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BETWEEN INTERNAL COMPETITION AND POST-SECULAR ENGAGEMENT: SOUTH KOREA'S RELIGIOUS FIELD IN HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article critically engages Jürgen Habermas's concept of the post-secular society by situating it within the non-Western socio-religious context of South Korea and evaluating its analytical applicability beyond Europe. Drawing upon selected preliminary empirical cases, it advances a sociological account of how post-secular dynamics concretely emerge within Korea's distinctive religious landscape. The study first examines the structural features of South Korea's multi-religious configuration, demonstrating how these conditions simultaneously intensify interreligious competition and generate dialogical interfaces between religious communities and secular institutions. Within this framework, the dual processes described as "pressing" and "checking" compel religious actors to reformulate doctrinal convictions into rationally defensible and publicly accessible arguments. These dynamics are illustrated through two case studies—the Anti–Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel Movement and public controversies surrounding human embryonic stem cell research—revealing how structurally embedded competition can stimulate constructive participation in democratic public discourse.

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1. Introduction

Jürgen Habermas' discourse on the post-secular society offers a compelling framework for reconsidering the role of religion in democratic public life.* Since the early 2000s, Habermas has argued that religious traditions and religiously motivated citizens can make constructive contributions to public deliberation, provided their claims are translated into rational and generally accessible forms. Despite its influence, this perspective has largely remained at the level of normative political philosophy. As José Casanova aptly asks, "In which way might modern individuals or societies be said to be 'post-secular'?" (Casanova, 2013, 27). Addressing this question requires attention to the social and institutional conditions under which post-secular dynamics actually take shape. South Korea presents a particularly instructive context for such an inquiry. As a non-Western society characterized by a highly competitive and pluralistic religious field, it offers fertile ground for examining how post-secular interactions emerge beyond Euro-American settings. The country's oligopolistic religious structure simultaneously intensifies interreligious rivalry and encourages religious actors to engage the public sphere in increasingly rationalized and formalized ways.

Two interrelated concerns guide the analysis. On a theoretical level, attention is given to the structural features of South Korea's religious landscape and their implications for the emergence of post-secular dynamics. On an empirical level, these dynamics are explored through two episodes from the early 2000s: the Anti–

* Lee, Young-Jun and Lee, Jong-Oh also regard Korean society as a space of post-secular possibilities ("Secular or Post-Secular? Korea as a Multi-Religious Society," *Journal of Dharma,* 44.3 (2019): 301-320. However, while their outlook mainly explored the potential of religion to respond to Koreans' spiritual and mental needs, my concern lies in how actively religions can function as agents of social change in the public sphere.

Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel Movement, where Buddhist environmental activism succeeded in shaping public discourse, and the debate over human embryonic stem cell (HESC) research, in which competitive motivations prompted engagement but the lack of effective doctrinal translation constrained public influence. Together, these cases illustrate that while religious competition can stimulate participation in public deliberation, meaningful outcomes depend on the successful translation of religious claims into secularly intelligible arguments. In this respect, the South Korean experience sheds light on the broader conditions under which post-secular interaction between religion and the public sphere becomes viable.

2. Habermas's Discourse on Religion and the Possibility of Post-Secular Public Reason

In both practical and normative dimensions, Jürgen Habermas characterizes one of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary democratic societies as the steady decline in meaningful citizen participation—a decline that directly threatens the vitality, resilience, and legitimacy of democratic institutions. For Habermas, democratic life cannot endure without active civic engagement, since such participation constitutes the living foundation of democratic will-formation and public deliberation. Across his extensive and evolving intellectual trajectory, Habermas has persistently underscored the indispensability of rational public discourse and has endeavored to defend democracy as an institutional embodiment of communicative rationality. His overarching diagnosis remains unequivocal: modern democracy faces a gradual yet profound erosion of the normative energies and participatory dynamism that once sustained its moral appeal and integrative force (Habermas 2006, 29; 2008, 121).

Habermas's sustained and increasingly nuanced engagement with religion during the past two decades must be interpreted within this broader context of democratic concern. He advances the argument that religion retains a distinctive and irreducible motivational potential capable of reanimating civic consciousness and reinvigorating political participation. By situating his

reflections within the wider global phenomenon often described as the "return of religion," a formulation prominently articulated by José Casanova, Habermas identifies a constellation of both crises and possibilities. On the one hand, the contemporary resurgence of religion is evident in radical fundamentalist movements, exclusivist identity politics, and instances of religiously motivated violence. On the other hand, the growing public visibility of religious communities and actors as contributors to civic debate across diverse cultural settings discloses religion's constructive capacity to enrich democratic discourse (Habermas 2008, 3). For Habermas, the decisive challenge consists in directing and transforming the motivational resources of religion into discursive forms capable of renewing and strengthening democratic public spheres.

In addition to its motivational significance, Habermas ascribes to religion a further and equally crucial function: the provision of semantically dense moral vocabularies to a secular public sphere that has become increasingly depleted, technocratic, and subordinated to instrumental rationality and the imperatives of capitalist logic (Habermas 2003, 114; 2006, 46). From this perspective, religious traditions preserve moral intuitions and symbolic resources that can counterbalance the reductionism of purely functional reasoning. Nevertheless, Habermas insists that religious citizens bear a reciprocal responsibility: they must translate their doctrinal claims, theological arguments, and symbolically charged language into formulations accessible within a public sphere that, by definition, operates through shared, intersubjectively intelligible, and religiously neutral modes of communication (Habermas 2008, 110). Only through such a "translation proviso" can religious contributions legitimately enter processes of democratic deliberation without violating the epistemic symmetry required among citizens (Habermas 2003, 109; 2008, 137).

Importantly, this translation process does not entail a dilution or forfeiture of religious substance. Rather, Habermas contends that a secularized rendering of religious language—drawing upon the deep moral reservoirs embedded in religious traditions—can stimulate critical self-reflection within a public

sphere otherwise dominated by instrumental calculation and technocratic reasoning (Habermas 2003, 40; 109–112). The debates surrounding Western bioethics provide a particularly illuminating example. In controversies over human cloning and embryonic stem-cell research, religious citizens have frequently assumed a prominent and agenda-setting role, articulating their opposition through morally charged categories such as sin, blasphemy, or the transgression of human limits. Although such categories originate in theological frameworks, their public articulation has often catalyzed broader societal reflection on the meaning and dignity of human life, the ethical boundaries of scientific intervention, and the normative orientation of technologically advanced societies. Through these discursive interventions, religious actors have contributed to shaping public agendas and widening the scope of ethical deliberation. A society in which religious citizens perform such constructive and dialogical functions may, within Habermas's conceptual vocabulary, be appropriately described as post-secular.

Despite the richness and influence of this framework, Habermas's approach remains primarily philosophical, reconstructive, and normative in orientation. Although he acknowledges the redirection of religious energies toward worldly and political concerns as a structural characteristic of postmodern societies, he conceptualizes the encounter between religion and modernity largely through an abstract binary opposition between the religious and the secular. His post-secular thesis is grounded in three central presuppositions. First, he maintains that the persistent tension between religious and secular epistemologies—often symbolized through the paradigmatic traditions of Jerusalem and Athens—constitutes a foundational dynamic within the intellectual history of Western civilization (Habermas 2008, 2). Second, he contends that processes of modern secularization have marginalized religion in a manner structurally analogous to the colonization of the lifeworld by systems of functional rationality. Third, he argues that religious communities frequently experience a form of temporal disjunction or cultural lag, which he famously characterizes as the "simultaneity of the non-contemporaneous,"

thereby motivating their distinctive mode of engagement within secular public spheres (Habermas 2002, 129).

While analytically suggestive, this conceptual architecture has attracted criticism for its reliance on abstract dualisms and for its implicit Eurocentric historical narrative (Calhoun 2013). Furthermore, Habermas ultimately leaves unresolved a decisive empirical problem: whether religious motivations will be channeled into violent fundamentalism or, alternatively, into rational and discursive contributions to democratic life remains, within his theoretical schema, a normative question concerning what religious citizens ought to do rather than an empirically grounded explanation of what they in fact do. This limitation underscores the necessity of complementing philosophical normativity with sociological investigation. It calls for careful analysis of the concrete structural, historical, and cultural conditions under which religion can function as a participant in public discourse rather than as an oppositional force.

Accordingly, this article shifts the analytical theme from abstract normative theory to empirical inquiry. It seeks to explore the social conditions that motivate religious actors to engage constructively in public life; the structural configurations of the religious field that enable or constrain post-secular participation; the ways in which historical trajectories shape institutional forms and collective mentalities; and the dynamic interaction among these multiple layers in lived practice. By examining South Korea as a focused case study, this research endeavors to illuminate how religion operates within a complex, pluralized, and historically contingent public sphere that exceeds the confines of a simplified religious–secular binary, thereby contributing to a more differentiated understanding of post-secular public reason.

3. Dynamics of Competition in South Korea's Religious Field

In the contemporary world, no nation can be accurately described as adhering to a single religious tradition or as having undergone complete secularization. Rather, most societies operate within complex multi-religious contexts (Warner et al. 2005, 9–10; Calhoun et al. 2011, 3), in which the processes, trajectories and intensities of secularization vary significantly. South Korea,

situated within such a "multi-religious situation," presents a particularly compelling case for analysis. The country enjoys a high degree of religious freedom and has experienced sustained growth in its religious population.* Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism together account for more than 99 percent of religious adherents, while dozens of minority traditions and new religious movements compete within the remaining one percent of the religious "market." Religious actors in South Korea are notably active in both domestic and transnational arenas. These structural features have profoundly shaped Korean social dynamics, generating patterns of both cooperation and contestation.**

The sources of these tensions may be broadly categorized into two interrelated and mutually reinforcing dimensions: demographic factors and historic–cultural factors. Demographically, the religious population has expanded markedly over the past century, intensifying frictions both between religious communities and secular society, as well as among religious groups themselves. Within an increasingly saturated religious market, the dominance of the three major traditions amplifies competition—not only for the conversion of the non-affiliated but also through attempts to attract adherents from rival faiths. At the same time, minority religions contest this "oligopolistic" configuration, occasionally achieving social visibility and recognition, yet without fundamentally disrupting the prevailing structure of religious power.

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* Based on the Korean census data (1985–2015), the proportion of religious adherents rose to around 50%, peaking at 52.9% in 2005 before declining to 43.9% in 2015. Although no official census data are available before 1985, government estimates suggest that about 22% of the population was religious in 1961, and only 5–6% between 1918 and 1934. Scholars widely attribute South Korea's major "religious surge" to the 1970s, largely fueled by the expansion of its three principal religions.

** For studies highlighting the intensification of conflicts both within religious groups and between religious and non-religious individuals since the 2000s, see Jun Sung-Pyo, 2001; and Park, Byoung et al: 221-252. In particular, for discussions on the conflict between Protestants and Buddhists, refer to Kim, Kyung Jae: 219-257.

Historical and cultural trajectories have further intensified these divisions. Although the Korean constitution formally mandates the separation of religion and state, the country's modern history—including the collapse of the monarchy, colonial domination, war, and prolonged authoritarian rule—produced a pattern in which political power alternately controlled, instrumentalized, or colluded with religious institutions.* The process of democratization in the 1980s fundamentally altered this relationship by opening new avenues for religious engagement in the secular public sphere (Kang 2013a; 2013b).** Since the 1990s, a "gray zone" has emerged in which religion and the state exchange resources—particularly in the domains of education and social welfare—thereby embedding religious actors more deeply within civil society (Kang, In-Choel, 2013 Kim, Minah, 2020). The convergence of rapid demographic growth and deeply embedded historical–cultural experiences has produced enduring and structurally embedded tensions both within the religious field and in the broader relationship between religion

* For example, the "Korea National Prayer Breakfast (Gukgajochangidohoe)" organized by Christian leaders (Cf. Chun, Myung-Soo: 55–82; Yoo, Yohan & Kim, Minah: 308) and the "Buddhist National Defending Ceremony" led by senior monks (Yoo, Seung Moo: 197–225; Kang, In-Choel, 2013) symbolically reveal state–religion collusion under military rule. Since the colonial era, religious elites and political authorities have exchanged legitimacy and institutional privileges, consolidating this enduring alliance.

** Since the early twenty-first century, religious groups in South Korea have become increasingly visible in politics in two main ways. First, they directly intervene to protect or advance institutional interests through lobbying against restrictions on missionary work, involvement of religion-affiliated private schools in debates on private education law revisions (Kang In-Choel, 2013), participation in taxation disputes, and public endorsements of electoral candidates. Second, they influence public agendas by presenting socially engaged, religiously grounded claims as serving the common good. Examples include environmental protests against major development projects, debates on overseas troop deployments, ethical disputes over genetic cloning, and public controversies surrounding homosexuality (Kim Sunggun: 143–170).

and the secular sphere in South Korea. In this regard, the analysis offered by Lee and Oh provides a particularly illuminating interpretive framework. They describe the Korean religious configuration as operating through a "feedback mechanism of tension," structured along two primary axes: (a) sustained competition among religious communities, and (b) ongoing friction between religious actors and secular institutions (126). Drawing explicitly on Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology (119–120), they contend that intra-religious rivalry and religion–state tensions should be examined as mutually constitutive processes rather than as analytically separable phenomena. Through their study of the 2008 controversy concerning allegations of religious discrimination, they show how competition within the religious field can trigger conflict with secular authorities, while such conflicts, in turn, further intensify inter-religious competition, thereby reinforcing a cyclical and self-perpetuating "feedback mechanism." (124).

Building on this framework, the Korean religious landscape can be understood as a space of intersecting tensions. Multiple and overlapping axes of conflict operate simultaneously: among major religious traditions, between major and minor religions,[*] and between religious actors and the secular sphere.[**] These tensions are mutually reinforcing, as internal competition within the religious field is transformed into cross-sphere conflict, and

[*] For tensions between Protestant groups and smaller folk religions concerning access to national support, see Park, Myung Soo, (2009): 1–37. Moreover, the growth of Muslim immigrant communities has generated increasing conflicts—often involving Protestant actors—particularly over mosque construction and the development of so-called "halal towns." On this issue, see Kim, Sang-Seop and Jung, Young-Tae, (2017): 639–668.

[**] This tension is reflected in secular perceptions of religion. A 2021 Gallup Korea survey, Religion in Korea, reported that 20% of non-religious respondents were very disappointed with religion, 82% viewed it as socially unhelpful, and 54% showed no interest. During COVID-19, secularizing trends deepened as religious groups were blamed for spreading infections (Lee, Saehwan, and Oh, Seil: 51–52).

external pressures from the secular domain reciprocally stimulate intensified inter-religious competition.

4. Pressing and Checking: South Korea's Religious Competition

How does inter-religious competition foster active discursive engagement in the public sphere, and what implications does the South Korean religious field hold for post-secular discourse? As I already mentioned, South Korea exhibits pronounced tensions both within its religious sphere and between religious and secular domains. From a Habermasian perspective, such intra-religious competition can paradoxically encourage deeper engagement with secular society. Heightened rivalry among religious groups often leads to increased interaction across social domains, opening new possibilities for dialogue, mutual interaction and public reasoning between religious and secular actors. The central discussion, therefore, is under what social, institutional and ethical conditions inter-religious competition can be transformed into constructive participation that strengthens democratic discourse and inclusive public engagement.

Habermas emphasizes the normative necessity of religious involvement in the public sphere and the concomitant obligation for religious actors to translate their doctrinal language into forms intelligible to secular audiences. Yet his approach remains largely prescriptive: whether religious groups engage constructively in public discourse is left to their discretion, and participation cannot be externally mandated (Habermas, 2008, 9-10). Consequently, Habermas's post-secular perspective retains a fundamentally normative character, advocating for religious engagement while encouraging secular citizens to adopt an open-minded stance toward religious actors.

Nevertheless, the Korean religious field illustrates how structural conditions can move beyond a purely normative framing. Shaped by demographic diversity and historical experience, this multi-religious context appears to encourage rational engagement with secular issues, effectively shaping the strategic choices of religious actors. From this vantage, a social structure that facilitates post-secular practice must fulfill two interrelated functions. First, it should redirect the energies of

believers outward, channeling their motivations toward secular, socially oriented objectives—a "world-mastering" orientation in Weberian terms. Second, it must promote public interventions grounded in rational discourse rather than violence or collusion, requiring the translation of religious language into secular terms. The South Korean religious field appears to simultaneously perform these dual functions, which can be conceptualized as the "pressing function" (mobilizing religious energy toward secular goals) and the "checking function" (ensuring rational and publicly intelligible engagement)."

The concept of the "pressing function" within the Korean religious field describes how intense intra-religious competition translates into heightened engagement with the secular sphere—essentially, how religious motivation is mobilized toward public participation. In South Korea, rivalry among religious groups fosters a "world-mastering" orientation, whereby believers perceive that the secular world should be shaped according to their convictions rather than those of other groups. This competitive ethos generates tensions between the religious and secular domains, effectively pressing religious actors into public action. Empirical studies by Kim (2017, 14–41), Oh (2017, 42–71), Yoo (2017, 98–117), Jang (2017, 72–97), and Song (2019, 497) demonstrate that the competitive environment of South Korea's religious field drives religious actors to high levels of social participation. Such competition stimulates innovations in missionary activities and encourages engagement with social issues, intertwining strategic objectives with a commitment to values rooted in religious doctrines. A notable illustration is the establishment of the "Temple Stay" program by Buddhist organizations, supported by government funding, which subsequently prompted Protestant groups to develop a comparable "Church Stay" initiative (Soo, 2009, 25–28). Here, competitive strategies aimed at doctrinal propagation and social engagement are closely linked, demonstrating how religious groups leverage rivalry to expand their influence. This form of public-sector competition is characteristic of the Korean religious

landscape,* arising from routine operations within a quasi-market structure and, in turn, reinforcing the competitive culture that defines the field.

How does the religious field ensure that believers channel their convictions into public affairs rationally and constructively? While routine competition and an outward orientation often encourage public engagement, they also carry risks, potentially leading to irrational or collusive behavior. This is where the "checking function" becomes critical. In South Korea, the relatively balanced power among the three major religious groups prevents any single congregation from asserting unilateral leadership, making procedural legitimacy central to social interventions. Each group scrutinizes and challenges the others' approaches to engaging the secular sphere, thereby narrowing the channels for influence to formal public participation. For instance, politically biased actions favoring Protestantism—such as those associated with former President Lee Myung-bak—provoked strong opposition from Buddhist and Catholic communities, culminating in the "Official Religious Bias Prohibition Law." These tensions have extended into doctrinal competition over secular issues and broader human rights debates, including homosexuality and the "Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law (Chang, Dong Min: 283–321)" Such cases illustrate that while religious actors may be tempted to collude with political powers, their actions are frequently corrected or preemptively constrained by oversight from competing groups.

* Kim, Sunpil, in "A Study on the Causes of the Increase in Social Participation of Korean Catholic Priests in the 21st Century," *Social Science Studies* 23/1 (2015): 90, argues that a perceived crisis within an increasingly saturated religious market may partly explain the growing engagement of Catholic priests in secular affairs. In a similar vein, Kang, In-Choel, (2006): 182, observes that interreligious competition can shape how major traditions interpret and doctrinally justify contentious issues such as conscientious objection. From the standpoint of new religious movements, Park, Seung-Gil's "New Religious Movements in the Globalized Religious Market," (2011), analyzes doctrinal rivalry among religions as they respond to the challenges and unintended consequences of globalization.

It is important to note that the pressing–checking mechanism in Korea's religious field does not operate perfectly or uniformly. This analysis is based on idealized conditions—akin to a frictionless system—that can succeed but are not guaranteed. Nevertheless, the high levels of inter-group tension and the historically shaped distribution of power provide conditions in which these dual functions can emerge, facilitating rational, constructive engagement in the public sphere.

4. Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel Movement and HESC Controversy

This section presents a preliminary case study illustrating how the concepts of "pressing and checking" function within South Korea's religious field and how they illuminate patterns of post-secular social discourse. Focusing on two significant public controversies—the Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel movement and the Human Embryonic Stem Cell (HESC) debate—the analysis demonstrates how religious actors participate in public deliberation through competitive yet structured mechanisms that shape ethical argumentation, public accountability and interaction between religious communities and broader civil society.

The South Korean religious field is marked by intense interreligious competition, which encourages religious actors to translate doctrinal teachings into secular and publicly accessible language when addressing social and political issues. Such translation enhances both the legitimacy and strategic effectiveness of religious interventions within the public sphere. Korean Buddhism offers a striking example: despite its traditionally transcendental orientation, Buddhist communities in Korea have developed a robust history of social engagement. This challenges Weberian portrayals of Buddhism as purely "mystic" and instead reveals a dynamic, world-engaging posture shaped significantly by competitive religious and social pressures.

A notable expression of this competitive drive occurred during the 2008 Pan-Buddhist Congress (Beombulgyododaehoe), when a monk declared: "Christians [Protestants] are taking over our entire country. What are Buddhists doing now?!" This reflected

perceived threats in a saturated religious market, highlighting competitive motivations as a driving force for public engagement. As previously mentioned, this event was sparked by the issue of "religious bias," or more specifically, "Protestant bias" within the government under the former president. Many Buddhists perceived this as an existential crisis for Buddhism in a "saturated religious market" (Seung-Mu, 2009, 95–97). This sentiment highlights the clear recognition by Buddhists of the threats they face within the religious field. It stimulates a competitive mindset, prompting them to consider public interventions. For Buddhists, enhancing their social authority through various public interventions has become a strategic response to the challenges posed by other religions. Reports provide substantial evidence of the strong competitive pressures faced by Buddhist believers (Hyunjong, 2011, 57–58; Yohan & Minah, 2014, 8; Siyoon, 2019), 110). It is crucial to note that Buddhist interest-driven actions and their aspiration to assert dominance in the secular world through public legitimization are inextricably linked. This suggests that, under the current structural conditions, the competitive motivations of Buddhist actors are readily transformed into public engagement through the process of doctrinal translation. The two most prominent social engagements undertaken by the Buddhist community—the Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel movement and the Human Embryonic Stem Cell (HESC) debate—serve as clear illustrations of this phenomenon.*

* The Anti-Cheonseong-san/Sapae-San Tunnel Movement (2002–2005) and the Hwang Woo-seok Human Embryonic Stem Cell (HESC) controversy (2003–2005) are often cited as key examples of interaction between religious and secular actors in South Korea's public sphere. The tunnel movement became a major environmental campaign in which Buddhist groups opposed infrastructure development through an ecological reserve, arguing it threatened biodiversity and sacred temple environments, thereby sparking national debate on development and environmental ethics. The HESC controversy revolved around ethical disputes over Dr. Hwang Woo-seok's stem cell research claims, generating intense dialogue among Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and secular voices concerning the moral boundaries of biotechnology and its alignment with Korean social values.

A. Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel Movement

The Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san Tunnel movement exemplifies how Buddhist actors strategically translated doctrine into public action. Since the early 2000s, vibrant academic discussions on environmental issues have emerged within Buddhist communities. These discourses are encapsulated in the narrative exemplified by the slogan "Protection of Temple Environment", which highlights several key points: the harmful effects of modern environmental destruction disproportionately impact Buddhists, as their traditional living sites are predominantly located in forested areas. As a result, Buddhists are compelled to resist destructive development projects to safeguard their communities' rights and properties. Here, Buddhist doctrine is regarded as inherently providing an alternative worldview that stands in opposition to exploitative modern capitalist development rooted in Western thought. Proposed infrastructure projects threatened culturally significant mountains and Buddhist temples, prompting widespread mobilization. Drawing on the doctrine of causality and the principle of non-duality, Buddhists framed environmental preservation as both a moral imperative and a defense of community rights (Lee, Siyoon, (2018): 169-215). This initiative positioned Buddhists as agenda setters in public discourse, demonstrating how interreligious competition motivated social engagement. The success of the movement depended on effective doctrinal translation, which framed environmental protection in universally accessible, secular terms.

In the early 2000s, the South Korean government proposed blasting tunnels for a high-speed train and highway through mountain Chunsung-san and Sapae-san, an area of cultural significance to Buddhists, housing the temples. In response, the Buddhist community became actively involved in the movement, grounding their opposition in Buddhist teachings. They highlighted the interdependent relationship between humanity and nature and invoked the Buddhist doctrine of non-duality to assert the rights of endangered species, such as a native lizard. This intervention gained widespread support and sparked a fierce

public debate on the trade-off between economic efficiency and environmental preservation. As a result, Buddhists succeeded in positioning themselves as key agenda setters in South Korea's public sphere.

The success of this intervention can also be attributed to the effort to translate religious concepts into secular language. Since the 1990s, the Buddhist community has been actively engaged in eco-ethical translation work, including academic research, publishing, religious education, and environmental protection, which provided rational legitimacy to their social interventions. Throughout this movement, many secular citizens were persuaded and responded to Buddhist arguments that human beings and the environment cannot be considered separately, and that all forms of life possess intrinsic value. In other words, the practice of doctrinal translation played a crucial role in the success of the intervention.

B. Human Embryonic Stem Cell (HESC) Debate

In contrast, the HESC controversy illustrates the risks of public engagement without a prior doctrinal translation process. When Dr. Hwang's claimed breakthroughs in stem cell cloning emerged, Korean Buddhists responded quickly, defending his work by appealing to Buddhist doctrines such as causality. However, lacking a developed bioethical discourse within the community, these interventions lacked legitimacy and were perceived as complicity. Here, the checking function of the competitive religious field became evident: Catholics and Protestants intervened, critiquing the ethical foundations of Hwang's research using established doctrinal translations from bioethics debates. This forced Buddhists to reassess and refine their approach, demonstrating how interreligious scrutiny shapes public engagement.

If the Chunsung-san/ Sapae-san case represents a realization of the Habermasian post-secular perspective, the HESC debate provides a comparative counterpart. The Buddhists failed to perform the role of agenda setters in this case, despite the two issues emerging at the same time in the early 2000s. The difference in outcomes can be attributed to the lack of a ready-made

discourse within the Buddhist community on the issue of bioethics, in contrast to environmental issues. Whereas environmental discourse had been an ongoing topic within the Buddhist community since the late 1990s, bioethical discourse was, at that time, almost non-existent in Korea. Without a doctrinal translation process in place, the competitively motivated Buddhists quickly reacted to the emerging bioethics debate. At that moment, national attention focused on Dr. Hwang, the "Buddhist" scientist who claimed to have developed the fundamental technology for embryonic stem cell cloning, which intensified the Buddhists' interest in this issue.

As a result, when Hwang's scientific fraud was uncovered—His papers, in which he claimed to have developed embryonic stem cell cloning technology, were later exposed as a fabrication—, many Buddhists fervently defended him, framing the scientific scandal as an illegitimate attack, while asserting that human genetic cloning was fully supported by Buddhist doctrine, particularly the concept of causality.* However, the weak and unrefined claims lacked legitimacy, and the Buddhists' efforts remained nothing more than a dangerous form of complicity. This case illustrates once again that Buddhist social intervention was a combination of profit-seeking within a competitive religious environment and an attempt to impose their worldview onto the secular realm. Furthermore, this failure demonstrates that, in the absence of a doctrinal translation process, religious actors' hasty social engagement—motivated solely by competitive forces—can easily devolve into an irrational approach.

However, in this context, the checking function becomes apparent in the Korean situation. When Buddhists attempted to

* A number of Buddhists interpreted the crisis surrounding Dr. Hwang as stemming from alleged resentment within the Catholic community, suggesting that Catholics sought to assert influence in biotechnology through advocacy of adult stem cell research grounded in their doctrinal positions (*Oh My News*, 8 February 2008; *Busanilbo*, 20 December 2005). Whether or not this perception was justified, interreligious rivalry over institutional interests and competing moral frameworks clearly shaped the dynamics of the controversy.

engage in secular affairs in a complicit manner, their religious competitors swiftly intervened. Notably, both Catholics and Protestants questioned the research ethics surrounding Dr. Hwang and strongly opposed his embryonic stem cell research (Suh, Yi-jong, 125-148). Additionally, the Catholic argument was solidified through the use of sophisticated language—that is, doctrinal translations—that had been refined through extensive debate in Western bioethics since the late 1990s. Regardless of whether this intervention was purely strategic, genuinely conviction-based, or a mixture of both, it was only possible within a highly competitive religious field. The Catholic intervention, in turn, activated the checking function, forcing Buddhists to reassess their approach. As a result, the competitive environment narrowed the path for Buddhist social engagement, motivating them to refine their doctrinal translations.*

C. Comparative Insights

These cases reveal how the pressing and checking functions operate within South Korea's religious field and shape patterns of public engagement. The Anti-Chunsung-san/Sapae-san movement proved successful largely because doctrinal translation into publicly accessible ethical language had already occurred, enabling effective and persuasive social intervention. By contrast, the HESC debate initially faltered due to the absence of such prior translation, limiting early religious influence; however, the checking function later stimulated corrective participation and renewed engagement. Taken together, these examples highlight the crucial role of doctrinal translation in fostering a post-secular society, demonstrating how competitive religious structures and interreligious dynamics shape the

* Notably, scholarly discussions on bioengineering began to appear within Buddhist academic circles around the period of Dr. Hwang's scandal. Most of these studies expressed support for stem cell cloning research (Kwak, Man Youn: 261–286; Kim, Sung-chul: 121–146; Yoo, Kyoung Dong: 231–256), although dissenting perspectives were also articulated (Heo, Nam-Kyol: 41–69). These comparatively delayed interventions in Buddhist scholarship reveal both a corrective dynamic and a process of reciprocal stimulation inherent in doctrinal translation.

capacity of faith communities to contribute constructively to democratic public discourse.

5. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the distinctive structural configuration of South Korea's religious field through the prism of Habermas's post-secular discourse, focusing on the intersecting tensions that shape religion–secular relations. Drawing on prior empirical research by Korean scholars, it proposed a preliminary analytical framework and outlined a broad empirical account to support its interpretation. The central argument is that the highly competitive structure of Korea's religious field generates cultural conditions that propel religious actors toward active engagement with secular affairs, typically through rationalized and formal participation in the public sphere. Despite persistent rivalry and conflict, a relative balance of power among religious groups has fostered a dynamic environment in which competition can stimulate public involvement. In this respect, the Korean case may be viewed as a localized expression of a post-secular society. Debates on religious competition in modern secular contexts remain divided. Some scholars stress its fragmenting and conflictual consequences, whereas others, particularly advocates of Religious Market Theory, highlight its innovative and adaptive potential. This study moves beyond that dichotomy by identifying the social conditions under which competitive pressures are transformed into constructive contributions to public discourse.

At the same time, this analysis does not claim that South Korea has fully realized a post-secular condition. Social structures do not operate mechanically; post-secular dynamics are contingent, uneven, and context-dependent. Following José Casanova's reading of Habermas, the post-secular is better understood not as a reversal of secularization but as an altered self-understanding within largely secularized societies. In this heuristic sense, Habermas's emphasis on translating religious claims into secular language has clear analytical relevance. As the cases discussed indicate, the effectiveness of Buddhist social interventions depended significantly on the success of such translation

processes. Further systematic and comparative research is needed to deepen and refine these findings.

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