biopolitical frame (e.g., unproductive sex) but from a more specific claim that homosexuality, primarily between men, weakens the military presence at the North-South border and thus poses a specifically communist threat to national security. Such anxieties are evident in the contradiction between legally compulsory—and highly socially valued—military service for South Korean men and the marginalization of gay service members as "special interest soldiers" who are potentially subject to mental evaluation or a highly stigmatizing dishonorable discharge (N. Kim 2016: 103). Article 92 of the Military Law, which infamously criminalizes same-sex intimacy and categorizes consensual sex together with rape, was ruled constitutional by the Constitutional Court of Korea in 2011 (ibid.: 104). Protestant leaders have consistently framed gay men and LGBTQ activism that agitates for their rights as destabilizing to the military and thus providing openings to communist incursion. The anti-discrimination bill that was at issue in 2017, and the gay rights that it would have secured, was thus understood as an affront to the necessity of ongoing militarization at the North-South border.

A final event from the period of the Jeju migrant crisis helps to illustrate how Protestant anti-communism covertly animated anti-asylum activism. In November 2018, during the migrant crisis and at the height of anti-refugee sentiment, the South Korean Supreme Court acquitted over 900 conscientious objectors, mostly Jehovah's Witnesses, who had refused to serve in the military because of their religious beliefs. This ruling incited the Christian Right once again to mobilize protests against the proposed anti-discrimination law and human rights in the name of national security. In mid-November, the anti-refugee movement held a rally to demonstrate against the landmark ruling, arguing that the government's protection of conscientious objectors would allow an increasing number of men fleeing civil war to file for refugee status as 'conscientious objectors' in their home countries. According to one of the organizers of the rally: "If a large number of healthy foreign men who claim to be refugees enter the country, it could cause instability, terrorism, and sex crimes ... the fact that the victims are mainly women and children are the reason why we held the rally" (T. Kim 2018).<sup>16</sup>

Protestant opposition to conscientious objection or alternative service is not a given on its face. After all, opposition to pacifism is not a core Protestant theological tenet. Moreover, most conscientious objectors were literally churched (albeit of a different, and ostracized, sect), having been imprisoned by the state for their religious beliefs—presumably the very kinds of people whom conservative Christians would wish to protect. However, as In-Cheol Kang (2018: 49) has argued, the concerted "religious militarism" evident in South Korean Protestantism is rooted in anti-communism. The conscientious objector—in the most literal terms a persecuted Christian—thus cannot be seen literally, but rather comes under the sign of the same human rights discourse applied to LGBTQ activists and refugees as a threat to national security. The rally against the ruling in November 2018 echoed the flyer at Youngnak Church, insofar as an ostensibly unrelated domestic group claiming anti-discrimination protections was taken as a

target of anti-migrant protest. In the organizer's words, the chain of logic is repeated: extending protections to foreign asylum-seekers means extending them to domestic South Koreans who, in abstaining from military service, are undermining an altogether different border and opening the door to communism. To be sure, by invoking a threat to 'women and children,' the rally organizer also called upon classic biopolitical tropes of national life generation. The fact that the acquittal of 900 conscientious objectors brought about the protest points to the centrality of North-South border security in how the source of threat was imagined. The Yemeni migrants thus once again became a proxy for a battle over domestic anti-discrimination law, and thus also became subject to the same pre-existing anti-communist narratives that uphold Protestant claims of persecution.

Evangelical Protestant activism has effectively mobilized ideas of border security to its own ends, in part, because *all* border politics are liable to invoke the politics of the North-South border, whether overtly or covertly. Indeed, questions of universal human rights, the figure of the 'fake refugee,' and anti-discrimination politics serve as the link between the South Korean border as such (e.g., visa-free Jeju Island) and the militarized North-South border. In this logic, porosity to gay and Muslim refugees at Jeju Island's maritime border leads to porosity at the North-South border in the form of weakened military presence, and thus a heightened threat from Christian-persecuting communism. Asylum-seeking refugees—framed as aiding sexual minorities whether or not they are themselves sexual minorities—are thus portrayed as posing as much of a threat to the North-South border as to the border that they actually cross.

## Conclusion

Conservative Christian politics in South Korea takes up themes that are similar to conservative Christian social agendas elsewhere, such as anti-gay activism and Islamophobia. Yet the forms that these agendas take in South Korea, and the source of their broader social traction, have their roots in a specific border imaginary with Cold War-era anti-communism at its center. Social issues that appear unrelated, such as the #MeToo movement, are rhetorically folded into a national security frame that understands compromises to normative forms of masculinity, the family, or the military as compromises to border security and the North-South border in particular. Thus, despite appearing dated or even obsolete in other national contexts, anti-communism remains a live political force in South Korea (D.-C. Kim 2017; N. Lee 2002). Moreover, anti-communism is a political ground on which evangelical Protestants have aligned themselves with the nation with enormous success, since anti-communism had been "the national policy of South Korea" since the Korean War (N. Lee 2002: 46). Communism is framed as a threat to national security at the North-South border and, simultaneously, as a threat to Christians who are putatively likely to be persecuted by communists. If anti-communism is, as Dong-Choon Kim (2017: 1) argues, "a chronic 'enemy-making' project" that is directed as much at the control of internal dissidents as it is toward resisting geopolitical others, it also functions as a shifting value that can be understood on more religious or secular terms as the case warrants. Conservative Protestant politics in South Korea is thus highly successful at mobilizing a national imaginary rooted in anti-communism.

The Jeju migrant crisis exemplifies this overlap between religious and state anti-communism, sometimes in counter-intuitive ways. As I have argued, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the global decline of communism's standing as a geopolitical enemy, evangelical South Korean missionary and martyrdom discourses have produced Islam as continuous with earlier communist persecutors of Christianity and threats to the nation. As the Jeju migrant crisis reveals,

rhetorical tactics that on their face appear continuous with, if not identical to, familiar European and US right-wing Islamophobic and xenophobic arguments draw covert political potency from the ways in which migrants from Muslim-majority areas, regardless of whether the migrants themselves identify as Muslim, can be framed as the Christian-persecuting successors to North Korean communists.

Moreover, the depiction of asylum-seekers as dangerous terrorists, rapists, or criminals converges with a separate critique that portrays them as opening the door to a *domestic* threat—the ‘communist within’ (LGBTQ activists, feminists, supporters of anti-discrimination legislation, conscientious objectors)—through their appeal to a liberal discourse of human rights. Anti-communism once again serves as a labile site at which the protection of conservative Christian religious beliefs (e.g., understanding homosexuality as an affront to God) can be made to appear consonant with, and sometimes identical to, national security (e.g., understanding homosexuality in the military as a challenge to North-South border security). The configurations of the seemingly disproportionate conservative Protestant activism that emerged in response to the Jeju migrant crisis disclose the multiple ways in which anti-communism interarticulates Christian Right and national identities in South Korea. Discourses of border security that appear on their face to differ little from other international contexts are, on closer inspection, infused with South Korean Protestant martyrology. Conversely, conservative Christian stances that do not seem specifically Korean emerge as deeply indebted to a border imaginary whose ultimate reference is the militarized North-South border. These overlaps between state and religious imaginaries on the grounds of anti-communism help to explain what conservative Protestants perceived to be at stake in the Yemeni migrants’ claims: not only a literal, physical border but a series of long-standing and highly charged battles over boundaries in both political and spiritual registers.

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#### ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research for this article was supported by the Korea Foundation, the Academy of Korean Studies, and the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies. I am grateful to Jeju Dark Tours, the Naomi Center, and Inner Global Peace in Jeju for their time and generous insights during our fieldwork trips. I would also like to thank Natalia Aki Cecire, Jennifer Hough, Junho Lee, and Jisu Yeom for their invaluable research assistance at different stages of this article’s preparation.

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**NOTES**

1. Interview with Devika Eun-Kyoung Koh, 20 September 2018.
2. This article is solely focused on Christian conservative responses to the Yemeni refugees. For the Yemenis' accounts and experiences of the anti-asylum movement in South Korea, see Peutz and Heo (forthcoming).
3. These numbers do not include the 30,000 North Koreans currently seeking asylum in South Korea.
4. In this article, I refer to those Protestant conservatives who opposed Yemeni refugee rights as 'the Christian Right' for the sake of convenience. In invoking this term, the internal factions and ideological commitments within the Christian Right—namely, the historical and generational differences between 'the Old Right' and 'the New Right'—are subsumed under the political framework of anti-communism. For a more nuanced counter-genealogy of the New Right that focuses instead on the neoliberal strands of conservative reform, see Suh (2018).
5. The Yemenis going to Jeju expended significant sums of money traveling solo via Kuala Lumpur. Some dealt with expensive brokers, while others took high-risk trips out of their villages and Yemen.
6. Fieldwork notes for "Colorful Workshop X NoProbland" fundraising event, 19 September 2018.
7. According to the international legal definition enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR 2010: 3).
8. This perception is also supported by evidence. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, roughly 70 percent of North Korean refugees were female and approximately 20 percent were children or adolescents (Chung 2008).
9. Interview with Gayoon Baek, 20 September 2018.
10. Studies have argued the same for North Korean migrants (Song 2016).
11. The fascinating convergence of feminist movements and anti-refugee protests in 2018 merits further study. To learn how this intersection vibrantly unfolded on digital media, see Kim et al. (2020).
12. See more about Chejuyöngnakkyohoe (Jeju Youngnak Presbyterian Church) at <http://www.jejuyn.or.kr/>, and Chejusöngan'gyohoe (Jeju Seongahn Church) at <http://www.jeuseongahn.org/>.
13. Although the scholarship on anti-communist martyrs is mostly in Korean, Choi's (2012) dissertation provides a useful review of this literature in English.
14. In Korean, the text reads as follows: "Tongsöngaenanminchönguk, Han'guk!! ... Taümdan'gyenün? Ch'abyölgümjiböpchejöng! Ch'abyölgümjiböp: sosuja (tongsöngae, Isüllam, nanmindüng) ülbändae hamyönchöbörhanünakpöp!"
15. On the day of the Christian Liberty Party's official registration (1 March 2016), the party's rallying cry was "We will defeat the pro-homosexuality anti-discrimination law, pass laws that forbid Islam and anti-Christianity, and cut down the culture of Satan. Ours will be a world-class moral revolution and change the spiritual flow of human history" (Lee 2016). The Christian Liberty Party (Kidokchayudang) later changed its name to Christian Liberty Unification Party (Kidokchayut'ongildang). For their web pages, see <http://clparty.kr/>. For more on the party's trilateral platform of "anti-antiChristianity, anti-Islam, and anti-homosexuality," see In-gyu Kang (2016). See also N. Kim (2016) and Han (2016).
16. With this language, the protestors resurrected the threat of 'fake refugees' fleeing military duties in their own civil wars back home. There was some truth to this speculation: many of the Yemenis did not want to fight for either the Saudi-backed Yemeni government or the Houthi armed movement for various reasons, including disgust with the proxy wars of outside powers in their country and even commitments to pacifism. However, it is precisely the overriding Islamophobic image of violence—terrorism and foreign invasion—that falsely displaced these Yemenis who themselves were seeking asylum from terrorism and foreign invasion.

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