

On This Topic



Beyond Coexistence: *Importation, Reinterpretation, and Retransmission in South Korea's Religious Landscape*

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South Korea represents one of the most compelling cases of religious diversity in the contemporary world. With over 927 registered religious bodies encompassing Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and numerous indigenous and new religious movements (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2018), the South Korean religious landscape is distinctive in that religion and ethnicity or national origin are not necessarily aligned, producing configurations of diversity rarely found elsewhere. Managing religious diversity is no longer merely a sociological phenomenon; it is one of the most pressing challenges facing modern states. Many European countries are confronting this issue from legal, institutional, and cultural perspectives. It is in this broader context that the Italian Ministry of University and Research's national grant program, PRIN (Progetti di Ricerca di Interesse Nazionale), is funding the two-and-a-half-year project "Making Korea a Religiously Plural Society? Historical, Legal, and Social Approaches" (2023–2026), which examines the South Korean case as a particularly illuminating instance of religious pluralism. South Korea's religious plurality

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is not a recent development but the product of a long and contested history. During the colonial period, the Japanese Government-General of Korea reorganized the religious landscape by categorizing religious bodies into “recognized,” “pseudo-,” and “non-” religions—a hierarchical structure that profoundly shaped the boundaries of legitimate religious practice and whose effects persisted well beyond liberation in 1945 (Kim 2016). The post-colonial South Korean government continued to modify this geography of religions, politically adopting and rejecting religious organizations in ways that further entangled the state with the religious sphere. Far from separating from society through modernization, religions in South Korea infiltrated social and political life, and their force has continued to grow and diversify.

Global interest in religious diversity has grown considerably in the 21st century. After Robert Wuthnow highlighted the significance of religious diversity in his 2003 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, scholarly attention to the topic has expanded at an international level (Kühle and Hoverd 2018). Within this broader trend, South Korea has emerged as a particularly compelling case. The Pew Research Center’s 2014 report, *Global Religious Diversity*, ranked South Korea eighth among the most religiously diverse countries in the world (Pew Research Center 2014). As Borup and Fibiger (2019) have observed, while Western traditions often assume clear boundaries between religions, Asian contexts frequently exhibit fluidity and syncretism, where embracing more than one religious tradition is common; the religious diversity of Asia therefore offers, to borrow Baker’s expression, a “fascinating laboratory” for further research (Baker 2019, 25). Korea is no exception: as Yoon (2004) and Baker (2019) have noted, Korea represents an ideal case for studying how different belief systems can coexist—and for examining the tensions that arise when they do. It is within this context that the present special section situates its inquiry.

Part of this complexity stems from the concept of religion itself. The very word *jonggyo* 宗教 (religion) did not originate from indigenous Korean experience but arrived through a chain of modern translation—from the European *religion* through the Japanese *shūkyō*—and was received and put

to use in the course of modernization rather than organically generated from Korean lived experience (Jeong et al. 2024; Jang 2017). But what if this very ambiguity—rather than hindering the understanding of religion in Korea—has paradoxically been the condition that made Korea’s distinctive religious landscape possible? The pattern of reception and creative reappropriation visible at the conceptual level has, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, repeated itself at the level of religious practice and institution.

Scholarship on Korean religions has made important contributions at two levels. Studies of individual traditions—Robert E. Buswell’s work on Korean Buddhism, Laurel Kendall and Boudewijn Walraven’s on Korean shamanism, Michael Kalton’s on Korean Confucianism, and Don Baker and James Grayson’s on Christianity in Korea—have deepened our understanding of each tradition in its own right. At the broader analytical level, scholars have identified the historical, social, and cultural conditions that gave rise to Korea’s multi-religious landscape and have examined how diverse religious communities have managed to share the same social space. Yet as Baker (2019) has observed, despite South Korea’s status as a “laboratory” of complex religious dynamics, the criteria for defining South Korea as a multi-religious society have tended to rely on quantitative measures such as the number of religious organizations or adherents. What demands closer attention—and what the present special section seeks to provide—is an examination of how these traditions have not merely coexisted but actively interacted, competed, and reconfigured one another as they passed through the Korean religious field. This issue contends that South Korea functions not merely as a site of religious coexistence but as an active conduit of religious transformation—one in which external traditions are imported, creatively reinterpreted through local cultural logics, and in some cases retransmitted outward in forms that reshape the very traditions from which they originated. The four articles assembled here demonstrate that this three-phase pattern of importation, reinterpretation, and retransmission constitutes a recurring structural dynamic in Korea’s religious history, one that is not captured by the conventional pluralism framework and that positions South Korea as a generative hub within global circuits of religious exchange.

This special section grew out of two internal workshops held as part of the aforementioned PRIN project: “Mapping Korean Religions: Current Research Trends and Future Directions” (April 12, 2024, University of Turin) and a second internal workshop (February 7, 2025, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice). Across these two workshops, participants examined the continuity and dynamism of religion as a phenomenon spanning the early 20th to the 21st centuries—from the colonial-era classification of religions, in which the Japanese Government-General of Korea categorized religious bodies into “recognized,” “pseudo-,” and “non-” religions, to the contemporary Muslim community in South Korea. Of the papers presented and discussed at these workshops, the four assembled in this issue focus particularly on the period from Korea’s liberation to the present day, tracing how traditional forms of religious practice have been transformed, adapted, and renegotiated in response to the conditions of modern Korean society. Buddhism continues to undergo creative reconfiguration: new Buddhist movements such as the Cheontae order have appropriated and reinterpreted Chinese Tiantai traditions, while established Seon meditation practices are being adapted in response to the global mindfulness movement. Confucian ritual, once central to the state’s ceremonial life, has been transformed from a living religious practice into an element of national cultural heritage—raising fundamental questions about the boundary between religion and culture. Meanwhile, divinatory practices rooted in Buddhist and shamanistic traditions have shifted from collective, state-oriented rites to individualized forms of spiritual consultation, increasingly shaped by global esoteric trends such as tarot. Furthermore, once integrated into Korea, some religious traditions undergo a retransmission beyond its borders: Korean Cheontae Buddhism has introduced its reinterpreted tradition back to China, while Korean Seon meditation is being disseminated internationally through programs such as Templestay.

Hyojin L. Fromell’s “Seokjeon in Transition: Continuities, Transformations, and Institutional Influences on the Confucian Memorial Rite in Post-Liberation Korea” traces the trajectory of the Seokjeon 釋奠, the ceremony honoring Confucius, from the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1910 through its designation as Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No.

85 in 1986. This study reveals how this ritual became a site of intense contestation in the post-liberation period, as competing Confucian factions struggled over the right to officiate the ceremony—a right that effectively symbolized institutional legitimacy. Of particular interest is the debate over shifting the ceremony’s date from the traditional first *jeong* 上丁 days to Confucius’ birthday, an adaptation consciously modeled on Christmas in an effort to reassert Confucianism’s status as a religion comparable to Christianity. Fromell demonstrates that despite these sustained efforts to recover the religious character of Seokjeon, the combined forces of Confucianism’s institutional decline and the logic of cultural heritage preservation ultimately placed the rite at the center of an unresolved tension between a living religious practice and a preserved cultural heritage of the past—a tension that, as Fromell shows through comparison with parallel cases in China, Taiwan, and Japan, reflects a broader East Asian pattern in which Confucian ritual has progressively shifted from moral-religious system to cultural memory.

If Fromell’s study reveals the fate of a tradition that struggled—and ultimately failed—to maintain its religious identity within a modernizing institutional landscape, Roh’s article presents a strikingly different trajectory: a movement that had no historical claim to a religious tradition yet successfully constructed one.

Yohong Roh’s “What Makes Cheontae Cheontae? A New Buddhist Movement and the Reinterpretation of the Cheontae Tradition in Contemporary Korea” examines how a new Buddhist movement founded in the post-liberation period, with no direct historical connection to the ancient Tiantai/Cheontae tradition, successfully reinvented itself as its legitimate heir. Drawing on internal newspapers, official publications, and fieldwork, Roh reveals that the name “Cheontae” was adopted partly by circumstance—the order had originally intended to register as the “Maitreya order,” but that name was already taken—yet this contingent naming opened access to a prestigious historical lineage that fueled the order’s rapid growth. This article traces two complementary strategies through which the order consolidated its legitimacy: transnational engagement with Chinese Buddhist and Japanese Tendai communities, culminating in the

enshrinement of the Chinese patriarch Zhiyi, the Goryeo monk Uicheon, and the modern founder Sangwol together in a memorial hall in China; and the doctrinal reinterpretation of its central practice, Guanyin prayer, as a form continuous with classical Tiantai *zhiguan* 止觀 meditation theory. Roh's analysis thus offers a compelling case of the very dynamic this special section seeks to illuminate—the importation, creative reinterpretation, and retransmission of a religious tradition through the South Korean conduit.

Where Roh examines how a Korean Buddhist order reinterpreted a Chinese tradition and transmitted it back to its place of origin, Andrea Maria Nencini turns to the reverse direction of this exchange—investigating how Korean Seon meditation is being adapted for transmission outward to international audiences, and what is gained and lost in the process.

Andrea Maria Nencini's "Between Hwadu and Mindfulness: Seon Meditation in Korean Templestay Programs for International Audiences" investigates how traditional Korean Seon meditation is being adapted and negotiated within the Templestay program, one of South Korea's most successful cultural tourism initiatives. Through firsthand participation in English-conducted programs at four temples—Hwagyesa, Gulgulsa, Lotus Lantern International Meditation Center, and the International Seon Center—Nencini maps a spectrum of meditation approaches ranging from traditional *hwadu* 話頭 contemplation to breath awareness, Seonmudo martial practice, and mantra-based chanting. The findings suggest that rather than homogenizing with global mindfulness, Templestay programs constitute sites of pragmatic negotiation, in which the degree of adherence to traditional Ganhwa Seon 看話禪 varies significantly according to the specific institutional history and pedagogical orientation of each temple. These variations exemplify the very dynamics this special section seeks to examine: the institutional pressure to adapt religious practice to the logic of secular wellness culture, even at the cost of decontextualizing it from its soteriological framework—and, conversely, the creative strategies through which individual temples preserve distinctive elements of the Korean Seon tradition while making them accessible to an increasingly global audience.

While the previous three articles examine transformations that are, to varying degrees, institutionally mediated—by Confucian organizations, a

Buddhist order, or the Jogye order's Templestay program—Althea Volpe's article shifts attention to a fundamentally different mode of religious change: one that unfolds without any institutional agency at all.

Volpe's "Individualism and Divination in Korea: From the Jeomchal Ceremony for Nullified Negative Karma to Future-Telling Esoteric Tools" traces the long arc of divinatory practices in South Korea, from collectively oriented rituals embedded in premodern religious and political life to the individualized forms of spiritual consultation prevalent in contemporary society. The article examines how practices such as the Silla Jeomchal ceremony (*jeomchal beophoe* 占察法會), Goryeo apotropaic and astrological rites, and Buddhist divination associated with Avalokiteśvara, once functioned not merely as tools for addressing personal concerns but as mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion, shared moral values, and the stability of the state. Volpe then shows how, in contemporary South Korea, divination remains remarkably widespread—with survey data indicating that over 40 percent of the population has engaged in divinatory consultation—yet has shifted decisively toward private concerns such as love, career, and psychological uncertainty, increasingly mediated through globally circulated esoteric tools such as tarot and accelerated by digital platforms that emphasize speed and anonymity. Crucially, however, Volpe argues that these individualized forms do not represent a complete break from collective values; rather, they reveal how individuals seek personal reassurance while continuing to negotiate social expectations and belonging. What makes Volpe's case particularly distinctive within this special section is that the individualization of contemporary divination represents a fundamentally de-institutional process: tarot, introduced to South Korea in the late 1990s, spread entirely through individuals' voluntary adoption without the initiative of any religious institution. This suggests that the transformation of religious practices is not always the result of strategic choices by established religious organizations—as seen in the cases of the Cheontae order's doctrinal reinterpretation or the Jogye order's Templestay adaptation—but can equally emerge as a bottom-up process driven by practitioners and consumers themselves, reflecting the broader dynamics of religious change in contemporary South Korean society.

One of the most compelling patterns to emerge across these four articles is that the transformation of religious practice—far from signaling its decline—has paradoxically expanded its social reach. As Hoang (2019) has observed in a broader Asian context, religious competition has become a reality, and such competition fuels further religious creativity, ideas, and reinvention. The Korean cases examined here bear this out: as explicitly religious framing gives way to cultural, therapeutic, or aesthetic registers, practices that were once confined to specific doctrinal communities or ritual occasions acquire a broader public presence. What is at work here is not a simple binary between preservation and loss, but rather an ongoing negotiation between religious depth and social reach.

Read together, Fromell's and Roh's articles illuminate this negotiation from opposing ends. Fromell traces the trajectory of Confucian Seokjeon—a rite progressively losing its religious framing and being transformed from a living ritual into a preserved cultural heritage. Roh, by contrast, shows a movement that began with virtually no historical depth yet deliberately constructed it, while simultaneously simplifying its core practice to maximize accessibility. The Cheontae order's replacement of the rigorous *sachong sammam* 四種三昧 with the far more accessible Guanyin prayer was not a passive dilution but a strategic recalibration—one accompanied by sustained doctrinal re-legitimation that sought to maintain the tradition's intellectual authority even as its practice became more inclusive. Together, the two cases suggest that neither depth nor reach alone determines a tradition's vitality; what matters is how the negotiation between them is managed.

A parallel but distinct comparison emerges between Nencini's and Volpe's articles. Both examine practices that are being reshaped by global trends—the mindfulness movement in one case, the worldwide spread of tarot and digital divination in the other. Yet the mechanisms of transformation differ fundamentally. In Nencini's Templestay programs, adaptation is institutionally mediated: the Jogye order, individual temples, and their instructors consciously calibrate how much of traditional Ganhwa Seon to preserve and how much to modify for international audiences. In Volpe's account of contemporary divination, by contrast, transformation is

de-institutional and bottom-up: tarot entered South Korea in the late 1990s without any religious organization's endorsement and spread through consumers' voluntary adoption. This contrast illuminates an important analytical point: the pattern of importation, reinterpretation, and retransmission that this special section identifies as a structural dynamic of South Korea's religious landscape can be driven by institutional strategy from above or by individual practitioners from below—and in many cases, as the Cheontae order's combination of doctrinal engineering and popular accessibility suggests, by both simultaneously.

Among these cases, Roh's account of the Cheontae order's donation of five thousand copies of its Chinese-language scripture to temples and university libraries in China—effectively retransmitting a reinterpreted Korean Cheontae back to the very homeland of the Tiantai tradition—is particularly striking. This act of reverse transmission suggests that transformation need not signify diminishment but can constitute a new form of cultural and religious productivity. The same logic of outward retransmission is visible, in different registers, in the international dissemination of Korean Seon through Templestay and in South Korea's emergence as one of the few East Asian states to have systematically preserved Confucian ritual in living ceremonial form.

Asia has long served as an epistemological site that deconstructs Western-centric concepts of religion while offering both historical precedents and a contemporary laboratory for understanding pluralistic coexistence in a globalized world (Borup and Fibiger 2019). Within this broader Asian context, South Korea stands out as a particularly distinctive case: unlike many other religiously diverse societies, where plurality has been driven primarily by migration or diaspora, South Korea has developed its remarkable religious diversity while maintaining a relatively homogeneous linguistic and cultural foundation (Baker 2019). This combination makes South Korea an especially significant site for examining how religious plurality emerges and operates independently of ethnic or demographic diversification. Scholars have long relied on concepts such as “coexistence,” “harmony,” and “syncretism” to account for this phenomenon—frameworks that have usefully captured the surface-level

compatibility of Korea's religious traditions. Yet what the articles in this special section collectively suggest is that these frameworks, while capturing an important dimension of South Korea's religious landscape, do not fully account for the dynamic processes of transformation that have continuously reshaped it. Rather than simply existing side by side, religious traditions in Korea have interpenetrated one another, undergone continuous transformation, and exerted mutual influence—suggesting that South Korea has functioned less as a site of mere pluralism than as a living laboratory of religious experimentation. This characterization is not new; Yoon (2004) and Baker (2019) already pointed out that South Korea's multi-religious landscape holds cultural-historical significance as a laboratory for exploring alternatives to global religious culture, and the findings of this special section affirm and extend that observation.

From the very moment the modern concept of religion was introduced, South Korea's religious landscape has been in a state of perpetual adaptation; each tradition has responded to external trends and internal pressures in its own distinctive manner, producing the diverse yet interconnected dynamics traced throughout this issue. The recurring pattern of reception, creative reconfiguration, and outward retransmission suggests that what takes place within Korea's religious laboratory is not contained within its borders. Rather, the transformed traditions are projected back into the wider world, positioning South Korea not merely as a site of internal experimentation but as an active hub within global circuits of religious exchange. The articles assembled here have focused on the post-liberation transformation of Buddhism, Confucianism, Seon meditation, and divinatory practices; future research might productively extend this analytical framework to traditions not examined in this issue— including Christianity, Islam, shamanism, and the rapidly evolving landscape of digital spirituality. This special section represents an exploratory attempt to move beyond conventional frameworks of coexistence and to capture the dynamic, transformative processes that have shaped South Korea's religious landscape. The three-phase pattern of importation, reinterpretation, and retransmission proposed here is not intended as a definitive model but as an analytical invitation—one that we hope will be tested, refined, and extended as South Korea's living laboratory continues to generate new configurations of religious life.

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