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Edited by Robert E. Buswell Jr.: Religions of Korea in Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Don Baker

For students of religion, especially those interested in religious pluralism and religious change, the Korean peninsula is a fascinating place to explore. The spectrum of religious beliefs and practices in Korea is wider than almost any other place on earth. The peninsula has been divided roughly in half since 1945, with the Communist People's Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) on the northern side of a demilitarized boundary and the democratic Republic of Korea (ROK) on the southern side, giving it an even more diverse religious culture today than it had during its thousand-plus years as a unified country. In the North, the Communist government has suppressed most religious activity and replaced it with the ideology of Juche (*chuch'e*), literally "self-reliance," an amalgam of Marxism and Neo-Confucianism with religious overtones. In the South, the opposite had occurred: since 1945, there has been an explosion of religious activity—particularly organized and self-conscious religious activity—leading to highly visible, vibrant, and growing Buddhist and Christian communities and expanding social roles for Korean new religions and traditional shamanism.

Comparatively little is said specifically about North Korea in this volume, for a couple of reasons. First of all, before 1945, there was little difference between religious beliefs and practices in the northern part of the peninsula and in the South, so what is said about Korea before 1945 applies to the entire peninsula. For the period after 1945, we have a lot more information about religion in the South than in the North, since North Korea is a closed society that does not allow many foreign observers in and does not let much information out.

What we do know about North Korea is that the government-promoted ideology of Juche claims at least the public allegiance of the vast majority of the population. We know that Juche teaches that human beings do not need to rely on any gods, since human beings are wise and strong enough to make decisions for themselves. We also know, however, that North Koreans are told to rely on the infallible guidance of Kim Il-sŏng (Kim Il Sung) and his son and successor, Kim Chŏng-il (Kim Jung Il). We know that, although Kim Il-sŏng died in 1994, signs posted all over North Korea remind citizens that "he is with us forever," he is considered even in death to be the head of the North Korean state, and his birthday

is observed as the foundation day of the new “Juche era.” In addition, North Koreans are told that they, too, can have eternal life, since, as Juche ideology explains, even after our individual physical body dies, we remain enmeshed in the relational web of the sociopolitical community fostered by Juche; therefore, as long as that community survives, so do we.

If Juche rhetoric sounds almost religious, that is intentional. The North Korean government intends for Juche to completely replace religion in the not-too-distant future. In the meantime, the state tolerates only limited practice of other religions. That is why there is nothing in this volume on non-Juche religious activity in North Korea after 1945. There are only about 35,000 people in North Korea officially recognized as having a religious affiliation (other than Juche). According to government-controlled religious organizations, North Korea has around 10,000 Buddhists, 10,000 Protestants, a few hundred Catholics, and 15,000 followers of Korea’s oldest indigenous new religion, Ch’öndogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way). If shamanism still exists in North Korea, it has been driven deep underground.

By contrast, in South Korea, the focus of most of the contemporary material in this volume, there are reams of scholarly materials concerning religious activity. The Republic of Korea enjoys one of the most complex and diverse religious cultures on the face of the globe. South Korea has the largest network of extant Confucian shrines of any nation and has a vibrant and active Buddhist community, with hundreds of major monasteries scattered in scenic mountainous regions around the peninsula. South Korea is additionally the most Protestant country in Asia (in terms of the percentage of its population that identifies itself as Protestant), but it also ranks third in Asia, behind the Philippines and East Timor, in the percentage of its population that attends Catholic worship services regularly. On top of that, there are a number of indigenous new religions, many of them large enough to operate their own universities and hospitals. And last but not least, shamanism is still practiced in homes and offices in even the most fashionable sections of South Korea’s most modern cities.

You can find ample evidence for this religious diversity just by walking the streets of Korea’s cities and towns and looking at the signs on the buildings around you. The first thing you will probably notice, particularly in Seoul and in its surrounding cities and towns, is the dominance of Christianity, obvious in the many churches, both large and small, that can be found along Korea’s streets and alleys. However, an attentive observer would also notice the resurgence of urban Buddhism, evident in the large number of temples being either built or rebuilt in Korea’s metropolitan areas. Close attention to the signs on homes, offices, and apartment buildings will reveal that shamanism is also alive and well. Though the offices of shamans usually lack the architectural distinctiveness of Christian churches and Buddhist temples, they can be identified by reverse swastikas (a traditional Buddhist emblem for auspiciousness, which originated in India) on building walls or by placards on office buildings and apartment blocks proclaiming that there is a “philosophy research center” (i.e., a fortune-teller) or a “bodhisattva”

(here meaning a shaman) inside. Not as obvious are the various worship halls and proselytizing centers for Korea's many indigenous new religions. Such religious diversity would not be surprising in a country inhabited by many different ethnic groups, since religious affiliation often serves as a marker of ethnic identity. Korea, however, is unusual in that it is one of the most ethnically homogeneous nations on earth, but also one of the most religiously diverse.

You do not need to travel the highways and byways of the peninsula to confirm this religious pluralism. Both government census data and Gallup survey results tell us that the South Korean population is divided into several religious groups. According to data gathered in the full census of 1995, 23.2 percent of South Koreans self-identify as Buddhists, 19.7 percent are Protestants, 6.6 percent are Roman Catholics, and 1.3 percent are followers of other religions. That leaves 50.1 percent with no religious affiliation, though we know that many of them patronize shamans, visit Buddhist temples, and may even attend a Christian church or Confucian shrine once in a while.

Snapshots of the religious population taken since 1995 tell us that more and more Koreans are proclaiming a specific religious orientation, but the respective divisions among them remain the same. In 2003 the South Korean government, based on a partial census, estimated that 54 percent of its citizens had a religious affiliation. Of those, 25.3 percent were Buddhist, 19.8 percent were Protestant, 7.4 percent were Catholic, 0.3 percent called themselves Confucians, 0.21 percent called themselves Wŏn Buddhists (a Korean new religion), and 0.75 percent had another religious affiliation. All three major religious communities had grown over the intervening eight years, a trend Gallup confirmed in 2004 with a survey of those living in Korea's largest cities. Gallup found 26.8 percent to be Buddhists, 21.6 percent to be Protestants, and 8.2 percent to be Catholics.

In that same period, the number of people who claimed to have no specific religious affiliation dropped to 46 percent, according to the government, or 43 percent, according to the Gallup survey. Such a decline does not necessarily mean that Koreans have grown more religious. Many of those who say they have no specific religious affiliation do not want to confine themselves to only one religious tradition. Instead, they want to be free to visit shamans and Buddhist temples and participate in the activities of new religious organizations without being told that by doing so they were no longer permitted to participate in the rituals and worship activities of other religious communities. It is also possible that some of the respondents to government or Gallup poll takers had a different understanding of "religion" than did the survey takers. Acts that observers considered religious, the respondents may not have viewed as religious at all. The term "religion" (Kor. *chonggyo*) is a relatively new term in Korean, having been imported from Japan as recently as the end of the nineteenth century. As a result, for some Koreans, the word "religion" does not necessarily embrace all the religious beliefs they hold or apply to all the religious activities in which they engage.

This may seem puzzling, at first. After all, defining what "religion" is appears to be a fairly easy task. Most of us know what religion is, or at least probably think

we do. However, our definition of religion is often shaped by our particular religious orientation. In a religious culture as diverse as Korea, some of those concepts do not apply to the entire range of religious organizations and activities found on the peninsula. For example, many people assume that to be religious means to believe in God, or gods. But such a definition might leave out monastic Buddhism and Confucianism, since the existence or nonexistence of God is normatively irrelevant in the religious practice of these two traditions. Does that mean Confucianism and monastic Buddhism are not religions? Obviously not. Many people also assume that a religion must have its own moral code. But such a definition would exclude Korea's folk religion, which has no distinctive moral code of its own. It would also cause problems in discussing some schools of Buddhist practice, which teach that the truly enlightened have transcended the normal moral dichotomy separating good from evil actions.

Instead of trying to define religion in the abstract and then applying that universal concept to specific components of Korea's religious culture, we will be better served if, first, we identify the sorts of activities in which Koreans engage that might reasonably be called "religious"; and, second, ascertain the reasons Koreans engage in those sorts of activities. Only then will we come up with an understanding of religion that is generally applicable to the Korean situation.

The Religious Aims of Koreans

Koreans, like human beings in countries and cultures all over the world, have a wide range of reasons for engaging in religious activities. One common reason, which is easy to identify as religious, is the pursuit of salvation. However, salvation can mean different things to different people.

For some, such as Christians and Pure Land Buddhists, salvation means going to heaven or the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss after you die. For them, the primary purpose of religious activity is to earn admission into paradise (though for the Pure Land Buddhists, paradise means a place where it will be easier to achieve *nirvāṇa*). However, for other Buddhists, being saved means not going anywhere after you die. Rather than rebirth in heaven, their ultimate religious goal is the achievement in this very life of *nirvāṇa*, the radical nonattachment to all the compounded things of this world, which brings a final end to the interminable cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and the concomitant inevitability of suffering.

An individual practitioner may seek his or her own salvation, but it is not unusual for religious activity to have as its intended aim the salvation of someone else. That someone else might be a recently deceased loved one, the whole of humanity, or even, in Buddhist circles, all sentient beings.

A common intended result of salvation, whether for oneself or for others, is an end to suffering. Those who believe in heaven look forward to eternal happiness in communion with God (or with Amitābha Buddha in Pure Land practice), in a realm in which there is no disease or pain, no hunger or thirst, no old age or

death, and, therefore, no suffering. Those who believe in nirvāṇa anticipate an end to the illusions of permanence, happiness, individuality, and loveliness that bedevil us in this realm of the transitory, since such illusions give rise to attachments, which inevitably lead to suffering when their transitory nature becomes obvious. Freed from such unrealistic attachments, those who enter nirvāṇa will therefore be free of suffering.

Some Koreans prefer another route to salvation. Unlike those who look forward to going to paradise after they die or escaping from the illusions of this world, these religious prefer instead to work toward the creation of a paradise on this earth. Although they realize this world is not perfect, they believe it is perfectible: that is, they affirm the intrinsic value of this world rather than deny its ultimate value, as Christians and Buddhists appear to do. In some Korean religious traditions, such as Korea's new indigenous religions of Ch'öndogyo or Wön Buddhism, salvation will come through a Great Transformation (*kaebyök* in Korean) that will erase from this planet such imperfections as war, disease, poverty, and political and social injustice. After that Great Transformation, life on earth will be perfect and free of suffering, and there will be no need to seek escape into heaven or into nirvāṇa.

Salvation is not the only goal of religious activity in Korea. Koreans also seek self-perfection. Sometimes that self-perfection is a means to the end of salvation. In such cases, practitioners strive through their own efforts to eliminate as much human weakness as possible in order to gain the reward of a ticket to paradise. However, for other Koreans, self-perfection is a goal in itself. Neo-Confucians, for example, expressed disdain for anyone who tried to become a better person in order to receive some sort of reward for their accomplishment.

Self-perfection can aim at primarily physical perfection or primarily spiritual perfection. Usually, however, the two are interrelated. In fact, one standard way of saying "to pursue moral self-improvement" in Korean is *momül takhta*, which literally means to polish your body. Self-perfection as physical perfection can mean that you have control over your body, including control of your emotions, such that your body will not raise any barriers to fidelity with the laws of nature or obedience to the will of God (or the gods). At its most extreme, this would mean being willing even to sacrifice your physical life if that is the only way you can maintain fidelity to the dharma or God. Buddhist self-immolators and Catholic martyrs are examples of people who subordinated normal human desires to religious imperatives. Alternatively, physical self-perfection can mean that you have brought your body under such tight control that you can suppress individualistic emotions and align your actions with the movements of cosmic forces. This was the goal of Confucian self-perfection. A third meaning of physical self-perfection is to train your body until you have reached a point where you can reverse the normal process of aging and the physical decay that accompanies it. This is the goal of pursuit of physical self-perfection by members of the internal alchemy school of Daoism.

Spiritual self-perfection focuses on mind control, on attaining control over your thoughts so that no selfish or otherwise immoral idea is able to linger in

your mind. This can be done either by emptying the mind of all ratiocination or by filling the mind with wholesome thoughts at all times. Such spiritual perfection may be cultivated by sitting in quiet meditation for long periods, as many Buddhist monks do, or by engaging in extensive periods of repetitive physical exercises such as chanting, as is done in some of the new religions in Korea.

Sometimes, however, spiritual cultivation is pursued through regular spiritual exercises that may not last an uncomfortably long time each they are performed, but that are done on a regular enough basis that they discipline both the body and the mind. One example would be rising regularly to pray before dawn, as many Korean Christians do. In such cases, both the body and the mind are disciplined at the same time, leading to both physical and mental discipline.

Sometimes Koreans engage in religious activity with less thought for such long-term goals as salvation or self-perfection than in more immediate goals, such as peace of mind. That peace of mind can come from listening to or reading religious explanations of how this world came to be the way it is. Creation stories, such as those in shamanic oral myths or the Christian Bible, tell us why we are in this world and what our roles are in it, giving us clarity about how we should behave. That clarity can provide peace of mind. Similarly, religious stories of supernatural intervention in human affairs can give us peace of mind, if those stories ease our fears of having no escape from the bad situations into which we may have fallen. The belief in the possibility of such intervention is one reason shamanism has remained such an important presence in Korean religious culture for so long. Another religious aid to peace of mind is the promise of a better life after this one. Many people find peace of mind when they are assured that they have nothing to fear from the inevitability of death. In addition, participation in communal religious activities can help us obtain peace of mind by raising our self-esteem, if participation in those activities raises our status in the eyes of others. Finally, some religious rituals themselves, by the very nature of the repetitive actions they require and the comfort people gain from familiarity with those actions, have a calming effect that can promote peace of mind.

Another goal of religious activities is the highlighting of important points of transition in life. Although such activities may not at first glance appear intrinsically religious, they nonetheless are often a goal of religious practice. Catholicism, for example, marks the joyful moment of the birth of a child with the ritual of baptism, welcoming a new arrival into the community. Another happy occasion whose importance is highlighted with ritual is marriage. Most Korean religious traditions (shamanism is one conspicuous exception) have ceremonies to both celebrate and sanctify the joining of two people to form a new family (though in Korea, neither shamans nor Buddhist monks traditionally officiated at weddings). Mournful occasions also are marked with religious ritual. When a loved one dies, religious ritual can provide a way to channel grief in a socially acceptable fashion and also can help us accept the fact that our beloved has left us before we were ready to say good-bye. Some religious traditions, such as Confucianism, go even farther to help the living deal with their grief by prescribing rituals of

remembrance on the anniversaries of the deaths of parents and grandparents. In a society that puts as much emphasis as Korea does on filial piety, those rituals of remembrance also provide a way for descendants to lessen any guilt they might feel over not having done enough for their parents or grandparents while they were alive.

There are also more pedestrian reasons for engaging in religious activities. Though some religious leaders and thinkers express dismay at how often religion is used to pursue mundane, personal benefits, for as long as there have been human beings on this earth, men and women have turned to religion in the hope that it would make them healthier or wealthier (or, preferably, both). After all, religion promises to put us in touch with forces more powerful than we would otherwise have at our disposal. How many of us would resist the temptation to avail ourselves of a superior power that may be able to help us put enough money in our pockets to buy a better automobile or home? How many of us would not seek supernatural assistance if we thought that was the only way we could heal a chronic or life-threatening medical condition or even merely regain the energy of youth? It is therefore not surprising that Koreans of virtually all religious persuasions pray, perform rituals, tithe, or engage in other religious behavior in the hopes that, for example, their son or daughter will gain admission to one of the best universities in the nation, or at least marry a graduate of such a university.

Finally, since human beings are social beings and need friends and like-minded companions, some turn to religion for fellowship. Engaging in shared religious activities creates a sense of fellowship, of belonging to a community of shared ideals and values. Moreover, those who find themselves doubting their religious convictions may find that communal religious activities help to strengthen those beliefs. When we join with others in communal prayer, worship, or meditation, our trust in the efficacy of those activities is reinforced by seeing that other people share that belief.

These various goals of religious activities are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they usually overlap. For example, a Confucian may want to create a utopia on this earth, but he probably also believes that the best way to achieve that goal is to cultivate self-perfection. A Christian may want to go to heaven, but she may also want God to make life more comfortable for her and her family on this earth. And practices that help a Buddhist woman calm and focus her mind will also help ensure that her unborn baby is born healthy and wise.

Moreover, despite their different reasons for engaging in religious activities, most Koreans will have at least one reason in common: overcoming the frustrations produced by the inevitable limitations in human life. Religion usually involves either seeking the assistance of a supernatural force or being, or aligning oneself with some more powerful force. Either way, religion implies joining with something or someone more powerful than oneself in order to have a better chance of overcoming the obstacles life inevitably throws one's way. Koreans may seek that aid from a shamanic mountain deity, a Buddhist bodhisattva, or the Christian God. Or they may seek to overcome their own limitations by aligning

themselves with the cosmic pattern Neo-Confucians believe governs the universe, by harmonizing their actions with the energy pattern in the geomancer's maps of the earth, or by breathing in such a way that their energy becomes one with the energy of the universe, as Daoist internal alchemy practitioners recommend.

Religion is obviously much more than just an attempt to benefit from cooperation with some force more powerful than oneself. After all, every time we get into an automobile and drive down the highway, we are using the power of the engine to get from one place to another faster than we could on our own. Yet we would not normally consider driving to be a religious act. It is not the desire to leverage our own power with some external power that defines religion. Rather, religion is identified by the techniques used to access that stronger power, as well as the type of power from which we seek to benefit.

The Religious Activities of Koreans

One technique used to gain the assistance of supernatural power is, of course, prayer. If you go to Buddhist shrines in the mountains on a day when the weather is nice enough for hiking, you will probably see quite a few people bowing over and over again before a statue of a buddha or a bodhisattva and asking for assistance in solving a health or financial problem. Such vocal petitionary prayer can also be seen in Christian churches. However, that is not the only form of prayer. In some of the new religions, such as Ch'öndogyo, prayer is a silent conversation with God within your own heart and is not audible to those around you. In folk religion, shamans not only converse aloud with their gods, they even negotiate and argue with them in their distinctive form of prayer.

There are other types of prayer as well, some of which are difficult to distinguish from worship. Producing religious objects by hand—making a lotus lantern for a Buddha's Birthday celebration, for example, or carving a statue of Jesus—could be seen as a form of prayer, if the aim is to gain merit for the lantern maker or the statue carver. However, if the purpose is primarily to express your devotion to the Buddha or to Jesus, then you are engaged in an act of worship. The same dual function applies to prayers that praise God or a god rather than asking him for a favor. When a Buddhist repeats over and over again, "Homage to the Buddha of Medicine," if she is simply expressing her belief in the existence, power, and benevolence of the Buddha of Medicine, she is worshipping that buddha; but if she is chanting his name over and over again, begging him to heal a family member dying of cancer, then she is praying. The same can be said of a Protestant who praises the Lord during Sunday services: if that is disinterested praise, it is primarily an act of worship; but if she is praising God in the hope that God will respond to her devotion by giving her husband a better-paying job, she is praying.

Pilgrimage is another form of worship popular among Koreans that can also be a form of prayer. Wön Buddhists and Catholics, for example, make the rounds of

various sacred sites on Korean soil to show their devotion and reinvigorate their faith, and out of hope that they will thereby earn merit that will increase their chances of entering a supernal realm after they die. Some may have more immediate goals, such as hoping that their visits to sacred sites will be quickly rewarded with good luck in school, business, or their personal relationships. But for others, a pilgrimage is more than just a form of worship or prayer: it can also be a form of spiritual training, a way to cultivate both a better mental attitude and moral character.

Meditation is another form of spiritual training popular among Koreans. Meditation is of course a traditional part of Buddhist monastic practice, but businessmen, housewives, and university students also meditate, and not all of them are Buddhists. Meditation is different from prayer and worship in that it is focused inward. Rather than trying to communicate with God to ask a favor or show our devotion to him, when we meditate we try either to empty our minds of all deliberate conscious thoughts or to focus our minds on one thing to the exclusion of all else. Mainstream Buddhists in Korea tend to emphasize focusing the mind on the *hwadu*, or “keyword,” of a *kongan* (a Zen conundrum) as a way of gaining direct access to the enlightenment inherent in the mind, though in recent years other forms of practice—such as silent meditation aimed at emptying the mind of all deliberate conscious thought, and Vipassanā (insight) practice derived from Southeast Asian traditions of Buddhism—have challenged the popularity of *hwadu* meditation. Neo-Confucians rejected both approaches, calling instead for a meditative focus on the unity of the cosmos. An efficient approach to meditation on which both agreed was to get out of our heads and focus attention instead on our breathing and on an invisible spot (known as the *tanjŏn*, or “cinnabar field”) a little below our navel. Korean practitioners of internal alchemy would agree, though they are less interested in the mental states associated with meditation than they are with the physiological effects of slow and steady abdominal breathing.

The most popular form of meditation is quiet sitting. However, there are other ways to meditate. Some Koreans alternate periods of sitting with quiet walking meditation, or even standing upright but still. There are also some new Buddhist denominations in Korea, as well as some non-Buddhist new religions, such as Ch’ondogyo and the Chŭngsan family of religions, that meditate by chanting. Chanting aloud the same phrase over and over again can have a similar physiological and psychological effect as quiet sitting.

For those who find meditation boring or too demanding, there are livelier forms of religious activity. In addition to worship through verbal declarations of praise and devotion, through the production of sacred objects, and through visits to sacred sites, believers can also express their religious faith through song or dance. Congregational singing in religious services was introduced to Koreans by Christian hymnals, but music has long been a part of Korean religious practice. Shamanic rituals are filled with loud, sometimes even raucous, music, with the excuse that the spirits need to be entertained. Buddhist music is much more restrained, since it

is intended to put its adherents in a contemplative mood. Confucian ritual music is even quieter, since Confucian music is designed to still emotions.

As may be expected, religious dance resembles its accompanying religious music. Confucian ritual dance hardly appears to be a dance at all, the performers move so slowly. Buddhist dance is well choreographed, like a Buddhist ritual at a somewhat faster speed. Shaman dances, on the other hand, do not appear at first glance to adhere to any set pattern, since the shaman is supposed to respond as the spirits move her, which sometimes means frenetically and wildly, rather than in the choreographed movements we typically associate with religious dance.

There are ways of worship more subdued than singing and dancing. A common way Koreans show respect to one another is through bowing. Koreans often bow where Westerners would shake hands, and the use of bowing has been extended into the religious sphere. Both Catholics and Buddhists bow from the waist before sacred statues, for example. Buddhists will also sometimes do a complete prostration, in which their head hits the floor when they want to show devotion to, and trust in, a particular buddha or bodhisattva. The same full prostration is used in the ancestor memorial services that originated in Confucianism.

Finally, there is one more form of worship that should not be overlooked: the presentation of gifts. Such gifts may be items offered as presents for a shaman's spirits, money tithed to a church, or offerings made to monks. They can even be donations of time, such as when believers demonstrate their faith and devotion by helping their church or temple prepare for formal worship services or by assisting with the daily tasks of keeping that church or temple open. For example, in many Buddhist monasteries, middle-aged women work in the kitchen, preparing food for the monks. (The monks commonly call these women "bodhisattvas," as if they are Buddhist saints incarnate.)

In addition to praying, worshiping, meditating, and going on pilgrimages, another common religious practice is ritual performance. There are nonreligious rituals, of course. Graduation ceremonies at secular institutions of higher education would not normally be considered religious, yet they are clearly rituals in that they adhere to a definite script that is followed every time a new class graduates. Nevertheless, rituals play a larger role in religious life than they do in other realms of human society. Moreover, its rituals are often what distinguish a religious community from other forms of human association.

Rituals can be stately or boisterous, as different as a Catholic high mass in Myöngdong Cathedral or a *kut* in which a shaman stands in her bare feet on the sharp blades of two fodder knives. They can be as grand as the Sökchönje ritual performed twice a year on the grounds of the main Confucian shrine in Seoul to honor the spirits of Confucius and his most illustrious Chinese and Korean disciples, or as modest as the household rituals of some of Korea's new religions, in which a bowl of clean water is placed on a home altar and a brief prayer is said. Rituals can be a form of prayer, or a mode of worship. Rituals can also be used to show respect for a person or a spirit, as in the ancestor memorial services performed by most Korean families, or they can be used, as noted earlier, to mark

significant occasions, such as weddings or the burial of a loved one. In Korean folk religion, rituals can be used to entertain spirits and keep them in a good mood so they will not cause any problems for the human beings in their purview.

In all these cases, religious rituals are like secular rituals in that they follow a standard format and in many cases adhere to a set script. However, they differ from secular rituals in the reasons they are performed (a secular ritual of prayer or worship is a contradiction in terms) or in the intended objects of the ritual (a secular ritual would not be directed at supernatural beings). Even when their purposes overlap with secular rituals, as in the case of marriages and funerals, religious rituals distinguish themselves by their aim of sanctifying the occasion for which they are performed or by their invocation of some supernatural power, such as God above.

Most, but not all, religions have ritual specialists. Whether they are called shamans, monks, or ministers, their function is basically the same: they are empowered to use their special knowledge of the rituals of their religious community to lead those rituals. Frequently, special ritual knowledge also empowers those leaders to offer the lay members of the community advice on how to behave. (In more tightly organized religious communities, that advice often becomes a command.)

Religious communities, like other human communities and organizations, have certain rules and regulations that help them function as a community and direct the actions of their members toward their common religious goals. In some religions, such as Christianity, those rules may take the form of commandments presented as laws of God that must be obeyed. To disobey those commandments is to sin, and sinners face divine punishment for eternity unless they repent and beg God's forgiveness.

In other religions, sin is not an important concept. Instead, their rules and regulations are primarily guidelines to tell you what you should do if you want to achieve certain goals. You can disregard those rules if you find that they are onerous, even though doing so will make it more difficult for you to achieve the ultimate goal of your religion. For example, if you are a lay Buddhist who happens to eat meat, most Korean Buddhists do not think you will be damned forever for giving into your carnivorous urges. However, your accumulated bad karma could drag you down into another cycle of rebirth instead of achieving liberation. Similarly, Confucians will not condemn you to eternal damnation if you do not honor your ancestors with the appropriate rituals. However, failing to honor your ancestors properly keeps you from being as good a human being as you should be, and that would bring shame to you and your family.

Korea's various religious traditions do not agree on what the rewards for good behavior are, or on what the punishments for bad behavior will be. Christians in Korea, like Christians elsewhere, believe the good will ascend to heaven after they die and the evil will fall into hell. Few other religions in Korea share that vision of the afterlife. However, even though they may not agree on what the penalties are for violating them, Korean religions generally share similar ethical standards.

They all agree that human beings should refrain from lying, stealing, cheating, sexual misconduct, murder, and any other selfish action that harms other human beings. They also agree that sons and daughters should respect their parents and grandparents, and that elders should guide their juniors. Korean religions also agree that we should treat our fellow human beings with compassion, helping those who are in need of assistance. They differ primarily in the behavioral expectations they add to that basic list. Shamans tell their clients to maintain good relations with their guardian spirits. Buddhists are urged to respect all forms of sentient life, including adopting a vegetarian diet if they are spiritually advanced enough. Believers in the new religion Ch'öndogyo are told to treat all human beings as though they were God. And many Protestant Christians are told not to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol.

Religions in Korea, like religions elsewhere, do not just tell you how to behave. Most of them also tell you what you can do to cultivate the sort of moral character that will ensure that you will behave the way you should. Those prescriptions vary from religion to religion. Shamans tell their clients to sponsor rituals regularly. Buddhists tell believers to read and reflect on the sūtras or to meditate in order to develop the mind of compassion and nonattachment necessary to rise above their narrow self-interest. Christians tell their fellow believers to pray and read the Bible so that they can resist the temptations of the devil and be faithful to God's will. Confucians tell their students and disciples to read the writings of the sages and identify the moral lessons in them so that they can apply those lessons in their daily lives. Except for folk religions, it is normal for Korean religions to include the study of revered texts as an essential element in moral cultivation. Moreover, again except for folk religion, it is standard practice for religious specialists to give lectures to the laity to help them learn how to read those texts and apply them to religious practice.

In addition, Buddhists, Christians, and many of the new religions encourage lay believers to withdraw from everyday life for a few days at a time to pray, chant, or meditate, to discipline their bodies and minds through ascetic practices, and to strengthen their determination to lead a moral life. Buddhists go to mountain monasteries, Christians go to *kidowön* (retreat centers), and followers of new religions go to *suryönwön* (training centers) or *sudowön* (centers for cultivating the Way). Despite differences in the specifics of what is taught during those periods of intense spiritual training, the essential idea is the same: there are times when it is helpful to withdraw from the world for a while to invigorate your ability to lead a moral life.

Objects of the Korean Religious Gaze

Despite the many similarities in their goals and activities, Korean religions are not all the same. Not only are the specifics of their goals and practices different from one religion to another, but so too are the objects of their religious gaze. Religions, by definition, look beyond the visible world for some underlying or overriding

force or presence that unites the disparate phenomena of normal existence, gives meaning to human existence, and provides the foundation for the values that religions believe should govern our lives.

For some religions, the ultimate object of their religious gaze is God. For others, it is an impersonal governing pattern or energy pervading the cosmos. Scholars often classify religions into three categories: monotheistic, polytheistic, and nontheistic. Traditionally, Koreans were either polytheistic or nontheistic. Until the last couple of centuries, monotheism was not a significant presence in Korea.

Though Koreans today generally assume that their ancestors worshiped a supreme deity known as Hanūnim, neither historical records nor artifacts provide any textual or archaeological evidence to support such an assumption. In premodern times, the Korean people were mostly polytheistic. They worshiped a number of different gods, mostly deified human heroes and deified personifications of nature. The educated elite, however, tended to be nontheistic. Neo-Confucians believed that there was one governing force in the cosmos, but that force, known as *li* (i; formative normative pattern) was immanent and impersonal and therefore does not correspond to the Western term “God.” While the Buddhist laity tended to treat the various buddhas and bodhisattvas as inhabitants of a polytheistic spiritual universe, monks often viewed such theological descriptions of the buddhas as heuristic language that helps us to recognize the unitary nature of ultimate reality, which they called “buddha-nature.”

Another way to distinguish popular religion and elite religion in traditional Korea is to note that gods in the popular imagination were anthropomorphic. In other words, they had personalities, and human beings could interact with them as though they were similar to human beings. On the other hand, the impersonal ground of reality in both the Neo-Confucian and the Buddhist monastic view was anthropocentric: rather than the object of a religious gaze outward, both *li* and buddha-nature could be sought within, since they filled the entire universe, both the stars externally and our minds internally.

If you pray to a god and expect a response, you have an anthropomorphic concept of that God, since only a supernatural personality can listen and respond to entreaties. In other words, anthropomorphic religion is religion that believes in divine persons with consciousness and intelligence, who interact with human beings. In anthropocentric religion, on the other hand, prayers would be a waste of time, since there is no supernatural personality to listen to those prayers. Instead, in anthropocentric religion, where religion is human-centered rather than god-centered, the focus is on self-cultivation, either on finding the real self within (such as the buddhahood that meditators seek to discover), or on linking with the impersonal forces in the cosmos without (such as in the Neo-Confucian drive to harmonize our minds with the principles of the cosmos).

The gods of shamanism and Korea’s folk religion are definitely anthropomorphic (they have personalities, and human beings can interact with them). So too are the gods of popular Buddhism, though philosophical Buddhism is more often

anthropocentric (in meditative monastic Buddhism, ultimate reality does not have a personality and, moreover, we can find it within as well as without). Neo-Confucianism was definitely not anthropomorphic, since ultimate reality was defined in terms of *li*, the cosmic network of appropriate relationships, and *ki* (*qi*, or *ch'i* in Chinese), the matter and energy that provide substance and motion to the cosmos. Though mainstream Neo-Confucians used a term, *Sangje* (the Lord on High), that can be translated as "God," they made it clear that that term was used metaphorically and did not refer to an actual supernatural personality.

When Christianity first appeared in Korea, at the end of the eighteenth century, it encountered a culture in which anthropomorphic polytheism coexisted alongside a nontheistic anthropocentrism, which was based on an assumption that behind the diversity of human experience lay a fundamental unity. At first, Christianity had a difficult time winning acceptance, since Christianity preaches an anthropomorphic monotheism, a combination Koreans had not encountered previously. However, this imported religion slowly began to win adherents and, in the process, began to change Korea's religious culture.

This first evidence of that change came with the birth of Korea's first indigenous organized religion in the middle of the nineteenth century. That religion was first known as *Tonghak* (Eastern Learning) to distinguish it from Western Learning, one of the early names given to Catholic Christianity. Early in the twentieth century, *Tonghak* changed its name to *Ch'öndogyo*, the Religion of the Heavenly Way. The God of *Ch'öndogyo* is not a supernatural personality like the God of Christianity. Nor is the God of *Ch'öndogyo* an impersonal metaphysical concept like the absolute of Neo-Confucianism. Rather, *Hanullim*, *Ch'öndogyo*'s name for God, is something in between. He is often depicted in *Ch'öndogyo* scriptures as the animating force in the universe whom we can experience personally when we ask Ultimate Energy to fill our hearts with spiritual energy; but we should also recognize him as present not only in ourselves but also in all other human beings and animate objects.

This compromise between the nontheism of Neo-Confucianism and the theism of Christianity has not been very successful. *Ch'öndogyo* does not have many followers in Korea in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the premodern bifurcation remains strong. Meditative Buddhism is still nontheistic, and that more contemplative approach to Buddhism is spreading among the Buddhist laity. In contrast, popular Buddhism is still predominantly polytheistic, as is the folk religion. Even the new religions that followed *Ch'öndogyo* did not imitate its theological example. *Wönbulgyo* (Round, or Consummate, Buddhism), which as its name implies is a new Buddhist religion, takes a circle as its object of worship, giving concrete form to the Buddhist belief in the unity of all reality. *Taejonggyo*, on the other hand, though it claims to be a revival of Korea's ancient religion, is clearly monotheistic (though it, like Christianity, worships three persons in that one God). Another major new religion (which is actually a family of new religions, since it has many different denominations), the *Chüngsan* group of religions, is polytheistic but with a monotheistic twist: the God of *Chüngsan'gyo* is the Supreme Lord of

Heaven, but he presides over a large population of other spirits of various ranks. Moreover, he descended to earth at the beginning of the twentieth century to help humanity prepare for the coming Great Transformation from the current age, in which the gods dominate humanity, to the next era, in which human beings will run their own affairs and will no longer be subservient to the gods.

The Christian challenge to traditional Korean concepts of the absolute has not overcome those preexisting visions of multiple gods or an impersonal cosmic unity. Nor have those traditional concepts overcome Christian monotheism. Instead, since the introduction of Christianity to Korea, Korea's religious culture has grown even more complex, with polytheists and believers in impersonal, anthropocentric ultimate reality coexisting with monotheists. Korea's contemporary religious culture now includes shamanism and folk religion, various forms of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant), and new religions of various types.

Shamanism and Folk Religion

Folk religion, including shamanism, is typically considered Korea's original religion, representing the fundamental religious orientation of Koreans as long as there has been an identifiably Korean presence in northeast Asia. Moreover, it is sometimes asserted that shamanism has preserved unaltered the primal spirituality of the Korean people. However, though shamanism and the folk religion of which it is now the most visible manifestation have survived the challenges posed by both Christianity and modernization, their contemporary forms have been substantially transformed. For example, in the past most Korean families worshiped household gods. There were many such gods, including a god of the hearth, a god of the roof beam in the main room of the house, and even a god of the outhouse. However, that was when Koreans lived in traditional thatched-roof, clay-walled homes alongside dirt paths in villages or small towns. Now most Koreans have moved into high-rise condominiums or two-story concrete houses in towns and cities and have left their household gods behind.

Koreans have also left behind their village gods. Before the rapid urbanization that started in the 1960s, the vast majority of South Koreans lived in villages and hamlets. Each village had its own tutelary deity or deities. The guardian deities of an inland agricultural community would usually include the local mountain god as well as a pair of generals, the male general in charge of all above the earth and the female general in charge of all on and below the earth. (In fishing villages, the Dragon King who ruled the waters might replace the mountain god as the primary tutelary deity.) Once a year, usually at the beginning of the new year, villagers would come together in a community ritual to thank their guardian gods for keeping their village safe over the past year, and to pray that they continue to provide protection during the year ahead. Such rituals have disappeared as religious rituals in modern Korea, though some survive as cultural relics supported

by local governments as a way of attracting urban tourists who want to see how their ancestors lived.

Mountains gods and dragon kings are examples of the importance of animism in Korea's traditional folk religion. Animism is the tendency to "anthropomorphize" natural objects that are normally inanimate. Animism animates mountains, bodies of water, stones, stars, and other normally inanimate natural objects so that human beings can interact with them. The world of animists is an enchanted world in which spirits inhabit many of the otherwise insentient natural objects people encounter in their local environment. Animism is prescientific, predating the view that the natural world is governed by impersonal forces operating according to laws of nature that operate independently of human will and behavior. Instead, animists view nature as filled with willful personalities, personalities that must be cajoled, entertained, flattered, and bribed to act in ways beneficial to human beings.

As the modern, scientific worldview has spread in Korea, penetrating even remote villages, inanimate natural objects have increasingly come to be seen as inert and more amenable to manipulation with tools than with flattery. Consequently, animism and the associated worship of, and ritual interaction with, the spirits of personified nature have almost disappeared. There remains one conspicuous exception, however. Because the Korean peninsula is so mountainous, mountain gods have always had a special importance in Korea. They retain much of their traditional authority even today. Though they no longer guard many villages, mountain gods can still be found in shrines behind most Buddhist monasteries built on the slopes of a hill or in the foothills of a mountain. Visitors to those monasteries will often visit the mountain god's shrine to ask him to continue to protect the temple as well as themselves and their family members.

Even though village rituals and household gods are becoming a thing of the past in modern Korea, and mountains are about the only inanimate natural objects that are still considered to be animated, another feature of Korea's folk religion has successfully resisted the challenge of modernity: shamanism has not only survived but is flourishing. Even the most modern sections of cities such as Seoul are dotted with shaman's offices.

In Korea, people we in English refer to as "shamans" actually belong to three different types of ritual specialists. The best-known type of shaman is the charismatic shaman, who in Korea is almost always a woman. A charismatic shaman enters a trance in order to be possessed by a spirit and then lets that spirit speak through her to members of her audience. (The spirits that possess shamans are not the animated natural objects of animism. Instead, they are usually the spirits of the recently departed or of long-dead figures from Korean and Chinese history.) Through the shaman's intercession, Koreans are able to plead with spirits to stop afflicting them with physical, financial, or personal problems, or are able to talk once again with recently deceased loved ones. Charismatic shamans are the most dramatic representatives of Koreans shamanism today and are thriving in

modern South Korea. In fact, they have been replacing the less dramatic hereditary shamans who, until the second half of the twentieth century, made up the majority of shamans in the southern half of the peninsula.

During a ritual, or *kut*, a charismatic shaman will sing and dance in order to attract the attention of the spirits. She will also talk with the spirits who show up and may even argue with them to determine which spirit is bothering her client, and why it is doing so. In some cases, she will let herself be possessed by the spirit that is causing trouble so that the offended parties can talk to that spirit and convince it to change its behavior. (Money presented to the shaman channeling the spirit is a particularly effective way to change a wayward spirit's behavior.) Once she has determined the cause of her client's problems, the shaman may become possessed by a different spirit and, speaking through that spirit, order the offending spirit to treat her client better. She may even threaten the offending spirit and force it to flee. However, not all rituals involve threatening misbehaving spirits. Sometimes shamans perform rituals to thank the spirits who have recently helped them or their clients, or they perform rituals to seek the advice of spirits.

Hereditary shamans do not go into a trance and are not possessed by any spirits. They are ritual specialists who have inherited the knowledge necessary to perform certain *kut* that influence the behavior of spirits. In the past, they also inherited a clientele, regular customers from their home village or from neighboring villages. However, when their clients began to move out of those villages into towns and cities, the hereditary shamans did not follow them. City dwellers who believe in shamanism tend to patronize charismatic shamans.

Those few hereditary shamans who still practice their craft in the countryside are more often viewed as custodians of tradition than as effective masters of religious ritual. However, they may still be called on after a funeral to help the deceased accept the fact that they are no longer in the world of living. In Korean tradition, the line between the dead and the living could sometimes be crossed; but when the dead tried to cross that line to contact the loved ones they left behind, they could inadvertently bring misfortune on those loved ones. Therefore it was important to make sure the dead realize they are truly dead. This would be done through a ritual, the *Ssikkim kut*, in which the shaman entices the soul of the recently dead to follow along a white cloth that serves as a road to the realm of the no-longer living. As the soul moves along that road in response to the inducements of the shaman, the shaman cuts the cloth behind the deceased, assuring that he or she cannot turn around and return to the realm of the living.

There is a third type of shaman that in the twenty-first century has become more common than hereditary shamans. These are shamanic diviners. Unlike nonshamanic fortune-tellers who use formulas based on Chinese techniques of divination to calculate fate, shamanic fortune-tellers read the words of the spirits in the throw of coins or rice grains. They do not necessarily go into a trance, nor do they perform the elaborate rituals other shamans perform. Instead, they sit in offices in Korea's cities and quietly offer advice to their customers based on their inspired interpretation of signs from the spirits.

Is folk religion—with its mountain gods and toilet gods, its village rituals, and its shamans and diviners—really a religion? There is no clearly articulated theology for the gods of folk religion. Nor is there a folk-religion “bible” that all believers in the folk religion must read. There is not even a creed listing the various things shamans and their clients should believe. Because folk religion lacks theology, scriptures, and doctrine, it is usually not studied in religious studies departments in Korean universities. (Instead, it is studied in anthropology and literature departments.) Nor is “shamanism” or “folk religion” a category on the questionnaires about religious affiliation used by Gallup pollsters and government census takers.

Yet folk religion has many of the essential elements of a religion. It has prayer, it has worship, and it has rituals. Any study of Korean religious practices must include these folk practices to be comprehensive. However, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish folk religion from the other religious traditions of Korea. That job is made more difficult by the fact that many shamans, if asked what their religion is, will respond, “I am a Buddhist, of course.” Moreover, many of the gods that appear in shaman rituals are borrowed from Buddhism.

Nevertheless, even if the boundary between them is not always clear, we can still talk in broad terms about Buddhism and folk religion as separate traditions. Buddhism, unlike folk religion, has clearly stated doctrines, has a standard collection of revered writings, and has standardized rituals. Moreover, Buddhism has a documented history on the Korean peninsula as a separate and distinct tradition.

Buddhism

When Buddhism entered Korea in the late fourth century, it initially took the guise of a more powerful form of folk religion. Korea’s first Buddhist monks performed miracles that suggested that the Buddha could heal diseases that the less powerful gods of folk religion could not. Those displays of the Buddha’s healing power occurred within the palaces of Korea’s first kingdoms. Buddhism was brought to those palaces by Chinese, Central Asian, and Indian monks, who promised Korea’s emerging royal families that its new spiritual technologies could help them stay healthy and long-lived, and also help them solidify and centralize their political authority.

Within just a couple of centuries, however, Buddhism became a religion for people beyond the palace walls as well. We can identify two main streams in Korean Buddhism as it developed in Korea. There are many Korean Buddhists, both in monasteries and in the secular world, who have been attracted to Buddhism primarily for its soteriological message: its promise of effective techniques for escaping suffering by developing insight that will dissolve the illusions that cause that suffering. However, there are also Buddhists who see Buddhism as a font of supernatural power for coping with the problems of everyday life in this world.

Such Buddhists visit Korea's monasteries not to meditate alongside monks but to pray to various buddhas (awakened ones), bodhisattvas (beings intent on enlightenment, who defer their own advance into full nirvāṇa in order to help other sentient beings achieve awakening), and other supernatural beings for assistance in overcoming intractable health, financial, or family problems.

Korean Buddhism is Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism. That means a couple of things. First of all, it means that the form of Buddhism that has become dominant in Korea derives from the same East Asian tradition out of which Japanese Zen was later born. Called Sōn in Korea, this is meditative Buddhism. In the Korean context, it means first studying sūtras and commentaries on those sūtras that explain how human beings are caught in a web of illusion that misleads them into attributing permanence to phenomena that are only transitory. After this grounding in doctrine, Sōn Buddhists will then seek to transcend a purely intellectual understanding of the nature of reality through meditation, so that the discriminating mind recognizes its limitations and lets go, allowing the meditator to experience the buddha-nature that is inherent in all things.

A second feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism as we find it in Korea is a result of the Mahāyāna focus on compassion. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, there are a large number of buddhas and bodhisattvas who, out of compassion, offer assistance to suffering humanity and, indeed, to all sentient beings. The more popular buddhas in Korea have included Śākyamuni (the Sage of the Śākyas, the historical Buddha Gautama), Amitābha (the Buddha of Limitless Light, or Limitless Life, who presides over the Western Paradise), Maitreya (the Buddha of the future), and Bhaiṣajyaguru (the Healing Buddha). A particularly popular bodhisattva throughout all periods of Korean history has been Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Each of these beings in his own way offers hope to those who are looking for concrete solutions to specific problems. The Buddha Amitābha (Amit'a in Korean) recognizes how difficult it is for beings to achieve true insight when they are surrounded by the distractions of this world. Feeling compassion for the many who might otherwise find it all but impossible to achieve awakening, Amitābha promises that he will allow anyone who places his or her trust in him to be reborn in his Pure Land, the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss, where all the conditions will be perfect for attaining enlightenment. The promises of the Healing Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru (Yaksa *yōrae* in Korean) are more concrete. He promises to heal all those who trust in him, and who also exhibit that trust through certain specified ritual displays of devotion. The Bodhisattva Maitreya (Kor. Mirūk) offered hope that a Buddhist paradise will eventually be established on this earth, though in the meantime believers could ask Maitreya to help them add a healthy son to their family or to bestow health, wealth, and longevity on petitioners and their family members. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, known in Korea as Kwanūm (the Chinese Guanyin and Japanese Kannon), "S/he Who Listens to the Cries of Humanity," was constantly on call to solve any problem a human being might face. She was sometimes depicted with multiple arms, the better to help simultane-

ously a multitude of beings in a multitude of ways. Two sūtras associated with Avalokiteśvara, the *Heart Sūtra* (*P'anya simgyōng*) and the *Thousand Hands Sūtra* (*Ch'ōnsugyōng*), are particularly beloved by Koreans and are often chanted in Buddhist rituals.

“Buddhism” in Korea today is an umbrella term that covers a great variety of beliefs, practices, and schools. The largest contemporary denominations, the Chogyejong and the T'aegojong, identify themselves as Sōn Buddhism, though their temples often have halls for chanting and halls for sūtra study alongside halls for meditation. However, South Korea also has many smaller, but thriving, denominations that focus on particular sūtras or on specific bodhisattvas or buddhas. One denomination run by nuns pays special attention to the Bodhisattva Kwanūm. There are also denominations devoted to the Healing Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, or Amitābha Buddha, as well as denominations focusing on the *Flower Garland Sūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra*. Moreover, Korea has at least two strong esoteric Buddhist denominations, which emphasize the chanting of mantras and the use of esoteric hand gestures, or mudrās, in their rituals. In addition, one of the largest of Korea's indigenous religions, Wōn Buddhism, shares many beliefs and practices with traditional Buddhism, though it uses no Buddhist images in its worship halls and has its own sacred texts.

The large number of Koreans today who tell survey takers that they are Buddhist shows that Buddhism is successfully adapting to the urban environment of modern Korea. During Korea's lengthy Chosōn dynasty, Buddhism was kept isolated in the mountains by the ruling Neo-Confucian elite, and any presence in the towns and cities of Korea was severely limited. Those mountain monasteries still flourish today and are frequently visited by pilgrims and others in search of a traditional Buddhist religious experience. However, Buddhist monks have also moved into the cities and have built urban temples. These temples often have Sunday morning services, in addition to regular monthly rituals dedicated to the Healing Buddha, the bodhisattva who assists the dead (Kṣitigarbha; Kor. Chijang), and the Bodhisattva of Compassion on the eighth, the eighteenth, and the twenty-fourth days, respectively, of the lunar month. Monks still chant sūtras, especially the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Thousand Hands Sūtra*, in the traditional style, using the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters that make up the text and following a tempo established by a monk striking a wooden clacker (*mok-t'ak*). However, many urban temples now also have a piano along the wall in the main worship hall for leading lay congregations in the Buddhist hymns that are commonly sung in modern-day Korean. Temples hold meditation retreats for lay practitioners, but they also welcome laity who turn to Buddhism for supernatural assistance, such as a worried mother who might visit a temple a hundred days in a row, bowing 108 times on each visit, to pray that her eldest son will be accepted into one of Korea's top universities.

Buddhism's success in meeting the challenge of modernity is in sharp contrast to Confucianism. Once hegemonic on the peninsula, Confucianism today has

shrunk to not much more than a source of ethical vocabulary and a guide to ancestor memorial services.

Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism

Confucian ideas first entered Korea in the fourth century along with institutional Buddhism, when Korea began importing written texts and administrative techniques from China, the bastion of advanced civilization in East Asia. However, Confucianism was imported primarily as a tool for government administration and a guide to writing poetry and histories, rather than as a religious tradition. It also provided a framework for discussing social obligations and the structure of society. A core assumption of Confucianism is that, if people learn to be loyal to their rulers, filial to their parents, deferential to their older siblings, correct in their relations with their spouses, and honest with their friends, then conflicts will be minimized and harmonious cooperation will prevail. Moreover, if everyone plays their assigned role within the social hierarchy, accepting the responsibilities of a superior toward an inferior and the duties of a subordinate toward a superior, then society could effectively work toward the collective good. This was an ethics of this world, which put aside questions of why we were on this earth in the first place, and what happened to us when we died. Answers to such questions were left for Buddhism to answer. Buddhism accepted responsibility for religious matters, since it provided answers to questions about the meaning of life and the nature of reality, and it provided rituals for interaction with supernatural beings.

That division of labor held for around a thousand years. Then, at the end of the fourteenth century, a new form of Confucianism was brought to Korea. Neo-Confucianism represented a metaphysical Confucianism that challenged Buddhist claims about the meaning of life and the nature of reality with counterclaims of its own. Neo-Confucianism turned on its head the Buddhist belief that things that change are inherently illusory and unreal. For Neo-Confucianism, it is precisely change that is real. To be more precise, patterns of change constitute reality. We should make sure our actions conform to that reality instead of striving to escape this realm of change into what Neo-Confucians considered the illusion of a static unity underlying change, à la the Buddhist concept of buddha-nature or *nirvāṇa*. In Neo-Confucian eyes, the pursuit of buddha-nature not only was a waste of time but also was selfish, since it put personal salvation ahead of the needs of society.

Neo-Confucians charged that Buddhist monks were immoral because they renounced their responsibilities to their families and fled into mountain monasteries to pursue enlightenment for themselves alone. When they entered a monastery, monks also left behind the land they were supposed to farm, and from which the government expected to collect taxes, and were exempted from *corvée* labor.

