

# **High School Religion Textbooks in Contemporary Korea**

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## **1. Religious Education and Textbooks in Korean High Schools**

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, Korean middle and high schools established by particular religions<sup>1)</sup> have respectively used their own religion textbooks: “the Bible” for the Christian-established middle and high schools and “Buddhism” for the Buddhist-established middle and high schools. Most of the textbooks consisted of introductory contents of Christianity and Buddhism on the basis of the Bible and the Buddhist Canons, respectively, despite many revisions.

Of course, the old textbooks used by Korean middle and high schools established by particular religions intended to be mission-oriented. It cannot be exaggerated that Korean middle and high schools established by particular religions began to serve modern western-style education as a part of missionary work in Korea where only traditional Confucian education was predominant at the time. Because there had been no curriculum to speak of, the schools established by particular religions made their own religion textbooks by referring to the theories and materials related to the religious education that were used by their own religious bodies in foreign countries.

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<sup>1)</sup> The number of middle and high schools established by particular religions is about 400 in Korea today. Among these there are about 20 Buddhist-established schools, 60 Catholic-established schools and more than 270 Protestant-established schools. The number of such schools amounts to about 10% of all the middle and high schools. These schools established by particular religions are official educational institutions accredited by the Ministry of Education and thus they also offer a secular curriculum, as is the case with other private schools as well as public schools. However, at the same time, they usually offer regular services of worship and more than one hour of religious course weekly in order to realize their original religious goals.

Meanwhile, as the modern western-style education became generalized, many secular schools were established and the middle and high schools established by particular religions gradually became a unique minority. Thus, general educational systems were mainly focused on secular (public or nonreligious private) schools. In fact, modern education in Korea originated from middle and high schools that were established by particular religions. They naturally came to be regarded as official educational institutes but gradually they were ignored and were not given any special attention within the Korean educational system.

For example, even related to religious education, Article 6 of the 'Basic Law of Education' stipulates that 'the public schools established by the state or local self-government should not give religious education for a particular religion.' Of course, the notion of 'religious education for a particular religion' means 'parochial education' of missionary work for such religious activities as proselytism.<sup>2)</sup> The law applies to only public schools and even stipulates nothing at all in terms of religious education in private schools established by particular religions. Therefore, Korean private schools established by particular religions have maintained the contents of parochial education for missionary work in their textbooks.

On the while, current textbooks of 'Society' and 'Morals' in elementary and middle schools and those of 'History,' 'Ethics,' 'Society and Culture,' etc. in high schools contain a considerable portion related to religions as contents of general education of religious knowledge in Korea. However, religious contents in such secular textbooks are not intended to facilitate understanding of religion itself but to explain then it away arbitrarily in various ways. Thus, the understandings of religious contents in these textbooks are often unsystematic and fragmentary. Such textbooks are mostly superficial and erroneous because scholars of religion did not write them.

Material used to teach religion to the students in its true sense had been only the textbooks used by private schools established by particular religions. However, these textbooks were not for regular curriculum but for missionary work. In

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<sup>2)</sup> This means that the education of religious knowledge for academic studies or the education of a "religious sense" as a part of education of humanity is permissible in any school.

fact, these private schools established by particular religions did not offer courses as part of a regular curriculum but as non-curricular (non-credit). Inevitably, it brought about outstanding issues.<sup>3)</sup>

As a result, the private schools established by particular religions sought to make their religion courses into regular curricular courses. The Korean Ministry of Education, in agreement, began to implement such regularization of these religion courses in 1982 on the pretext of self-cultivation and humanistic liberal education for the students. It is above all important that this regularization was applied to all the middle and high school as well as the private schools established by particular religions.<sup>4)</sup> It was not until the regularization of religion curriculum that religion textbooks have come to be included as official textbooks in the Korean middle and high schools.

## **2. Formation of Common Religion Curriculum and Change of Textbooks**

The regularization of religion curriculum into (general) elective courses does not mean that a new curriculum was created for schools established by particular religions. Rather, the old courses such as ‘The Bible’ or ‘Buddhism,’ have come to be regularized into officially recognized elective courses.

Regularization also meant that the religion textbooks in schools established by a particular religion gave up their previous autonomous and even arbitrary contents, as they were in other countries, and had to reflect the characteristics of being textbooks as part of an official education. A standardized religion curriculum was newly formed. It was not an easy task to outline the contents of the new religion curriculum, because it had to be developed for all the students, including

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<sup>3)</sup> For example, teachers of religion course could not get a teachers’ certificate accredited by the Ministry of Education and thus they had to be employed just as support staff, not as fully qualified teachers. As a result, they could not enjoy the same right as regular teachers in terms of their status and pension. Students also used to neglect religion courses, because they spent more time in other regular courses.

<sup>4)</sup> It means that all the high schools, including public and non-religious private schools as well as schools established by particular religions, have come to be able to offer religion as a regular elective course. Strictly speaking, if a certain school offers ‘religion’ as an elective course, it is stipulated that the school has only to offer one other elective course in order to give the students a choice not to take a religion class.

even non-religious students of non-religious private schools and public schools. This implied a resolute academic generalization of the previously stereotyped dogmatic teachings, practices and (church) histories of particular religions. Naturally, the new curriculum put more emphasis on the content about general theories and other religious traditions. Yet, the old mission-oriented trends of private schools established by particular religions that had played a leading role for regularization of the religion curriculum could not be suddenly and easily abandoned.

At last, both aspects of religious education, universal education (including educations of religious knowledge and religious sense) and particular (parochial) education, came to be compromised in practice. Such compromise has been regarded as the core issue of the religion curriculum for middle and high schools in Korea until now. This has been sometimes misunderstood as an ‘ambiguity of educational goals’ and even resulted in intense debates. Nevertheless, the two ends within the religion curriculum have come to be harmoniously maintained in the current 7<sup>th</sup> *Curricular for High School* (2002 – 2007 edition).

In fact, current religion curriculum suggests that religion textbooks should aim to fulfill the three aspects as follows:

- (1) To understand basic facts and universal theories about religion,
- (2) To establish sound perspectives on religion through existential questions and enquires,
- (3) To understand religious teachings and inspire its practices in daily life and to form a sound personality and bring up desirable members of society.<sup>5)</sup>

The framework of the current religion curriculum for high schools is outlined in the following.

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<sup>5)</sup> The Ministry of Education, *Explanation of High School Curricula – Liberal Arts*, Seoul: Daehan Textbooks Ltd., 2001, p. 124.

<b>Sections</b>	<b>Contents</b>
1. Human and Religion	Ultimate Questions and Problems, Encountering Religion and Problem-solving, Knowing and Believing, The Meaning and Role of Religion
2. Understanding Religious Experience	Various Views of Life, Views of the Cosmos, History, Life and Death, Canon and Religious Norm. Ritual and Religious Practice
3. Other Religious Traditions	Religious Thoughts and Their Background, Truth and Enlightenment, Understanding Religious Characteristics
4. World Religions and Culture	Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and etc.
5. Religious Understanding of Human and Nature	Various Views of Human, Religious Views of Human and Nature, Science and Religion
6. Korean Religion and Culture	Korean Folk Religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, New Religions and Culture
7. Religious Community	The idea and Structure of Community, Social Function of Religion, Inter-religious Compromise and Coexistence, Formation of Religious Personality
8. The Tradition and Thoughts of a Particular Religion	Canon, Dogma and the History of Religion, Religious Life, Korean Religion and Culture Creation, My Plan for a Religious Life

TABLE 1: The 'Religion' Framework of the Current 7<sup>th</sup> *Curricula for High School*<sup>6)</sup>

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<sup>6)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Section 8, The Tradition and Thoughts of a Particular Religion, can be said to have been added in order to accommodate the already existing parochial education for the schools established by particular religions. Of course, the religion curriculum seems unsystematic in parts because the two opposite forms of religious education, universal education and parochial education, were compromised for pragmatic reasons. However, the religion textbooks published after the implementation of the common religion curriculum were completely different from those before. Namely, the new textbooks contained general theories of religion and facts about other religions that had not been there before. This aspect of the most recent Korean religious education seems to have very positive results.<sup>7)</sup>

The religion textbooks written on the basis of the curriculum must follow official procedures imposed by the Ministry of Education in order to become 'authorized textbooks.' The actual authorization is a matter under the jurisdiction of the Local Office of Education. This office usually entrusts professors of religious studies and high school teachers from different religious backgrounds with examining authority. Referring to their evaluation, the Local Office of Education then exercises its power to give authorization to a textbook. The most important in the authorization process of textbooks is to indicate the factual mistakes of the contents and, furthermore, to evaluate and correct slanderous or distorted descriptions of other religions.

### **3. Content Analysis of Current Religion Textbooks**

In actuality, published religion textbooks are quite different in terms of the framework and content, even if they have abided by the common religion curriculum and have followed the authorization procedures. It is because most of the

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<sup>7)</sup> According to current standards, a regular teaching credential is needed in order to teach a religion course using the new textbook. Previously, religious schools such as seminaries or Buddhist colleges informally recommended teachers. However, today a candidate for the post of a religion teacher must complete more than 5 religion courses among the following 11 courses in addition to courses of education. The eleven courses are, 'Introduction to Religious Studies,' 'World Religions' or 'History of Religions' or 'Comparative Religion,' 'Korean Religion,' 'Religious Education,' 'Phenomenology of Religion,' 'Philosophy of Religion,' 'Sociology of Religion' or 'Anthropology of Religion,' 'Psychology of Religion,' 'Religion and Science,' and Contemporary Religion.'

authors are related to a particular religion and they see the general theory of religion and other religions from the standpoint of their own religion. First of all, let us examine the current religion textbooks<sup>8)</sup> from three religious bodies in contrast with the common religion curriculum.

<b>Current Curriculum</b>	<b>Religion(Buddhism) 1 Volume (278 pages)</b>	<b>Religion(Catholicism) 1 Volume (183 pages)</b>	<b>Religion(Protestantism) 3 Vols. (392 pages)</b>
1. Human & Religion	Human Life & Religion	In Search of Myself	Human & Religion
2. Understanding Religious Experience	Human Life & Religion	Man's Way	Human & Religion
3. Other Religious Traditions	World Religion		
4. World Religions & Culture	Thoughts & Features of World Religions	Other Religions	World Religious Traditions
5. Religious Understanding of Human & Nature	Human, Nature & Religion	Man's Way	
6. Korean Religion & Culture	Our Religion & Culture		Korean Religion, Religion Transmitted to Korea
7. Religious Community	Modern Society & Role of Religion		Modern Society & Religion

<sup>8)</sup> The textbook titles are as follows. 1) Union of Buddhist Education ed., *High School Religion (Buddhism)*, Seoul: Daehan Bulkyo Chogyejong Publishing Co., 2002. 2) Association of Catholic Education Fund, *High School Religion*, Seoul: Publishing Corporation of Catholic Culture Institute, 2002. 3) Union of Korean Christian Schools, *High School Religion (Christianity) 1, 2, 3*, Seoul: Saengmyungui malssumsa, 2002. Of course, there are other textbooks published by Chinkakjong (An Esoteric Buddhist Denomination), Won-Buddhism, The Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Unification Church but they are not discussed here because they are used in a minimal number of schools.

8. The Tradition & Thought of a Particular Religion	Beginning of a World of Enlightenment, Truth of <i>Mahayana</i> , Buddhist Ethics, Buddhism in Korea, Buddhism & Arts, Faith & Practice of Buddhism, Buddhism & Creation of a New Culture, (135pages/49%)	He Who Loves Us, What We Choose, In Search of Happiness (105pages/57%)	The Christian Bible, God's Work in the New Testament, God's Work in the Old Testament, Christ's Teachings, Church History, Christian Life, The Future for Christians (207pages/53%)
Other Contents	For the Study of This Chapter, Study Questions, Index	Activities & Questions, Index	For the Study of This Chapter, Study Questions

TABLE 2: Contents of Current Textbooks in Contrast with Curriculum

The textbooks listed in Table 2 were published in 2002 with reference to the religion curriculum and are still being used at present. Mostly they express intentions of harmonization of both the sides of religious education, universal and (particular) parochial educations. What reflects the current curriculum best in its entirety is thought to be the textbook published by the Union of Buddhist Education. It shows their effort to include the contents of the curriculum, despite some propaganda statements. The textbook published by the Association of Catholic Education Fund is characterized by its



easiness in that the students can understand and approach the content of the curriculum from their own present situations. However, it lacks contents of Korean religions in comparison to other textbooks. On the other hand, it is also important that the textbook written by the Protestants is distinct in form from the old one ('the Bible' textbook) and contains other world religions including Korean religions. But it consists of 3 volumes and thus the content seems to be overfilled with complex issues.

The sections, 2 Understanding Religious Experience, 3 Other Religious Traditions and 7 Religious Community, of the current curriculum aim to get students to understand various forms to express religious experience in general from the viewpoint of 'Comparative Religion'. However, the sections are mostly omitted or dealt with briefly in other chapters or even replaced by other contents in textbooks because mainly the authors lacked knowledge of this approach (or have intentions to avoid such general understanding). It means that they have made light of the basis of 'education for a religious sense,' which is a part of an education for humanity in a broad context. However, it is this education for religious sense that the current curriculum emphasizes to represent the ultimate meaning of being religious in life, going beyond naive cultural knowledge about religion.

Section 5, Religious Understanding of Human and Nature, as listed above, is an attempt to get students to reflect on views of human beings and nature by applying religious insights to their viewpoints. It is true that this section has not been well discussed in the textbooks because it misfits systematically with the other contents of the curriculum.

Of course, the eight sections of the current curriculum do not indicate the chapters from a textbook. Thus, section 8, The Tradition and Thought of a Particular Religion, does not need to amount to one eighth of the textbook. Nevertheless, the textbooks have allotted half or more than half of the book to this section, as we saw above. It is obvious that this section is too large and unbalanced as a part of a comprehensive religion textbook, even though the curriculum has accepted such parochial education in some sense.

Nonetheless, it is fundamentally significant that current religion textbooks have gone beyond the previous purely parochial textbooks such as 'The Bible' or 'Buddhism' to become a universal 'religion' textbook. It means that current

textbooks transcend the limits of their own religion and accept and acknowledge other religions and the universal concept of religion in which religions take part.

When we consider the descriptions of 'religion', the textbook written by the Protestants explains 'religion', using traditional etymology. The word 'Chongkyo (宗敎),' is said to be a translation of the English word, 'religion' which was originally derived from a Latin word with the meaning "to revive a relationship with and to serve with reverence a god who has supernatural powers and who is the foundation of man's being." Obviously, it is defined from a very western theological premise.

The textbook published by the Buddhists says, "The mundane world we usually experience is distinguished from transcendent reality or ideal reality... Religion regards the latter as something more valuable, powerful or idealistic and the former as subordinate or incomplete. Many scholars apply the terms of the sacred and the profane to this relation..." It is a part that a non-Buddhist scholar is said to have written and it seems that too much content from college books of religious studies have been transferred without any screening. It would be difficult for students to understand and there seems to be little that can be called Buddhist.

Compared with these, the textbook published by the Catholics tries to take a different approach. It does not define 'religion' directly but introduces critiques of religion by Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, pointing out the problems and making the students think for themselves about what religion is. Above all, this textbook argues that however much science may have developed, inevitably human beings encounter hardships in life and come to seek what is religious. It is indeed a very open approach. Nonetheless, all the above-examined textbooks show an effort to overcome their old perspectives in which they see 'religion' within their own religious boundaries.

Another important characteristic of the textbooks is that they include considerable amount of content related to other religions, after the formation of a common religion curriculum. Previously, the textbooks dealt with just their own religions, ignoring others. Although the Catholic Church has been positive in accepting other religions since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, the high school textbook published by the Korean Catholic group discusses other religions very briefly, mainly focusing on

the origin and historical background, thought and dogma, canon and development in Korea. It is not very different from the simple contents of the secular textbooks of 'History' and 'Ethics.'

On the other hand, the textbook written by the Protestants reflects the conservative tendency of their theology. It states in their textbook that 'First, we must acknowledge the merits and the historical achievements of other religions. We must respect their ethical teachings, their rituals and dogmas and etc. even though we do not accept them for ourselves. However, we must have firm confidence and conviction in our own faith, despite our recognition of other religions. According to the Christian faith of our forefathers, there is only one God and it is through Jesus Christ that we will gain salvation.'

Compared with these, the textbook published by the Buddhists has made an additional section, 'Inter-religious Compromise and Understanding,' which demonstrates their open attitude toward other religions. That is, the textbook emphasizes the fact that religious pluralism is needed today, explaining that 'pluralism is what is a departure from religious self-centeredness,' It is emphasized that this is different from exclusivism in which one's own religion is seen as the only truth and inclusivism which accepts other religions partly and intends to include them into one's own because only one's own religion is accepted as the truth. Accordingly, the teachings of world religions are said to be 'expedient means that point to One Reality (the Truth) like many ways to the top of the mountain, various colors in a rainbow, and various medicines to cure an illness...'

#### **4. Problems and Alternatives of Current Religion Textbooks**

As mentioned above, religion courses in Korean high schools were regularized in 1980s and it resulted in the formation of a common religion curriculum. Thus, religion textbooks published after the regularization can be said to follow the curriculum and are wholly different from those that the schools established by particular religions had used before. Universal education, consisting of educations of religious knowledge and religious sense, was added to the old parochial education of particular religions with regularization.

The schools established by particular religions cannot help offering some parochial education, given their history and purpose of establishment. But, the religion textbooks ultimately have to overcome parochial biases because religion was regularized as a general elective course not only for the students of schools established by particular religions but also for the students of other schools. In fact, the content of universal education was gradually extended in religion textbooks since the formation of common religion curriculum. Still there are no textbooks where parochial biases have been completely eliminated and acceptable for use in public or (non-religious) private schools as well as schools established by particular religions.<sup>9)</sup> It seems that this problem will improve step by step in the future as time passes. Actually, most private schools established by particular religions in other countries have used textbooks for only parochial education. In the Korean case, it is, above all, important that the current religion textbooks for high school students are based on a common religion curriculum. Moreover, it is really significant that the extent of how much universal religious education needs to be expanded in the textbooks is discussed in a public forum in Korea.

On the other hand, the current textbooks are open to criticism, because the wide ranges of users have not been taken into account. First of all, the content of textbooks seems to overly lay stress on dogma and history, giving an impression that it is a summary of materials from college education. Furthermore, the amount of material is too much given its allotted class time and the content is said to be not stimulating to students. Moreover, students are forcibly allocated to their high schools by means of a computerized selection system based on the closeness of schools to students' homes in Korea today. As a result, even in schools established by particular religion, there are more non-adherents to that particular religion than adherents. Nonetheless, it is a fact that such non-adherents have not been taken into consideration in most of the religion textbooks.

Even the teachers, being parochially educated, lack knowledge of other religions. The textbooks have been criticized for not becoming a good guide for them. Thus, religion textbooks are not very popular among the teachers and students in

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<sup>9)</sup> Korean Association of Religious Education is said to be making plans to publish such a textbook. Indeed, it is doubtful that any school will accept it as a textbook at present time. Nevertheless, it will be clearly significant to do so for the future of Korean religious education.

classes and it is said to be used only in part. Therefore, some religious orders have developed various complementary sources like multi-media materials for teachers these days.

It goes without saying that it is highly important to develop a religion textbook that is useful for non-adherent students. Parochial contents of particular religion will have to be sharply removed and universal contents of religion must be expanded. However, the education of religious knowledge related to simple history and dogma of world religions is also covered in other secular courses and as a result is redundant. Rather, the real aspect proper to religion textbook is thought to be characterized by the education of a religious sense in which human comes to pursue a transformation of his inner being. Most of the current religion textbooks are lacking such content. In the forthcoming textbooks, it will most likely be helpful to include various contents of concrete religious experiences related to rituals, symbols and religious communities to overcome such shortcomings.