

***Korea — A Religious History*, by James Huntley Grayson, Oxon and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002, xvi, 288 pp.**

For the information it provides general readers, students and scholars interested in Korea's religious landscape and more broadly the light it sheds on contemporary Korean society, *Korea — A Religious History* is in many ways an extremely informative and useful reference. In volume, the content of this book can be almost evenly divided into two halves. The first, longer, half presents a history of Korean religion from prehistoric times to 1871. Because of the longer chronology covered in the first half, it is the more extensive, but only slightly so. The second, shorter, half covers Korea's religious history from 1872 to 2000. This two-part division very nearly corresponds to the periods before and after the introduction of Christianity into Korea. The first half of the book consists of three parts: Part I, Early Korea (three chapters); Part II, The Koryŏ Dynasty (two chapters); and Part III, The Chosŏn Dynasty (two chapters). The second half, Part IV, Korea in the Modern Era (eight chapters), provides, besides a history of the introduction and spread of Christianity in Korea since 1872, an account of the eclipse of Confucianism, the decline, revival and conflicts in later Korean Buddhism, the appearance of the syncretic religions and recent developments in folk religion.

The author, James Huntley Grayson, is Reader in Modern Korean Studies in the School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield. The book

under review is a revision of his 1989 work of the same title. The author's research interests, as might be expected, are in traditional Korean religion, Korean Christianity and oral folklore. *Korea — A Religious History* is therefore an extension of his original work's presentation of Korean folk religion, shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and the new religions in Korea to the end of the twentieth century. Another of the author's works, in line with his interest in folklore, *Myths and Legends from Korea*, followed in 2001. As a scholar, his bibliography indicates his familiarity with a wide range of the relevant literature in English and other Western languages on religion in East Asia and Korea in particular. As a scholar, his linguistic ability is evident in his extensive use of works in Korean. However, only one work in Japanese is cited, and, even though he frequently shows evidence of being familiar with Chinese, he cites no works in that language. 9

*Korea — A Religious History* unfolds Korea's religious history through a factual, chronological, non-judgmental narrative. This manner of writing allows for little that could be considered contentious to anyone of any religious tradition. Yet, based on the 1995 National Population Household Census in Appendix B, the religious profile of Korea today is one in which those with no religious affiliation at all (49.3 percent) still make up a significant part of the country's total population, even when the relatively high proportional Christian population (26.3 percent), the combined Buddhist population (12 percent), the syncretic religions and the negligible number of those who identify themselves as adherents of Confucianism are taken into account. Given this religious profile, it would have been interesting if the author had commented on this present divide in religious adherence compared to other Asian countries or as a reflection of Korea's past. The outstanding feature of this milieu, however, is the remarkable tolerance that the Korean religious landscape now displays.

One of the greater problems in a religious history of Korea is whether to include Confucianism, as this author does. Because of the secular content of its texts and its historical association with the conduct of government, Confucianism as a religion makes such an inclusion contentious. Most recent scholarship also amplifies doubts about its qualification as a religion. This scholarship strongly indicates that it is much more accurate to regard Confucianism in the Sinic influenced areas of East Asia as a former system of ethics or philosophy rather than a religion. In the few places that it might still be said to exist in Asia at the present time, Confucianism more resembles a residual, respected *mentalité* (“the way of the scholars” is how Benjamin Elman designated it in pre-1911 China) than anything like a belief system with an eschatology similar to that found in most religions. However, Neo-Confucianism (Korean: *Ch'ngja-hak*) as it existed in China and Korea from late in the fourteenth century, and as it is presented by the author, can be differentiated from original Confucianism (Korean: *Yuhak*) by the greater metaphysical qualities that were added to it through Zhu Xi's infusion of Buddhist and Daoist elements in the late thirteenth century. It seems rather clear that it is because of these qualities in this later form of Confucianism that the author decided to treat it as a religion. In a broad, liberal minded sense, this type of Confucianism might be construed to have had a certain religious cast to it. It was this late form that existed throughout the Chosŏn dynasty perhaps at least until the demise of two of its major foundations: the civil examinations in 1894 and the extinction of the monarchy in 1910.

In a study of “traditional” Korean religions, Daoism (Taoism) presents another problem. This is in part because, as the author adequately explains, Daoism was never strictly a religion, but a religio-philosophical system somewhat resembling Neo-Confucianism with substantial folk religion accretions. The author explains that Daoism's folk religious aspects were the reason it never took hold in

Korea, since pre-existing indigenous religions, such as shamanism, adequately met the people's spiritual needs and thus no strong need for an imported variety appeared. In fact, among all of the East Asian countries in which the concept of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism) existed, Daoism may have been the least influential in Korea.

Among the more interesting sections in the second half of the book are those concerning the new, syncretic, ostensibly Christian groups in Korea and how they have frequently retained "primal", i.e. native and shamanistic elements, or syncretically mixed Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Catholicism and Protestantism. According to Grayson's book, by the late 1990s there were sixty-nine of these new religions registered with the government. Some readers may already be familiar with one of these, the T'ongil-gyo or Unification Church, due to the notoriety of its founder, Mun Sŏnmyŏng, his activities and some of his church's practices in the United States and elsewhere outside of Korea. In the 1980s, he and his church became well known, even notorious, as one of one of these new religions. Besides the mixed features of these new religions, even in the more established, mainline Christian bodies in Korea, it is possible to find suggestions of the influence of indigenous religion. For example, the Protestant God is most commonly referred to as *hanūnim* and both the Roman Catholic and Ch'ŏndo-gyo God is referred to as *ch'ŏnju*. Each of these terms was derived from native Korean or Sino-Korean and convey, as in the case of the latter's literal meaning of "Ruler of Heaven," the concept of a paramount deity associated with the sky.

As one who for over three decades has casually explored, considered and compared Korea's religious environment from several different perspectives, this reviewer has come to see that environment as both awe inspiring and disenchanting. In general, on close, personal inspection, the authenticity of all

Korean religions and their material manifestations can be disappointing, particularly when compared to the scholarly and preservationist efforts that have been carried out in Japan and Southeast Asia. The awesomeness, where it can be found, resides mostly in the architecture and artifacts of Korea's Buddhist and Confucian past. However, very few of the original Buddhist temple structures have been preserved in whole, due, sadly, as has often been the case, to human mishap, official proscription, neglect or the calamity of war over the usually hundreds of years since the structures were first built or the artifacts were produced. Of the extant Buddhist structures, some have been rebuilt or added to in ways that give them a too obviously ersatz, recently constructed appearance which clashes with the preserved older parts of the temples. On the other hand, many of the remaining Confucian shrines, such as those of the royal family in Seoul and of those dedicated to prominent scholars in outlying parts of Korea in most cases, in their appearance if not actual, authenticity, spectacularly make up for the occasional Buddhist temple's lack of inspiration. Most of the Christian churches are overwhelmingly nondescript or make attempts at presenting a mega-church, modernist appearance.

In sum, *Korea — A Religious History* should be read precisely for the genuine quality of its historical content. There are few other works available in one volume which combine such useful information about Korea's religious past and present and relate them so well to the country's socio-cultural trends. It may also be useful as a foundational work for helping readers to understand the present changes now occurring in Korea's increasingly contentious religious landscape.

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