

Editorial

# Introduction to “Religious Conflict and Coexistence: The Korean Context and Beyond”

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This Special Issue is composed of the articles that were presented at the first World Religion Forum held 7–8 October 2019 by the World Religious Peace Committee (세계종교평화협의회, hereafter WRPC).<sup>1</sup> A few additional scholars who were interested in the conference theme, *Religious Conflict and Coexistence: the Korean Context and Beyond*, joined our project and helped enrich our conversation. This Special Issue is intended to foster meaningful discussions on religious peace. Before we proceed further, it seems worth giving readers a brief background of this Special Issue, which covers the religious and historic status of Jellabuk-do Province, particularly the city of Jeonju, where the conference took place, and the contribution of the WRPC to this project. Then, we will provide highlights of our papers in three different foci.

Due to its rich religious life and deep spirituality, we believe that the Republic of Korea provides a suitable environment for this timely issue. Whether religious or non-religious, the traditional thoughts and behavioral patterns of Confucianism and Shamanism influence most Koreans. At the same time, South Korea is the only Asian country in which Christianity has taken deep root and flourished.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it presents a rare case of religious peace and coexistence, as shown particularly in the interaction of two major traditions, Christianity and Buddhism, checking and balancing each other while maintaining a significant presence in society. It is also a place where a variety of religions have played a pivotal role in society, constantly offering people new worldviews for new challenges.

Of the many regions in Korea, Jellabuk-do Province is arguably the best place to study religion. You can find several religious traditions flourishing in the major milestone of Korean history. You can find the creation of noteworthy new religious movements. You can also find the historical phenomenon that various religious communities have employed to seek peaceful coexistence, even though conflicts occasionally arise with each other. There are several points to support this claim. First, this province boasts the splendid Buddhist culture from the Baekje Kingdom (18 BCE–660 ACE), during which the famous Geumsansa (Geumsan Temple) in the city of Gimje was built. Iksan Mireuksa (Mireuk Temple), which was established by King Mu and is well known for the Mireuksaji Stone Pagoda, the country's oldest and largest stone pagoda, is also an artifact of Baekje. Second, Jellabuk-do Province is significant in the history and terrain of Korean Christianity. It was the Jeondong Cathedral in Jeonju in which the first Korean Catholic martyr shed blood. Jeonju Seomun Church was the first Protestant church in the Honam region. Jellabuk-do also has numerous Protestant churches, which have taken deep root in local communities for over a hundred years. Third, many of the notable new religious movements during the early modern era started in Jeollabuk-do. In particular, the city of Iksan is the place where the Buddhadharma Study Society (佛法研究會) was founded and where it plays a central role for Won

<sup>1</sup> The World Religion Forum was held at Jeonbuk National University in the city of Jeonju.

<sup>2</sup> (Kim 2006, p. 117).

Buddhism, having its headquarters there. Various religious communities derived from the teachings of Jeungsan take the area of Mt. Moak of Jellabuk-do as their holy land. In addition, Jellabuk-do is the area where the followers of the Donghak Movement rooted in Cheondoism shed their blood, fighting a fierce battle with foreign invaders to realize on earth the Heavenly Will. The sixth of October 2019, the day before the conference, was when Dongryeon Church in Hwangdeung in the city of Iksan celebrated its 119th anniversary. Although a small church in a farming village, Dongryeon Church has been well-known for its active commitment to the welfare for senior citizens. It was founded in 1900 by Elder Baek Nak-gyu, who is the great-grandfather of Professor Yoo, co-editor of this Special Issue. Church history tells us that he participated in the Ugeumchi Battle as a leader of the Donghak Movement, but the failure of the revolution eventually led him to flee to Hwangdeung, where he converted to Christianity and built the church. What is noteworthy is the legacy of the church that an elder pointed out at the ceremony. He proudly spoke about the church's identity inheriting the spirit of the Donghak Movement, which was an indigenous new religious movement. He meant that even if the legacy is the spirit of a different religion, if it is an outcome of a genuine effort for justice and equality, we can proudly embrace it. This is something that cannot be easily imagined by most Protestant churches in Korea.

More importantly for this Special Issue, Jellabuk-do is where the World Religion Peace Committee (WRPC) is located. The WRPC has shown a model case of building cooperation in Jollabuk-do among four major religious communities, including Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Won Buddhism. In particular, the WRPC has tried to promote peaceful relationships by helping them to expand their mutual understanding and collaborate to play a positive role in society. Enmity and hostility against other religions are usually caused by ignorance. Scholars of religious studies can contribute to fostering mature, civic relations among religions. However, it is not easy to produce the type of knowledge that is worth contributing to the peaceful coexistence of religions. Thus, our objective is not just to reiterate the moral imperative of religious coexistence, but to yield high-quality research outcomes, which could draw the attention of a larger audience beyond the city of Jeonju and Korea.

This goal can be pursued in two different directions. One is to promote the knowledge, which the public is not well aware of, and to equip them with new perspectives on religion and culture, based on objective information and critical thinking. The public lecture of the 2018 conference with the theme *Understanding Religion As Much As We Know*, which was given at the Jeondong Cathedral, was indeed aligned with this objective. Invited as the keynote speaker at the World Religious Culture Festival, Professor Yoo called attention to the positive role of the WRPC in carrying out this important task. At this conference, Professor Yoo accepted the leadership role in organizing a larger international forum, which would become the foundation of the 2019 World Religion Forum to which this Special Issue is dedicated. The other direction is to produce high-quality research outcomes, whose values can be recognized by not only Korean academia but also by a larger international scholarly body.

The 2019 World Religion Forum at the World Religious Culture Festival was a product of the city of Jeonju-sponsored-WRPC's continuous effort to promote religious peace. All papers in this Special Issue are dedicated to the WRPC's noble vision, categorized under three different foci: (1) creative, critical reading of the text and new theoretical frameworks to understand religious tension and conflict; (2) philosophical and spiritual solutions to inter-denominational and interreligious conflict; and (3) the instrumentality of religion to deal with social challenges and its power to bring hope and reconciliation. The first category features papers bringing in historical, analytical, and theoretical discussions on religious conflict. Watt's "Biblical Rhetoric of Separatism and Universalism and Its Intolerant Consequences" discusses the negative consequences of the sacred narratives of the two Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Christianity. The anti-Canaanites' pollution rhetoric of Judaism and the challenge of the early Christian community to that ideal of purity and its development, as a counter-narrative, into the universal rhetoric are his historical showcase to warn of the abuse and distortion of religious messages that every religious community can experience. According to his analysis, the problem occurs because we have the tendency to "set our traditions and texts against

each other". He suggests that we should not try to make "negative comparisons" to define and build the religious identity and communal solidarity. Jin Young Kim's article, "Understanding the Letter to the Romans in the Sect-Cult Development of Early Churches" attempts a new theoretical framework to better understand Paul's apologetic and missionary approach to the traditional Jewish community and particularly the Roman church. Her creative interpretation of the Romans with the cult-sect framework, which is modified by L. Michael White, sheds new light on the early church's perception of the other. Deviating from the traditional, Weber-Troeltsch's 'church-sect' typology, she argues that her new framework more clearly shows Paul's compassionate attitude toward the gentile churches with "the Greco-Roman virtue of self-mastery" and unbelieving Jews, seeking "the unified people of God". Mehta's "Christmas in the Room: Gender, Conflict, and Compromise in Multi-Religious Domestic Space" complicates and expands the scope of conversation on interfaith tension and conflict. She explores a new territory in which interfaith interactions, conflicts, and compromise occur. It is the domestic space, the home; its emotional stakes are much higher than that of the public square, often leading to a zero sum game. Not only does her article enrich the general conversation on our interfaith sensitivity and intelligence but it also gives us an important, timely task to investigate the religious conflict happening in the most personal and private domain.

The second category brings in philosophical conversation on the theme of interreligious harmony through three Korean examples: Jinul's eclecticism, syncretistic attempts by pre-Joseon Buddhism and Confucianism, and Suun Choe Je-u's pluralistic utilization of the Heavenly Will. In his paper "An Aristotelian Interpretation of Bojo Jinul and An Enhanced Moral Grounding", Lee revisits Jinul's historic contribution of harmonizing the divergent views of enlightenment in his Buddhist community. He utilizes Aristotle's hylomorphism to better explain Jinul's points on the mutual necessity and concurrence of sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation. The Aristotelian ideal, actuality, which is Buddha or Buddhahood in his case, precedes potentiality, which is the manifestation of the spiritual ideal. They are separate phenomena in the conventional time but a single experience in the ultimate time. Thus, Jinul promotes the mutual recognition and value of the Seon and Kyo schools: the former for essential transformation and the latter for the realization of the essence. Vermeersch's paper, titled "Syncretism, Harmonization, and Mutual Appropriation between Buddhism and Confucianism in Pre-Joseon Korea", offers a new explanation of interfaith perception and interaction between Buddhism and Confucianism in pre-Joseon Korea. He questions the traditional characterization, which is *hoetong* (會通) and harmony. He argues that these terms cannot properly reflect their active and creative engagement in embracing each other's values. Vermeersch utilizes the paradigm of syncretism, whose Korean meaning is somewhat negative but still useful to unravel the complexity of these two traditions' mutual perception. According to his reading of historical materials, each tradition shows syncretic characteristics, including ecumenism, inclusivism, compartmentalism, and eclecticism, in its various apologetic and political projects. Seong's paper, "The Basis for Coexistence Found from within: The Mystic Universality and Ethicality of Donghak", discusses Suun Choe Je-u's mystical, pluralistic philosophy. As already shown in numerous historical cases of syncretism and eclecticism by Korean religious communities, the effort to reconcile with the counter-religious tradition can be also found in the Donghak Movement (東學, Eastern Learning). Seong focuses on the mystical experiences and rituals in understanding Suun's apologetics. Differences and contradictions are dissolved by the larger cosmic principle of the Heavenly Will. According to Seong's analysis, Suun's objective was not to completely denounce the wisdom of Western Learning (西學), but reprimand its moral laxity caused by the lack of understanding and of the will to actualize the universal Heavenly Will in historical reality.

While the first two categories offer textual, philosophical, and ethnographic analysis of the root cause of religious conflict and solutions, the third category presents important historical cases, revealing the powerful role of religion in dealing with sufferings of life, including religious persecution, social chaos, social injustice, and interfaith power dynamic. Yoo's research on interfaith relationship in Jeju Island, titled "Similar but Superior: Rhetoric of Coexistence Employed by Religions in Jeju Island, Korea", presents an excellent case to demonstrate the general tendency of the Jejuians to get along

with people of different religions. His expertise in comparative religion and ethnographic research, including personal interviews with indigenous shamans, *simbang*, establishes a pattern of interaction, particularly of four faith communities: shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Their interactions have been, at times, defensive and even hostile to each other, but most often inclusive and utilitarian in highlighting their superiority and embracing ideas and rituals of others to look more attractive. According to Yoo, the *similar-but-superior* paradigm is not simply an artifice to dominate but a justified embrace of the heterogeneous, which has long been effective. Jihyun Kim's paper, "Enlightenment on the Spirit-Altar: Eschatology and Restoration of Morality at the King Kwan Shrine in *Fin de siècle* Seoul", presents extensive research on the idea of enlightenment, prevalent in the elite circle of the late Joseon dynasty. She argues that the dominant understanding of *kae hwa* (開化) overlooks an important usage. Her textual study, particularly her scrupulous attention to the details of the Corpus of Enlightenment, uncovers the purpose of the spirit-written texts, which was calling for moral recovery and transformation. Her proposition challenges the traditional demarcation between the pre-modern and modern ideas of enlightenment. At the center of the discourse on civilizational progress and moral recovery was religion, which was the worship of Thearch Kwan in her case. Similarly, the papers of Torrey and Minah Kim show a powerful role of religion in dealing with life crisis at both the personal and social levels. Torrey's research, "Confucian Exemplars and Catholic Saints as Models for Women in Nineteenth-Century Korea", not only discovers parallels between virtuous actions of women in Confucian and Catholic communities, but also highlights later their qualitative escalation into something that she calls "self-asserting heroism." Her parallel and comparative points lead to the proposition that the saints' stories offered Joseon women a new lifestyle choice and timely inspiration to overcome both domestic and social oppression. Minah Kim's paper, "Seeking Solidarity Between Protestant and Catholic Churches for Social Justice in Korea: The Case of the Korea Christian Action Organization for Urban Industrial Mission (Saseon)", gives special insight into the driving force, which Korean religious communities have been struggling to find, to have a strong sense of connection with and respect for each other. Saseon is an excellent and rare historical case of interfaith/intra-faith dialogue and collaboration in modern Korea. Clergy members, students, and community leaders from both Catholic and Protestant communities united under the common cause of social justice, particularly democratization and labor and farmers' movements. The key factor for their success was their focus on helping the powerless and hopeless, which is the universal mission of almost all religions, rather than projecting their theological claims on each other.

We, the guest editors, believe that our papers cover important topics with various methodologies, such as textual studies, historical analysis, philosophical inquiries, and ethnographic/anthropological studies. They enrich our conversation on religious conflict and coexistence not only for the Korean context, but also for other contexts in the world. Concluding our remarks, we want to express our deep appreciation to our contributors. Their creative works are invaluable in helping our intellectual journey to seek the coexistence and coprosperity of religion. We also thank Ms. Macy Zong, managing editor, for her support on every occasion. We hope that you enjoy our research. We look forward to receiving your feedback and continuing our conversation.

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## Reference

Kim, Andrew E. 2006. Korean Religious Culture and its Affinity to Christianity: The Rise of Protestant Christianity in South Korea. *Sociology of Religion* 61: 117–33. [CrossRef]



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