

## G-SEC WORKING PAPER No.17

### Religion, Nationalism, and Historiography: Remembering An Chunggŭn

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#### **Abstract**

An Chunggŭn, a Korean nationalist most famous for the assassination of Itō Hirobumi is almost universally recognized by Koreans. Excommunicated for killing Itō, his sentence was only lifted in 1993. Many Catholics in Korea, stung by the Catholic Church's official acceptance of Japanese rule during the colonial period, have sought to capitalize on An's nationalist credentials while downplaying his excommunication. Catholic scholars seek to do this by finding ways to legitimize his actions without being too critical of the Catholic Church. There are also efforts at the popular level. The Catholic Street Missionary Association publishes an inexpensive pamphlet to be handed out to prospective Catholics. The cover of the 2005 edition features pictures of Pope John Paul II, Mother Theresa, and An Chunggŭn. Inside the pamphlet is a short biography of An, stressing his nationalism and Catholicism and declaring the union between faith and love of country, papering over the sharp divisions that can arise between the two as evidenced by An's excommunication.

This paper will examine Korean perspectives on An and his place in Korean and Catholic history and will highlight the tension that exists between the demands of nation and faith and how they shape historiography and memory.

**Keywords:** nationalism, religion, historiography, Korea, Japan

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National and religious identities are of central importance to our world today and have often had a complex and contentious relationship. Though conceptually it might seem that nation and religion occupy different spaces, the nation the particular and religion the universal, their role in the everyday lives of members of a nation and a religious community cannot be so neatly divided. In fact, people who feel an attachment both to their nation and their religion may have conflicting demands made upon them by these two poles of authority.

This is especially true in Korea. The division of the peninsula into two states that have both claimed to be the true representative of the Korean nation, and the religious diversity that is present in the Republic of Korea, makes the nation and religion particularly sensitive topics. Koreans who have religious faith and identify strongly with their nation and the demand of nationalism that each nation should have its own state find themselves in a particular difficulty as they seek both to preserve their own faith, which makes them different from other Koreans not of their religious community, while affirming the basic oneness of the Korean people.

Korean Catholics face special difficulties. During the colonial period the Catholic Church essentially collaborated with the Japanese authorities. For example, foreign missionaries often sought to discourage Koreans from taking part in nationalist activities.<sup>1</sup> Faced with such a difficult historical legacy, some Korean Catholics have sought to resolve the conflicts in a way that maintains the moral legitimacy of both the nation and the Catholic faith. One focal point for this project is the life of An Chunggŭn. An, a convert to Catholicism during the waning days of the Chosŏn dynasty often found himself in conflict with the leaders of his church because of his nationalism. This

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea, *Korean Catholic Church and the Nationalist Movement*.

struggle came to a head in 1909 when An killed Itō Hirobumi, the first Resident-General of Korea, an act for which he suffered excommunication. He was under this sentence until it was lifted in 1993 by Stephen Cardinal Kim.<sup>2</sup> Despite this difficult history, Korean Catholics have sought not only to rehabilitate An but to put him forward as an ideal model of someone who successfully united patriotism and faith.

The conflict An faced mirrors that felt by those Korean Catholics who are strongly attached to their faith and to the Korean nation. Therefore, Korean Catholic efforts to rehabilitate An can be understood as attempts to resolve the conflict between nation and religion. Furthermore, Korean Catholics have sought to use the life and thought of An to address contemporary issues faced by Koreans. This is indicative of efforts to make religion relevant to the nation and vice versa. Together, Korean Catholic efforts to rehabilitate An, their perspectives on him, and their efforts to apply his life and thought to contemporary issues, can tell us much about the relationship between faith and nation and the role of religion in Korean society.

As I am in the early stages of my research I have confined myself almost solely to materials that focus on An Chunggŭn after the lifting of his excommunication in 1993. In addition, I have focused on the work of Korean Catholics. It is my hope to later expand my research to include more non-Catholic Korean, Chinese, and Japanese perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Baker (1997) p. 166

## *The Life of An Chunggŭn*

Before examining Korean Catholic perspectives on An Chunggŭn it is necessary to briefly examine his life. An was born in 1879 into a *yangban* (gentry) family of some means in Hwanghae province in the northern part of Korea. His grandfather held a minor position in the Chosŏn dynasty government and his father, T'aehun, was locally known for his Confucian learning. An's father also had something of a reformist streak. In fact, he was among a number of students who were to be sent to China for modern military training. However, when his patron fell out of favor, T'aehun, fearing that factional politics being what they were, took his family and moved to a more remote part of the province.

An Chunggŭn wrote fondly of his childhood in his autobiography. Living in a more wild area suited his personality. He preferred hunting and riding horses to studying, and when his childhood friends teased him, saying that he was a son unworthy of his scholarly father, he responded that like the ancient king Hangu, he needed only to know how to write his name. Despite this, An studied the Confucian Classics and learned to read and write Classical Chinese. It is worth noting that An, though a nationalist, would write his autobiography in Classical Chinese rather than in *hang'gul*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1894, when An was still relatively young, a rebellion inspired by the Tonghak religion broke out. A group of Tonghak, though some have argued that they were in fact bandits operating under the Tonghak name, menaced An's village.<sup>4</sup> In response to this threat, An's father raised a militia and despite being outnumbered, led his forces in

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<sup>3</sup> An (1995) pp. 23-26.

<sup>4</sup> *Han'guk Kat'ollik taesajon pondangsa pyup'yon* (1985) p. 779.

a victory which smashed the Tonghak army. An, though still a teenager, played an important role in the battle. In his autobiography, An proudly notes that a Japanese official recognized his father's role in putting down the rebellion in that part of Korea.

Shortly after the battle, a Korean official, arguing that because T'aehun had defeated the Tonghak, he must have recovered the rice they had stolen from him and was therefore liable for it. T'aehun tried to resist this extortion, but in the end, was forced to seek refuge in a Catholic Church. He remained there for several months, protected by a French priest. While there, he was convinced by a Confucian Catholic scholar to convert. He returned home when the situation improved, bringing Catholic books with him. With these, and with the help of a priest from Alsace-Lorraine named Father Wilhelm, he proceeded to convert most of his family and many of his neighbors to Catholicism.<sup>5</sup>

An Chunggŭn threw himself into his new faith. Not only did he himself become a fervent believer, he also helped Father Wilhelm undertake missionary work. They traveled together throughout Hwanghae province. An gave many speeches urging Koreans to convert to Catholicism. In addition to classical Catholic arguments seeking to prove the existence of God, such as the argument from design, he also lectured on Aristotle's classification of the soul. Being a good Confucian, An also drew upon the Classics to make his arguments, quoting the Sage emperors Yao and Shun to prove the existence of the soul and telling his listeners that not worshipping the Lord of Heaven is similar to a subject not being loyal to the king or children being unfilial to their parents.

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<sup>5</sup> An (1995) pp. 26-32.

He also argued that the most educated of those in the West all believed in the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Through Catholicism, An came to learn much of the world outside of Korea. He was favorably impressed and hoped that the Catholic Church could play some role in helping Korea to reform itself. Much of this seems to have come to him through Father Wilhelm, who was teaching him French, a language that would have opened up a whole new world of ideas to him. In fact, Father Wilhelm even thought of establishing a Catholic university in Korea. Together, he and An went to Bishop Mutel to see if he would give his assent and support their endeavor.<sup>7</sup>

Mutel responded negatively to their proposal, arguing that such an education would only cause Korean Catholics to become indifferent to their faith. An, feeling betrayed, declared that he could no longer trust foreigners and gave up learning French. This opened up a fissure between him and the Catholic Church. While he would still look to priests for advice, in the future, he would often act alone.<sup>8</sup> He also looked outside the Catholic Church for ideas on how to reform Korea. He became a pan-Asianist and believed that the yellow peoples of Asia must work together lest they be overwhelmed by the white races. This put An in a rather difficult position as a pan-Asianist Catholic who distrusted foreigners and whites but who partook in the sacrament of confession and the holy sacrifice of the mass (said in Latin) conducted by French priests.<sup>9</sup>

Korea's situation worsened in the years following the University proposal. An, a believer in civilization and enlightenment thought, hoped that through education he

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<sup>6</sup> An (1995) pp. 32-39.

<sup>7</sup> An (1995) p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> An (1995) pp. 39-55.

<sup>9</sup> An (1995) pp. 169-180.

could help Korea to reform so that it could maintain its independence. He helped establish and manage two elementary schools following the Russo-Japanese War. However, following Japan's imposition of a protectorate on Korea in 1907 and the abolishment of the army that same year, An came to believe that force was the only way to recover Korea's waning independence. Though Catholic priests advised him against turning to violent means he traveled to Manchuria and helped to form a guerilla army, holding the rank of Lieutenant-General.<sup>10</sup>

An's army met with some success. In one battle, it even managed to capture several Japanese prisoners. Many of those in An's camp wanted to execute them, but An argued that they should be left unharmed. To do otherwise would be to act against God and the laws of a civilized country. His arguments won the day, and the prisoners were released unharmed. His army would later be defeated in battle and the soldiers were forced to scatter. An and two of his men sought refuge in the mountains. Still a good Catholic and Confucian, he convinced his fellow travelers that they should believe in Catholicism by quoting Confucius' words in the *Analects*<sup>11</sup> that a man who learns the Tao in the morning can die happy in the evening. An baptized the two men himself.<sup>12</sup>

An made it safely home but became increasingly dejected about the fate of his country. It appeared that Japanese power would grow in the peninsula until Korean independence was wholly gone. Despite this, Koreans seemed to An to be largely uninterested in the fate of their nation. An became convinced that only through a great and heroic deed could the Korean people be united and so throw off the Japanese yoke. He became resigned, as if to fate, that it should be he who carried out this act.

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<sup>10</sup> An (1995) pp. 55-68.

<sup>11</sup> *Analects*, 4:8.

<sup>12</sup> An (1995) pp. 68-78.

An believed that the source of Korea's troubles was Itō Hirobumi. Itō, an elder statesman (*genrō*), had played a central role in the formation of the Meiji Japanese state. He was the framer of the Japanese constitution and the first prime minister of Japan. He also had pressured the Korean government into accepting the protectorate treaty and had served as the first Resident General of Korea, making him an arch villain to many Koreans. An, believed that Itō had tricked the Meiji Emperor and was not actually following his policy. An believed that through killing Itō he would in one stroke unite the Korean people and call the Meiji Emperor's attention to Itō's misdeeds, allowing Japan to follow a policy that would guarantee a pan-Asianist peace in the East that safeguarded Korea's independence.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, in August of 1909, An had an opportunity to put his plan into action. At a railroad station in what is now China, An shot and killed Itō, wounding three other members of his party. An was immediately arrested. At his trial he admitted to killing Itō but argued that he was a soldier who had killed in the line of duty and therefore he should be treated as a prisoner of war. The court did not accept this defense and An was found guilty. He waived his appeals and was executed in 1910, shortly before Korea was annexed.<sup>14</sup> He was excommunicated for killing Itō, but, against the orders of Bishop Mutel, was given the sacraments by Father Wilhelm, who was exiled from Korea for his actions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> An (1995) pp. 78-82.

<sup>14</sup> An (1995) pp. 82-100.

<sup>15</sup> Kim (2000) pp. 260-263.

## *The Appeal*

Even though the events that made An famous occurred nearly a century ago, he remains a figure almost universally recognized in Korea today. Such is his fame that his image graces the 2006 official t-shirt of the Red Devils, the Korean soccer team.<sup>16</sup>

What is interesting about this image is that his name does not appear on the shirt. The assumption is that his face is so iconic that labeling it is unnecessary. At the same time, Korean Catholics have sought to utilize his image. In the Catholic martyr museums in Busan and Seoul there are exhibits on An in addition to the ones on Korean Catholics who were killed for their faith during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His face even graces the cover, with Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II, of a booklet distributed by the Catholic Street Missionary society. What then is An's appeal?

An's life itself makes for a good story. As can be seen from the biographical sketch of An provided above, his life was quite exciting. He presents a rather festive character, who in his own words was fond of drinking, dancing, and hunting. Thanks to his bravery, along with his unwillingness to take insults laying down and his temper which earned him the name "thunder mouth," An constantly found himself in violent confrontations.<sup>17</sup> His battle with the Tonghak, the Japanese, and his attack on Itō all makes for an exciting narrative.

This is further emphasized in the primary documents left by An. The main source for his life is his autobiography, which, being in Classical Chinese, has been translated into Korean several times. An's autobiography, written in prison as he

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<sup>16</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, April 28th, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> An (1995) pp. 29-32.

awaited execution, is essentially a chronological narrative of his life and seeks to offer the reasons behind his actions. Interestingly, he admits to several embarrassing details, such as the fact that he did not know what Itō Hirobumi looked like and so shot three other men who were with Itō so as to make sure that he had hit his target.<sup>18</sup> What I found especially striking is that despite such awkward facts, An comes across in his autobiography as a rather likeable character. His passion for his country and his sense of responsibility and willingness to sacrifice suffuse the pages of his autobiography, showing him to be a powerful and even attractive personality.

In addition to his autobiography, An left behind an essay detailing his theory of how peace in the east could be secured. Unfortunately, he was executed before he could finish it. His Confucian and Catholic heritage shows clearly in this work, as it emphasizes the role of God as just judge over the nations and morality and unity as key for a country's well being. An stresses the importance of a free union between East Asian nations which would guarantee both solidarity and independence. Because only the introduction was completely finished, An's work tends to emphasize platitudes and lacks details, making it ambiguous enough to still be useful in the rather different political situation of today.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, its racial understanding of the world tends to be minimized in contemporary commentary.

An also wrote letters just before his execution to Bishop Mutel, Father Wilhelm, his mother, his wife, and his brothers. These letters, though short, are full of deep human emotion. The image they contain of An is of a hero caught between love of country and love of his family. Though sad, they also contain hope for the Korean

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<sup>18</sup> An (1995) pp. 82-88.

<sup>19</sup> An (1995) pp. 169-180.

nation. Moreover, they show An's deep faith in God, as he tells his loved ones that though there is not much time to write now, in Heaven they will have all of eternity to be together. This human drama is inherently appealing.<sup>20</sup>

It must also be stressed that An, though failing in his goal of uniting Koreans so that they could resist the expansion of Japanese power on the peninsula, was successful in his immediate goal of killing Itō. The fact that An was able to successfully kill Itō, understood as the main culprit behind Japan's advance on the peninsula, may offer a certain level of emotional satisfaction to Koreans frustrated not only at Japan's actions in Korea but the inability of Koreans to successfully defend their independence. An's actions produced concrete results during a time when the efforts of Koreans who were concerned about the fate of their country typically came to naught. At the same time, his failure can be understood within a narrative of hope. Democracy activist and former president Kim Daejung saw great meaning in An's actions, writing while he was in prison that:

Even in our own history, we cannot say that in their lifetimes the six martyred officials, Yi Sun-sin, Ch'oe Su-un, Chŏn Pong-jun, An Chung-gun, Yun Pong-gil, or the persecuted Christian martyrs were successes. Today, however, there is not one Korean who would consider them failures in comparison to others who might have been hailed as great successes in their times.<sup>21</sup>

For Kim Daejung, An Chunggŭn is one of a number of Koreans whose actions have borne fruit later. An, and others like him, are sources of inspiration for endurance and hope during hard times and are part of a pantheon of heroes that are almost universally known in Korea.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> An (1995) pp. 309-323.

<sup>21</sup> Kim (1987) pp. 65-67.

<sup>22</sup> Jager (2003) p. 145.

Because An was executed in 1910, several months before Korea was annexed, he was not sullied by even apparent collaboration during the Japanese colonial period. His reputation is clean and he is therefore ready for appropriation as a nationalist symbol. In addition, because he did not leave behind a large body of theoretical work and was active before Marxist or anti-Communist ideas became popular in the peninsula, he is easily brought into the narratives of both North and South Korea.<sup>23</sup> This universal appeal makes him very attractive for those wishing to find a focus around which all Koreans everywhere can rally.

In addition to his sterling nationalist credentials, An also possessed a deep faith that is attractive to many Korean Catholics. His last letters from prison, the transcripts of his trial, his autobiography, and the witnesses of his final days and execution all testify that he had a strong Catholic faith. Despite his conflicts with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, An never disavowed his faith or attacked Catholic doctrine. In fact, he constantly reiterated his devotion to God. For example, in his last letter to his uncle he wrote that he hoped that one day that Korea would become a Catholic nation and expressed concern that his oldest uncle had not converted to Catholicism.<sup>24</sup>

So far I have stressed An's appeal to Koreans as a whole while saying little about Korean Catholics. This is because I wanted to show that An possesses an appeal that is generally accessible to Koreans. It is because of this general appeal that An is especially important to Catholics, as he can act as a bridging figure. We can see this in a Catholic guidebook published by the Catholic Street Missionary Society that introduces the Catholic Church and is meant to be given to prospective Catholics. It is

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<sup>23</sup> Jager (2003) p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> An (2003) pp. 320-321.

interesting that despite there being numerous Korean saints, the publishers of the guidebook decided to use An's image. I believe that the image of one of the saints possesses a mostly Catholic religious significance which would not necessarily appeal to non-Catholics. On the other hand, an iconic image of An Chunggŭn is more likely to attract their attention. In the case of the guidebook, it would seem that there is hope that An Chunggŭn could provide a nationalist bridge which would lead readers to convert to Catholicism. The fact that the flag behind An's head is a representation of the one upon which he wrote "Korean Independence" with his own blood further underlines this. If An, a Korean nationalist hero was a Catholic, then Catholicism is a suitable religion for Koreans.

An as a nationalist is especially important to patriotic Korean Catholics. This is in part because the Catholic Church, unlike some Protestant churches, does not have the best of nationalist credentials. During the persecutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Korean Catholics sought assistance from foreign powers. For example, in 1801, Hwang Sayong, a convert to Catholicism, wrote a letter to the Bishop of Beijing requesting that the Bishop encourage the Qing dynasty to assert its authority over Korea or that western troops be dispatched to the peninsula in order to coerce the Korean government into granting religious tolerance for the Catholics. The letter was intercepted and Hwang was executed as a traitor.<sup>25</sup> Even more damning is that the foreign missionary leaders of the Catholic Church often collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial period and sought to thwart the activities of nationalists and reformists. An, thanks to his unsullied nationalism, is important as he shows that despite the actions of some Catholics, Catholicism is not intrinsically anti-nationalist.

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<sup>25</sup> Choi (2006) pp. 132-137.

The inherent drama and human emotion in An's life, the rich primary sources that he has left behind, and his sterling nationalist and Catholic credentials make him an attractive figure to Korean Catholics, as well as Koreans in general. The fact that much of his thought can be encapsulated in platitudes and lacks strong connections with either Marxist or anti-Communist thought and that he is best known for the killing of a Japanese official widely despised by Koreans makes him an ideal figure for Koreans to rally around. Moreover, his life and thought offers a sort of flexibility that allows his ideas to be brought into different narratives and applied to solving the problems faced by Koreans today. However, before such solutions can be utilized, it is necessary for Korean Catholics to formulate solutions addressing the conflict between An's nationalism and his faith. It is to this issue that we now turn.

#### *Problems An's Historical Legacy Poses*

There are several problems that Catholics in Korea face who wish to construct a narrative of Catholic nationalism around An. Though An was a devout Catholic and has sterling nationalist credentials, he was torn apart by his loyalty to the Catholic Church and the Korean nation. In order to present An as successfully uniting Catholicism and nationalism so that his life and thought may be applied to contemporary issues, this conflict must be resolved.

The first major problem is that of An's excommunication. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines excommunication thusly:

Certain particularly grave sins incur excommunication, the most severe ecclesiastical penalty, which impedes the reception of the sacraments and the exercise of certain ecclesiastical acts, and for which absolution

consequently cannot be granted, according to canon law, except by the Pope, the bishop of the place or priests authorized by them. In danger of death any priest, even if deprived of faculties for hearing confessions, can absolve from every sin and excommunication.<sup>26</sup>

Excommunication is the most serious penalty that can be meted out by the Catholic Church. Therefore, the fact that An was excommunicated seems like a major issue for Korean Catholics. However, An's excommunication was lifted by Stephen Cardinal Kim in 1993. So far in my research, I have found An's excommunication to be a non-issue. It would seem that the authority of Cardinal Kim is such that now that he has spoken, the issue is no longer important. Because my research has focused on the period after Cardinal Kim's lifting of An's excommunication, I believe that further research focused on the period before 1993 will show that this issue was of greater importance.

While An's excommunication does not seem to have hurt his image as a devout Catholic, it does injure the Catholic Church's already weak nationalist credentials. What makes matters worse for the Catholic Church is the treatment accorded to An in addition to his excommunication. Rather than seeking leniency or offering assistance to An, Bishop Mutel urged newspapers covering the story of the assassination not to mention An's religious affiliation. At the ceremonies in Korea marking Itō's death, Bishop Mutel had a delegation of nuns pay their respects with a large wreath of flowers. Moreover, in his journal, Mutel wrote that it was appropriate that the Japanese government refused to return An's body to his family. While such treatment of An does

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<sup>26</sup> Catholic Church (2000) paragraph 1463.

not harm An directly, it does present an obstacle for Korean Catholics who hope to utilize An's story to bolster the nationalist credentials of their church.<sup>27</sup>

It would seem that the main problem facing Korean Catholics in regards to An is that which has made him a Korean nationalist icon, the act of killing Itō Hirobumi itself. The Catholic Church has strict guidelines on when the use of lethal force is considered legitimate. Typically, such violence is only usable in self-defense. However at the time that An killed Itō, he was not immediately threatening An's or anyone else's life. Therefore it is possible for someone to not only argue that what An did was immoral but was in fact an act of terrorism. Such a label, considering the actively on-going "War on Terror" is not something that Korean nationalists, particularly Catholics, want attached to An.

#### *Overcoming Conflict between An's Nationalism and Catholicism*

Korean Catholics have sought to resolve the above difficulties in creative ways. One of the thorniest problems they face is how to project a positive image of the Catholic Church considering the treatment of An by its hierarchy. This problem is dealt with by emphasizing An's individual identity as a Korean Catholic against the official stance of the hierarchy. The brief history of the Catholic Church in Korea on the official website of the Council of Korean Catholic Bishops is illustrative of this interpretation:

Beginning in the earliest part of the Japanese occupation, armed resistance movements sprang up across the country. The national struggle against the Japanese colonialism was so fierce that there were as

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<sup>27</sup> Kim (2000) pp. 255-259.

many as 50,000 Korean casualties from August 1907 to September 1909. Despite the official position of the Catholic Church which favored colonial rule, a considerable number of Korean Catholics joined armed resistance movement. These Catholics were following their conscience in becoming actively involved in the national causes. An Jung-geun, Thomas, was the typical case. His first commitment for his country was made in the field of education, but later he changed direction and joined armed resistance for justice. When An Jung-geun assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the Japanese Colonial Ruler of Korea, at Harbin railroad platform in China on Oct. 26, 1909, he became a symbol of heroic patriotism for Korean people... Church authorities, however, clearly opposed armed resistance of Korean Catholics against the Japanese because they perceived colonial rule and the invasion of imperialism as being acceptable. The Catholic hierarchy insisted upon the separation of Church and the government and treated nationalism solely from political perspective. Therefore, Church authorities refused An Jung-geun the sacrament of reconciliation and the Holy communion... Under such hard condition [sic], Catholic patriots did not stop their activities, claiming that their faith in God and love for country can coexist... Nevertheless, the Church objected to armed resistance against the Japanese, recognizing the Japanese colonial rule over Korea as legitimate and opposed the involvement of the faithful in the independence movement. Regardless of the official position of the Church, a great number of Korean Catholics risked their lives by actively participating in the independence movement. The Church failed to become one with Korean people and its consequence was shown in the visible decline of the number of neophytes and her isolation from intellectuals and from the society as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

This account sees Korean Catholics as being faithful even when acting outside the authority of the Church. The fact that this authority accepted imperialism and colonization further weakens its legitimacy when compared to individual Catholic nationalists like An, making An's excommunication less of an issue and showing that he was in fact in the right. One could reasonably surmise that the reason that the Catholic Church did not become one with the Korean people was because its leadership positions were dominated by foreigners. Such a position is stated explicitly in an article

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<sup>28</sup> Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea, *Korean Catholic Church and the Nationalist Movement*.

on the Church's reaction to An's killing of Itō.<sup>29</sup> Because the leadership of the Catholic Church in Korea today is almost entirely Korean, it could be argued that the Church is now one with the Korean people. Therefore, those conditions that led to a weakened legitimacy for the Catholic Church in An's time are no longer operative today. Korean Catholics can therefore freely criticize the Catholic Church's of the past with minimal damage to its contemporary legitimacy. The problem that the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, is not Korean is addressed by reference to the apologies Pope John Paul II issued for the past sins of Catholics.<sup>30</sup> The foreign leadership of the Catholic Church can be accepted because past sins have been recognized and because the Church now opposes the imperialism and colonialism which it once accepted in Korea.

While one author I examined has tried to argue that An's killing of Itō was a legitimate act of self-defense, this argument does not seem to be very popular, possibly because Itō was not immediately threatening An's life.<sup>31</sup> A much more popular argument seeks to legitimize An's actions by arguing that they were military in nature and that An was acting in the capacity of a soldier. An Chunggŭn himself made this argument at his trial. He stated that his killing of Itō Hirobumi was that of one soldier killing another. An based this claim on the fact that he had held the rank of Lieutenant-general as an officer in a guerilla army and by appealing to a secret plea made by the King of Korea calling for a military uprising.<sup>32</sup> This defense of An's actions has been repeated in contemporary sources.<sup>33</sup> Further elaborating on this case is Father Sin Sŭngguk who quotes a document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the

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<sup>29</sup> Kim (2000) pp. 260-266.

<sup>30</sup> Sin (1999) p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ch'oe (1991) p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> An (1996) pp. 194-196, 226-228, 286-288.

<sup>33</sup> Kim (2000) p. 251.

Faith entitled *Instruction on Christian Freedom* which accepts the use of violence “as a last resort to put an end to an obvious and prolonged tyranny which is gravely damaging the fundamental rights of individuals and the common good.”<sup>34</sup> Sin argues that this is applicable in An’s case, providing a theological justification for An’s actions.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to historical and theological justifications of the actions of the Catholic Church and An Chunggŭn, an alternate source of legitimacy, Japanese admirers of An, is utilized to resolve the conflicts surrounding An. An illustrative example is provided by an article in a Catholic newspaper about Saito Michinori, the author of *The Man who Shot Itō*. The article recounts how Saito, not a Catholic, was introduced to An Chunggŭn by a Buddhist monk who had in his possession a sample of An’s calligraphy. Saito was so deeply impressed by An that he visited the places connected with An’s life and collected historical materials on him. Saito asserted that An was not simply an assassin but a military officer who had to do what he did out of concern for “peace in the East.” In addition, Saito also stated that Catholicism had an important influence on An. For such comments, Saito received threats from right-wing Japanese political groups.<sup>36</sup>

Because Saito is Japanese, his acceptance and celebration of An provides legitimacy for An’s actions. If even Japanese accept that what An did was good and right, then it must indeed be so. The threats Saito received from Japanese rightists only increases Saito’s legitimacy. The fact that a Buddhist monk and the non-Catholic Saito respect An and that Saito argues that An was influenced positively by his Catholicism serves to show that Catholic claims on An are also legitimate.

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<sup>34</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*.

<sup>35</sup> Oh. “An Chunggŭnŭn H’angukŭi Sado Paolo.” *Pyŏnghwa Sinmun*. August 15th, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> “An Chunggŭn Idŭngbangmun Chŏgyŏkŭn Kip’ŭn Sinangsimaesŏ Ulŏnaonŭigŏ,” *Pyŏnghwa Sinmun*, November 7th, 1999.

Finally, powerful imagery is deployed that shows An as both a devout Catholic and fervent nationalist. For example, some Korean Catholics have referred to An as being like Moses<sup>37</sup> or Saint Paul.<sup>38</sup> In one case, An is even likened to the Jesus of Korea with his mother as the Blessed Virgin. In this instance, strong parallels between his life and that of Jesus, especially the idea that they both died unselfishly for others, are drawn.<sup>39</sup> One striking example is found within the Catholic Street Missionary Guidebook on Catholicism which states that:

After he shot Itō, who had arrived at Halbin station on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1909 to meet with a Russian representative to plot the invasion of Asia, three times in the chest and abdomen with bullets upon which he had carved crosses, Thomas An shouted at the top of his lungs “Long Live the Great Han Empire!” three times and pulled out and waved the flag he had written “Independence” and “Freedom” in blood. As soon as Itō died, An made the sign of the cross and said “Lord, I thank you for allowing me to destroy this tyrant.” As soon as An had finished offering up his prayer, he was arrested by Russian military police, maintaining himself in a dignified manner... The Korean Catholic Church generously praises the great light of this believer, the Patriot An, whose actions performed for the Korean people were in keeping with his piety and patriotism.<sup>40</sup>

Such powerful images, perhaps with even more success than theological and historical arguments, seek to resolve the conflict between faith and nation An presents in order to allow his story and thought to be utilized in the service of both.

### *The Utilization of An's Life and Thought*

Having resolved the conflict between nation and faith that surround An to their own satisfaction, Korean Catholics can apply his life and thought to address important

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<sup>37</sup> Sangdök. “Yöksarul Pinch’aen Inmul An Chunggün.” *Kat’ollik Sinmun*. October 13th, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> “An Chunggün Idüngbangmun.”

<sup>39</sup> Sin (1999) pp. 17-19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ch’onjyoryül Allyödülmnida* (2005) pp. 12-13.

contemporary issues. One key issue of concern is the unification of the Korean peninsula, the continued division of which is a source of great pain and frustration. For many, the division is not something that the Korean people themselves desired but was rather foisted upon them by the United States and the Soviet Union as they pursued their own interests. Therefore, there is a strong belief among many Koreans that unification must be carried out peacefully and by the Korean people themselves.<sup>41</sup>

These ideas are echoed in a series of joint meetings held in 2000 between the South Korean Catholic Priests for Justice (KCPJ, *Chönjugyojõngüiguhyũnjõn'gguksajaedangwa*) and the North Korean Association of North Korean Catholics (ANKC, *Chosõnk'at'olligyohyõphoe*). An Chunggũn was central to these meetings. A seminar and discussion on the role of religion in unification was held in his honor as was a joint prayer service.<sup>42</sup> At the seminar, Rev. Chon Jong-hun insisted that:

The reunification of Korea has to be made in sovereign independent spirit and peace. We have to carry out the reunification movement in total dedication mentally and physically as did An Jung-geun. The faith and spirituality of An Jung-geun is founded on the national spirit. He devoted himself for the great cause and realization of human rights, justice and peace (prophetic office); he practiced service, sharing and renouncement of vested rights(royal office); he had a sincere life of prayer, devotion and faith (priestly office). An Jung-geun was a model of the faith life. His theory of peace in Asia was a prophetic and patriotic declaration, and this theory was founded on the spirit of love for God and neighbors that is the very Gospel spirit of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Again in this passage we find powerful imagery that connects An Chunggũn to the prophetic, royal, and priestly offices of Jesus Christ; roles which all baptized Catholics

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<sup>41</sup> Jaegar (2003) pp. 59-65.

<sup>42</sup> "Chunggũksõ An Chunggũn Saemina," *Pyõnghwa Sinmun*, October 22nd, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea, *South Korean Priests and North Korean Catholics Join Hands to Commemorate Patriot An and Agree on Joint Excavation of His Remains*.

are considered to take part in. This speech emphasizes that unification must be carried out by the Korean people themselves on a foundation of peace. Koreans are called upon to imitate An in order to carry out these tasks.

It may at first seem strange that An, who fought in a guerilla army and who shot and killed Itō Hirobumi would be treated as an icon of peace. However, it must be remembered though An, in his, “Theory of Peace in the East” emphasized the importance of regional unity between China, Korea, and Japan so that together the yellow people could resist the imperialism of the whites. An stress that it was necessary that the three East Asian nations act as equal partners without infringing upon each other’s sovereignty. It is to this theory that Rev. Chon is appealing. An’s theory, and his decision to kill Itō are not understood as acts of random violence but as carefully calculated moves which were meant to bring about peace. Father Shin, in the introduction to his translation of An’s autobiography argues that if An’s prophetic theory for building peace in the East would have been followed and had people heeded An, the horrors of World War Two, including the atomic bombings of Japan, could have been avoided. An is cast as a prophet. The fact that the uprising he hoped for did not materialize, according to Shin, is the fault of the Korean people, especially Japanese collaborators.<sup>44</sup> It is for these reasons that An was posthumously given an award by a Catholic youth organization for advancing the cause of peace.<sup>45</sup> In addition, there has even been talk of building a center for peace dedicated to An.<sup>46</sup> An Chunggŭn’s vision of the method by which peace could be maintained in East Asia has been expanded to

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<sup>44</sup> Sin (1999) pp. 19-30.

<sup>45</sup> “Chae 1 Hoe An Chunggŭn Pyŏnghwasang Susangjaro Pyŏnghwalul Yŏnŭn Kat’ollikjŏngnyŭn Sŏnjŏng,” *Pyŏnghwa Sinmun*, March 24th, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> “An Chunggŭn Pyŏnghwayŏngusaent’o Kŏnnib Ch’ujin,” *Pyŏnghwa Sinmun*, November 11th, 2003.

not only include the safeguarding of Korean independence but the peaceful unification of the peninsula.

In addition to such political issues of unification, peace, and regionalism, Korean Catholics have sought to apply the life of An to other issues. For example, in his introduction to his translation of An's autobiography, Father Shin argues that the historical legacy of An Chunggŭn is being lost and uses the respect some Japanese have paid to him to shame Koreans who do not pay sufficient attention to An and the lessons he has to teach.<sup>47</sup> For Shin, the lack of attention paid to An's legacy is unfortunate because there are serious moral problems in Korea which the life and thought of An could help solve. In Shin's view, Koreans are too selfish and do not care about their neighbors or their country. This lamentable situation could be ended if only the Korean people were to look at the example of dedication to God and nation which can be found in the life of An Chunggŭn. An's life thus offers a model for moral regeneration.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, in Shin's work, An seems to act as a means for Korean Catholics to assert their own unique identity. For example, Shin argues that the theology of An's time was too concerned with transcendent matters and not with the here and now. Catholicism must meet the practical needs of Koreans. Shin declares that he is not a European and that Catholicism must become Korean in order to help the Korean people. For Shin, the case of An, and the conflict surrounding him, indicates the need for Koreans to develop their own contextualized form of Catholicism.<sup>49</sup>

An Chunggŭn, a fervent nationalist and a devout Catholic, has a strong appeal to Korean Catholics. His tumultuous life was marked with the conflict between the

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<sup>47</sup> Sin (1999) pp. 20-21.

<sup>48</sup> Sin (1999) pp. 24-27.

<sup>49</sup> Sin (1999) pp. 27-31.

demands of religion and nation. Korean Catholics have sought to resolve such difficulties and having done so to their own satisfaction are able to apply his life and thought to contemporary issues. An has been found by them to not only be relevant to the great political issues of the day, but to matters largely interior to the Catholic Church in Korea as well.

### *Conclusion*

An Chunggŭn faced a difficult situation. He sought to unite his Catholicism and nationalism but clashed with the leaders of his church and suffered excommunication. Despite this, contemporary Korean Catholics have sought to rehabilitate An and utilize his life and thought to settle the conflict between faith and nation in both his and their own lives. Resolving the contradictions in An's life helps to ease the tensions between faith and nation in Catholic believers who identify strongly with their nation and religion. His life and thought have acted as a source of inspiration and guidance for Korean Catholics looking for answers to contemporary problems. Though An suffered from deep conflicts between faith and nation in his own life, to many Korean Catholics, he now represents and models their successful union.

However, too close of a union between nation and religion can be dangerous. If one becomes too dominant, it can usurp the functions proper to the other, leaving the door open for authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In addition, the creative tension that can exist between the two would be lost if one was able to control the other.<sup>50</sup> Because of Korea's religious diversity there is little chance of one religion usurping the proper

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<sup>50</sup> Audi (1997) pp. 74-75.

role of the state. However, there is a danger of nationalism subverting religious organizations and ideals for its own interests.

Gi-Wook Shin discusses the potential danger of nationalism in his book *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*. He traces the pedigree of ethnic nationalism in Korea and how it gained dominance over other alternative forms of understanding the Korean nation, such as pan-Asianism and agrarianism.<sup>51</sup> Shin is concerned about the dangers of ethnic nationalism, arguing that while it was relatively harmless during the colonial period, when Koreans gained independence, it helped lead to authoritarian governments and consequent violation of human rights.<sup>52</sup> Shin writes that:

With respect to nationalism, Koreans maintain a strong sense of ethnic homogeneity based on shared blood and ancestry, and nationalism continues to function as a key resource in Korean politics and foreign relations...ethnic nationalism has become a considerable force in Korean society and politics and...can be dangerous and oppressive when fused with racism and other essentialist ideologies. Koreans must thus strive to find ways to use ethnic nationalism constructively and mitigate its harmful effects. In particular, Koreans must seriously consider the establishment of a democratic institution that can contain repressive, essentialist elements of nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

I would argue that religious organizations can play an important role in addressing the concerns Shin raises. Nation and religion can engage in a dynamic and creative tension which could help limit their potential authoritarianism. The particularity of the nation can help limit the tendency of some forms of religion to seek dangerous levels of homogeneity while the universality of religion can help provide an understanding of morality that does not completely base the dignity and worth of human beings on

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<sup>51</sup> Shin (2006) pp. 3-24.

<sup>52</sup> Shin (2006) pp. 96-113, 230.

<sup>53</sup> Shin (2006) pp. 232-233.

membership within a specific national community. Religious organizations in Korea, including the Catholic Church, could make significant contributions in this sphere.

The life and thought of An Chunggŭn could assist in such efforts. At the same time it would be very easy for an understanding of An to arise which would legitimate both ethnic and religious intolerance. If Korean Catholics pay careful attention not to fall into the traps of religious intolerance or ahistorical revisionism, it is possible for them to utilize narratives of An Chunggŭn as sources of reconciliation, inspiration, and guidance for Koreans as they seek to meet the challenges of the contemporary world while acting as a balance against the possible excesses of ethnic nationalism. The life and thought of An Chunggŭn can play an important role by providing a space where the conflict between nation and religion can be examined so as to develop positive, constructive, and authentic ways for them to work together in the future.

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