Performing God's Will
Agents of Christianity in Transnational Adoption from South Korea

JANE MEJDAHL

In 1954, the year after the Korean War came to a halt with the armistice agreement between North and South Korea, a devout Christian, Evangelical farmer couple from Oregon, Harry and Bertha Holt attended a film screening showcasing rather tragic circumstances of children born to US soldier fathers and South Korean mothers during the US military involvement in the Korean War 1950–1953, organised by leading Evangelical missionary organisation, World Vision (The Adoption History Project, n.d.). In her 1956 memoir, *The Seed from the East,* Bertha Holt recounts,

"We saw before us the tragic plight of hundreds of illegitimate children. GI-babies...children that had American fathers and Korean mothers... children that had been hidden by remorseful mothers until it was no longer possible to keep their secret. Finally the children were allowed to roam the streets where they were often beaten by other children who had never known Koreans with blond hair or blue eyes. (ibid.)."

World Vision encouraged everyone in the audience to sponsor a child in South Korea through their sponsor program (ibid.). However, sponsoring a child in South Korea did not prove to be enough for the Holts. In October 1955 the Holts landed in New York bringing with them 12 mixed-race children from South Korea out of which the Holts adopted eight themselves (Chung, 2021: 63). This event marked the beginning of the next 70 years of the Holts' facilitating adoptions from non-Western countries to the West. From South Korea alone, the Holts were responsible for more than half of the approximately 200,000 transnational adoptions to the West, mainly to the US, from the 1950s to today (Hübinette, 2005: 61).

The Holts' affiliation with Evangelical Christianity and their strong religious motivations serve as the point of departure for this essay. The main aim is to explore the role of religion in the foundation of transnational adoption from South Korea to the US during the early Cold War years. More particularly, I ask, how have Evangelical motivations and beliefs influenced the beginnings of transnational adoption from South Korea. I demonstrate that transnational adoption emerged in wake of the expansion of Evangelism in the US and in South Korea, and was underpinned by mutual geopolitical interests in East Asia during the first years of the Cold War. Informed by Talal Asad's idea that religion cannot be separated from power, but at the same time cannot be reduced to a mere disguise for political power (Asad, 1993: 116), I argue that religion, in the form of Evangelism, intersected with political interests and played an influential role in the formation of transnational adoption as a practice of producing and exercising authority in highly political contexts.

In the first part of the essay, I delve deeper into Asad's understanding of religion as a space for hu-

man practice as this notion informs my argument and I outline what I mean by religion as a practice of producing and exercising authority. Next, I describe the religious and political climate in the US and in South Korea during the early Cold War years with a particular focus on Evangelical expansion and the intersection with anti-communism. I then move on analyse how the Holts, exemplified in Bertha Holt's memoir, with the use of religious authority, advanced the idea of adopting South Korean children in the US. Lastly, I discuss how religious, Christian interests intersected with political powers that sought to strengthen ties between the US and South Korea as part of a mission for promoting global Christianity and a communism-free world.

Religion as a Practice of Producing and Exercising Authority

Masuzawa (2005) argues that historically the study of religion has been dominated by essentialising descriptions of non-Western religions focused on concrete facts and seemingly objective realities (p. 2). In his historisation of the study of religion Talal Asad (1993) similarly analyses how Western scholars influenced by modernity ideals have spurred a theoretical search for the essence of religion that has resulted in a conceptual separation of religion and power (p. 116). Asad borrows from Said (2003) and states that the problem is that societies of the Orient would be deemed 'backwards' or 'primitive' if they didn't follow the trajectory of the modern disenchantment project, meaning the separation of the religious from the secular, including in politics, law, and science (ibid.). In the study of religion of today, Asad claims, scholars have rejected both the essentialising analysis of religion as well as the idea that religion somehow only belongs to 'lesser-developed' societies. Instead scholars seek to understand religion as "[...] a distinctive space of human practice which cannot be reduced to any other" (p. 115).

In what follows I concur with Asad and un-

derstand religion as a space for human practice. If religion is to be understood as a space for human practice or "[...] as an activity rather than a state of mind [...]" (Keane in Baffelli and Caple, 2019: 5), that space also holds capacity for the exercise of power or authority. Baffelli and Caple (2019) suggest that religious authority is expressed in the "[...] authority to act as media, making sense-able and cognizable that which remain beyond the senses" (p. 5, italics in the original). In my analysis below, I thus understand the practice of religious authority as the privilege to interpret and make sense of the world. Furthermore, I focus on the practice of religious authority in highly political contexts. Asad (1993) stipulates that religious power cannot be conflated with mere political power (p. 116). However, in line with DuBois (2011) who puts forward that religion is both an agent of political change and a symptom of it (p. 7), I argue that religious interests intersected with political interests and shaped mutually beneficial relations between the US and South Korea in the early Cold War years, illustrated in the foundation of transnational adoption.

The Cold War and Political Mobilisation of Evangelism

Turner and Salemink (2015) claim that scholars of religion only rarely include Christianity in definitions of so-called Asian religions despite it being present in several East and Southeast Asian countries (p. 4). Particularly in South Korea, Christianity has enjoyed wide success. Protestantism has the country's largest following with more than 19% of the population identifying as Protestant Christians in 2015 (Choi, 2020: 279). Although Protestantism was introduced already in the late 19th century, it wasn't until a series of Evangelical campaigns took the country by storm in the 1950s that the expansion took off (ibid.). Since then, Christianity has been deeply entangled in the modern political development on the Korean peninsula. South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee, was

a fervent Evangelical Presbyterian (Park, 2007: 2), the democracy movement of the 1980s was heavily supported by Christian churches (Chang, 1998: 438), and in the current political climate success almost always entails a devotion to Christianity (Choi, 2020: 280). As such, any expectation of growing secularisation in the development of the modern nation state has been proven wrong in the context of modern South Korea (ibid.).

Helen Jin Kim (2022) connects the success of Protestantism and specifically Evangelism in South Korea to the propagation of Evangelism in the US in the pretext of the early Cold War Years (p. 3). Kim claims that the Evangelicals suffered a blow in an early 20th century struggle between Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism in the US. However, she also writes, against the backdrop of the Cold War and the heightened fear of communism, Evangelical missionary organisations such as World Vision started to gain headway (ibid.). Kim points to one of the reasons being that Evangelical missionaries, as staunch opponents of atheistic communism, travelled in the footsteps of the US army's foreign wars against communism and operated in countries such as South Korea with heavy US military presence (p. 9). Some Evangelicals framed the war against communism as a holy war in which they saw themselves with a divine mandate to convert as many people as possible to ward off the 'Anti-Christ' represented by North Korea (p. 13). Kim concludes that the interchangeability between the Evangelical fight for conversion and against communism was well received by the US public and gave rise to significant expansion (p. 6). According to Kim, the propagation of Evangelism in the US cannot be separated from the geopolitical pretexts of the US which in turn also connects it to the rise of Protestantism and Evangelism in South Korea during the same time (p. 14).

In a similar vein, Han (2009) demonstrates how Evangelism in South Korea came to be conflated with the US-backed fight for freedom, first from Japanese colonialism during the Pacific War and later from communism (p. 26). During Evangelical prayer rallies the 'spirit' of the freedom fight was invoked and the US military intervention was constructed as God's extended arm. In other words, 'God's will' was designated as the main reason for Korean sovereignty (p. 27). Han thus argues that the configuration of Protestantism and Evangelism in South Korea is innately linked to geopolitical interests of both South Korea and the US. As I'll demonstrate below, it is within this political and religious climate that the exercise of religious authority propelled the first transnational adoptions to take place.

Kim (2022) stresses that the expansion of Protestantism and Evangelism in South Korea is not merely a matter of US neocolonial hegemonic powers 'forcing' South Koreans to convert en masse. Nor are South Koreans to be perceived as 'free global agents' at liberty to consume whatever religion available (p. 17). Rather, Kim suggests, we should look at the success of Protestantism and Evangelism in South Korea as a result of historical processes in which 'historical subjects' have interacted with each other in transpacific exchanges of ideology, aid, allyship, and people (pp. 14-18). Here, Kim asserts, the orphan emerges as a figure of interest, as a mediator in such processes (ibid., p. 13).

Agents of Evangelism and Cold War Politics

Eleana Kim (2009) writes, citing Lisa Malkki, that children with their presumed innocence often serve as symbolic neutralisers to 'depoliticise' highly charged political contexts and adds that "[...] actual children in adoption mediated geopolitical relations between states" (p. 3, italics in the original). Below I analyse how transnational adoption, brought forward by religious motivations and interests, has shaped South Korean and US relations, focusing on the early Cold War years as those years mark the beginnings of both adop-

tions and the proliferation of South Korean/US allyship. But first I explore how Evangelicals, Bertha and Harry Holt, grew a following and motivated Americans to adopt through the production and exercise of religious authority.

Historian and sociologist of religion Soojin Chung (2021) suggests that to understand how Harry and Bertha Holt went from sponsors of children in World Vision's sponsorship programme to becoming the founders of a movement prompting thousands of Christian US families to adopt, we need to examine their so-called "founding myth". In a religious context, Chung claims, a founding myth is characterised by 'revivalist' language of life-changing moments in which 'God's foresight' or 'will' is expressed (p. 59). This is also the language Bertha Holt uses when she describes her motivation to adopt.

When Harry and Bertha Holt returned home after their meeting with World Vision the stories of the mixed-race children in South Korea kept haunting Bertha Holt (ibid.). In her memoir she details how she began to nurture a dream of bringing some of those children to their home in Oregon while she waited for her husband to share his opinion. She writes,

"On Friday, April 15th, Harry voiced the burden on his heart. [...] "Every night when I go to bed, I see those pictures all over again. It doesn't make any difference where I am or what I'm doing. I think about those kids over there. I look out here at this beautiful playground God has so generously given us and something inside of me cries out at the thought of those poor little babies starving to death, or being thrown into dumps to be gnawed by rats." (ibid.: 60)."

As Bertha Holt expected, her husband had been thinking her exact thoughts. Bertha Holt describes the moment as life altering as if she had experienced an epiphany, "As I listened to Harry repeat almost word for word the very things I had told myself could be done, I realized that God was working in our hearts. Only God could bring about such a miracle." (The Adoption History Project, n.d.). Thus Bertha Holt frames their desire to adopt as God's will, a divine calling to her and her husband to save the children of South Korea. Here Bertha Holt frames her wish to adopt as inspired by the divine. Her wording is significant as Chung (2021) argues Bertha Holt's use of words like "miracle" and "dream" is characteristic for the Christian tradition of describing God's direct communication with "humanity" (p. 60). Such language use can be seen as legitimising the Holts' desire to adopt as indeed a calling brought on by divinity (ibid.). Chung elaborates that the doctrine of calling was already an ingrained part of Evangelical teachings.

By framing their mission as sacred and legitimised from the highest place, the Holts eventually gained a sizable following of ardent believers who helped them spread the word of the 'divine appointment' to adopt (p. 62). Hence, with reference to Baffelli and Caple (2019), the Holts assumed religious authority by acting as mediators, interpreters, and sense-makers of God's will.

Religious interests also played a hefty role in how the Holts conducted adoptions and exercised religious authority in practice. Notably, for several years Holt only allowed Christian Protestants, preferably Evangelicals to adopt (p. 58). Catholic or Jewish couples were referred to other adoption organisations by the Holts (Oh, 2005: 174). Likewise, Tobias Hübinette (2005) points to how the Holts exercised authority by prioritising adoptive parents' religious beliefs over parental capabilities. Couples who had been rejected by other organisations as unsuitable adopters were accepted by the Holts as long as their religious orientation aligned (p. 61). Accordingly, religion and the assumption of religious authority heavily impacted the initiation of large-scale transnational adoptions from South Korea.

In what follows, I focus on Cold War politics

to show how transnational adoption was brought forward by mutual religious and political interests across the pacific. Clarissa Oh (2012; 2005) and Eleana Kim (2009) highlight portrayals in US popular media and Christian outlets of the devastating impact of the Korean War on children in South Korea. The plight of the mixed-race children, born to US soldier fathers posted in South Korea and Korean mothers, was specifically illuminated and images of destitute war waifs dominated the media coverage (Oh, 2012: 35). Kim (2009) elaborates that as more news about the Holts' successful mission to bring back children to the US came out, more and more Christian couples began to show an interest in adopting (p. 11). Fuelled by the media-invoked images of hungry orphans and compounded by religious ardour, believers stressed both the Christian and patriotic duty to care for what were seen as half American children and encouraged the US public and government to take responsibility (Oh, 2012: 35). Oh (2005) claims that the Holts were not particularly preoccupied with patriotic commitments. To them fulfilling their assumed divine duty to save the children of Korea and place them in Christian homes was the priority (p. 174). However, as discussed above, the US experienced an Evangelical upsurge in those early Cold War years. Proponents of a certain strand of Evangelism were very much absorbed in nationalistic and patriotic concerns, specifically regarding the fight against communism (Kim, 2022: 13). Additionally, Oh (2005) contends that apart from Evangelism, a particular brand of religious patriotism, dubbed 'Christian Americanism', also gained a stronghold among the US public during those years (p. 162). Oh describes Christian Americanism as "[...] a fusion of vaguely Christian principles with values identified as particularly American" (ibid.: 162). Even though it was never a fully formulated doctrine, the idea of a conflation between Christianity and patriotism was still supported and promoted to the white, middle-class by US churches and government (ibid.). Oh asserts, that no matter

the Holts' own inclinations, they soon became the figureheads of a movement to save the children of South Korea for devout Evangelicals and supporters of Christian Americanism alike (p. 175). The US media used words such as 'crusade' and 'mission' to describe the Holts' endeavours while a US Congressman likened the Holts to the 'Biblical good Samaritan' (ibid.). I argue that by doing so the Holts were granted religious authority by key figures in the US public. The newfound authority soon intersected with political power when they, after a year of lobbying for more lenient immigration laws, saw a special 'orphan bill' that secured transnational adoption from South Korea passed in Congress in 1957 (Hübinette, 2005: 62).

On the South Korean side, state policies coincided with the newly found interest in South Korean children in the US. President Syngman Rhee worked towards national unity after the armistice agreement of the Korean War. According to Kim (2009), the mixed-race children did not fit the image of the government's ethno-nationalistic nation building programme, 'one nation, one race' (p. 12). In 1953 Syngman Rhee wrote a letter to the South Korean ambassador to the UN to stress that:

"We are most anxious to send as many of our orphans to the States as possible. In particular we desire to have adopted those children of Western fathers and Korean mothers who can never hope to make a place for themselves in Korean society. Those children should appeal to Americans more than Koreans. (ibid.: 12)."

When the Holts offered their assistance the South Koreans were already used to and relied on Christian missionaries for social welfare services. It was Christian missionaries who largely tended to the substantial needs of the children during and after the Korean War (Chung, 2020: 18; Hübinette, 2005: 2). Hence, I suggest that with the authority on welfare already in place for Christian organisations, the South Korean government read-

ily accepted the Holts as adoption operators on the basis of their religious dedication and in spite of their inadequate experience with child welfare. Thus, once again religious authority translated into practical and political power.

Apart from solving the 'problem' with the mixed-race children, the South Korean government had further motivation to establish ties with the US. Woo (2015) suggests that in the Cold War political climate in Asia, South Korea perceived themselves to be in a vulnerable position between communist North Korea and China (p. 30). Koo (2021) highlights that North Korea already taunted South Korea for letting foreigners father children and the South Korean government feared that the mixed-race children would become a political tool for North Korean advancement (p. 565). Consequently, the Rhee administration came to see transnational adoption as an opportunity to curb the North Korean ridicule and strengthen ties with the US (Woo, 2015: 30). Oh (2005) highlights how religious media in the US would portray South Koreans in refugee camps and children in orphanages as keen Christian believers, endlessly studying the bible, singing hymns, and engaging in prayers. As Oh points out, the South Koreans were configured as 'good' Christians pitted against 'evil' communism (p. 167). Against such a backdrop, adopting South Korean children could be construed as a chance to affirm Christian values while at the same time creating a bulwark against the perceived communist threat and to further US geopolitical interests in Asia (Woo, 2015: 31; Oh, 2005: 167). In that sense transnational adoption can also be seen as an alignment of religious and political values across the Pacific.

To the South Koreans the adoptions were equally valuable as a realisation of familial and ideological kinship with the US for security (Woo, 2015: 31). I discussed above how both South Korean and US Christians, bound by mutual interests, worked for the propagation of Evangelism as a bulwark against the communist threat (Han 2009; Kim 2022). Within the environment of mutual geopolitical and religious interests, transnational adoption of mixed-race children emerged as a possible practical way of furthering Evangelism. The children could serve as bridges between the countries and their conversion to Christianity would mark US empire building, enable South Korean nation building schemes, and align the two nations. In the case of transnational adoption, religious motivation to secure conversions and authority to gain a following and carry out adoptions thus intersected with political interests and power in both South Korea and the US.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the role of Christianity and Evangelism in the foundations of transnational adoption from South Korea during the early Cold War years. I have pointed to the rise of Evangelism in both the US and in South Korea and how those stories are connected by US militarism and mutual geopolitical interests. Borrowing from Asad's (2003) notion that religion is a space for human practice invested in power and Baffelli and Caple's (2019) understanding of religious authority, I have argued that transnational adoption was propelled by the production and exercise of religious authority in the form of a revivalist founding myth. I have also demonstrated how religious motivation and authority through transnational adoption intersected with political interests and sometimes translated into political power in the context of the Cold War.

In reality, one may argue that the first adopted children were subjected to a forced deportation of racial others, backed by religious and political support. Critical scholars across the humanities and social sciences have also documented how the Holts' calling turned into a global undertaking of ethically dubious character when the West's demand for babies quickly outgrew the actual supply. They point to how the Holts and other private operators sourced children through unethical and

illicit means such as the coercion and bribing of birth parents, local authorities, and social welfare personnel (Kim, 2015; Kim & Cho, 2014; Lee, 2022). Even to this day, joint Christian right-wing forces in the US and in South Korea still exercise religious authority to promote adoption and shape South Korean adoption policies. They shun regulatory legislation as communist, and reference 'God's will' when they advocate and enable questionable and also unlawful adoption practices (Morrison, 2021). The connection to the Holts in the early days of transnational adoption from South Korea is palpable. After all, it is the same religious zeal, hinged on the near same politics that characterise promoters of adoption today in a Korea still split at the 38th parallel.

————————

Jane Mejdahl holds a master's degree in Anthropology from University of Copenhagen and is currently finishing a master's degree in Asian Studies, Lund University.
Email: janmej@gmail.com

References

Asad, Talal. (1993). *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Baffelli, Erica., & Caple, Jane. (2019). Guest editors' introduction: Religious authority in East Asia materiality, media, and aesthetics. *Asian Ethnology, 78*(1), 3–23.

Chang, Yun-shik. (1998). The progressive Christian church and democracy in South Korea. *Journal of Church and State*, 40(2), 437–465.

Choi, Hyaeweol. (2020). The sacred and the secular: protestant Christianity as lived experience in modern Korea: an introduction. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 25(2), 279–289.

Choi, Hyaeweol. (2009). *Gender and mission encounters in Korea: New women, old ways*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chung, Soojin. (2021). *Adopting for God: The mission to change America through transnational adoption*. New York: NYU Press.

Chung, Soojin. (2020). Woman's Work for Woman: The Controversial Role of the Female missionaries in Korea, 1885–1945. *Fides et Historia*, 52(2), 17–27.

DuBois, Thomas David. (2011). *Religion and the making of modern East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Han, Ju Hui Judy. (2009). *Contemporary Korean/American evangelical missions: Politics of space, gender, and difference*. Unpublished Thesis. University of California, Berkeley.

Hübinette, Tobias. (2005). *Comforting an orphaned nation: Representations of international adoption and adopted Koreans in Korean popular culture*. Unpublished Thesis. Institutionen för orientaliska språk, Stockholm University.

Kim, Helen Jin. (2022). *Race for revival: How cold war South Korea shaped the American evangelical empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kim, Hosu. (2015). The biopolitics of transnational adoption in South Korea: Preemption and the governance of single birthmothers. *Body & Society*, 21(1), 58–89.

Kim, Hosu., & Cho, Grace M. (2014). The kinship of violence. In P. Duncan & G. Wong (Eds.), *Mothering in East Asian communities: Politics and practices* (pp. 31–52). Demeter Press.

Kim, Eleana. (2009, October). *The origins of Korean adoption: Cold war geopolitics and intimate diplomacy*. US-Korea Institute at SAIS, Working paper 09-09. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11137

Lee, Kyung.eun. (2022). South Korea's legacy of orphan adoption and the violation of adoptees' rights to know their origins. *Childhood*, 29(2), 235–251.

Morrison, Steve. (2021). *Korea's revised adoption process - On the road to socialism*. MPAK Blog, June 17. http://mpakusa.blogspot.com/2021/06/koreas-revised-adoption-process-on-road.html

Mrs. Harry Holt, The Seed from the East, 1956 (n.d.). *The Adoption History Project.* https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/archive/HoltSFE.htm

Oh, Arrisa H. (2012). From war waif to ideal immigrant: The Cold War transformation of the Korean orphan. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 31(4), 34–55.

Oh, Arrisa H. (2005). A new kind of missionary work: Chrisitians, Christian Americanists, and the adoption of Korean GI babies, 1955-1961. *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 33(3/4), 161–188.

Turner, Bryan. S., & Salemink, Oscar. (2014). Introduction: Constructing religion and religions in Asia. In B. S. Turner & O. Salemink (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of religions in Asia,* (pp. 1-14). Routledge.

Woo, Susie. (2015). Imagining kin: Cold war sentimentalism and the Korean children's choir. *American Quarterly*, 67(1), 25–53.

Park, Chung-shin. (2007). The Protestant Church as a political training ground in modern Korea. *International Journal of Korean History*, 11, 45–59.

Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Simandjuntak, Deasy. (2021). Disciplining the accepted and amputating the deviants: Religious nationalism and segregated citizenship in Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 8(1), 88–107.

Simandjuntak, Deasy. (2021). Disciplining the accepted and amputating the deviants: Religious nationalism and segregated citizenship in Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 8(1), 88–107.

Turner, Bryan. S., & Salemink, Oscar. (2014). Introduction: Constructing religion and religions in Asia. In B. S. Turner & O. Salemink (Eds.). *Routledge handbook of religions in Asia,* (pp. 1-14). Routledge.

Woo, Susie. (2015). Imagining kin: Cold war sentimentalism and the Korean children's choir. *American Quarterly*, 67(1), 25–53.