Special Issue

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On This Topic

Rethinking the Religious Landscape of Early 20th-Century Korea

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The theme of the articles in this special issue is the religious landscape of Korea in the early 20th-century. The term *religion* was not chosen as the keyword in order to analyze how it was understood conceptually by Koreans, nor to examine the formation and development of religious orders as a social phenomenon. Rather, the main objective of this special issue is to use religion as a conceptual medium for exploring changes in the life attitudes, values, and worldviews of Koreans and to examine their religious faiths and practices, meanings of spirituality, and institutionalization and operation of various religious organizations in the course of the country's modernization to gain insights into the formation of a Korean modernity in the early 20th-century. In other words, by looking at the emergence and activities of the so-called new, indigenous religions of Korea, the goal is to examine the process and characteristics of Korea's religious modernization in face of Western modernity in the early 20th-century.

This special issue features five articles. First, Jongchun Park's "Family Resemblances of Religious Reappropriation in Modern Korean Indigenous New Religions" comprehensively introduces the new features, the followers of these religions, and the religious practices of new, indigenous religions of

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modern Korea in the early 20th-century, from Donghak (Eastern Learning) to Jeungsangyo, Daejonggyo, and Won Buddhism. Next, Jongwon Hwang's "Views on the Spirituality and Sanctification of Personality in Cheondogyo in the Early 20th-Century: Focusing on Son Byeong-hui's Theory of Mind-Nature" provides a detailed analysis of the meaning of religious spirituality and the process of sanctification of human character (*seonghwa* 聖化) based on spirituality as proposed by Son Byeong-hui. Hwang concludes that Cheondogyo presented three inner Heavens of human beings and three corresponding spiritual capacities based on Buddhist concepts, thereby inheriting the traditional thought of Donghak, while at the same time exploring the possibility of an interfaith dialogue with the West through Son's theory of spirituality.

The third article, Minjung Baek's "The Transformation of Buddhist Thought and Religious Modernity in Early 20th-Century Korea: The Case of Won Buddhism," introduces how Won Buddhism, while grounded in the world religion of Buddhism, integrates the belief in *gaebyeok* 開闢 (Great Awakening or Great Opening), presenting a religious ideology and practice that allows it to respond actively to the science, technology, and capitalism of the modern West. In particular, Won Buddhism proposed the principle and methods of a Great Opening of Spirit to wisely navigate material civilization.

Following this article is Seonhee Kim's "Religion as an Epistemic Challenge: The Confucian Response in Early 20th-Century Korea," which lays out the context leading up to the epistemological question of whether Confucianism truly is a *religion*. Kim argues that the Korean Confucian scholars of the early 20th-century who led the Confucian religion movement sought to religionize Confucianism not as a religion in the sense of modern Western religions at the time, but as a civilizational tool for national autonomy and advancement.

Finally, in "The Landscape of Last Days Foretold by Religions: Differentiation of Prophecy among New Religions under Japanese Colonial Rule," Chang Yick Lee provides an intriguing introduction of the apocalyptic political landscape and the future new world to come as predicted by many new, indigenous religions in Korea, which were classified as quasi-religions under Japanese colonial rule and subject to control by the Japanese Government-General. These prophesies were based on secret texts collectively referred to as *Jeonggamnok* 鄭鑑錄, which forewarned of Japan's defeat at the end of the world and envisioned a new capital

and new world created by the leaders of the new religions. By showing forms of religious resistance and revolution in addition to the resignation and compromise of the Korean people, Lee's article dynamically portrays the activities of the new, indigenous religions at the time.

Let us take a closer look at each of these five articles and how they capture the religious modernity of Korea in the emergence, development, and activities of new religions in Korea during the early 20th-century. In his article, Jongchun Park analyzes Donghak, Jeungsangyo, Daejonggyo, and Won Buddhism to show the similarities between them as a family of new, indigenous religions of modern Korea. According to Park, the three major features shared by these religions are first, their dynamic revitalization of transcendent reality and the reinforcement of direct communication with the divine; second, their inheritance of the traditional Neo-Confucian practice of self-cultivation based on sincerity and reverence, which they religiously reappropriated and subsumed under a framework centering faith, and the subsequent divergence into meditation practice and magical-ritual practice in this process; and third, the presentation of post-subaltern religious visions in the form of *hucheon gaebyeok* 後天開闢 (Great Awakening of the Later Heaven), which was to overturn the oppression of the ruling class and replace the established order.

Park notes the tendency of new indigenous religions following Donghak to emphasize faith in a shift to overcome Confucian practices based on self-cultivation as a result of their acceptance of Christianity to a certain degree. Christianity, which entered Korea during the late Joseon dynasty, emphasized the sacraments and personal faith in terms of religious perspective and ritual practice, stimulating the new religions of modern Korea. Park writes that the new religions accordingly stressed the importance of faith and emphasized sincerity as a way to ritually practice that faith. Park also explains that the religious interest in becoming an immortal or attaining enlightenment via breath discipline and medication was most prominent in Daejonggyo and Won Buddhism, while the other trend that focused on magical-ritual practices of spirit communication through talismans, incantations, and occult techniques were more prominent in Donghak and Jeungsangyo.

Park focuses on how the new religions of modern Korea presented and

practiced the idea of *hucheon gaebyeok* as an alternative religious vision beyond the hierarchical control and oppression of traditional Confucian communities. As utopian alternative religions, Park calls these new religions post-subaltern religious movements that represent the dreams and ideals of the non-elites in Korean society. Since the founders of new, indigenous religions of modern Korea were mostly yangban who had fallen from previous social prestige or the children of the concubines or remarried wives of yangban, they could fully sympathize with the subaltern. Combined with their upbringing in learned yangban households and the knowledge and information they consequently possessed, they were able to found alternative religions presenting new ideals, such as the *hucheon gaebyeok*, while representing the impoverished lives of the lower classes at a religious level. The tendencies Park discusses were shared among the new, indigenous religions of 20th-century Korea and reveal the religious features of modern Korea.

Meanwhile, Cheondogyo, assumed a particularly important role amidst the political turbulence on the Korean Peninsula in the early 20th-century. In the 1900s, Donghak had already led the Enlightenment movement of 1904, and in the 1910s, Cheondogyo led the preparations for the March First Independence Movement of 1919. These social movements to recover national sovereignty and achieve modernization independently were based on the religious philosophy of *innaecheon* 人乃天 (humans are Heaven). In his article, Jongwon Hwang stresses that Uiam 義庵 Son Byeong-hui 孫秉熙 (1861–1922), the leader of Cheondogyo, was at the center of all these events.

Hwang's study provides a detailed introduction to the religious spirituality proposed by Son Byeong-hui, the spiritual leader of Cheongdogyo, in the early 20th-century and how Son explained the sanctification of character based on this spirituality. This analysis is based on Son's *Muche beopgyeong* 無體法經 (Scripture of Formless Law), a difficult text containing Son's mature reflections on his theory of mind-nature. According to Hwang, this work by Son employs the concept of three types of spirituality to explain why humans possess the altruistic tendency to care for others in addition to their self-centeredness. Hwang explains these three types as well as the three phases of the sanctification of character and explicates their significance in terms of religious philosophy.

First, Son's theory of mind-nature is particularly significant in the historical development of Donghak. Choe Je-u, the founder of Donghak, presented the unique view that God exists as *silllyeong* 新靈 (divine spirit) within the human body and as *gihwa* 氣化 (transformation of *gi, qi* in Chinese) within nature. Choe Si-hyeong, who succeeded Choe Je-u, deeply contemplated Hanullim (Lord of Heaven) of the transformation of *gi* among these two ontological forms. Son, meanwhile, grounded himself in Buddhist concepts to focus on the Hanullim, who exists as a spirit in the inner world of humans, and on the human spirituality that is aware of its existence. Second, Son's theory of spirituality clearly defines the doctrinal foundation and religious purpose of leading a sacred life of compassion for others, providing a basis for serious interfaith dialogue with other world religions. Third, Son's theory of spirituality both shows the significance and limitations of his time in that he projected the existential conditions he himself experienced into religious contemplation. Given the historical circumstances of the time, Cheondogyo had no choice but to accommodate to a certain extent a Western modernization that was grounded in industrial capitalism. Any religion seeking spiritual awakening and the sanctification of character should be able to guide people toward transcending their self-centeredness and leading a life of compassion for others and life itself. It should even go one step further and encourage people to critically reflect upon the greed-spurring capitalistic society and to pursue an ecological community in which human and nature exist in harmony. Hwang concludes that the theory of spirituality Son proposed in Cheondogyo, despite its shortcomings, presents an important religious doctrine and methods for individuals to reflect upon their inner selves, become aware of their spirituality, and transcend self-centeredness.

Minjung Baek's article explores the transformation of Buddhist thought and the problem of religious modernity in Won Buddhism (圓佛教), one of the indigenous religious that newly emerged in colonial Korea during the early 20th-century. Under precarious circumstances, where the Japanese Government-General continued religious oppression and persecution, Sotaesan Bak Jung-bin (1891–1943) made it clear that the religious community he conceived of was, above all, Buddhist. Won Buddhism, however, was inevitably different from traditional Buddhism given its emergence against

the backdrop of a transformed, modernized world of the early 20th-century, namely, an era of capitalism, science, and technology. Compared to Buddhist ontology of dependent origination, Won Buddhism more actively presents an ethical world of grace, in which all beings relate to one another via grace. The Fourfold Grace was an object of faith and bestowed transgressions and merits in human life. Another difference between Buddhism and Won Buddhism is the latter's emphasis on spiritual cultivation and its fundamental transformation in response to the era of material civilization.

Like other new, indigenous religious of Korea during this period, Won Buddhism also embraced the doctrine of *hucheon gaebyeok*, although not in the same way as other new religions. For instance, Cheondogyo, which derived from Donghak in the early 20th-century and most heavily carried its traits, deeply considered the issue of modernization and moved towards enlightenment and civilization more akin to Western or Japanese modernity. The generation of followers of Cheondogyo after Son Byeong-hui even created spaces of intellectual exchange to closely study Western philosophy. Jeungsangyo, by contrast, ended up carrying tendencies of mystical spells and idol worship due to the eccentric acts of its founder, Kang Jeungsan. Finally, Daejonggyo, based on a modern reinterpretation of the Dangun myth, proposed a nationalistic ideology and vision and poured its efforts into political struggle for national independence. Won Buddhism departed from these features as it sought to popularize Buddhism and spread it throughout society as a religion of everyday life. Not only did it widely accept lay believers but also moved towards equal rights between men and women, and by advocating equal education, Won Buddhism continued to be more broadly influential throughout society.

Baek explains how Won Buddhism comprehensively exemplifies the characteristics of Korea's religious modernity. The seemingly incompatible traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are integrated in a balanced religious whole in Won Buddhism. Because it accommodates the faith and values unique to new, indigenous religious in Korea, Won Buddhism can not only present the universality of Buddhism as a world religion but also contains the particular religious thinking of the Korean Peninsula. In this sense, Won Buddhism justly deserves recognition for having realized both

universality and particularity. Another important aspect of Won Buddhism is its critical reflection upon the era of material civilization and engagement with science and capitalism. Notably, Won Buddhism of the early 20th-century did not simply focus on the independence or liberation of Korea, but attempted to present an encompassing and universal vision for the civilization of all humankind. Sotaesan's emphasis on the need for an intelligent faith and veneration of truth itself rather than a transcendent being in the future, the importance he placed in public values, and the proposal of a model of ethical ontology and community in which mutual coexistence was possible, are contributions of Won Buddhism that cannot be overlooked.

In her article, Seonhee Kim focuses on the epistemological framework shaping the historical emergence in early 20th-century East Asia of the question of whether Confucianism was a religion. Kim shifts away from assessing the question of whether East Asian or Korean Confucianism fit the standard Western definition of *religion*, and instead explores the question itself to analyze why such framework was pursued in the first place. Kim argues that the encounter of Confucianism and Western categories of religion was not just an issue of translating terminology but a conceptual clash that led to the birth of new epistemological categories and practical responses. By analyzing how modern Korean Confucian scholars such as Yi Seung-hui, Yi Byeong-heon, and Park Eun-sik, who also led the Confucian religion movement, appropriated the concept of *religion*, Kim explicates how efforts to religionize Confucianism functioned as a strategy of Confucian civilization to bring about national independence and development in face of national crisis. Kim ultimately seeks to show how the movement to religionize Confucianism was not a misuse or mistranslation of modern Western thought or concepts but an original epistemological and practical response and innovation set off by the encounter with religion as a global conceptual signifier.

Kim writes that the leaders of the Confucian religion movement sought to expand or transform the area of traditional Confucianism, which was an integration of the introspective practice of self-cultivation, the intellectual system based on the study of Confucian classics, and the political ideology of rule by ritual. To fulfill the format of religion based on the standard of Christianity, these figures attempted to convert traditional spaces such as

ancestor worshiping shrines, private Confucian academies, where scholars learned from masters and engaged in discussions with colleagues, and personal studies, where they practiced individual self-cultivation and pursued intellectual endeavors, into churches and schools that would convene congregations to hold religious services and provide education, respectively. In other words, the individuals attempting to religionize Confucianism tried to transfer the material basis of Confucianism into the institution of religion, thereby maintaining the status of Confucianism. These Confucian scholars preserved the basic principles and pursuits of Confucianism in terms of traditional ethical virtues such as *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, and *zhi* 智, yet invoked the new framework of religion to rationalize its necessity and assert its purpose. Religion used in this sense was simultaneously an externally imposed novel framework and a framework Korean Confucian scholars themselves harbored, since the concept of *gyo* 敎 (*teaching* or *doctrine*), chosen as part of the translation of the Western term "religion," had long been a comprehensive concept referring to the intellectual tradition of East Asia, including Confucianism.

Kim's assessment is that Korean Confucian scholars of the early 20th-century did not pursue Westernization or modernization per se, but rather civilization that would allow the nation to grow stronger and self-sufficient. To that end, they pursued the physical and practical institutions of worship and association along with ethics and science. Seen this way, the Confucian religion movement carried out by early 20th-century Korean Confucian scholars was not a distortion or misuse of what they had received from the West, but rather a manifestation of new perceptions and practices triggered by a concept using the same signifier. Regardless of what Westerners sought to convey by transmitting religion, Confucian scholars of modern Korea could rearticulate and reimagine the details of what they believed as *gyo*. This is why their actions must not be evaluated based on how much they understood the concept of religion in the way Europeans sought to emphasize during the colonial period. Although the Confucian scholars put forth the label of religion, what they sought to summon was not faith as a modern Western concept but ethical self-cultivation; what they attempted to revive was not philosophical theism but national development. Ultimately, most of

the Korean Confucian scholars at the time imagined a civilization that would revive their nation. The movement to religionize Confucianism thus reflected the aspirations towards and limitations of civilizational transformation.

The final article by Chang Yick Lee focuses on how most of the quasi-religious organizations that were unable to enjoy freedom of propagation under Japanese colonial rule in the early 20th-century were new, indigenous religious of Korea. When anxiety and unease spread across the Korean Peninsula after the Mukden Incident in 1931, the Japanese Government-General devoted considerable effort to cracking down on and censoring quasi-religious groups on the peninsula. Their justifications were that quasi-religions disturbed the social order, perturbed the people, disrupting the guarantee and maintenance of public security, and that most of the ideologies of such religions were heavily nationalistic, all of which led to quasi-religions to commit crimes of lèse-majesté or dissemination of baseless words and false rumors. According to Lee's analysis, many quasi-religious organizations were punished under the Public Order Preservation Law that had been enacted by the Japanese for prophesying the advent of the *jinin* 眞人 (True Human) and the founding of a new state based on various secret texts called *Jeonggamnok*. They were charged with stirring national consciousness and disturbing public order by politically seditious words and acts, although some received relatively lenient punishments after being considered cases of religious delusion even if they advocated national independence and Japan's defeat in the war.

What specifically was cited as conclusive evidence of lèse-majesté or the spreading of baseless rumors, leading to the oppression and dissolution of quasi-religious organizations? Most of the new, indigenous religions of modern Korea portrayed the landscape of the world's end following a certain formulaic pattern of Japan's defeat and Korea's independence. The basic narrative structure was that the apocalypse would come, the religious leaders of these new religions or *True Humans* would establish a new capital at Mt. Gyeryong (Gyeryongsan 鷄龍山), ascend the throne, defeat Japan, make Korea independent, create a new state, new society, and earthly paradise, and the followers of these religions would become high-ranking government officials, and all would prosper together. The envisioned new world and political landscape at the end of the world portrayed by each religion were not

completely uniform, however, and some were substantially different.

Lee's aim, as he states, is to examine the scenes of the apocalypse described by new, indigenous religions of Korea under Japanese colonial rule from multiple aspects, moving beyond a simplified and unidirectional interpretation, to enable more diverse readings of the historical material related to these new religions. Lee offers a detailed analysis of the stepwise categorization process of how religions outside of officially recognized religions became quasi-religious organizations, then quasi-religions, and finally pseudo- or heretical religions. Lee reviews the gradual dissemination of the myth of Mt. Gyeryong around the time of the publication of *Jeonggamnok* in the 1920s and attempts a comprehensive yet analytical interpretation of diverse landscapes of the last days as foretold by new, indigenous religions at the time. As a result, Lee's article shows how prophesies based on *Jeonggamnok* from the 1910s to the 1930s circulated varying narratives of the apocalypse and the new world to come, functioning as both means of resistance and revolution and of resignation and compromise. Lee argues that such work will allow a more historically contextual and dynamic understanding of the eschatology of new religions during the early 20th-century, which has been until now described in terms including *gaebyeok* (which Lee in this context renders as *cosmic renewal*) or *hucheon*.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue illuminate how the upheavals of the early 20th-century—colonial domination, the pressures of global modernity, and the search for new ethical and spiritual foundations—reshaped Korea's religious field in strikingly diverse ways. By examining the doctrinal innovations, social visions, institutional experiments, and epistemic reconfigurations undertaken by Korea's new, indigenous religions and their interlocutors, the studies in this special issue reveal both the creativity and the tensions inherent in Korea's passage into modernity. Rather than viewing these movements as peripheral or derivative, the contributions collected here demonstrate that they constituted vital arenas in which Koreans reimagined the human, the sacred, and the social order. It is hoped they will offer a richer and more dynamic understanding of how religious agency, thought, and practice participated in the making of modern Korea.

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