

Introduction: The Korean “Rush Hour of the Gods” and Daesoon Jinrihoe

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ABSTRACT: This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to Daesoon Jinrihoe, the largest contemporary new religion in South Korea. New religions in South Korea are among the largest and fastest-growing religious movements in the world, yet they are understudied outside of their home country. Their growth confirms that in our allegedly “secularized” world, new religions continue to be born, flourish, and expand internationally. The case of Daesoon Jinrihoe is discussed by contributors of this issue in its own merits, without relying on generalizations on Korean new religions. On the other hand, both the Korean and the larger East Asian contexts are considered in all articles.

KEYWORDS: Daesoon Jinrihoe, Religion in Korea, Korean New Religions, Secularization, New Religious Movements.

CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was established in Italy in 1988 to offer a professional association to international scholars of new religions and to document the global religious pluralism. It has organized thirty-one international conferences throughout the world, has published more than 100 books, and operates four different large Web sites.

When CESNUR was started, new religions were not taken seriously and dismissed as mere curiosities. The prevailing orthodoxy among European scholars of religion was that religion was declining, and, in the famous words of anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1923–2015),

the evolutionary future of religion is extinction. (...) As a cultural trait, belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge and of the realization by secular faiths that supernatural belief is not necessary to the effective use of ritual. The question of whether such a

denouement will be good or bad for humanity is irrelevant to the prediction; the process is inevitable (Wallace 1966, 264–65).

As is known, for decades, especially among social theorists, the main model of interpretation has been the secularization thesis. Secularization was defined as the transformation of a society from close identification and affiliation with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious values and secular institutions. The secularization thesis refers to the belief that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance.

Later in his life, one of the main advocates of these theories, Peter Berger (1929–2017), started suspecting that his notion of secularization was not universally true. He noticed that, in the U.S., religious pluralism and technological progress coexisted with a presence of institutional religion significantly higher than in Europe. Initially, Berger considered the possibility of an “American exceptionalism” in religion. Later still, however, the same Berger and others realized that rapidly modernizing countries such as South Korea, Turkey, or Taiwan behaved very much like the United States, and religion was actually growing there. They concluded that perhaps the classic secularization theory, implying that modernity caused the decline of religion, was true only in Western Europe, which had its peculiar “European exceptionalism” (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008).

But even in secular Europe, there are areas where religion grows, so that sociologists of religion retreated to the humbler theories of “multiple modernities” (each local situation is different from the others), “multiple secularizations,” and more (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen 2011; Rosati and Stoeckl 2012).

That global new religions appear today runs counter the traditional theory, elaborated by the German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), who had a strong influence on modern theology and philosophy, of a unique and unrepeatable “Axial Age,” from about the 8th to the 3rd century BC, when in both East and West all the great religions appeared (Jaspers 1949). We can wonder whether perhaps today we are in a second “Axial Age.”

This question may seem exaggerated to those who look only to Europe or North America, where no major new religions have emerged in the late 20th or early 21st century, and the most studied new religions established in the mid-20th

century do not seem to be growing. However, this is an ethnocentric view. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia the growth of the new religions is continuous.

Between World War I and II, Korean new religions had more members than traditional religions. Today, they still count their numbers in the millions. Although Taiwan and Japan, for which the expression “rush hour of the Gods” was originally introduced by Horace Neill McFarland (1923–2017: McFarland 1967), come closer, in no other country in the world have new religions been so successful. How was this possible?

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* traces the roots of contemporary new religions in Joseon Korea’s 19th-century social and religious crisis, and show how the oldest Korean new religion, Donghak, was at the roots of all the subsequent religious effervescence. This process cannot be understood without examining a larger context, where Korean national identity became contested, national symbols lost their religious significance, and a quest for new shared meanings accompanied economic and social transformations, as illustrated in the article by Kang Donku. Yoon Yongbok starts from Donghak to present a map of Korean new religions and emphasize the special features of the largest of them, Daesoon Jinrihoe.

Well-known in Korea, Daesoon Jinrihoe is understudied abroad—and occasionally misunderstood, as evidenced in the article by Yoon Yongbok and Massimo Introvigne criticizing a recent text by John Jorgensen on this new religion. The same Introvigne provides a general introduction to Daesoon Jinrihoe. Park Sangkyu observes that the few existing studies on Daesoon Jinrihoe focus on its theology, while he discusses its organizational structure, based on the replication at all levels of the master-disciple relationship. Cha Seon-Keun examines the doctrine of suffering of Daesoon Jinrihoe, and how its explanation of human affliction differs from those proposed by traditional East Asian religions.

On the one hand, the articles confirm that Daesoon Jinrihoe should be studied within the Korean context and the political events that resulted from the propagation of Donghak, the execution of its leader in 1864, and a revolution carried out in the name of the movement in 1894. The failure of the bloody Donghak revolution of 1894, however, changed forever the attitude of Korean new religions, and most switched from political activism to social welfare and charity. Through the Korean War and beyond, new religions gained credibility

both as providers of social and educational services and as alternatives to traditional religions and mainline Christianity. This is certainly true for Daesoon Jinrihoe, as documented in the article by Rosita Šorytė, who also notes how the Yeosu Headquarters Temple Complex spatializes a vast social welfare activity by offering to it a visible center that is both organizational and spiritual.

As Cha notices, Daesoon Jinrihoe’s theology, practices, and rapid growth are somewhat unique in the Korean and perhaps international scenario of new religious movements. Yet Daesoon Jinrihoe, precisely in this moment when it tries to evolve into a global movement, can only be profitably studied by showing its relationship with the larger contexts of East Asian religions and “Korean new religions,” although Yoon and Introvigne caution against hasty and inaccurate generalizations about the latter category.

It is not an exaggeration to say that adequate scholarly studies of Daesoon Jinrihoe were eagerly awaited by those studying new religious movements throughout the world. There was simply not enough information on such a large movement. Much work remains to be done, but we hope that this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* would be at least a starting point to fill the gap.

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