

## 12. Opposing desires revisited: opportunities and threats in pro and anti-LGBT activism within South Korean Protestantism<sup>1</sup>

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As this study has shown, conservative Protestant groups have been fighting against various political initiatives in favor of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Korea since the early 2000s. Anti-LGBT campaigns, many of which were successful, included campaigns against anti-discrimination bills, against human rights ordinances, against gay men in the Korean military, and against school textbooks disseminating information on homosexuality. Recent scholarship considers several explanatory avenues for the emergence of anti-LGBT activism in South Korea, arguing, for example, that while the Christian doctrine may play an important role in the fight against homosexuality, the decisive reason is to be found in the crisis of Korean Protestantism. By focusing on the opposition against LGBT issues, the argument goes, church leaders and professionalized anti-LGBT groups try to deflect attention away from declining church memberships and scandals like embezzlement and sexual harassment (Siwoo 2018, 36–46). In Han Ch'aeyun's view, conservative Protestant church leaders use anti-gay rhetoric to create an “external enemy” or threat to help increase their political leverage and at the same time lessen the divisions among notoriously fragmented denominations (Han 2017, 180–181).

Existing social scientific research on conservative Christian opponents of LGBT rights mainly investigates how Christian forces strive to prevent or undo pro-LGBT legislation in the arenas of politics and law (Kim, Nami 2016 on Korea; Hark & Villa 2015 on Germany; Béraud & Portier 2015 on France; Stone 2016; Dorf & Tarrow 2014; Fejes 2008; Fetner 2008; Green 2000; Herman 1997 on the United States). This chapter examines how anti-LGBT activists create an ‘internal enemy’ too, by fighting and vilifying LGBT-affirmative tendencies *within* Protestantism – going beyond theological and

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attitudinal (Moon 2014; Rich 2017; Choi, Eunjung 2014) as well as exclusively political disputes. This perspective on the dynamics between Christian pro and anti-LGBT groups complements similar studies, for example on LGBT groups at Christian universities in the United States (Coley 2018; 2017; 2014) by taking into consideration a broader range of forms and arenas of contention. The chapter also goes beyond perspectives that focus on one party of the conflict only, like the Korean LGBT movement (Kwon Kim & Cho 2011; Bong 2009; Park-Kim et al. 2007), benevolent Christian congregations in Seoul (Yi et al. 2017), ex-gay activism within the Christian anti-LGBT movement (Pak 2018), and the latter's transnational connections (Yi, Jung & Phillips 2017). Studying the internal rifts within Korean Christianity is worthwhile considering that Korean Protestantism in general is characterized by a high degree of factionalization and internal conflicts (Clark 2008, 220). From this perspective, the Korean case can serve as an example of how religious contention over LGBT issues works in a non-western context.

Protestant anti-LGBT activists and LGBT-affirmative actors enter into various forms of struggles, which are analyzed by adapting the *contentious politics* framework (Tilly & Tarrow 2015; Tarrow 2011; McAdam et al. 2001) and *movement-counter-movement dynamics* (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996) for the study of religious conflict. These approaches emphasize the importance of interaction between collective actors and their opponents. The first framework in particular focuses on the interplay of 'members' and 'challengers', i.e., between actors with power or access to powerful parts of a certain community and actors who challenge the former's position or worldview. This conceptual lens helps understand what a crucial role perceived or deliberately constructed threats and opportunities play in this interaction. By concentrating on relational, cognitive, and constructivist aspects, this investigation identifies the mechanisms at work as well as the action repertoires used in the contentious relations among anti-LGBT, moderate, and LGBT-affirmative actors within Korean Protestantism.

I argue that the attacks against pro-LGBT stances within Protestantism are crucial to understand the motivations, strategy, and the complex actor constellations of Protestant anti-LGBT activism in Korea. Many major Protestant denominations and their anti-LGBT factions aim at creating an image of Korean Protestantism standing united against homosexuality and related, allegedly anti-Christian 'ills'. This unity, however, shows distinct cracks. Dissent does not only arise between an uncompromising anti-LGBT camp and other conservative, yet more moderate voices. Explicitly affirmative attitudes have also become visible in recent years.

Through a thorough analysis of PEA data and further relevant newspaper articles and press statements, I was able to come up with two main findings on concrete internal struggles over LGBT issues, which emerged and soon substantially expanded from 2015 onwards. First, through being framed as a threat, LGBT-affirmative activism within Protestantism can be strategically utilized as an additional incentive to fight LGBT issues. The anti-LGBT movement can stress the urgency to eliminate this threat, thus trying to mobilize fellow believers for the struggle against an 'internal enemy'. Second, despite these efforts of anti-LGBT factions, practicing Christian LGBT individuals and their allies have become more active and gained greater visibility owing to the very oppression originating from their bellicose Christian 'fellows'.

The chapter proceeds as follows: after shortly presenting the analytical framework, I offer an overview of the contentious interactions over LGBT issues within Korean Protestantism and beyond. The main body of the study consists of an analysis of five case studies, namely, heresy trials against a pro-LGBT pastor, conflicts at Christian universities, the vilification of the progressive National Council of Churches in Korea and the Christian newspaper Newsjoy, and the controversy around an arguably moderate junior pastor of a Protestant congregation. The conclusion summarizes and further contextualizes the results of this chapter's analysis.

## 12.1 Contentious politics and movement-counter-movement dynamics in the religious context

Religious movements have been analyzed from various angles, including cultural or ideological and organizational approaches for analysis (Kniss & Burns 2004, 696). Further areas of research encompass the intersection of genuinely political movements with religious ones, their respective collective identities, and strategies pursued in relation to the state or society at large (Snow & Beyerlein 2019, 576–580). This chapter deals with two specific subsets of research on religious movements and adds a third aspect: social movements within religious organizations, religion as a resource or facilitator for the emergence of movements and their actions (Kniss & Burns, 2004: 695), and religious conflict. While conflict between religious groups is not unusual and has been the subject of extensive scientific investigation, a systematic analysis of such an actor constellation – especially concerning contention over LGBT issues in religious contexts – is still lacking. The chapter will fill this lacuna by applying and adapting two approaches commonly used for the study of conflict in social movement studies: *movement-counter-movement dynamics* and the *contentious politics* framework.

Protestant anti-LGBT and pro-LGBT actors in Korea enter into diverse conflicts with each other, one reacting to the other's actions and vice-versa. Social movement scholars speak of “movement-counter-movement dynamics” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) or “opposing movements” (Dugan, 2004) when referring to such actor constellations. While this chapter is not so much concerned with the circumstances around the emergence of counter-movements, it will show that the opportunity structures identified in Meyer and Staggenborg's seminal article (1996: 1635–1643) play an important role in the dynamic interactions between religious pro and anti-LGBT actors. These opportunity structures include the following aspects: the opposing movement shows signs of success, it poses a threat to vested interests or values of dissenting groups, and it receives support from elite allies.

Concerning the role of threats and elite actors, the *contentious politics* approach (Tilly & Tarrow 2015; Tarrow 2011; McAdam et al. 2001) is a helpful complement to the analytical framework of this study. The approach transcends the traditional social movements approach by taking into consideration a less restricted set of actors,<sup>2</sup> and it highlights

2 Tarrow defines social movements as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 2011, 9, orig-

the environmental, relational, and cognitive *mechanisms* at work in contentious interactions (for details, cf. chapter 3). McAdam et al. (2001, 5) define contentious politics as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.” The ‘political’ bias of this definition may pose problems to the analysis of religious contexts. McAdam and Tarrow (2011, 5) themselves acknowledge that such a state-centeredness excludes many phenomena worthy of study. I contend that by reconceptualizing the government from the definition above as a powerful, authoritative religious body, this bias can be remedied for the purpose of this chapter’s analysis. Authoritative religious bodies are important because they wield power over subordinate religious organizations and individual believers. Moreover, they define what kind of attitudes and actions are legitimate from a perspective of religious doctrine and ethics (cf. chapter 10.2). Influential religious actors possess capacities similar to those of (authoritarian) states. For example, they have a repressive potential, repression being defined as “efforts to suppress either contentious acts or groups and organizations responsible for them” (McAdam et al. 2001, 69, original italicized).<sup>3</sup> *Certification* and *decertification* represent important mechanisms for (de)mobilization in this context: “Certification entails the validation of actors, their performances, and their claims by external authorities. Decertification is the withdrawal of such validation by certifying agents” (McAdam et al. 2001, 121). This corresponds to the support of influential allies in the movement-counter-movement approach seen above.

Authoritative religious bodies can, as shall be demonstrated in the context of this chapter, consist of denominational leaders, general assemblies of specific denominations, church associations, or the leaderships of Christian universities. Such religious bodies can function as claim makers themselves, or they can assist the *members*, i.e., constituted actors with privileged or routine access to these bodies, in their fight against their *challengers* (cf. McAdam et al. 2001, 12). The focus on religious actors does not preclude the possibility that either members or challengers may receive or seek support from authorities external to the religious arena. In fact, it is rather common that actors attempt to *appropriate* existing organizations or communities to gain benefits and mobilize more effectively (McAdam et al. 2001, 44).

I argue that unlike contention in democratic regimes, many religions, or their religious subsets – especially fundamentalist factions – do not allow for open deliberation over certain doctrinal and moral aspects of religion, thus impeding the emergence and actions of what one may call a civil society within religion (cf. Tilly & Tarrow 2015,

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inal italicized). I argue that the general properties of this definition apply to the Korean anti-LGBT movement within Protestantism, but less so to LGBT-affirmative activism inside Korean Protestantism. As we shall see, pro-LGBT activities often take place on an ad-hoc basis and are rather uncoordinated, at least when excluding the services offered by certain churches or groups like “Rainbow Jesus” (*mujigae yesu*) that explicitly cater LGBT Christians. For perspectives on *religious* movements and their particularities see Snow and Beyerlein (2019) and Kniss and Burns (2004).

3 Repression can take abstract forms as well. If, for example, a certain religious doctrine presenting homosexuality as morally bad is continuously communicated and thus well known, this can already exert a suppressive effect both on the individuals affected and on their potential allies.

56–58; Tarrow 2011, 179). Therefore, it can be expected that challengers will resort to *transgressive forms of contention*. Transgressive contention involves challengers employing innovative collective action, often out of necessity, since *contained contention*, that is, established forms of claim making within existing institutions, may not be available to them (McAdam et al. 2001, 7f.).

Repression may threaten challengers, while transgressive counteraction can in turn represent threats to members. The contentious politics framework calls attention to the fact that such threats – as well as opportunities – only become relevant as soon as they are perceived, and in some cases constructed. As McAdam et al. (2001, 43) argue, “[r]ather than look upon ‘opportunities and threats’ as objective structural factors, we see them as subject to attribution”. The necessity of *attribution* accentuates the deliberate, strategic construction of opportunities and threats as opposed to the traditional, rather static opportunity structures agenda of social movement studies (McAdam et al. 2001, 14f.). Meyer and Staggenborg also refer to such cognitive and dispositional mechanisms, claiming that the parties to a conflict react dynamically to the actions of the respective opponent and, if the conflict is prolonged, continuously create constraints and opportunities for each other. Consequently, “[t]he opposing movement is a critical component in the structure of political opportunity the other side faces” (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996, 1633). While *opportunities* consist of “the [perceived] probability that social protest actions will lead to success in achieving a desired outcome” (Goldstone & Tilly 2001, 182), *threats* are commonly perceived *ex negativo* as “the risks and costs of action or inaction” (Tarrow 2011, 160). This study emphasizes the productive, opportunity-like potential of threats. In comparison to opportunities and mere grievances,<sup>4</sup> threats involve a greater sense of urgency and intensity (Almeida 2019, 44). Tilly (1978, 134–135) argues that “a given amount of threat tends to generate more collective action than the ‘same’ amount of opportunity.” The attribution or creation of threats, I argue, thus represents an attractive tactical choice for the actors involved in contention.

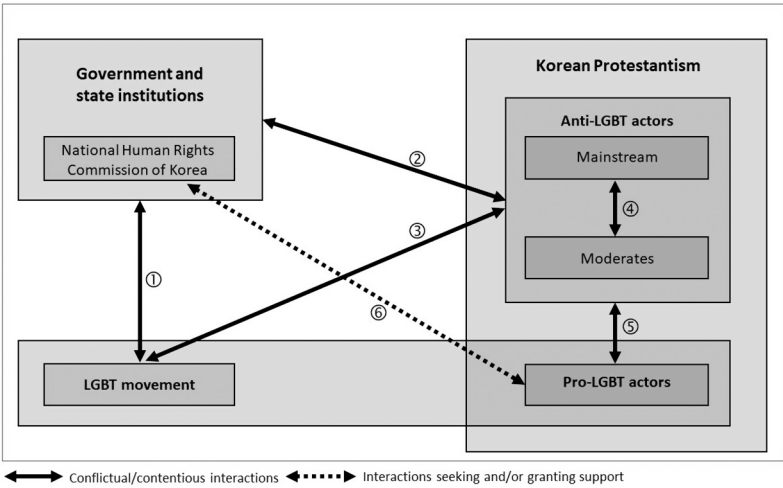
## 12.2 The complex interactions of pro and anti-LGBT actors in Korean Protestantism and beyond

Regarding the specific constellation of religious actors under investigation in this study, the assumption of a clear-cut picture seems tempting: the actors enforcing anti-LGBT stances within Korean Protestantism can be regarded as the original movement to which LGBT-affirmative counteractors react. However, when taking into consideration non-religious actors as well, the picture becomes more complicated. The Korean anti-LGBT movement can be regarded as a countermovement to begin with, which then engendered opposition from newly forming actors. As Zald and Useem (1987, 249) note, sometimes “a countermovement may in turn generate a counter-countermovement that is different from the original movement.” Figure 11 illustrates the complex web of contentious

4 Grievances being defined as “troublesome matters or conditions, and the feelings associated with them – such as dissatisfaction, fear, indignation, resentment, and moral shock” (Snow & Soule 2010, 23).

interaction, in which both pro and anti-LGBT activism within Korean Protestantism are embedded.

Figure 11: Actor constellation and actor overlaps (Venn diagrams) of Protestant and non-religious pro and anti-LGBT actors interrelating with each other and with the state



The counter-countermovement, consisting of pro-LGBT activities within Protestantism, emerged only at a later stage in the process of contentious interaction around LGBT issues in Korea (depicted as solid double arrows in Figure 11). While the respective forms of interaction shall be the cornerstone of this chapter's analysis, a linear or procedural perspective can illuminate the specific relations among actors and may help identify potential circular interactions. For the sake of clarity, some actor overlaps such as those between governmental actors and the Protestant anti-LGBT camp have been excluded (cf. chapter 10.5 for this). Figure 11 thus represents a simple, ideal-typical depiction of the actor constellation at hand, with a focus on the actors and interactions relevant to research focus of this chapter.

The Korean LGBT movement represented the initial spark. It emerged in the mid-early 1990s after the democratization of South Korea and started lobbying for LGBT rights (arrow ① in Figure 1). In response, from the mid-early 2000s onwards, a subset of actors within conservative Korean Protestantism started problematizing LGBT issues (cf. chapter 5). These groups and activists engage in contentious relations both with the LGBT movement and with state actors, which they perceive to excessively promote LGBT rights, purportedly to the detriment of religious freedom of Korean Christians (②, ③).<sup>5</sup> I argue that for large portions of institutional Protestantism in Korea, anti-LGBT stances have become a dominant feature of their faith, which is why I call this group the

5 Interestingly, the perception of pro-LGBT groups is the exact opposite. From their perspective, state actors are often unwilling, or fail to enact human rights protection for sexual minorities (which, of course, may be due to the powerful anti-LGBT activism of certain Protestant groups). To be clear, I do not argue that the anti-LGBT movement emerged because of or in opposition to the LGBT

‘mainstream’. I use this term also to differentiate these actors from those who hold less vociferous, less exclusionary attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. As I will show in the next section, such ‘moderate’ positions – despite being rather unimportant in terms of quantity – face strong opposition from mainstream anti-LGBT forces (④). Finally, there is conflictual interaction between pro-LGBT and anti-LGBT forces within Protestantism (⑤). These last two types of interrelation will constitute the main focus of the five case studies below. However, actors external to Korean Protestantism also get entangled, at times in a circular manner. As already mentioned also elsewhere in this study, certain state institutions come under fire for their defense of LGBT rights. When Christian pro-LGBT actors then approach these state institutions to seek support against their anti-LGBT opponents (⑥), the anti-LGBT camp resumes its attacks against the state institution in an even more vigorous manner.

### 12.3 Case studies of contention over LGBT issues within Korean Protestantism

The cases identified as involving protracted contention over LGBT issues cover a broad range of actors and interactions. Both individual and collective actors become targets of anti-LGBT activism, including the attacks against Pastor Lim Borah and two instances of punishments for pro-LGBT students at Christian universities. Two cases comprise more institutionalized actors, the progressive Christian online newspaper Newsnjoy and the progressive church association NCKK, which are criticized for their LGBT-affirmative stances. Finally, the case of Bundang Woori Church proves relevant as it demonstrates how even slightly dissenting voices can be perceived as a threat. As we shall see, these conflicts reflect broader religious and socio-political cleavages in Korean Protestantism and society at large.

#### (De)certification and scale shift: the heresy trials against Pastor Lim Borah

Openly LGBT-inclusive congregations are scarce in Korea, but they do exist (Yi et al. 2017). There is even an association of (pro-)LGBT Christians called *Rainbow Jesus*, with members from many Protestant denominations and from Catholic Church. *Sumdol Hyanglin Church* (*sōmdol hyangnin kyohoe*) is perhaps the most famous of the LGBT-affirmative congregations, with its founding pastor Lim Borah (*Im Po-ra*) being one of the first in Korean Protestantism to speak out against hatred and discrimination against LGBT people (Schumacher 2016, November 22). Sumdol Hyanglin Church belongs to the theologically progressive *Kijang* denomination (Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, PROK) and is the only Presbyterian congregation in Korea explicitly welcoming sexual minorities (Yi et al. 2017, 1462; Rode 2018, April 25).

Pastor Lim became active in supporting LGBT rights when Protestant anti-LGBT forces began fighting against the inclusion of homosexuality into anti-discrimination

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movement and state actors only. It might also be, e.g., a reaction to more general changes in society (cf. Mottl 1980).

bills from 2007 onwards. She organized discussion events bringing together different Christian views on homosexuality, arguing herself that homosexuals are not objects to be healed or pitied, but that they are part of God's good creation (Yi, Tae-ung 2008, January 30). Along with other LGBT-affirmative pastors from Rainbow Jesus, Pastor Lim has been a regular attendant of the annual Seoul Queer Culture Festival (SQCF), running a booth and participating in the pride parade (Kang, Chu-hwa 2014, June 7). The involvement of Christian groups in the SQCF is a recurrent subject of scandalization with conservative Christian media (Yi, Tae-ung 2018, July 16; Ch'oe, Yŏng-gyŏng 2016, August 18). Pastor Lim consistently reaffirmed her strong pro-LGBT attitude and demanded changes in Korean Christianity: "Homosexuality is not a matter of pro or contra, it is about whether we embrace the dignity of a life or not" (quoted in Pak & Chin 2014, October 19). Pastor Lim also points to the opportunities a welcoming attitude towards LGBT believers could have for her own denomination.

The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) is afraid to take the lead role in advocating for human rights of sexual minorities because they worry about additional loss of members, even though they usually like to see themselves as pioneers. I think taking on this matter and openly advocating for the rights of sexual minorities would enrich the profile of PROK. It might even bring new members. Many LGBT Christians are hurt and deeply disappointed by the church and they are longing for a congregation that welcomes them as they are. (Quoted in Schumacher 2016, November 22)

Conservative Protestant denominations did not only refuse to follow Pastor Lim's recommendations, but accused her of heresy, that is, beliefs or opinions against the established doctrinal principles of a religion (cf. Tutino 2012). At the General Assembly of Presbyterian Churches in September 2017, the heresy task forces (*idan taech'aek wiwŏnhoe*) of eight major Protestant denominations<sup>6</sup> demanded that Pastor Lim be declared guilty of heresy. These task forces claimed that her advocacy for homosexuals and her participation in translating the 'Queer Bible Commentary' were unacceptable and that her interpretation of the Bible constituted an "irrevocable error" as well as a threat to Korean Protestantism (quoted in Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2017, September 4). In this investigative process, Pastor Lim Borah was not given any opportunity to defend herself directly (Kang, To-hyŏn 2019, January 15). Here, the repressive power of churches and their leadership structures becomes evident. The demand to declare Pastor Lim a heretic is a clear example of *decertification*: powerful actors external to her own denomination tried to delegitimize her.

At the same time, the controversy around this pro-LGBT reverend provided an opportunity to extend the conflict by expanding the number of actors involved. The group *Anti-Homosexuality Christian Solidarity* (AHCS, *pandongsŏngae kidok simin yŏndae*), for example,

6 These denominations included the *Presbyterian Church of Korea* (PCK, *T'onghap*), the *General Assembly of Presbyterian Church in Korea* (GAPCK, *Hapdong*), the *Presbyterian Church of Korea* (Daesin), the *Kosin Presbyterian Church in Korea* (Kosin), the *Korean Presbyterian Church* (Hapsin), the *Korean Methodist Church*, the *Korea Evangelical Holiness Church*, and the *Korea Baptist Convention*.

joined the chorus of opposition against Pastor Lim by criticizing her mother denomination PROK for allowing such a “heretical” behavior (AHCS 2017, September 4). This process constitutes a case of *scale shift*, “a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (McAdam et al. 2001, 311). While the coordinated quality of the contention at hand may be questionable, the extension of the conflict is not. In fact, not only did professionalized anti-LGBT groups join the fight. Progressive Christian organizations intervened as well, showing their solidarity with Pastor Lim and by so doing, at least to a certain extent, (re)certifying her. Already when Lim Borah was still under investigation for heresy, the Women’s Committee (*yösŏng wiwŏnhoe*) of NCCCK issued a supportive statement (Kim, Chin-yŏng 2017, August 10), as did the *United Church of Canada*, demonstrating international support (Yi, Ŭn-hye 2017, August 17). The *PROK Life Mission Solidarity* (*saengmyŏng sŏn’gyo yŏndae*) also issued a statement criticizing both the hypocritical behavior of the denominations prosecuting Pastor Lim in light of their own scandals and wrongdoings, and the negative attitude of PROK’s general assembly president towards sexual minorities. At a meeting with other denominations’ presidents, he had supported a statement against homosexuality and same-sex marriage, thus further isolating PROK’s Pastor Lim (Yi, Ŭn-hye 2017, August 5). These instances of supportive statements for Pastor Lim on the one hand, and dismissive ones on the other, hint at broader underlying conflicts within Korean Protestantism. Moreover, the latter statement by PROK’s Life Mission Solidarity evidences that contention over LGBT issues exists even within this progressive denomination. A year later, when the Presbyterian denominations *Tonghap* and *Daesin Paeksŏk* actually declared Pastor Lim heretical, PROK displayed a firmer stance, demanding the withdrawal of these decisions and urging the two denominations to apologize to Pastor Lim (Kim, Chin-yŏng 2018, September 13).<sup>7</sup>

### Repressive measures and their implications: punishing LGBT activism at Christian universities

Contention over LGBT issues can be encountered at Christian universities in Korea as well. In February 2016, theology and missionary students at the *Methodist Theological University* (*kamsin daehakkyo*) protested against the *Korean Methodist Church’s* decision to include an official ban on homosexuality into its church constitution. The protesters were all wearing masks hiding their faces, fearing potential consequences following their activism against discrimination (Paek, Sang-Hyŏn 2016, February 21). However, most LGBT-related activism at Christian universities consists of publicly declaring one’s aversion to homosexuality, which has been done by whole universities (e.g. Handong

7 The case of Lim Borah is a prominent one, but not the only one, in which a Protestant pastor got punished for their LGBT-friendly positions. Another case that attracted wide attention is the one of the Methodist pastor Lee Dong-hwan (*Yi Tong-hwan*), who was suspended from being a pastor for two years by an ecclesiastical tribunal in October 2020 because he had held a blessing prayer for sexual minorities at the Seoul Queer Culture Festival the year before. However, just like in the case of Pastor Lim Borah, this repressive measure was met with resistance and solidarity from pro-LGBT groups and churches in Korea and abroad. He was even awarded a special prize by Amnesty International in March 2021 for his relentless commitment (Park, Ji-won 2021, April 29).

University, Yu, Yŏng-dae 2017, May 26), by groups of Christian professors (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2017, August 11; 2017, September 26) and by students (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2017, August 8).

I will focus on two cases of extended contention over LGBT issues at Christian universities, more specifically conflicts that involved a broader range of actors in protracted interactions. In late 2017, the feminist students club *Wildflower* (*tŭlkkot*) of *Handong University*, a private Christian university located in the city of Pohang in south-western Korea, planned to hold a lecture event on prostitution. The university administration forbade this event, but the club proceeded with the event regardless, inviting feminist scholars who also talked about polyamory and homosexuality. As a result, Handong University considered taking disciplinary measures against three members of *Wildflower*, two participants, as well as against a professor who indirectly supported the lecture (Yu, Sŏl-hŭi 2018, January 8). One student was eventually expelled.<sup>8</sup>

The student club *Wildflower* challenged the repressive measures taken by their university and filed a complaint with the *National Human Rights Commission of Korea* (NHRCK). In this action, the students sought help from an institution outside their Christian university and indeed received support (interaction ⑥ in Figure 11 above). The NHRCK recommended that Handong University withdraw the disciplinary measure as it constituted an act of discrimination of sexual minorities and thus a violation of human rights. Yet, Handong University did not accept this decision (NHRCK 2019, May 7).<sup>9</sup> In February 2020, a court ruled that while the disciplinary measure taken by Handong University was severe, it was rightful since the lecture event violated the founding philosophy of the school (Chang, 2020).

The NHRCK was established in 2001 as an independent state agency to protect and advocate human rights in Korea. As soon as the NHRCK started an investigation of the *Wildflower* incident, contention became more heated and shifted towards the NHRCK as the main target. Christian parents' groups staged several protests in front of the NHRCK building in Seoul, gathering up to 300 participants (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2019, January 23). Press statements reprimanding the NHRCK for infringing on the religious and academic freedom of Christian universities were also issued by various Christian organizations.<sup>10</sup> The *Korean Association of Church Communication* (KACC), mouthpiece of the conservative

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- 8 A related case concerns the lecturer Kim Tae-ok who was dismissed from Handong University for not meeting the requirements for reappointment. Kukmin Daily reported that reasons for his dismissal could be found in his lack of opposition against homosexuality and his support for the student club *Wildflower* (Ku, Cha-ch'ang 2018, January 3). Kim Tae-ok was subsequently found guilty of heresy in a decision "to protect the Korean church" taken by the general assembly of the Presbyterian *Paeksŏk* denomination in September 2019. "Pastor Kim Tae-ok interprets the Bible arbitrarily, teaches greatly wrong ideas in core doctrines, and advocates Islam and homosexuality" (quoted in Yi, Ŭn-hye, 2019, September 20).
  - 9 The NHRCK issued a similar recommendation to protect the human rights of sexual minorities in a case that occurred at *Soongsil University*, a private Christian University in Seoul. The university had prohibited the screening of a movie as the university deemed the film to show a beautifying image of homosexuality (NHRCK 2019, May 7).
  - 10 Press statements were issued by, among others, the *Handong University Parents' Prayer Association* (*handong taehakkyo hakpumo kidohoe*), the *Christian Voters Union* (*han'guk kidokkyo yugwŏnja yŏnhap*), and the *National Union of Professors against the Legalization of Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage*

parts of Korean Protestantism such as the CCK, even demanded that the NHRCK be dismantled: “[...] the National Human Rights Commission of Korea [...] should be dissolved to properly stop the destruction of human dignity and values, and to stop it putting undue pressure on schools that practice correct teaching” (KACC 2019, May 18). It is remarkable that although the lecture event organized by the student club *Wildflower* was predominantly about issues other than homosexuality, most of the statements overemphasize this aspect, accusing the NHRCK of taking a biased stance, overly favoring LGBT rights as against the freedom of religion (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2019, January 8; Yu, Yŏng-dae 2019, February 2; Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2018, April 4).

Similar repressive measures against pro-LGBT activism were taken by *Changshin University*, another private Christian university in south-western Korea, located in the city of Changwon. Commemorating the international day against homophobia on May 17, 2018, eight students of the student club *Am-ha’aretz* dressed in rainbow-colored clothes and entered the altar area holding a rainbow flag after a church service at Changshin University. The group shared pictures of this rainbow performance on social media. The university leadership did not approve of this action and immediately started an investigation of the students involved, asserting that they violated the regulations of the school and of the Presbyterian *Tonghap* denomination Changshin University belongs to. In a press statement, the students expressed their disappointment with the university’s actions, claiming that their rights of freedom of expression and freedom of conscience were infringed (Yi, Yong-p’il 2018, May 21).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, in July 2018, four students were suspended from attending Changshin University. With the support from *Hope and Law* (*hŭimang-ŭl mandŭnnŭn pŏp*), a lawyers’ association advocating human rights, the penalized students successfully appealed against their university’s verdict. As opposed to the *Wildflower* case, a court decided in July 2019 that their suspensions were invalid, albeit only due to procedural flaws (Yi, Ŭn-hye 2019, July 18). In a press statement, the KACC condemned this decision and accused the court of showing disrespect for Christianity. The KACC (2019, July 23) also demanded Changshin University to take disciplinary measures against the students yet again – this time correctly – in order to protect the church and society at large from an unwanted influx of homosexuality. The KACC statement reveals the ideological and political implications of Protestant anti-LGBT activism by further elaborating on the alleged dangers of homosexuality:

Homosexuality cannot simply be regarded as encompassing sexual minorities or the weak, but it is a ruse conceived by Satan, which aims to destroy the church through ‘Cultural Marxism’. Homosexuality is not just a matter of sex, it is sex politics, it is sex

(*tongsŏngae tongsŏnghon hapbŏphwa pandae chŏn’guk kyosu yŏnhap*) (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2018, April 4; 2019, January 8; Yu, Yŏng-dae 2019, February 2).

11 In the press statement, *Am-ha’aretz* also claim that they are not affected by the church regulation since it only mentions staff members of universities and not students. The church constitution of the Presbyterian Church of Korea *Tonghap* states in article 26–12: “Those who support and advocate homosexuals and homosexuality are against the teachings of the Bible, and those who support and advocate homosexuals and homosexuality shall not be members of the Church and professors and faculty members of the Theological University.” Moreover, the students argued that the university regulations did not mention homosexuality at all (Yi, Yong-p’il 2018, May 21).

ideology, it is sex revolution. What they seek to do is destroying Christian values, families, society, and the church as a whole. (KACC 2019, July 23)

While disparaging homosexuality is a common feature of KACC press releases, it is striking that a relatively minor rainbow performance provokes such a strong response. Indeed, any activism in favor of homosexuality – no matter how innocuous – is met with dramatic allegations such as an intent of church destruction, social decay, and communist conspiracy (cf. chapters 7 & 8). In such a discursive environment, engaging in LGBT-affirmative activism entails high risks for the people involved. When Protestant denominations, universities, and specialized anti-LGBT organizations dominate the discourse and institutionalize anti-LGBT stances, established ways of deliberation, for example, at denominational general assemblies, are no longer available. Pro-LGBT actors have to resort to other means, consistently risking shaming, disciplinary measures, and exclusion. Under such circumstances, even seemingly small acts of dissent represent transgressive and potentially threatening actions.

The repressive measures against students who are (perceived to be) fighting for LGBT rights on campus are already noteworthy phenomena in themselves. Even more remarkable, though, is the fact that a broader range of Protestant anti-LGBT actors only mobilized as soon as these ‘incidents’ created a stir also outside the Christian arena – another example of scale shift. When the NHRCK got involved in the Wildflower case at Handong University, other Protestant anti-LGBT forces started mobilizing, staging protests and issuing press statements. Similar furor emerged when a court rendered a verdict in favor of the rainbow performance students. This extended contention brings to light even more fundamental conflicts that have been shaping Korean Protestantism. The liberal political and judicial elites (or those libeled as such) in general and governmental institutions like the NHRCK in particular have been longstanding targets of attacks by conservative Protestants.<sup>12</sup> This church-state antagonism enables, and contributes to counteraction. If this cleavage emerges in conflicts internal to Protestantism as well, the purported threat becomes greater and counteraction more urgent. Furthermore, if this is the case, anti-LGBT actors can resort to well-established arguments and action repertoires more easily.

## Reproducing the progressive/conservative divide: the cases of Newsjoy and NCKK

Protestant actors like the progressive Christian online newspaper *Newsjoy* and the theologically liberal church association NCKK (*National Council of Churches in Korea*) have been under attack for their support of LGBT issues as well. Anti-LGBT groups take issue, for example, with *Newsjoy*’s positive reporting on LGBT topics. In December 2018, a pastor of the group *Anti-Homosexual Christian Solidarity* started organizing several rallies against

12 The NHRCK is mainly criticized for the inclusion of “sexual orientation” in its anti-discrimination mandate (article 2 of the NHRCK Act). Courts have been targets of conservative Protestant protest on many occasions, too. For example, Protestant groups tried to exert influence on trials of the Supreme Court, fighting successfully against the lift of the ban on homosexuality in the Korean military, but unsuccessfully against the elimination of a strict prohibition of abortions (cf. chapter 6).

Newsjoy. The protesters decried this “anti-Christian press” as a “destructive force that infiltrated the church” and as a supporter of communism, demanding that churches supporting Newsjoy financially halt their funding (Kim, Chin-yŏng 2018, December 18; cf. also Chang, Myŏng-sŏng 2019, January 8). Subsequently, the *National Association of Professors against the Legalization of Homosexuality and Same-Sex-Marriage*<sup>13</sup> issued a statement condemning Newsjoy’s critical articles on Christian anti-LGBT activists in particular. The professors’ groups stated that Newsjoy “is the newspaper most supportive of homosexuality among domestic media, it has a strong hostility toward anti-homosexual activism and is releasing all kinds of malicious articles” (quoted in Kang, To-hyŏn 2019, January 25). Newsjoy features a section in which it conducts fact checks of “fake news” produced by representatives of the anti-LGBT movement. Viewing this kind of reporting as acts of defamation, several anti-LGBT activists sued Newsjoy. In January 2020, a court ruled that Newsjoy had to pay compensations for reporting “beyond the scope of legitimate media activities of monitoring, critique, and checking” and demanded that the articles in question be deleted (quoted in Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2020, January 20). However, Newsjoy appealed this sentence and subsequently won eight court cases at the appellate court and, in one case, received the recommendation to seek reconciliation with a plaintiff. The Supreme Court confirmed these rulings in August 2021 and thus concluded that anti-LGBT activists and groups have in fact spread false and distorted information (Ku, Kwŏn-hyo 2021, August 30). In March 2020, the gay mens’ organization *Chingusai* announced that Newsjoy would receive the 14<sup>th</sup> rainbow human rights award for being the only media within the Korean Christian community to actively fight against hatred and discrimination against minorities (Paek, Sang-hyŏn 2020, March 27).

As a church association including liberal Protestant denominations, the NCKK<sup>14</sup> is also a frequent target of conservative Protestant critique. Like Newsjoy, the NCKK has the potential of reaching many church members – threatening the image agitated for by the anti-LGBT camp of the Korean churches standing united against homosexual ‘evils’. Theologically positive perspectives on homosexuality and related subjects directly call into question the conservatives’ worldview and fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, the NCKK was met with fierce and partly violent protests when, for example, it published a translated theological book on homosexuality (Pak, Chi-hun 2015, December 17). The NCKK was also criticized when it invited a gay film director who advocates same-sex marriage for a lecture event on anti-discrimination (Sin & Paek 2016, April 29), and when it demanded that the political parties in the newly elected National Assembly quickly pass an anti-discrimination law (KACC 2020, April 23). The latter controversy on NCKK’s advocacy for the anti-discrimination law illustrates the broader socio-political and religious cleavages underlying the contention over LGBT

13 Although the name of this professors’ group suggests differently, homosexuality has never been officially criminalized on the state level in Korea. Only the Military Criminal Law of South Korea includes a provision (article 92–6) punishing sex between men. Historically, however, this provision has not been implemented until recently (cf. chapter 7.2).

14 NCKK’s member denominations include, as of April 2023, for example, the *Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea* (PROK, Kijang), the *Anglican Church of Korea*, the *Lutheran Church in Korea*, but also more conservative ones like the *Korean Orthodox Church*, the *Assemblies of God of Korea*, and the *Presbyterian Church of Korea* (PCK, Tonghap) (NCKK n.d.).

issues. The *Christian Liberty Unification Party*, a minor right-wing Christian political party (cf. chapter 10.5), for example, in a press statement denounced NCKK as a left-wing religious political force:

They [the NCKK] claim they are active for the weak who are faced with discrimination and want to realize justice, but in fact, they habitually shout the political slogans of the Democratic Party on fake equity and fake peace like parrots, thereby advocating the anti-discrimination law which would legalize actions to promote homosexuality and to destroy the church and normal social culture. (Quoted in in Yu, Yöng-dae 2020, April 22)

Rivalry does not only exist in the area of political inclinations, but also among Korean Protestant associations. The leader of the conservative *Christian Council of Korea* (CCK), for instance, joined a rally against the NCKK, decrying its support for the anti-discrimination law (Chi, Yu-sök 2020, April 22). There are also calls for the NCKK, the CCK and other conservative church associations<sup>15</sup> to reunite in order to strengthen Korean Protestantism, but the NCKK's promotion of homosexuality and its alleged support of North Korea are presented as making such an endeavor impossible. Therefore, the KACC argues, it would be better to no longer recognize NCKK as a church association at all (KACC 2016, May 18).

Contention over LGBT issues renders visible the rifts that run deeper than simple disagreements over the theological or ethical assessments of homosexuality. Longstanding conflicts between ideologically, theologically, and politically opposing parts of Korean Protestantism come to the fore here. Anti-LGBT forces strategically use well-established arguments to disavow their internal enemies, such as anti-communism and nationalism, when maintaining that by advocating progressive issues, the NCKK, Newsjoy, and others willfully damage not only the church, but also families and the country as a whole (cf. chapter 7.2). The fault lines, however, do not run merely between progressive and conservative Protestant forces. They are also observable within conservative Protestantism itself, as the next case exemplifies.

### Critique, backlash, and strategic accommodation: the case of Bundang Woori Church

On June 5, 2019, a junior pastor of *Bundang Woori Church* (*pundang uri kyohoe*), a missional church located in the city of Söngnam south of Seoul, committed an act he would come to regret afterwards. In a sermon that was televised online but later deleted, he claimed that the obstinate and uncompromising focus on homosexuality shed a negative light on Korean Protestantism. In his view, people engaging in activism against homosexuality lost track of societal trends and could thus be regarded as "*kkondae*", a derogatory appellation for people with outdated values, which they try to impose on others in a more

15 Conflicts exist within organized conservative Korean Protestantism, too. For example, 20 denominations split from the CCK in 2012 due to disagreement over the election of a new leadership, forming the *Communion of Churches in Korea* (CCIK, *han'guk kyohoe yönhap*) (Paek, Sang-hyön 2017, August 27).

or less aggressive way. Although the junior pastor also voiced his view that from a Biblical perspective homosexuality was a sin, his sermon was met with immediate and fierce backlash from within the church. Protestant anti-LGBT activists denounced him and the senior pastor of Bundang Woori Church as advocates of leftist and anti-Christian ideas, resulting in several official apologies and reaffirmations of the two pastors' strong anti-gay stance. The junior pastor promised he would not preach for the duration of one year after this incident, and the senior pastor announced he would establish a Christian research institute on the topic of homosexuality (Yi, Ŭn-hye 2019, June 11).

This episode illustrates how even moderate attitudes towards LGBT issues are met with fierce resistance from anti-LGBT forces within South Korean Protestantism. Anti-LGBT groups have not only presented the actions of the Bundang Woori Church junior pastor as a threat for the Korean church. Other prominent church actors have also been criticized when they or their entourage are not in alignment with the hegemonic anti-LGBT discourse. For instance, the anti-LGBT group AHCS demanded an apology from the chairman of the *South Kyöngsang Province Christian Council* (*kyöngnam kidokkyo chönggyönhaphoe*) as a reaction to his son's promotion of queer theology via social media (AHCS 2018, July 17). Another peculiar example concerns the leadership of *Chongshin University*, a private Christian university in Seoul belonging to the conservative *Hapdong* denomination, which came under fire from anti-LGBT groups for dismissing a homophobic professor. Students had taken issue with the professor teaching in a bioethics lecture that homosexual acts were against the creation order and harmful to health (Im, Po-hyök 2020, January 28).

The fierce verbal attacks against Bundang Woori Church are surprising, since its senior pastor had actively preached the sinfulness of homosexuality in the past (The Bible-smith Project 2016, May 12). It seems as though the junior pastor's sermon did not come under attack so much for his relatively moderate stance on homosexuality. Rather, the reason for being faced with an immense backlash is the fact that the junior pastor – very much like Newsjoy – openly attacked the anti-LGBT factions of Korean Protestantism. The act of pointing out critical aspects of anti-LGBT activism from within conservative Protestantism poses a particular threat to the intended image of a united church. Therefore, the Protestant anti-LGBT movement immediately and forcefully responded to the junior pastor's announcements. Their response proved effective: with the announcement to create a Christian research institute in order to deal with the problem of homosexuality, the senior pastor publicly demonstrated his willingness to atone for the 'mistakes' committed. In a sense, Bundang Woori Church appears keen to become an overachiever as a means to convincingly prove its firm anti-LGBT attitude. Such a behavior can be called *strategic accommodation*, a kind of "dramatic ingratiation" to (re)gain the favor of certain actors by "fostering the impression that values, aims, and/or conduct are in conformity with, or at least not incongruent with, certain values, traditions, and normative standards within the ambient society" (Snow, 1979: 30, cited in Snow & Beyerlein, 2019: 579).

The threat posed by the junior pastor's sermon is productively used by the anti-LGBT movement. The anti-LGBT actors achieved their goal of forcing Bundang Woori Church to realign with the anti-LGBT mainstream. They set another warning example for all those who may hold similar LGBT-affirmative or just moderate opinions and are pon-

dering whether to act upon them. So Kang-sök, a senior pastor of *New Eden Church*, a mega-church located in the city of Yongin south of Seoul, is both an active member of the Protestant anti-LGBT movement and a frequent contributor to the *Kukmin Daily*. In a column, he analyzed the “exhausting controversy” around Bundang Woori Church and put forward an interesting comparison:

The historian Toynbee said that if a civilization succeeded in responding to an external challenge, such as a harsh natural environment or external invasion, that civilization could continue and develop. If it fails, the civilization disappears behind the stage of history. Interestingly, civilizations that have not been challenged have gone a path of collapse. [...] In this sense, the attack of anti-Christian forces on the Korean church is a good challenge for us. If the Korean church does not accept this challenge but makes compromises, it will surely go extinct. Recently, there was an exhausting controversy over the issue of homosexuality in the Korean church. However, by resisting the opinion that homosexuality is only a mayfly and that this trend has already ended, Korean churches have succeeded in becoming one again. (So, Kang-sök 2019, August 27)

This passage allows for an insight into the logics underlying the opposition against pro-LGBT tendencies within Protestantism. While LGBT-affirmative actions and attitudes are perceived and/or presented as acute threats to the church, families, and to the society as a whole, they also constitute opportunities – opportunities to reiterate anti-LGBT arguments, to reinvigorate and thus mobilize church members, and to recreate an image of a church standing united against inimical groups. The internal enemy thus becomes a productive force for anti-LGBT activism.<sup>16</sup>

Whether such opportunities ‘pay off’ for the anti-LGBT forces in the long run remains questionable, though. As I have shown, pro-LGBT actors are increasingly visible and assertive within Korean Protestantism. The continuous and relentless activities of the Protestant anti-LGBT forces certainly played its part in propelling counteractors into existence. To some extent, the threat emanating from anti-LGBT activism creates opportunities for pro-LGBT actors, too, and increases the urgency for resistance. Admittedly, counteraction has been minor and scattered so far, certainly when compared to the excessive anti-LGBT reactions that ensued. There are also many who are intimidated by the ferocious anti-LGBT forces and the effects they yield, such as the reproduction and reinforcement of homophobic attitudes in Christian families. But others refuse to endure the ubiquitous repression, discrimination, and hatred in their churches any longer. They stage rainbow performances, they openly participate in queer events and seek support

16 On the other hand, So Kang-sök is also aware of the dangers of the rifts running through Korean Protestantism in general, and through the anti-LGBT movement in particular. In another column, he comments on diverging views on how to tackle queer festivals: “I truly admire everyone who has been with me to lead the anti-homosexuality movement. However, one should not fall into one’s own righteousness. And just because the views against the Queer Festival are a little different, friends should not criticize or attack each other. We must go together encouragingly. The most important thing is the right perception of homosexuality. This is because when the perception is wrong, the expression can be wrong and the positions can be different” (So, Kang-sök 2019, July 3). For a detailed perspective on the conflicts within the Korean anti-LGBT movement, refer to chapters 8.1 and 10.3.

from external institutions if necessary, making the existence of Christian LGBT people and their allies a visible reality in South Korean Protestantism.

## 12.4 Conclusion: creating the internal enemy

This chapter has explored the contention between anti and pro-LGBT actors within Korean Protestantism, focusing on the relational, cognitive, and constructivist aspects at work in such interactions. I have suggested that the perception and attribution of threat play important roles in opposing LGBT-affirmative tendencies. The greater the threat, the more active anti-LGBT activism gets. Anti-LGBT actors themselves strategically increase the threat by engaging in extreme allegations such as church destruction, communist collaboration, and imperilment of the nation. Anti-LGBT counteraction is particularly strong when external opponents such as the NHRCK enter the conflict in defense of LGBT rights. In such cases, the anti-LGBT movement often resorts to established narratives and action repertoires. The enlarged threat thus opens up greater opportunities to attack the opposing forces. In other words, if the *internal* enemy, that is, the pro-LGBT activists within Korean Protestantism, is joined by the *external* enemy (cf. Han, Ch'aeyun 2017), ferocious counteraction is considered even more urgent.

Socio-political and church-internal cleavages are deeply rooted in the history of Korean Protestantism. These denominational and ideological rifts break open in the contention over LGBT issues as well. Anti-LGBT actors try to win over whole church communities, thereby creating a religious 'regime' that often acts repressively against LGBT individuals and LGBT-affirmative attitudes. Alongside other action repertoires such as protests and issuing press statements, concrete repressive measures represent a common action form in this context, consisting of punishing pro-LGBT students and declaring pastors heretical. These attempts at delegitimization do not go unchallenged, though. Pro-LGBT actors also receive support from within and outside the church, encouraging them to remain steadfast against endeavors to exclude and denigrate them. Others, however, when faced with fierce backlash, quickly refrain from their moderate attitudes and engage in even more diligent anti-LGBT activities as a result, as the case of Bundang Woori Church reveals.

This chapter demonstrated that several mechanisms like scale shift, certification and decertification, as well as the attribution of threat can be observed in the contentious interactions of pro and anti-LGBT actors within Korean Protestantism. Applying the contentious politics and movement-counter-movement frameworks to the study of religious conflict thus proved fruitful, in particular as it allowed for a new take on the actors involved, such as state-like, repressive authoritative religious bodies. Future research should continue on this avenue and apply this approach to other cases of contention involving religious actors, both in Korea and beyond. This way, one could test if similar mechanisms and action repertoires are observable in further instances of LGBT-related struggles. One should also consider comparing the mechanisms uncovered in this study with those at work in the broader socio-political contention over LGBT issues in Korea. The interactions between anti-LGBT forces and secular state actors in particular,

which this chapter's investigation revealed to be of great significance for anti-LGBT mobilization, should become an object of detailed examination.