Religions of Korea Yesterday and Today

The earliest Western visitors to Korea at the turn of the last century routinely pointed out that Koreans were a people who often called on supernatural powers and carried out rituals for otherworldly reasons. Historians tell us that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism have all been prominent in Korea since early history, informing people’s view of life both here and in the afterworld. It is thus little surprising that even contemporary observers remark that modernization has not affected the demand for religions in this country, a land dotted with countless crosses standing for churches in the cities, while countryside teems with Buddhist temples of every type. In many urban neighborhoods one can still encounter innumerable houses of fortunetelling (Kr. jeomjip), identifiable because of their distinct reverse swastika sign.

The statistics bear out the fact of Koreans’ resilient religiosity. In this nation of some fifty million people, half of its population profess to hold religious affiliations. According to a government survey conducted in 2005, more than 29% of Koreans identified themselves as Christian (18.3% Protestant and 10.9% Roman Catholic), while 22.8% were solidly Buddhist. Almost half (46.5%) of those questioned claimed not to be religious, but upon closer inspection, even they engaged in religious activities of various kinds: going to Buddhist monasteries for a child’s academic obstacles, consulting Christian ministers for a healing prayer, and maybe visiting a shaman or two for fortunetelling and even an exorcism — all without thinking that one must be bound to the teachings of a single tradition.

It has been remarked that Koreans practice an “instrumentalist” approach to religious life, or simply put, subscribe to any religion so long as it proves beneficial to their goals here and now. Although Korean religious groups defend themselves passionately and not infrequently denounce others as a way of asserting their superiority, in reality many Koreans see little wrong in taking advantage of every religious option available to them. Even the most fervent Christian or Buddhist will consult the clergy of competing traditions if he or she believed it would serve a tangible purpose. Such is the classic formulation of Korean religiosity: people adrift in a sea of beliefs, relying on anything and everything to survive.

But this does not explain the fact that Korea has had strong religious institutions for much of its history, or that Korean religions have had highly antagonistic relationships with one another for as long as records have existed. When Buddhism first arrived in Korea in the fourth century, it caused untold friction. Even though two of the three kingdoms in the peninsula eventually adopted it as the state religion and generously financed Buddhist monasteries, the tension between aristocrats who supported native beliefs and the royalty that embraced Buddhism was such that in the kingdom of Silla (57 BC-668 AD) only a miraculous spillage of white blood from a beheaded Buddhist supporter could convince the nobles to recognize Buddhism’s power. Buddhism’s comprehensive explanation of the world and pantheon of deities who could wield potent magic in service of the state soon exuded enormous appeal, gaining it the status of the dominant religion of Korea throughout the succeeding dynasties of Unified Silla (668-935) and Goryeo (918-1392). During that time Buddhism left an indelible mark on the inhabitants of the land, as well as a wealth of art and architecture everywhere it spread.

The situation changed dramatically when the dynasty of Joseon (1392-1910) was established by elites who saw greater value in the political thought of China and chose Confucianism as the central state ideology over Buddhism. The royal court drastically curtailed its patronage of Buddhism and enacted measures to diminish the monks’ status in Korean society. In Buddhism’s place the kings and officials expanded the cult of nature and ancestral spirits, building temples and altars dedicated to them at a great expense. The ruling class also exhorted commoners to engage in a more regular and systematic worship of their ancestors, a practice that survives to this day in the form of annual offerings on the first day of the Lunar New Year (Kr. seolmal) and during the Autumn Moon Festival (Kr. chuseok). Confucianism’s emphasis on loyalty, filial piety, and chastity also remains influential in today’s Korea, shaping people’s conduct in various social contexts.

Even though Christianity was transmitted to Korea only in the 18th century, by reliable accounts South Korea has some of the biggest churches in the world and ranks as the second most Christian country in Asia after the Philippines. Korea also has the distinction of producing the second largest number of Christian missionaries in the world, next only to the United States. Christianity had a turbulent
belief in the superiority of the North Korean system and ruthlessly persecuted. But it won support from the lower classes for its egalitarian doctrine while Joseon increasingly descended into instability, corruption, and ineffectualness. As Joseon crumbled and Japan annexed Korea as a colony in 1910, a large number of Korean intellectuals previously marginalized by the court championed Christianity not only as their personal salvation but also as that of the Korean nation. With significant support from the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) in the three-year interim period following independence (1945-48) and the First Republic (1948-1960) led by President Rhee Syngman who publicly vowed to rule South Korea as a Christian nation, Christianity thrived, attaining an outsized position in Korean politics that it currently enjoys.

Meanwhile, an integral part of the Koreans’ existence has been Shamanism. Some scholars have suggested that in the prehistoric time the first Korean political system had been theocratic, ruled by shaman-kings who served as both political and religious leaders. That arrangement was made obsolete when foreign thoughts such as Buddhism and Confucianism displaced native customs, but shamans as specialists of everyday religion continued to flourish, sought out by all segments of the social spectrum from the slaves to the royal family. It is striking that Korean Shamanism has consistently come under attack from the powerful elites during the last six hundred years, yet it has never once been threatened of extinction. Shamanism especially in the modern period has been excoriated as “superstitious” and “irrational;” however, the desire of Koreans to find comfort in the shamans’ divination and apotropaic rites does not appear to have dissipated.

North Korea in the last sixty years has presented an altogether different story. As part of its totalitarian rule the North Korean state has based its religious policy on that well-known Communist axiom: “Religion is the opium of the masses.” Much like in other Communist countries, the government in Pyongyang suppresses all religions, both home-grown and imported, effectively creating a society that has no room for religious beliefs. While there are Buddhist temples and Christian churches within North Korea, the extent of their freedom is difficult to measure given the tight control on information. Those familiar with North Korean religious organizations, however, feel that what little is practiced at these sites is only a showcase meant to illustrate the government propaganda of religious freedom, not a representation of the reality among ordinary citizens.

In lieu of religion, North Korea promotes an unquestioned belief in the superiority of the North Korean system and in the leadership of the ruling Kim family. Known as juche, or “sovereign autonomy,” it is taught to every North Korean as the nationalistic philosophy of self-reliance, a principle that should guide both individuals and society. Although in the beginning juche was a political thought designed to assert the independence of the North Korean state from mightier foreign powers like China and the Soviet Union, it gradually became focused on the national founder, Kim Il-sung, equipped with its own doctrine, ceremonies, and priests. As a cult of personality, its most important lesson is the supremacy of Kim, who is portrayed as father to the people and whose birthday, April 15th, is celebrated as the biggest national holiday, known as Sun Day. Glorifying Kim is also a way to reinforce the legitimacy of the hereditary rule, now continued by Kim’s son, Kim Jong-il, and possibly by grandson Kim Jong-un in the near future.

In contrast, South Korea today is a multi-religious society. In addition to Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Shamanism, there can be found religions of all stripes and colors, thanks in no small part due to the increase in foreigners who now number at more than one million. Islam is one religion that has made a sizeable gain in Korea in the last half century. As of 2005, it operated nine mosques, four centers, and sixty temporary worship halls around the country. The actual number of Muslims is about 150,000 and growing, out of whom 35,000 are believed to be Korean converts to the faith. There are also countless new religions, some of which are foreign and others domestic. From Japan, Tenrikyo and Soka Gakkai have been most successful; a Taiwan-based neo-Buddhist order of Supreme Master Qinghai is gaining a foothold; native new religions such as Cheondogyo, Won Buddhism, and the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon all command respectable followings.

Korean religions have been slowly becoming global in their expansion strategies and receiving worldwide attention for it. South Korean Christian missionaries are particularly active in proselytizing, found in locations as varied as Africa, the Middle East, and China. It is also no secret that Korean Christians have formed a large base in northeastern China, where they offer humanitarian aid to escaping North Korean refugees as part of their missionary work. The highly publicized July 2008 abduction of Korean Christians by the Taliban in Afghanistan highlighted the extent to which Korean churches have staked their prestige on the success of global missions. The Korean Buddhist orders, on the other hand, have found reception in the countries that are already Buddhist, notably in Southeast Asia, where they perform development assistance in order to win local goodwill and establish their overseas bases. The expansion of the Korean
new religions, too, has been aggressive, and in North America it has attracted less-than-welcoming scrutiny from the local media. The Unification Church, called in common parlance “The Moonies” after the surname of its leader, has been present in the U.S. for more than fifty years, and one of the emerging Korean Daoist groups known as Dahn World earned the unflattering epithet “The Yoga Cult” from the Rolling Stone Magazine and CNN in 2010 for recruiting American college students with unorthodox exercise techniques, for which it allegedly charged an unreasonable sum of money.

No one has been able to satisfyingly explain the explosiveness of Korean religiosity, but one thing is certain: religions have been an inseparable aspect of Korean life since the beginning and given the present circumstance it does not look as though they will wither away anytime soon. The complexity of Korea’s religious dimension is a fascinating, and ongoing, object of study for many scholars.

References


