

The Flourishing of New Religions in Korea

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ABSTRACT: This issue of *Nova Religio* explores the success, in several cases spectacular, of different new religions in South Korea, and the controversies they generated. In this introduction I suggest that, notwithstanding their different Christian and non-Christian backgrounds, most Korean new religions share some common features, including messianism, millenarianism, and proposals for social reform. I introduce a typology of four major groupings: Christian new religions, “traditionalist” groups that call for a restoration of Korea’s ancient spirituality, Won Buddhism, and Jeungsanism. Finally, I suggest that both political and religious factors contributed to the flourishing of new religions in twentieth and twenty-first century Korea.

KEYWORDS: Korean new religions, new religious movements in South Korea, Korean spirituality, formation of new religions, Jeungsanism

In 2014, historian of religion Philip Jenkins wrote a controversial magazine article about the decline of new religious movements. He saw “a genuine and epochal decline in the number and scale” of them.¹ Jenkins noted that the last new religious movements that received global attention, such as the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Children of God/The Family International, had been founded in the 1950s and early 1960s. None of the movements founded in subsequent decades had become comparably famous—or infamous. Jenkins’ piece was deliberately provocative.

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Seven years later, we can easily observe that new religions have continued to appear, although it may be true that in the United States and western Europe movements founded after the 1960s remained comparatively small. Large new religious movements have been founded outside of the United States and western Europe, and some count their members in the millions. Daesoon Jinrihoe, for instance, was founded in 1969, and is today the largest new religion in South Korea. The Church of Almighty God, the largest Chinese Christian new religious movement, was established in 1981. According to Chinese governmental sources (which perhaps inflate the statistics for their own purposes), it may have millions of members in China, and because thousands of its persecuted devotees have escaped abroad it is now present in more than 20 countries.² Indonesia³ and Vietnam⁴ have also produced large religious movements founded in the last decades of the twentieth century. African, Puerto Rican, and Columbian neo-Pentecostal groups are quickly becoming globalized.⁵ La Luz del Mundo, a new religious movement born in Mexico in 1926 but globalized only recently, may also have several million members,⁶ and neither COVID-19 nor the arrest and detention of its leader, accused of sexual abuse, seem to have significantly reduced the number of its devotees.⁷

In 1970, American historian H. Neill McFarland published *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, a successful book about the new religions of Japan.⁸ His prediction that Japanese new religions might emerge as major world religions came only partially true: only Soka Gakkai became truly globalized. It has now been suggested that the real “rush hour of the Gods” comes from South Korea,⁹ a possibility explored in this issue of *Nova Religio* that I have co-edited with the cooperation of Jason Greenberger, who is gratefully acknowledged here.

KOREAN NEW RELIGIONS: A TYPOLOGY

The study of Korean new religions is under-developed in the West, and suffers from various problems in South Korea as well.¹⁰ A leading specialist of the subject, South Korean religious studies scholar KANG Don Ku, noted in several articles that generalizations were proposed before sufficient ethnographic studies of different Korean new religions had been carried out.¹¹ Kang himself encouraged other scholars to cooperate in the project that led to *A Study of Korean Religious Orders*, first published by the Academy of Korean Studies in 2007 and whose 11th edition was released in 2018.¹² Much, however, still remains to be done.

Even the number of new religions that have been founded in Korea from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century is unclear. Two South Korean religious studies scholars offered different figures: in 1987 YOON Yee Heum estimated the number to be between 150 and

200,¹³ while KIM Hong Cheol referred to over 500 new religions in 1998.¹⁴ Statistics about the number of members of new religions are even more controversial. Some scholars believe that in the first half of the twentieth century Korean new religions had *more* members than traditional religions,¹⁵ and their membership today is still in the millions, although it is routinely under-evaluated in census statistics.¹⁶

Typologies of Korean new religions have been both proposed and criticized by different scholars.¹⁷ Most of them, however, agree that the foundation and drama of Donghak was the catalyst for the subsequent flourishing of hundreds of Korean new religions. In 1860, CHOE Je U (1824–1864) claimed to have received a revelation from Sangje (the Supreme God). He founded a new religion called Donghak (“Eastern Learning,” as opposed to “Western Learning,” or Christianity), criticizing at the same time the corruption of official Confucianism.

Choe was executed in 1864, but Donghak continued and played a major role in the peasant rebellion of 1894, one of whose claims was the rehabilitation of Choe. The Donghak rebels came to control a significant part of the Korean territory before being defeated by the Korean monarchy, supported first by Chinese and then by Japanese troops. A bloody repression followed, which together with the war left 300,000 dead.¹⁸ Donghak was reorganized as Ch’öndogyo, which claimed to be a non-political religious movement. Some of its leaders played a crucial role in the fight for Korean independence from Japan, but the movement declined due to factionalism, schisms, and contrasts between pro-Communist and anti-Communist wings during the Korean War (1950–53).¹⁹ Branches of Ch’öndogyo still exist in both North and South Korea.

Donghak was, in a sense, *the* model for Korean new religions, including what many have recognized as their five distinctive features. First, there is a leader who is recognized as a new divine incarnation, prophet, or messiah. Second, they include a theory of the messianic role of Korea, a role only a new and truly Korean religion could understand and interpret. Third is a proposal for social reform overcoming the prevailing corruption, and affirming Korean independence from foreign powers—a theme that became prominent during Japanese occupation (1910–1945), with some new religions assuming a leading role in the anti-Japanese struggle. Fourth are new rituals, some of them kept secret. And fifth is the idea that a great transformation (*Kaebyoŏk*) will soon create a paradise on Earth, although this idea is interpreted in various ways by different movements.²⁰

Although no typology can account for the diversity of Korean new religions, I suggest that they can be roughly grouped into four categories: Christian new religions, “traditionalist” Korean religions, Won Buddhism, and Jeungsanism, discussed in turn below.

South Korea is host to some of the largest Protestant congregations in the world (including Seoul’s Yoido Full Gospel Church), and it has

generated a number of Christian new religions. Three of these are especially important. First is the Unification Movement, founded by Reverend MOON Sun Myung (1920–2012). It has three main branches led respectively by Moon’s widow, HAK Ja Han, who presides over the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, and two of Reverend and Mrs. Moon’s sons, MOON Hyun Jin (Preston Moon), whose followers founded the Family Peace Association, and MOON Hyung Jin (Sean Moon), who established the Sanctuary Church.²¹ A second cluster of Christian new religions are the movements deriving from former Seventh-day Adventist preacher AHN Sahng Hong (1918–1995). The largest of these is the World Mission Society Church of God, whose members believe that leader ZAHNG Gil Jah is the incarnation of God the Mother.²² A third important group of Christian new religions are those descending from the Olive Tree, founded by PARK Tae Seon (1915–1990), which was at one time the largest Korean new religion.²³ This group includes the Victory Altar, founded by CHO Hee Seung (1931–2004),²⁴ and Shincheonji.

Shincheonji is discussed in two articles in this special issue. My own article presents the history and theology of Shincheonji, and explains why it became not only controversial but a main target of the South Korean anti-cult movement long before the COVID-19 crisis. A second article by John Grisafi further examines how Shincheonji was scapegoated and accused of being largely responsible for the initial spread of the COVID-19 crisis in South Korea. Both Grisafi and I note that courts of law ultimately exonerated Shincheonji from charges related to COVID-19, yet campaigns against the movement by anti-cultists and some politicians did not subside.

Controversies surrounding some Korean new religions founded by Christians made headlines throughout the world when Korean President PARK Geun Hye was impeached and arrested in 2017, due to a scandal involving her relations with CHOI Soon Sil. The latter was the daughter of CHOI Tae Min (1912–1994), who had been Park’s mentor and had left Roman Catholicism to establish Yongsae-gyo, a syncretistic new religion with elements of Christianity, Buddhism, and Donghak. Other controversies about Christian new religions continued during the COVID-19 crisis and focused particularly, though not exclusively, on Shincheonji.

A second category, which I call “traditionalist” new religions, emphasize what they regard as the oldest Korean traditions. For example, Daejongism was founded in 1909 by NA Cheol (1864–1916) to promote the cult of the mythical first Korean king Dangun as an incarnation of the Lord of Heaven, God. It became very successful between the two World Wars, both for its contribution to the struggle for Korean independence from Japanese occupation and esoteric techniques of internal alchemy, but it declined thereafter.²⁵ Daejongism has also been

influential on Dahnhak, a system of health and martial art exercises created in 1985 and popularized in the West by LEE Ilchi (b. 1950). Although Lee downplays his Daejongist roots when addressing Western followers, these are obvious for scholars of Korean religions, and Lee's Mago Retreat in Sedona, Arizona, even includes a statue of King Dangun.²⁶

Other groups in the "traditionalist" category emphasize Korea's Confucian heritage. A typical example is Kaengjŏngyudo, discussed in this issue by Uri Kaplan. Kaplan emphasizes that groups like Kaengjŏngyudo, although comparatively small in size, exert a large cultural influence on contemporary South Korean society. He also notes that while its emphasis on Confucianism makes the group different from the largest Korean new religions, some of which are rather critical of the Confucian heritage, Kaengjŏngyudo shares with other groups strong millennial expectations.

A third main group of Korean new religions includes Won Buddhism and its schisms. Won Buddhism was founded by PARK Chung Bin (1891–1943), usually referred to as Sotaesan, after his enlightenment in 1916. Many Won Buddhists and outside observers would agree with scholar of Korean religions Don Baker, who asserts that although Won Buddhism has enough "Buddhist coloring" to justify the use of "Buddhism" in its name, it is nevertheless a new religion and should be accepted as such.²⁷

The final form of Korean new religion is Jeungsanism, which of these four has the largest number of followers. It originated with KANG Il-Sun, a rural prophet known to his disciples as Kang Jeungsan (1871–1909) and recognized by them as the incarnation of the Supreme God, Sangje. Kang died in 1909 and did not appoint a successor. His movement generated some 120 different new religions in Korea, most of them now defunct. In the 1920s, the largest branch, known as Bocheonism ("Doctrine of Universal Heaven"), became the largest Korean religion before being suppressed by the Japanese.

Jo Cheol Je, known to his disciples as Jo Jeongsan (1895–1958), was not a direct disciple of Kang Jeungsan but claimed to have received a revelation from him. He was recognized by a number of Kang's relatives and disciples as the master's successor, and established Mugeukdo in 1925, then, after Mugeukdo had been compelled to disband by the Japanese in 1941, Tageukdo in 1950. Jo died in 1958, and most of his disciples accepted PARK Han Gyeong, later known as Park Wudang (1918–1996), as his successor.²⁸

In 1968, however, controversies erupted. Some followed one of Jo's sons, Jo Yongnae (1934–2004), who kept the name Tageukdo and the headquarters near Busan, while most members sided with Park, who reorganized the movement in Seoul under the name Daesoon Jinrihoe in 1969. When Park died in 1996, conflicts developed between

a minority (led by Yi Yu Jong, 1936–2010), advocating, and a majority rejecting, Park’s worship as a third main deity together with Kang Jeungsan and Jo Jeongsan. New schisms followed,²⁹ but they did not stop the expansion of Daesoon Jinrihoe in South Korea, where it is currently the largest new religion with several million followers. However, outside of Korea a group derived from a different branch of Jeungsanism, Jeungsando, has a larger following than Daesoon Jinrihoe.³⁰

Through iconographic comparison with Vietnam’s Cao Dai, this issue’s article by Jason Greenberger and LEE Gyungwon shows how Daesoon Jinrihoe, like other Korean new religions, also promoted itself as offering a religious answer to the question of national sovereignty, threatened by Japanese, Chinese, and Western imperialism. As Daesoon Jinrihoe expands internationally the political meaning of its iconography is downplayed today, yet Greenberger and Lee note how the messianic role of Korea as the host nation of a new era continues to be affirmed.

WHY KOREA?

In general, Korean Christian new religions have been more successful abroad than in Korea, which is particularly true for the World Mission Society Church of God: it claims some two million members, but its expansion has been most spectacular in Nepal and Latin America, and significant in the United States. The Unification Movement is much smaller (some 65,000 members) but has often been in the news in the West. By contrast, Won Buddhism and the Jeungsanist new religions are primarily South Korean phenomena although they are actively working to increase their missionary activities abroad, including by translating their holy scriptures into English. Both Ch’ondogyo and Daejongism are losing members, with Dahnhak obtaining some success in the West only by *not* emphasizing its roots in Daejongism. The sizable growth of hundreds of new religions in Korea and the expansion of some of them internationally is a phenomenon scholars such as Kang Don Ku have described as unprecedented in the world’s religious history.³¹

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to review theories in an attempt to explain why the creation of new religions becomes more frequent, and the newly created religions more successful, in certain times and places. What several theories have in common is the idea that, after the French and the Industrial Revolutions, the world was confronted by rapid changes and the feeling of an “accelerated history,” which favored religious mobility and the success of new religions. The change was more rapid in some places than others. It is not coincidental that several new religions, including Spiritualism and the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, appeared in the nineteenth century in the United States, and particularly in the State of New York.³² And it is not coincidental that some Asian countries, faced with imperialism, colonization-decolonization processes, wars, and sudden economic development produced an astonishing number of successful new religions.

In Korea social unrest, confrontation with Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Western imperialism, and the persuasion that the traditional Three Teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) had been unable to criticize dramatic social injustice opened the way in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to two different phenomena: the success of Christianity, and the birth of Korean indigenous new religions. During the Japanese occupation, Ch'ondogyo, Daejongism, and the branch of Jeungsanism known as Bocheonism gained followers by persuading many Koreans that they were credible custodians of the national spirit and fighters in the struggle for independence. As the late Benjamin Weems noted more than fifty years ago, their role became less relevant during World War II and they were unable to account for, or became deeply divided about, the Korean War, which explains their decline.³³ But new groups emerged, and became even larger.

The unique growth of Korean new religions appears to be due to two sets of factors. Socio-political factors such as the Japanese colonization, the struggle for independence, the Korean war, and the rapid post-War modernization created social unrest and anomie, which traditional religions were often ill-equipped to answer. As Don Baker has argued, seeking answers to the basic questions of life in times of crisis is a specifically religious quest, and the rise of Korean new religions should be understood in religious terms, not only as a by-product of socio-political processes.³⁴ I hope that this issue of *Nova Religio* will help readers to understand Korean new religions considering both the historical context in which they flourished and the religious messages they propose to Korea and, increasingly, to the world.

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ENDNOTES

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