

# Modernization of Korean Religion and East Asian Religious Mind

Chongsuh Kim  
Seoul National University

## 1. The Identity of Korean Religion

As the first visitor to Korea from the Occidental world, Hendrick Hamel (1630-92) found no such thing as “religion” in Korea; there were neither preaching nor religious learning. Subsequently, similar testimonies were offered by some merchants, travelers, and missionaries from the Western world such as E. Oppert, P. I. Lowell, and G. W. Gilmore. In the eyes of the Westerners who were accustomed only to the concept of “religion”<sup>1</sup> developed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, religions of the Korean people — Shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism — did not appear to be (proper) religions.

My point is that the act of acknowledging a religion is consciously or unconsciously influenced by a cognitive frame emerging from one’s experiences. For instance, whether they are religious or not and no matter what they believe in, Koreans generally imagine their supreme god (*Haneunim*) as an old man in white clothes with white beard, who comes down from the sky. It is hardly possible that the supreme god is depicted as a black man. Koreans can never imagine a god who wanders around a desert which they have never seen.

Therefore it is difficult to accept the concept of “religion” developed in the Western world and apply it directly to the concept of “Korean religion.” With the Western concept of “religion,” one cannot fully analyze and understand religious phenomena in Korea. The concept of “Korean religion” should emerge from the religious experiences of the Korean people. If “religion” (*jonggyo*) in Korean literally means ‘the fundamental teachings in human life,’ “Korean religion” can be understood as “the symbolic system of the fundamental teachings that Koreans believe and according to which they act and lead their lives.” Of course, this definition needs further explanation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a well known fact that the term “jonggyo” (종교; 宗教), which is commonly used as a genus of various religious traditions in East Asia, is a translation of the western term, “religion,” although there are some voices that speculate that “jonggyo” originated from the Buddhist usage. When the word “jonggyo” was first created, there was no perfectly equivalent term to “religion” in East Asia. As “match-meaning” (*ko-i*) Buddhism came into being in order to make Chinese people understand the Buddhist concepts which had no equivalents in Chinese in the early times of Chinese Buddhism, the term “jonggyo” can be said to have been also created to make people understand the idea of “religion.” Although many terminologies of Chinese Buddhism deliver well the original meanings of the language of Indian Buddhism, it is difficult to say that they always correspond exactly. In a similar vein, one cannot say certainly that “jonggyo” is equivalent to “religion,” since “religion” is originally a term with Judeo-Christian background. It is in the very recent moments of human history that the concept of “religion” is expanded to include non-Christian religious traditions. For discussions on the concept of religion, see W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and the End of Religion*, (New York, 1964); Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Mark C. Taylor ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (Chicago & London, 1998), 269-284. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that the term “jonggyo” began to be used in a way that included various religious traditions without any Christian-centered backgrounds in the regions of East Asia from the time of its first usage.

When “Korean religion” is a subject of discussion, people generally speak of “religion of Korea” or “religions in Korea.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, people often assume that they are discussing “Korean religion,” when they talk about individual religious traditions which are found in Korea such as shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and the so-called new religions. This is certainly a way of approach, if not too simplistic, in the study of Korean religion.

However, the problem is that all these religious traditions are imported from outside the Korea peninsula. There is no indigenous religious tradition in Korea, which characteristically represents her own religious originality as in the sense of a “world religion” such as Chinese Confucianism and Taoism or Japanese Shinto. “Korean shamanism” (*musok*) is from Siberia; Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism from China; Christianity from the Occident. Such new religious movements as Cheondogyo or Jeungsangyo have originated in Korea but have too small a number of followers to represent Korea. Therefore some people claim that there is no such thing as “Korean religion.” In a similar vein, others say that those religious traditions in Korea do not show peculiar characteristics in comparison with their original sources in other cultures and, accordingly, it is hard to establish a distinctive identity of “Korean religion.”

Of course, there is some truth in these claims. However, are not the peculiarities defined relatively? Although one can find the phenomena of ‘possession’ in both Korean and Siberian shamanism, there is still a difference. Whereas Siberian shamans generally use fire and undertake ‘soul journey,’ Korean shamans use bells and mirrors to cure illnesses and practice “stepping on sharp blades” (*jakdutagi*) to prove their spiritual powers. Moreover, although Korean Confucianism imported the Confucian classics and rituals from China, classical Confucian traditions like “the rituals in honor of Confucius” (*Seokjeonje*), are today preserved better in Korea than in China. Another example is the symbol of “ten longevities” (*sipjangsaeng*) in Korean Taoism that

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<sup>2</sup> The most recent “Population Census” was issued by the Korean National Statistical Office in 2005. The statistics of ‘religious population’ abstracted from the Census is acknowledged as the most reliable religious population survey because it is based on a direct data collection and on the total population, compared with previous statistics released by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism or Gallop that are based on the reports from religious bodies or sample surveys. According to this census, the population of the Republic of Korea is about forty seven million and about 53 percent (almost twenty five million) of the whole was religious; 10,726,463 (22.8%) were Buddhists, 8,616,438 (18.3%) were Protestants (Christian), 5,146,147 (10.9%) were Catholics (Christian), and 104,575 (0.2%) were Confucians. (This census can be downloaded from <<http://www.nso.go.kr/>>) This data indicates two important points about the religious configuration in South Korea. First, the proportion of religious and non-religious population is almost the same; religious (and non-religious) population consists of half of the whole population. This means that there is a balance between religious and non-religious discourses in South Korea and possibly a strong tension between them. In comparison with the Chinese or Japanese situation, the ratio of the religious population of South Korea is relatively much higher. Second, the number of Christians (when Protestants and Catholics are combined together) exceeds that of Buddhists. This is also a unique aspect of the Korean religious *status quo* in comparison with the Chinese or Japanese case. Although Chinese Christianity and Japanese Christianity have longer and highly developed histories than Korean Christianity, the former are significantly smaller than the latter in terms of number of believers and effect on society.

is not found in China; furthermore, the “shrine of mountain gods” (*sansingak*) and the “shrine of the Big Dipper” (*chilseonggak*) in Korean Buddhist temples, which uniquely demonstrate syncretism between Buddhism and popular beliefs, are missing in China; Korean Catholicism has taken pride in its unparalleled history of mission that was first brought into Korea not by any Western missionary but by Koreans themselves from China; also, Korean Protestantism has been widely noted for accomplishing an explosive growth with only a century of history in contrast with those of China and Japan. They have developed distinctive religious practices like “early morning prayer meeting” (*saebyeokgidohoe*) and “paying regular visits to members” (*simbang*). If one looks into Korean religion carefully, one shall find and list more peculiarities of Korean religion. Seen from this perspective, “Korean religion” does have a unique character.

More importantly, one needs to see “Korean religion” not only as a composite of various religious traditions accumulated on a common ground of Korean shamanism but also as a general concept, namely, “Korean religion in general” or ‘Korean religion on the whole.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is not correct to assume that “Korean religion” has been formed with the introductions of various religious traditions like shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Rather, it is more proper to say that there has always been a certain form of Korean religiosity,<sup>4</sup> which has transformed itself by adapting to the newly introduced religious frameworks. “Korean religion” is not a collection of individual religious traditions but an abstract, single idea, and all these different traditions have served merely as vessels which contain Korean religiosity or religious mind.

From this perspective, it is understandable that a Korean may be involved with multi-layered religious beliefs all at once because “Korean religion” is essentially pluralistic, manifesting one’s inherent religiosity or religious mind in many different experiences. Confronted with life crises, for instance, Koreans may try to solve problems with concrete and practical methods (shamanistic approach), reflect on the given reality with respect to a set of ideally standardized virtues (Confucian approach), or dismiss them as a mere illusion (Buddhist approach). Sometimes they put up with the harsh realities of life by accepting them as a normal condition of life with an eschatological vision (Christian approach). Although Koreans may find it difficult to choose one (or multiple) solution(s) out of various approaches, (because these approaches all emerge from the common source, “Korean Religion”) they share the same motive in coping with the realities of life. For Koreans, it is more urgently

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<sup>3</sup> For such a ‘general concept’ of “Korean religion,” see Chongsuh Kim, “The Early Development of Korean Religious Studies before 1945,” The Academy of Korean Studies, ed., *A Historical Outline of Korean Thoughts*, (Kyeongido, 1993): 246.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars called this archetype of Korean religion as “Ghost teaching (*Gwishingyo*)” (Park Eunsik and Yi Neunghwa), “Old teaching (*Gogyo*)” (Choi Namseon), and “Old religion (*Gojonggyo*)” (Kwon Sangno).

important to lead their lives in any given circumstance by adapting to varied situations than to exclusively choose and thoroughly depend on one particular religion.

Western observers often found it difficult to understand such a peculiar and syncretic aspect of Korean religion.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, many scholars have argued that the multi-layered plurality of religion is the most distinctive feature of Korean religion, which cannot be found in other countries. Nonetheless, religious pluralism is by no means restricted to Korean religion. Religious hybridism and pluralism are also indicated in China as well as in Japan. What distinguishes the Korean case from other East Asian countries is that in Korea both Eastern (shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) and Western (Christianity) religious traditions are represented evenly each with a significant number of members. In other words, Korean religion displays the characteristics of what may be called a multi-layered pluralism, including almost equal representation of both Eastern and Western religious elements.

## 2. Modernization and the Conceptual Transformation of Korean Religion

Koreans' religiosity has recurrently expressed unique characteristics over a long period of time. The identity of Korean religion has been established on the basis of such characteristics. However, human experiences are transformed over time in response to changing situations. If our religious cognition is based on our experiences, the former has to go through transformation as the latter changes. Thus modernization of Korea inevitably brought significant changes to the concept of religion in Korea. Going through the process of modernization, Korean religion in a traditional society has become generally differentiated. Consequently, the concept of religion itself has also changed.

For example, educational institutions like "public schools" (*hyanggyo*) or "private schools" (*seowon*) in the traditional society not only taught students classical (mainly Confucian) texts but also served as a place of religious rituals in honor of Confucian old sages. Therefore, these schools were not only a place of learning but also a religious place serving as a spiritual center for local regions. However, as Western-style educational system was introduced as part of the modernization project, modernized schools took over only the educational function from the traditional schools and gave up the religious function. The disconnection between religion and education allowed the latter to establish its independent status and deprived the former of its influence on the educational sphere. From the perspective of education, this severance can be viewed as a process of secularization, the weakening of religious power in society. From the

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, an American missionary, who came to Korea in the beginning of the twentieth century, expressed his puzzlement about Korean religion in the following way: "He [Korean Man] personally takes his own education from Confucius; he sends his wife to Buddha to pray for offspring, and in the ills of life he willingly pays toll to Shamanite Mu-dang and Pansu. The average Korean is thus a follower of all three systems, in the hope that by their united help he may reach a happy destiny." George H. Jones, "The Spirit Worship of the Koreans," *Transactions of the Korean Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2 (1901): 39.

perspective of religion, on the other hand, the same phenomenon can be seen as a process of deep purification. This was also the elimination of the non-essential and secondary role of secular education which previously had religious functions in a comprehensive symbolic system of the pre-modern, undifferentiated society.

Similar changes occurred in the sphere of medicine. In the Korean traditional society, people generally attributed physical illnesses to gods or spiritual beings and depended on shamans' exorcising rituals to overcome illness. Meanwhile, traditional medicine has been based on the notion of 'the correspondence of heaven and man' where the principles of Yin and Yang as well as the Five Primary Substances (*wu hsing*), derived from nature (macro-cosmos), are applicable to human bodies (micro-cosmos). Therefore, religion and medical treatments were undifferentiated; the activity of treating people's illness had a religious dimension, and religion regarded medical treatments as a way of saving people. However, as Western-style medical practices spread, curing people's illness became rationalized and specialized. In modernized hospitals, medical practices were carried out with no respect to the religious dimension. Medical treatments were completely severed from religion. Going through the process of modernization, the comprehensive concept of traditional religion was deprived of its secondary medical function and its boundaries reduced.

In the traditional society, statecraft was also undifferentiated from religion. The basic political frame of the state was based on the Confucian ideology, and officials ruled common people in accordance with Confucian standards. With modernization, statecraft constitutionally broke away from religion. Establishment of religion was prohibited, and political actions lost relationship with religion. Pointless became the concept of religion derived from the traditional Confucian ideology, which even had the political implication that man should pursue statecraft and world peace, starting from the cultivation of the individual and the management of the household. The previous concept of religion which had a political dimension had become simplified and scaled down.

With modernization, the concept of Korean religion was radically transformed as a result of social differentiation. Educational, medical, and political functions of religion were weakened by a great measure. On the other hand, religion distinctively became a symbolic system that served as a sheer basis of certain beliefs and practices to lead one's life properly. The religious discourse gradually changed its subject from the social and institutional dimension to individual truth, faith, and interest in personal redemption.

Certainly, it was not only in the sphere of religion where differentiation happened during modernization. It also took place in all social spheres. Among them, the differentiation of the social strata is especially relevant to that of religion. Whereas the structure of the traditional society was generally polarized into two social statuses of the gentry (the Confucian literati, *yangban*) and the plebeian (*sangmin*), the appearance of the middle strata, consisting of artisans, local officers, and the offspring of noble men from concubines (*seoeol*), served as a motive power for a fundamental change toward a new social order. In

addition, the evolutionary theory introduced in a social context from the West during modernization bridged the discontinuous gap between both the gentry and the plebeian classes. Such a sudden change in the way of hierarchical disintegration since the beginning of the modern period significantly influenced Korean religions in terms of the distribution of their main members.

Above all, religion, which used to be a part of privileged culture of the gentry class, had become recognized as basic rights of all people. Regardless of social status, one could freely participate in certain religious communities and have a claim to personal religious beliefs. Freedom of religion led to a considerable change that may be called “popularization of religion.”<sup>6</sup> This process opened up a chance to generalize the Korean concept of religion by confirming the fact that all Koreans are ‘*homo religiosus*.’ Such a social background in the Korean religious situation is also connected to the fact that the post-modernization religions were able to invigorate their activities with the active participations of lay believers, compared with the traditional religions.

Another significant change in Korean religion during modernization was derived from an inflow of the Western culture which was mainly represented by Christianity. This meant a considerable change in the Korean religious configuration which had consisted of, especially after the Chinese culture was introduced to Korea, three main religious traditions for about two thousand years—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism while sharing the common basis of shamanistic beliefs. Therefore, the history of Korean religion can be divided into three distinct periods in view of the two most important changes of the introductions of Chinese and Western religious cultures. The first period was ‘the age of shamanism,’ in which religiosity of the Korean people was expressed in the frame of shamanistic beliefs. The second period was ‘the age of traditional religions,’ in which religious minds of the Korean people were carried by the religions from China—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The third period was ‘an age of religious pluralism’ in which Koreans’ religious minds left behind the Oriental provincialism and took on a cross-cultural and world-wide outlook with the introduction of Christianity.

The transmission of Christianity opened completely new possibilities to the concept of Korean religion. It was in this context that Choe Che-u’s (1824-1864) “Eastern Learning” (*Tonghak*) appeared. After having unusual experiences with Christianity, he came to create a religion which worshipped “heavenly god” (*Haneullim*). In a similar way, these new experiences inspired the emergence of several other new autogenous religions which brought about fundamental changes in Korean religious symbolism. For instance, in the history of Korean religions, the unprecedented concept of an incarnate god appeared with Gang Il-

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this phenomenon of “popularization of religion” was not captured in any official record. For there were few data concerning religious population in the traditional society. What we know today is that the religious population was about two percent of the whole population at the beginning of Japanese colonial reign and increased explosively in the following periods. The report of increased religious population was, in my view, not so much a result of the expansion of missionary works as that of the religious popularization in official statistical researches.

sun (1871-1909) and religious communities were institutionalized as one could see in the “local group leadership” (*jeopju*) system which is similar to the Christian parish system. In the end, the post-modernization religious experiences of Koreans have developed quite differently from that of the traditional society and become sophisticated.

By ignoring the profound concept of Korean religion that recurrently and uniquely emerged and dynamically transformed and by explaining it away with a focus on only a few characteristics of it, one cannot avoid an error of reductionism. Moreover, the conceptual changes of Korean religion based on Koreans’ unique experiences have little to do with the transformative tradition of the Western concept of ‘religion.’ In Korean religion, there are too many elements that appear puzzling and incomprehensible in the eyes of Western observers.

### 3. The Development of the Modern Religious Studies in Korea

In order to understand Korean religion deeply, one needs to examine existing studies on Korean religion. First of all, it was Westerners who started assuming a relatively objective approach to the study of Korean religion. Initially, they had a romantic curiosity of exotic practices or a non-scholarly intention of doing Christian mission. Although they generally assumed that there is no religion but only superstition in Korea in early times, they gradually paid greater attention to the Korean traditional religions. Although their studies were still based on biased Christian understanding of other religions, some missionaries like G. H. Jones (1867-1919), H. B. Hulbert (1863-1949), and C. A. Clark (1878-1961) tried to figure out the basic symbolism underlying Korean religion and reminded Koreans of the significance of a pure religiosity itself. They properly set up the fundamental premise of modern scholarship that ‘religious studies should be to study religion.’ In other words, the study of religion should focus on religion itself rather than on histories and philosophies which are related to religion or on its social function or cultural influence. In particular, these early Westerners tried to understand all Korean folk beliefs within a larger category of shamanism and tended to make a distinction between Confucianism and ancestor worship as two different traditions.

Since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been many Western scholars who studied Korean religion and wrote noticeable work about it. However, they tended to put more emphasis on collecting materials of Korean religion rather than on forcing a particular methodology to it. There have been few Western specialists who attempted to suggest a general theory of Korean religion on the whole. More often, they dealt with only particular religious traditions. However, it is very suggestive that Western scholars have gradually tried to distinguish the features of Korean religions from those of Chinese and Japanese religions.

Meanwhile, Japanese scholars contributed much to establishing an academic standard in the study of Korean religion. Although they are now

criticized for having an ulterior motive to provide information to the Japanese colonial regime and holding an attitude of cultural superiority, one can hardly deny the fact that they systematically surveyed and collected various texts and materials and also arranged them in a scholarly fashion. It is true that they often studied Korean religion under the supervision of the colonial administration and imprudently distorted religious phenomena and data, focusing on only achievements for governmental policies rather than pure academic researches. Still, there were also a number of serious and pioneering researches by Japanese scholars on Korean religion during the period of Japanese colonialism.

Despite some criticism, the studies of Korean religion produced by Japanese scholars such as Mishna's (1902-1971) study on Korean ancient religious beliefs, Takahashi's (1878-1967) research on religious texts during the Chosun Dynasty, systematization of Korean Buddhist texts by Eda (1898-1957) and others, and compilation of primary texts on various folk beliefs such as geomancy, divination as well as *Ghosts in Korea (Chosun eui Guishin, 1929)* and new religious movements by Murayama (1891-1968) are invaluable literature which are widely read and good milestones for students even now.

Among Japanese scholars, it was, however, Akamatsu (1886-1960) and Akiba (1888-1954) who contributed most in establishing general theories of Korean religion with modern methodologies. Akamatsu came to the Kyeongseong Imperial University (which is to become the Seoul National University later) as the first professor of the religious studies in 1927 and introduced modern academic curricula to the Korean religious studies by offering objective courses which used the methodology of so-called 'comparative religion' as opposed to apologetic approaches to particular religious traditions. His book titled *A Study of the Contemporary Religious Theories (Bankin Shukyogakusetsu no Kenkyu, 1929)* systematically presented the academic trends of the religious studies which have been developed in the Western academic world and made students aware of the importance of auxiliary scientific approaches (linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology) in the study of religion. Through his books, many Korean scholars and students encountered Western (modern) theories of religious studies, which at that time they did not have direct access to.

A year before (1926) Akiba, who studied with leading scholars such as B. Malinowski at the London University, came to the Kyeongseong Imperial University. He used a socio-anthropological methodology and conducted an 'intensive field research' on Korean shamanism. Whereas other existing literature on Korean shamanism assumed textual or historical approaches to the object of study, Akiba's study focused on its functional rather than religious aspects and compared it with other shamanistic practices in Japan, Manchuria, Mongolia, and Siberia. Such a pursuit of universality through a comparative approach provided Korean religious studies with an opportunity to break from provincialism and be a part of global academic community. This tendency has also been emphasized more and more since 1970s when Western religious studies by Mircea Eliade and his followers were introduced to Korean scholars.

In comparison with the studies of foreigners on Korean religion, Koreans' studies on religion sought existential self-understanding from the subjective perspective. Especially during the Japanese colonial reign, nationalistic historians like Park Eunsik (1859-1925) or Sin Chaeho (1880-1936) conducted researches on religion with an intention to revive a nationalistic spirit. Nonetheless, since their studies often showed self-centeredness in using historical sources and took a chauvinistic stance, it is difficult to say that their views were objective enough to stand up to the standards of modern scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, some other Korean scholars assumed a positivist approach and sought for academic universality. They emphasized the importance of source materials themselves as one can see in the works of Yi Neunghwa (1868-1943), 'the father of the modern Korean religious studies,' who extensively compiled religious materials and wrote several encyclopedic books. Whereas previous approaches to Korean religion tended to focus on the study of Chinese classics, it is important to note that Yi Neunghwa tried to see Korean religion as a religious phenomenon *sui generis* rather than as a normative standard. In addition, it was through the works of Choe Namseon (1890-1957) and others that the texts of individual religious traditions and the uniqueness of Korean religion were interpreted using various Western auxiliary scientific theories. In consequence, the scope of Korean religious studies as well as the denotation of "Korean religion" was dramatically expanded.

Whereas foreign scholars generally adopted comparative methods and (functionalistic) universal approaches in the study of Korean religion, Koreans scholars often espoused (historical) particularism, focusing on the autochthonous symbolism which related to the Korean language, origins and folklore. This tendency can be found in several studies on Korean folk beliefs like Son Jintae's (1900-?) 'historical folkore studies (*yeoksa minsokhak*).' Meanwhile, each religious traditions like Buddhism and Christianity gradually began to elaborate their pre-understanding of Korean religion in order to understand their own traditions. The sudden increase of religious population after modernization brought about rapid growth of several religious traditions, whose interest in the study of Korean religion gradually overcame their naïve apologetic perspectives and proceeded with refinement toward a more universal academic stance.

Post-colonial Korean scholars' study on Korean religion entered a new phase in 1970, when Korean Association for the History of Religions was established. It was a result of a combination between the accumulated capacity of Korean religious scholarship and the upsurge of interest in Western religious studies. As specialists of particular religious traditions began to appear and several Western theoretical books of comparative religion were translated into Korean in turn, various theories and auxiliary scientific methodologies were applied to the study of Korean religion. However, it should be pointed out that there have been many attempts to explain away Korean religious phenomena

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<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, there are still some ultra-chauvinistic researchers who, for example, claim that Confucius was actually Korean and that the Chinese characters originated from Korea.

uncritically in the theoretical framework of Western religious studies. This is why a scholarly reflection on this uncritical tendency has appeared in the academic discourse since the mid-1990s, as there emerged a revival of interest in the history of Korean religious studies and some serious discussions on the question of “Korean methodology” in the study of Korean religion.

In short, it was after an age of religious pluralism began in the modern period that Korean religion, which used to be essentially an object of faith in the past, became an object of academic study. Religious experiences are now scrutinized in more objective ways and critical self-awareness in the cognition of religion has emerged. It might be said that the concept of Korean religion, which used to demonstrate only an unsophisticated mode of faith and practice, has matured as a more reflected mode along with the development of Korean religious studies. The concept of Korean religion has been formed on the basis of both universal and particular aspects of the manifested Korean religious minds. Therefore, the three key elements of Korean religion which Korean religious studies have researched can be said to be (1) the fundamental aspect of religiosity, (2) its universal aspect found through comparison, and (3) its Korean particular aspects.

#### 4. Korean Religious Studies and Religious Experiences in East Asia

As a constellation of stars is found because human beings see the sky at night, the questions of who conducts research and from what perspective are not less important than religious phenomena themselves in religious studies. Since Max Müller, the modern (world) religious studies have been led mainly by Western scholarship. Naturally, (world) religious studies have revolved around “religion” the concept of which has developed in the Western style. Consequently, even the key concepts of Eastern religion have been often misunderstood by Western religious studies. For instance, the question, “Is Buddhism a kind of atheism?” commits an error of categorization. This question is as nonsensical as to say “there is no Nirvana in Christianity.” An Eastern scholar of religion becomes embarrassed when a Western scholar asks whether “Confucianism is a religion,” while translating the phrase “Confucius said (*Tzu yüeh*)...” in *the Analects of Confucius (Lun yü)* into “master said...” or “gentleman said...”

Even Korean scholars of religion often depend solely upon analytical methods of Western religious studies in their researches of Korean religion. It might be said that the same case has happened in China and Japan. Accordingly, scholarly achievements produced in East Asia have often been underrated in world academic circles of religion. The problem that East Asian religious studies have been marginalized cannot be attributed only to a matter of Western hegemony. Although religious experiences of East Asians are very significant across the world, and there are numerous studies about them which certainly deserve more attention, they have not been discussed enough in the theoretical discourses of religious studies among scholars across the world. Bluntly

speaking, the consequences are that the universal definition of religion has been distorted, and the scope of world religious studies has been restricted. This is an unfortunate situation not only for East Asians but also for all including the Westerners.

Nevertheless, today's East Asian religious studies cannot simply part from the Western-centered world religious studies, be ghettoized, and seek for an independent development. East Asians also belong to the world. And it is true that the world religious studies have tried to understand religious phenomena of other cultures based on the premise that there is a mental unity in all human as well as a universal spirituality or religiosity. It is certainly desirable to understand individual religious phenomena through a higher concept of genus.<sup>8</sup>

If one studies only Korean shamanism, for instance, it is difficult to find out which aspect is really important or only unique to Korea. Compared with shamanisms in China, Japan, and Siberia and understood as a part of religious phenomena in East Asia, the characteristics and significance of Korean shamanism will be recognized better. Furthermore, seeing Korean shamanism as a part of world religious phenomena, as Eliade does in his book, *Shamanism* (1951), will invite an increased attention to its unique aspects.

Sympathetically understanding one's own religious experiences in the wider context (namely, other regions and religious cultures), one can also see that one's religious plausibility structures themselves are upgraded. Those who are related to Korean shamanism will be more proud of their spiritual experiences (in comparison with the so-called world religions like Buddhism or Christianity), when they find that shamanism is not an isolated local religious phenomenon on the Korean peninsula but is also found in China, Japan, and other places as part of world religious experiences. It means that the concept of Korean religion (in this case, shamanism) confined to the Korean peninsula can take part among that of world religions.

Meanwhile, some people have criticized such an attempt of generalization from a comparative viewpoint noticeably after the postmodernist and postcolonial perspectives have appeared.<sup>9</sup> They assert that generalization through comparison is an imperialistic and violent project, eclipsing particular characteristics of each religious phenomenon and forcing them into an artificial category of universal shamanism which is created by Western scholarship. This criticism is not without merit. It is important for Korean shamanism to bring attention to its own unique aspect as well as to realize itself as an example to

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<sup>8</sup> The necessity of "generalization" has already been pointed out by many Western scholars of religion: "[D]oes a ruby or an emerald sparkle less if called a jewel?" (J. Wach); "I hope to have suggested how the categories used by historians of religion might be 'modulated'.... It is only by such mutual modulation, within the context of comparison, that progress in the study of religion will be possible." (J. Z. Smith).

<sup>9</sup> On this criticism, the Western religious studies have invited the argument, "[c]omparison seems inherent in the working out of self-emergent systems..." in terms of man's perception (L. E. Sullivan) or, 'new comparativism' in an attempt to overcome the problems of classical comparative methodology by scholars like M. Eliade, by making the concept of 'pattern,' the main media of comparison, flexible (W. E. Paden).

ascertain the theoretical matrix of a universal world shamanism. Perhaps, it would be possible to creatively reinterpret the academic interest in world shamanism, which has been gradually attenuated, when the significance of individual shamanistic phenomenon (*e.g.*, Korean shamanism) is investigated more fully. Then, similar logic can be applied to other religious traditions such as Korean Buddhism and Christianity.

In short, Korean religious studies should continue to participate in universal discussions with the world religious studies and, at the same time, publicize its particular characteristics. The question is how Korean religious studies will be able to approach the present global religious studies, which is too westernized, without losing its distinctive perspective. In this vein, it is thought to be highly desirable that Korean religious studies firstly start by sharing the horizon of comparison with other East Asian —most notably, Chinese and Japanese— academics of religion.

Walking into a Buddhist temple with a Buddhist emblem (卍) as its insignia in Korean cities, one often finds a statue of Buddha standing between those of a General Spirit and a Child Spirit. It would not be easy to understand such a syncretism of shamanism and Buddhism with the Western concept of religion. On the other hand, the Chinese who have worshiped intermingled popular gods of Buddhism and Taoism or the Japanese who have experienced ‘Dual Shinto (*Ryobu Shinto*)’ mixed with Buddhism can easily empathize with Korean type of Buddhism-and-shamanism, while finding a considerable difference between them. In addition, whereas dragons are regarded as an icon of the devil in many Western cultures, Eastern Asians generally see it as an auspicious sign. Such Chinese, Japanese and Korean religious phenomena are certainly significant and can be easily generalized into a higher category of genus. If such a task of generalization is done extensively, it might be possible to reconstruct the world religious studies which have been distorted in a Western biased discourse. Of course, doing so would first require a close partnership between the East Asian scholars of religions.

Finally, it should be reminded that the cognition of Korean religion is deeply related to the contents of Koreans’ religious experiences. “Korean religion” is by no means a closed and fixed concept and is open to transformation, as the religious experiences of Koreans change. The wider the world Korean people experience, the more open the concept of Korean religion will be recognized. Then, Korean religious studies will try harder to shed light on the peculiarities of Korean religion which cannot be easily dissolved in even such an open framework. That is, human beings tend to cultivate more nostalgia to return to the origin, as their experiences are expanded.