

New Religions and Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea

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ABSTRACT: In the Joseon Dynasty era, Korea adopted Confucianism as its official religion. Confucianism, however, failed to persuade the common people, because it did not include doctrines about the afterlife and prayers to the gods for obtaining their blessings. As a result, although persecuted or discriminated, Buddhism, Daoism, and shamanism survived, and Catholicism was successfully introduced. None of these religions, however, was able to replace the grand national narrative of Confucianism. As a result, starting with Donghak in 1860, several new religions emerged. Daesoon Jinrihoe occupies a unique place among them, as the first Korean religion that proposed a systematic theology and an organization based on Daoism, which had been present in Korea since the 7th century but never managed to create a stable organized religion.

KEYWORDS: Religion in Korea, Korean New Religions, Confucianism in Korea, Daoism in Korea, Donghak, Daesoon Jinrihoe.

Korea's Religious Landscape

A wide variety of religions have historically existed in Korean society. Korean folk religions such as shamanism have appeared since the pre-Christian era. Confucianism, along with Chinese characters, came into the Korean Peninsula around the time of Jesus Christ. Buddhism was introduced in the year 372, when the ancient national system started to form. In 624, Daoism was transmitted from the Tang Dynasty of China. Therefore, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Korean folk religions came to co-exist in Korea. However, after the Goguryeo Dynasty (37 BCE–668 CE) collapsed, Daoism prevailed among common people, was adopted for the national (official) rituals by the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), and established itself in the country (Yoon 2016, 306–14).

Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religions have remained in co-existence from the Goryeo to the late Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). Since Confucianism was a state religious tradition in Joseon Korea, every law or norm had to fit Confucian ideology. Due to the fact that Confucianism was a state religion, Buddhism and folk religions, including shamanism, were continuously suppressed until the end of the Joseon Dynasty. As a result, Buddhist monks or shamans usually came from the lowest class of people. The status of Daoism, however, did not change. Since the mid-Joseon era, it was subject to discrimination. Eventually, the last remnants of Daoist rituals performed by the government were abolished with the Japanese invasion of Joseon Korea, and Daoism continued to exist as a folk religion only.

Meanwhile, Catholicism had been introduced to Korea via China in the late 18th century. Some Korean aristocrats interested in the Western civilization came across the Chinese translation of Western documents about Christianity and converted to Catholicism. Those men in the gentry class introduced Catholicism to Korea, yet, except by themselves, it was hardly welcome in the Confucian Korean society (Kim 2003, 99–114) As Catholicism refused to hold ancestral rituals, the Joseon government branded it as a “cult.” Catholicism was continuously persecuted throughout the end of the 18th and 19th centuries. As a result, about 10,000 Catholics were martyred.

The Main Korean New Religions

In the 19th century, Western powers, including the United States, France and Britain, and Japan, approached the coasts and asked Joseon Korea to open the ports. The disturbance caused by Catholicism, along with the pressure of external powers, intensified political confusion in the late Joseon era. In this context, a new religion called Donghak (Eastern Learning) was founded by Choe Je-u (1824–1864) in 1860 in the middle of social turmoil. After Choe’s execution in 1864, Donghak tried to reform the society through a militant peasant movement. In 1894, however, two armed forces (from Qing China and Japan) marched into Korea to support the government against the rebels, and the Donghak rebellion ended in failure (Kim 2003, 99–114).

Other new religions hoping to establish a millenarian world in the future emerged in the 20th century. Donghak changed its name into Cheondoism in

1905. Subsequently, many new religions such as Daejonggyo, Jeungsanism (Jeungsangyo), and Won Buddhism appeared in Korean society in the first half of the 20th century. However, with the exception of Daejonggyo, most new religions transformed themselves from realistic movements for Korean independence into utopian ideologies announcing a new world.

The new religions that emerged during the Japanese colonial period were classified into several lineages. The major lineages are the Donghak–Eastern Learning (Cheondoism), Jeungsanism, and Won Buddhism. Most of the new religions emerged at the same time and had influence on each other. Buddhism, Confucianism, and the folk religions of Korea became elements of each new synthesis.

Its founder, Choe Je-u, stated that Donghak was a synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In fact, Choe also incorporated elements of Catholicism, which was somewhat paradoxical, considering that Eastern Learning was introduced as the antidote allowing Joseon Korea to resist Western Learning, i.e. Catholicism. After changing its name to Cheondoism in 1905, Donghak has remained active to the present day (Kim 2003, 147).

Daejonggyo is a new religion that deifies Dangun, the mythical progenitor of the Korean people. Unlike other new religions, Daejonggyo was strongly involved in the independence movement until the Korean liberation from Japan.

Buddhist Dharma Research Group was the first name of Won Buddhism, a new religion that claims to stand for Buddhism. Won Buddhism was founded by Park Jung-Bin (Sotaesan, 1891–1943) in 1916. The name Buddhist Dharma Research Group was changed into Won Buddhism after the independence. Even though its name proclaims its Buddhist identity, Won Buddhism is somewhat different from the traditional Buddhism of Korea (Yoon 2003, 210–14). The difference between Won Buddhism and traditional Buddhism is that the former does not include the traditional rituals worshipping the Buddha. In addition, a circle representing unity is enshrined in Won Buddhism's temples as the main object of worship, rather than statues of Buddha. The canon of scriptures is different from that of traditional Buddhism. Sotaesan is regarded as the founder of a new religion, not just as an interpreter of Buddha Shakyamuni. The theology includes several basic elements of traditional Buddhism, but also adds new doctrines.

In traditional Buddhism, the most basic doctrine perceives the present world as a world of agony, whereas Won Buddhism positively perceives it as a world of blessings. Furthermore, Won Buddhism insists that the future is bright and optimistic, and includes a doctrine of the transition from the Former to the Later World that is typical of Korean new religions (Yoon 2012, 195–99).

The religious lineages commonly referred to as Jeungsanism was founded with a basis on Chinese Daoism, which was combined with Korean Daoist thought and local folk religions (Yang 2004, 13–8). The beginning of the Jeungsan lineages derives from the religious activities of Kang Il-Sun (honorific name, Kang Jeungsan, 1871–1909). Kang attained enlightenment through religious cultivation in 1901. Since then, he propagated his teachings and performed religious activities to redeem the world for seven years. His disciples call these activities and rituals the “Reordering Works of Heaven and Heart.”

Kang proclaimed that he came down from Heaven and incarnated on Earth to save the human world from despair. Since 1901, and before Kang’s death in 1909, his followers served him as a man of divine power, and started to form a religious order around him. However, the order was divided into several factions. Both their number and their followers had a spectacular growth in the colonial period. However, except Shintoism, Christianity, and Buddhism, the Japanese colonial government oppressed Korean religions, considering all of them as “cults.” At the end of the colonial period, most of the new religions faced stagnation, and some had finally ended up being closed down (Yoon 1997, 29–72).

The Emergence of Daesoon Jinrihoe

Most of the Jeungsanist new religions that surfaced during the colonial period were founded by people who had been directly related to Kang Jeungsan. Yet, Daesoon Jinrihoe and its predecessors emerged as an exceptional phenomenon. Jo Cheol-Je (honorific name, Jo Jeongsan, 1895–1958) did not have an opportunity to meet Kang Jeungsan in person. However, he claimed to have received a revelation from him, and founded a new religious movement named Mugeukdo in 1925. Mugeukdo, along with other new religions, had to disband in 1941, because of the pressure by the Japanese colonial government. After the independence, the movement started again its religious activities, and in 1950

assumed the new name of Taegeukdo (Association of Korean Native Religions 2005, 149–53).

Before passing away in 1958, Jo designated as his successor Park Han-Gyeong (honorific name, Park Wudang, 1917–1995 according to the lunar calendar traditionally adopted by the movement, or 1918–1996 according to the solar calendar). Park led Taegeukdo until 1968. Then, due to internal problems of the organization, Park left the headquarters of Taegeukdo in Busan in 1969 and founded a new religious order, Daesoon Jinrihoe, in Seoul in 1969 (Hong 1988, 791–95).

Why Were the Korean New Religions Successful?

The background of the emerging new religions, from Donghak on, includes several elements. First, the vulnerability of Confucianism was apparent in Joseon Korea. Before the Joseon era, Confucianism functioned as a national religion, which was akin to the role of Islam in some Muslim countries today. Confucian norms and ethics also worked as social norms and morality in Joseon Korea. The state affairs were carried out based on Confucian ideology. Even the kings were no exception. Confucianism ruled over Joseon, yet, it still had a weak point in the sphere of religion proper. Confucianism did not offer a systematic doctrine of the afterlife, and discouraged praying to the gods for receiving blessing and favors, something that was deeply ingrained in Korean culture and history (Keum 1989, 26–49).

It is also true that, throughout the Joseon era, Buddhism and shamanism manages to survive in spite of severe oppression. This happened because they took charge of the activities related to the afterlife and the pursuit of blessings from the gods. The weakness of Confucianism in these fields opened the way for the success of these two religious competitors.

Confucianism' limit was that it was never close to the common population of Korea, precisely because of its radical exclusion of praying for receiving blessings and favors from the gods. Religions include a variety of factors such as prayers and blessings, announcing a future better world, and seeking the Dao. If a certain religion emphasizes only one factor, it is subjected to a limit. Because of the limits of Confucianism, shamanism and other folk religions continued to exist in Joseon.

The reason why Buddhism, despite official hostility, did not completely disappear is similar. Buddhism took into account the factors neglected by Confucianism. Most Daoist rituals carried out by the government were abolished from the mid-Joseon era. But Daoism too survived as a private belief among the common people of Korea.

Second, despite the fact that Confucianism had such vulnerability, no new religions emerged until the late Joseon era. That happened because Buddhism and folk religions supported the Joseon dynasty. But, by the late Joseon era, Buddhism had lost its influence. It had been suppressed by Confucianism and had lost many traditions. Shamanism remained a folk custom including religious forms. But it could not play a role as a proper religious order. Shamanism proposed divine blessings but lacked elaborate doctrines or adequate religious theories. In addition, Buddhist monks and shamans, who belonged to the lowest classes, were treated contemptuously by the aristocrats. Their religious role had limits.

When Catholicism was introduced in the late Joseon period, it rapidly spread in several parts of the nation, which resulted from a combination of different factors. But, as Catholicism was branded as a wicked teaching or “cult” by the government and Confucianism, it was perceived by many as a social disturbance. As a consequence, Catholicism could not be recognized widely but was only partially accepted by Korean society. Because Catholicism denied the Korean custom of ancestral rituals, it was also perceived as being against the Confucian social ethic of the “three fundamental principles” and “five moral disciplines” in human relations (Jo 1988, 175–77).

If we look at the social atmosphere in general, Catholicism was regarded as a “cult” or pseudo-religion by a significant number of Koreans. This prevented Catholicism from being accepted on a nationwide basis. Due to the widespread opposition to Catholicism, a third religion, outside Buddhism or Daoism, was born. As mentioned earlier, Choe Je-u believed he was proposing a synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but he also incorporated Christian elements.

Third, at that time, the socio-cultural turmoil had a strong impact on the birth of new religions. A faith in which the path to a new world was opened by a new leader spread throughout Korea. This phenomenon would have been hard to anticipate in established religions such as Confucianism or Buddhism, or a

relatively new religion such as Catholicism. The birth of the third religion was timely enough to give such faith to many.

Donghak emerged in that background, but the external powers, especially Japan, invaded Korea in the first decade of the 20th century. Ordinary Koreans struggled to find spiritual comfort. In the middle of social chaos, Korean new religions started to emerge. Except Donghak, most of the Korean new religions started their activities between 1900 and the 1930s, a period of time including the Japanese invasion and the colonial era. The new religions of this period were characterized by ethnocentrism. They proposed plans for world peace, which they believed could and should be accomplished, with the Korean people at its center.

This process started with Donghak. Under complex circumstances, Choe Je-u, who came from an impoverished gentry family, suggested a new religion that combined Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. His ideas found widespread acceptance in Korean society, except in the Confucian ruling class. Early Donghak grew rapidly among the common people. In the end, however, Donghak was suppressed and its founder was executed. His execution was the root cause of the Donghak peasant revolution, which bravely resisted against the government and foreign powers. Ultimately, however, the revolution was subjugated, and one of its consequences was the permanence of a Japanese army in Korea.

Since Donghak exerted a strong religious influence on Korean society, various new religions emerged in the aftermath of the failed revolution. The background against which these new religious movements emerged was a situation where the established religions showed their limitations in approaching the common people. The new religions were accepted by the commoners because they suggested new ideologies and ideals that the existed religions could not provide, and which resonated with the aspirations of ordinary Koreans.

New religions such as Donghak and Daejonggyo can be compared to Judaism because of their ethnocentrism. However, there are also differences between Korean new religions and Judaism. For the former, the Koreans are part of a “chosen people” if they are able to become leaders in the pursuit of world peace. Korean new religions insist that the world peace and a great future utopia should be the ultimate objectives, where Koreans should play a crucial role. However, the idea that Koreans should dominate and rule other peoples or nations is not present. Thus, the expression “ethnic religions” is often used rather than “ethnocentrism.”

Daesoon Jinrihoe is among the ethnic religions that originated from Kang Jeungsan, but is characterized by its uniqueness. The movement systemized intrinsic folk beliefs, myths, and legends into a new doctrine, and formed a well-organized religious order. Even though other ethnic religions took a similar stance, Daesoon Jinrihoe can be described as the group that emphasizes more strongly the importance of globalization without an ethnocentric propensity. The movement deserves attention, since it is the first in Korea that has accepted a majority of the elements of Daoist thought and has formed a religious order based on it.

In Korea, Daoism was never able in the past to grow into an organized religious order. Daoism was introduced in Korea in the early 7th century, however, it did not manage to become an organized religion and only played minor roles in personal piety and some state-run public rituals. In the late Joseon Dynasty, Daoism just disappeared amid the prosperity of Confucianism, leaving relics as popular customs. Its activities hardly attracted any attention. Daesoon Jinrihoe is unique among Korea's new religions for its systematization of Daoist elements, which lied dormant in Korean religious culture.

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