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An Undulating Trajectory: The History of Religious Traditions in Korea

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Abstract

An examination of eight consecutive periods of the history of religious traditions in Korea indicates that there is an undulating trajectory for each tradition of influence and pre-eminence over two thousand years. Certain traditions came to shape the cultural, religious and intellectual ethos of long eras of time and then fall into a condition of lessened influence. More important than the observation of undulation in a tradition's influence—not a unique historical fact—is the usefulness of the Korean case for the broader study of the history of religious traditions. A medium-size state such as Korea with a cultural depth of nearly two millennia makes an interesting case study of the interactions between different religious traditions, and between the society and culture of a particular nation. Smaller scale and depth of history allows certain features to stand out more clearly, and gives enough time to see how events have worked out. Results from studies of the Korean traditions help to clarify matters in the other East Asian nations by pointing out what is distinctive about the traditions in each of these nations, and what is generally the case for them all. In this sense, the study of the religious history of Korea is a laboratory for the historian of religion, the specialist in particular religious and philosophical traditions, the social historian, and the comparative or historical ethnographer.

Keywords: Buddhism, Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Catholicism, Protestantism, undulating trajectory

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Stepping Back

Having been asked to write an 'overview' piece on the religious traditions of Korea, I found myself in the novel position of not reporting on my own field work or textual research, but rather commenting on the entire history of the various religious traditions which have flourished on the Korean peninsula. One way or another, I have been observing, thinking and researching about religion in Korea for fifty years. Perhaps it would now be salutary to step back and think about what I have seen and what I have mulled over in my mind.

To begin, I would make four general observations from an academic point of view.[1] First, although it was and is common for many writers on religion in Japan and in China to speak of Japanese religion,[2] or Chinese religion,[3] I don't believe that there is 'anything' which we can call Korean religion—or Japanese religion or Chinese religion for that matter. To put together all the religious traditions in one country as if they were a single thing is to ignore the differences between them and within them. Clearly, there are features of the teachings, experience and history of the different traditions found in a particular nation which reflect the culture of that nation and of a particular period of time. This does not mean, however, that all of these traditions can be lumped together as a single entity. This is, to my mind, the error of reification. It has been my practice when speaking of the religious groups or religious life of Korea to refer to 'religious traditions', and the 'religions of Korea'. Plurality and the distinctiveness of experience are key to understanding the religious scene in any nation.

The second point—which provides this article with its title—is that given the fact of the presence of different religious traditions within the Korean nation, viewed historically one can see an ebb and flow of dominance between them. Religious traditions respond both to the presence of the broad cultural and political characteristics of a period in a nation's history, as well as to the presence of competing traditions. In different periods of Korean history, certain cultural characteristics were stronger or more dominant than others. One should not simply classify Korean religious history by the dynastic periods in which they existed, but rather by the cultural and religious features which typified certain periods of time. Thus, by mapping out the ebb and flow of religious traditions against the political chronology, one can see that there is an 'undulating trajectory'[4] of experience over hundreds of years which reflects the impact of the broader culture and political scene. Some traditions dominate an era—and the other traditions.

The third point is that there is an essential 'conservativeness' to the religious traditions of Korea, a tendency towards the retention of characteristics of practice and belief. One could say that every tradition from the folk traditions to Buddhism, Christianity and Confucianism shares in this tendency. This feature is not unique to Korea, but it does seem to my mind to be a stronger characteristic of the religious and philosophical traditions of the peninsula.

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[1] I have discussed these points in my book *Korea: A Religious History* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 1-2 and 230-235.

[2] An early example of the use of this term is Masaharu Anasaki, *History of Japanese Religion* (London, Kegan Paul, 1930). The leading historian of religion, Joseph M. Kitagawa, wrote two important works on Japan entitled *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), and *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[3] See for example Matthias Eder, *Chinese Religion* (Tokyo: Society for Asian Folklore, 1973), Laurence G. Thompson *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (London: Wadsworth, 1979), Deborah Sommer, *Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and more recently Xinzhong Yao and Yanxia Zhao, *Chinese Religion: A Contextual Approach* (London/New York: Continuum, 2010).

[4] This term was suggested to me by Dr. Kevin Cawley, which I find to be a useful way of looking at the history of religions in Korea.

Finally, I have thought for some time that the history of the various religious traditions of Korea provides an exceptional resource for the study of the processes of the history of religion in general, making Korean history a laboratory for religious beliefs and practices. This comment could be made of any nation or people, but it is particularly the case for Korea because of the relatively small-scale of the nation, the depth of its history, and the more constrained numbers of religious and cultural features. Korea's small-scale and the depth of its history mean that it is easier to tease out historical and cultural features, to observe their interactions, than in a nation such as China, a nation of great geographical scale, varied regional cultures and populations, and a more complex national culture. Events and developments in Korea stand out more clearly. Just as events in small-scale societies enabled anthropologists to see general cultural features more sharply, so too Korea enables us to see better the generalities of the developments of religious traditions.

What Are the Traditions of Religion in Korea?

Before we can look at the religious traditions which existed on the peninsula or those which were transmitted there, we must note two important misunderstandings which commonly occur in books and articles on religion in Korea. In writings by both Korean and non-Korean scholars, reference often is made to a religious tradition called 'Daoism' which, depending on the author, was present either as a religious tradition in different historic periods, or as an important religious influence on the culture and art of pre-modern Korea. If by 'Daoism', we mean what the term means in China—the institutionalised forms of Chinese folk traditions which have been formed into different schools with their own textual traditions, their own distinctive shrines and priesthood, then there never was anything called 'Daoism' in Korean history. 'Daoist' schools in China bear a clear comparison with Buddhism—but this 'Daoism' never existed in Korea unlike Buddhism which in Korea shared many of the same formal schools, traditions and practices found in China.

However, if by 'Daoism' we mean nothing more than non-Buddhist, Chinese religious influences on Korea, then, yes, there was a significant 'Daoist' influence on Korea. This influence came from the broad religious traditions of China, primarily from the historic folk traditions, and from the state cult. The ubiquity of the use of the *sip changsaeng* (十長生, Ten Symbols of Immortality), shrines dedicated to Kwan U (關羽, the Chinese god of war) and many other examples give ample evidence to this kind of cultural influence. But, this broad and extensive influence is not the same as the formal sects or schools called 'Daoist' in China.

Our second caveat is the use of the word 'shamanism'. Until very recently, 'shamanism' was used almost synonymously with the term 'folk religion'. Many popular writers both in and out of Korea wrote as if the traditions and practices focussed around the shaman constituted the entirety of Korean folk religious practices. This is clearly not the case, and most detailed studies of folk religion in Korea make it quite clear that shamanistic practices are an important feature, if not *the* characteristic feature, of Korean religious practices. What I term 'Korean folk religion' while including shamanistic rites and practices, also includes all those traditional cultic practices associated with the village, the family or the individual which do not involve a 'shaman' or use any 'shamanistic' cultic practices. In the broad envelope of non-shamanistic practices, I would include rites or actions to propitiate the guardian spirit(s) of the house, the toilets, the village, village or house wells, the fields, the mountain spirit (*sallyŏng*) or the Mountain God (called *San-shin*), the spirits of mountain passes, non-Confucian and non-shamanistic ancestral rites, and specific disease spirits such as

the Small Pox Spirit. Because they are 'popularly' practiced, I would also include all cultic practices which ultimately derive from China.

Very broadly speaking, we can state that between the fourth century to the first part of this century, Korea has had five major traditions of religious belief and practice—the folk religious traditions (which I have referred to as Korea's primal religion), Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity (in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms), and (from the twentieth century) Islam. Partly mapping onto the dynastic history of the peninsula, there are eight periods of religious history: 1) a pre-Buddhist-Confucian era (roughly prior to the fourth century), 2) the era of the spread of a Buddhist-Confucian civilisation (the fourth to the early seventh centuries), 3) a period of the developing sophistication of Buddhism in religion and the arts (the late seventh to early tenth centuries), 4) an era of the pre-eminence of Buddhism in religion, arts and society (the mid-tenth to twelfth centuries), 5) a period of the decline of Buddhist influence, and the rise of Confucianism (the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), 6) the rise to dominance of Confucianism (the late fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), 7) an era of the decline of Confucianism and the emergence of a new religious tradition, Christianity (the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries), and 8) a period of the rise of Christianity and its impact on Korean society and culture (the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

These periods of religious history represent the undulation of emergence, development, dominance, decline, and re-emergence, an undulating trajectory of the cultural and religious impact of these traditions on Korean society. Comparisons drawn with the history of religions in Korea with the other East Asian nations of China, Japan and Vietnam show that although each of these traditions is present in them all, the significance of them varies according to different historical circumstances.

Religious Traditions in Korea by Period

Period 1: Before the fourth century,[5] the impact of Chinese civilisation on the culture of the ancient tribal nations and peoples of Northeast Asia was minimal compared with what followed after that date. Precisely what the content of the religious practices of this era was is hard to know in any detail, but there are records of seasonal rituals tied to the cycle of agriculture and animal husbandry. Ancestral ceremonies were known, and the political leadership seemed to claim divine ancestry and to have special intercessory powers with the spiritual world.

Period 2: The fourth century is the point[6] from which the influence of Sinitic civilisation flowed into the Korean nations and states[7] and transformed them over the course of centuries into component parts of continental East Asian civilisation. Buddhism brought new religious beliefs and philosophical ideas, formalised rituals, access to a vast body of ritual, religious, and philosophical writings, the plastic and painterly arts, ritual and religious architecture, and the sense of a great world beyond the boundaries of Korea and China.

The impact of Confucianism on this period was equally great, but in a different direction from Buddhism. Confucianism brought with it the universal script of East Asia—Chinese characters—and the classical written language of East Asia, another body of philosophical writings, concepts of governance and society, and a formalised system of education. During this period, Confucian influence was largely cultural and political, but not

[5] For a more detailed discussion see Grayson (2002), Chapter 2.
[6] Grayson (2002), Chapter 3.
[7] These ancient states and proto-states occupied territory in central and southern Manchuria as well as the Korean Peninsula.

social in the sense that its values dominated the mores of the Korean nations. The tide of cultural influence which hit the Korean nations during this era was not matched by any other system until the impact of Western civilisation in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Period 3: From the late seventh to the tenth centuries,[8] the two traditions of Buddhism and Confucianism became imbedded in the Korean states, became more mature and sophisticated, often reflecting trends in China, but in many cases not. It was in this era that the formal schools of Buddhism emerged, in particular during the later centuries of this era the schools of meditation, Sŏn Buddhism (禪 佛教). Learned monks travelled to China to study there, a number of whom pressed on to India to study and to make a pilgrimage to the great sites of the Buddhist religion. Likewise art and architecture flourished during this era, one of the great monuments of which is the artificial stone grotto shrine, the Sŏkkur-am (石窟庵), with its impressive statue of the Buddha. Whatever popular traditions there were, on a formal and national level Buddhism had come to dominate the religious life of the nation.

Parallel to this development was the effect of Confucianism on the governance of the state. From the mid-seventh century, when Silla (新羅)[9] came to dominate the territory of the peninsula, Confucianism was transforming the way in which the kingdom was governed. Royal authority created a more centralised system of government, the powers of the nobility were constrained, a class of Confucian literati bureaucrats began to emerge, a system of education based upon the knowledge of the Confucian classical writings was created, and a Confucian-focussed state ritual system was maintained by the central authority. Confucianism was coming to dominate the political discourse and practice of governance in Silla in the same way that Buddhism dominated the religious, artistic, and philosophical life of the nation.

Period 4: After the fall of Silla and Parhae (渤海) in the first quarter of the tenth century, the Kingdom of Koryŏ was established over most of the territory of the peninsula.[10] If Silla was significantly influenced by Chinese religious and philosophical culture, in the Koryŏ era (高麗), the state and nation became *transformed* so that they appeared to be very similar in structure, character and ethos to the Chinese states. During the tenth to twelfth centuries, Buddhism was pre-eminent. Not only did religious practice, religious thought and the arts flourish, but Buddhism was prestigious. A good indicator of this prestige was the life and work of the eminent monk Ŭich'ŏn (義天, 1055-1101). A scholarly monk, promoter of textual study and the unification of the various Buddhist schools, he was the son of a king, and brother to three other kings. It was not just acceptable to be a leading Buddhist figure, it carried social and political prestige, and the members of the highest ranks of society did not distain to become a monk. At the same time, the old system of nobility which had lingered on through the later Silla period was swept away, and the political dominance of a class of literati bureaucrats was complete. Ever since then, the term *yangban* (兩班) has been used to designate the Korean aristocracy. Much as in China, there was a state of complementarity between the two traditions. This condition was to be shattered by events in the next era.

Period 5: Politically, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in East Asia forms the era of Mongol imperial dominance, a political factor which came to have a significant impact on

[8] See Grayson (2002), Chapter 4.
[9] After the fall of the Kingdom of Koguryŏ in the mid-seventh century, a new state emerged within its former territory called Parhae. Much less is known about this kingdom, and I will not discuss it here, limiting my observations solely to the Kingdom of Silla.
[10] See Grayson (2002), Chapter 5.

religious life and practice in the peninsula.[11] Because the Mongol establishment promoted Buddhism, Buddhism came to be seen by certain sectors of the political elite as a symbol of Mongol overlordship. The rise of this sense of 'nationalism' among certain quarters of a political elite which was imbued with the ideas of Confucian governance was augmented by developments in Confucian thought itself. Neo-Confucian philosophy (called *Sŏngni-hak*, 性理學) emerged in China and Korea from the twelfth century. If classical Confucian thought had little or no interest in metaphysics, Neo-Confucianism combined metaphysics with traditional Confucian ideas about social relations and good governance. Confucianism had moved on to the territory of Buddhism, creating not just an intellectual clash of religio-philosophical traditions, but it provided the Confucian elite with a philosophy to overthrow what was perceived to be a corrupt Buddhist establishment and to create a new state based on Confucian, not Buddhist, principles. Leading scholars such as Chŏng Tojŏn (鄭道傳, 1337-1398) made common cause with military figures such as Yi Sŏnggye (李成桂, 1335-1408) to sweep away the old state and to create something really new.

Period 6: This era (the late fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) is the point on the historical trajectory of religions in Korea when dramatic and significant cultural change occurred. By the end of the period, the religious and philosophical ethos of the nation was not only markedly different from the preceding Koryŏ era, the religious and philosophical ethos of the new Chosŏn dynasty (朝鮮, 1392-1910) was markedly different from either China or Japan. Neo-Confucianism came to dominate the philosophical, ritual, and cultural life of Korea to an extent which was not the case for the other two nations of East Asia. I have referred to this fact as the result of an obsession by the elite to create a 'model' Confucian society. If in the Silla era Confucianism influenced the Korean states politically and culturally, it was in the Chosŏn era that Neo-Confucianism came to shape extensively the social mores and practices of the nation. Pre-eminent among these values were the Five Relationships[12], chief of which was filial piety. Ritually this value was expressed through the performance of ancestral rites (called *chesa* 祭祀). The socio-political instrument by which these values were spread and enforced was the use of the *hyangyak* (鄕約) or village covenants.[13]

This extreme emphasis on the importance of Neo-Confucianism (politically, philosophically and ritually) led to the rabid persecution of Buddhism. From the onset of the dynasty, tight rules were introduced which limited the number of temples, and of monks and nuns. Moreover, twice during this period there were centrally-supported attempts to eradicate Buddhism entirely. As this period was a time of transition, one would expect to find anomalies, such as the royal family's private Buddhist devotion while at the same time the monarch promoted a policy of the strict control or suppression of Buddhism. However, the level of prestige which Buddhism had had during the Koryŏ era vanished in this era, never to return.

Period 7: The second half of the long-lived Chosŏn dynasty (seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries) was a period both of the triumph of the process to thoroughly Confucianise Korean

[11] See Grayson (2002), Chapter 6.

[12] Derived from a reading of the classical Confucian text the *Lunyu* (論語) or *Analects*, these five social and political mores are the relationship between the ruler and ruler, parent and child, male spouse and female spouse, older sibling and younger sibling, and friend and friend. Each dyadic relationship has an attached moral value. The child's moral relationship to his/her parent is summed up in the term 'filial piety' or *hyo* (孝, and is considered to be the key value amongst the five.

[13] Martina Deuchler has written extensively on the Confucian transformation of Korea. See especially *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study in Sociology and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

society, and a period of the decline in Confucian intellectual and moral influence. It was in this era when Christianity (in its Roman Catholic form) first appeared in Korea, beginning momentous social and religious changes—for which early Catholics suffered persecution and martyrdom during the nineteenth century. The cause, perhaps oversimplified, was a clash of values between Confucianism which promoted the performance of ancestral rites as a sign of filial piety and Christianity which rejected anything idolatrous, anything which implied the worship of gods other than God Himself. By 1600 or so, the philosophical, moral and ritual promotion of Neo-Confucianism had proceeded so far that women's role in society and in the family had become greatly constrained, the importance of male issue and the ritual priority of oldest sons had become dominant, the relegation of secondary sons supported, and the rules for inheritance significantly altered in favour of first sons.[14] All of these practices ultimately derived from a narrow and overly emphatic understanding of filial piety. Thus, when Roman Catholicism first entered Korea proclaiming the uniqueness or singularity of God, early Christians rejected the practice of *chesa* because it was seen to be idolatrous worship. The result of this clash of core values was a three-quarter century of ferocious persecution of Christianity unseen since the first centuries of the Christian Church.

Period 8: Our final period (late nineteenth and twentieth centuries) is the era of 'modern' Korea. In this period we see the collapse of the traditional political and social order based on Neo-Confucian thought and practice, the absorption of the state by a neighbour Japan, civil war, and - in the case of the southern part of the peninsula, rapid post-colonial industrial growth leading to the creation of an important urban-industrial state with world-leading industries. In this period Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, came to have a leading role in the development of new forms of education and medicine; its adherents played a crucial role in the independence movement during the colonial era, and in the establishment of the post-colonial state in the southern half of the peninsula.

Protestant Christianity only came to Korea in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, yet by the beginning of the new century, it had become the most dynamic religious force.[15] The spread of Protestantism (Methodism and Presbyterianism largely derived from North America) was due to several factors—its contribution to 'modernity' through educational and medical work, the emphasis on individual believers promoting local evangelism, the translation and transmission of the Bible in the indigenous alphabet *Han'gŭl*, and the resolution of the conflict between the core values of filial piety and the rejection of any perceived idolatrous practices.

Two points can be made here. First, before foreign Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea, the indigenous Bible and Christian teachings were being spread by local Korean Christians. This action paralleled similar actions in the late eighteenth century by indigenous Catholic Christians who spread Christian belief before foreign missionaries arrived. Local responsibility for the spread of Christian belief and practice is a general characteristic of all forms of Korean Christianity. Second, Korean Protestants resolved the issue of the conflict between Confucian and Christian values through the creation of a Christian substitute for parental *chesa* rites by the middle of the final decade of the nineteenth century. Called *ch'udo yebae* (追悼 禮拜, grieving rite), by the end of the twentieth century it had grown to be the

[14] Mark Peterson has discussed these issues in his book on adoption and inheritance, *Korean Adoption and Inheritance: Case Studies in the Creation of a Classic Confucian Society* (Ithaca, New York: East Asian Program, Cornell University, 1996).

[15] I have discussed this Protestant impact in "The Impact of Korea Protestant Christianity on Buddhism and the New Religions". *Papers of the British Association for Korean Studies*, vol. 1 (1991), 57-73.

centre of a complex set of Christian rituals for the dead.[16] By the end of the twentieth century, according to the 1995 Household Census, nearly one-third of the Korean population above the age of 15 claimed to adhere to Christianity in one of its forms.

An interesting result of this rapid growth has been its effects on Buddhism and Roman Catholic Christianity. Whereas, Buddhism was believed to be moribund in Korea at the end of the nineteenth century, by the end of the twentieth century one-third of the population above the age of 15 claimed to adhere to one of the forms of Buddhism. Modern Korean Buddhist emphasis on lay Buddhist meetings, the use of Protestant hymn music, the emphasis on national and foreign missions, and the creation of youth and young peoples' organisations—to name a few practices, reflect a borrowing or use of Protestant models. Protestant Christian practice was a model for the 'modernisation' of Korean Buddhism, while the rapid growth of Protestantism was a competitive stimulus for its numerical growth.

Likewise, the emergence of Protestant Christianity stimulated its sister form of Christianity, Catholicism. Because of the extent and horrors of the persecutions of the nineteenth century, Korean Catholics had developed a 'ghetto' mentality which shielded them from the rest of society. This mentality had changed by the middle of the twentieth due to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council encouraging Catholics to go out into the world, and especially to the sheer visibility of Protestant fellow Christians. The ghetto mentality was shattered forever. Indeed, the last Household Census (2005) indicated that although Christianity continued to grow, Protestantism had declined. Numerical growth in Christian adherents was due principally to the growth of Korean Catholicism.

Final Observations

Our rapid overview of the history of religious traditions in Korea does indicate that there is a trajectory of rise and fall in the influence and numerical presence of the different traditions on the peninsula. A few things do stand out. There is a tendency for one tradition or another to become dominant (more than just significant). This often is related to (but not determined by) important cultural or political events. The second and eighth periods bear comparison because at a time when was there was significant change in political affairs (relationships with 'China', or with the 'West'), there was a significant change in culture. As part of that culture, new religious traditions were transmitted bringing with them cultural, artistic, and social changes.

The sixth period is interesting because of changes within the Confucian tradition which altered the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism forever, and led to attempts to suppress Buddhist belief and practice as heterodox. Concern for the repression of the 'heterodox' also explains why a Confucian government (and individual 'Confucianists') tried to violently suppress Roman Catholicism- because its teachings undermined the moral pillars of society.

It is a further point of interest that both forms of Christianity in their earliest stages were promoted first by local Christians *before* foreign missionaries came to Korea. Emphasis on local evangelisation appears to be a characteristic of Korean Christianity.

These final comments illustrate a claim made at the beginning of this brief article that a medium-size state with a cultural depth of nearly two millennia makes an interesting case study of the interactions between different religious traditions, and between the society and

[16] For a discussion of the origin and development of this ritual, see Grayson, "*Ch'udo yebae*: A Case Study in the Early Emplantation of Protestant Christianity in Korea". *Journal of Asian Studies* 68:2 (2009), 413-434. The practice of *ch'udo yebae* was first recorded amongst members of the congregation of Chŏng-dong First Methodist Church, the oldest Methodist church in Seoul.

culture of a particular nation. Smaller scale and depth of history allow certain features to stand out more clearly, and give enough time to see how matters have worked out. Results from studies of the Korean traditions help to clarify matters in the other East Asian nations by pointing out what is distinctive about the traditions in each of these nations, and what is generally the case for them all. In this sense, the study of the religious history of Korea is a laboratory for the historian of religion, the specialist in particular religious and philosophical traditions, the social historian, and the comparative or historical ethnographer.

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