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The Rise of Religious Nones and Its Impact on Interreligious Dialogue: Examining “Religious Literacy” and “Meditation” as Mediating Mechanisms

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Abstract

As interactions between Eastern and Western religions increase, “interreligious dialogue (IRD)” has become more prevalent. This study investigates the evolving religious landscape of South Korea, shaped by the growing presence of “religious nones” (or simply “nones”), through the framework of IRD. Since the 1960s, IRD in South Korea has been predominantly led by Christian institutions and facilitated by experts, such as theologians and religious studies scholars. However, the rise of the nones is driving a profound shift in the dialogic paradigm. The traditional intellectual approach, which focused on identifying doctrinal similarities, is shifting toward an emphasis on practical dimensions, including personal religious experiences and the concept of salvation. In this shifting context, “religious literacy” and “meditation” are emerging as crucial points of convergence, not only for IRD but also for interactions between the religious and the nones. While the growing presence of the nones may initially lead to confusion and conflict, it has the potential, in the long run, to foster religious coexistence. South Korea serves as a notable case illustrating how IRD can open new pathways in the realm of praxis. Religious literacy enhances understanding and promotes a tolerant attitude toward the broader social relationships that religion cultivates, while meditation provides a shared platform for dialogue and engagement at the societal level. In this regard, Korea presents a particularly compelling case study, offering a critical examination of the feasibility of these possibilities.



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1. The Rise of Religious Nones and Its Implications for “Interreligious Dialogue (IRD)”

Encountering different religious traditions naturally raises the question: “In what ways are religions similar or different?” This inquiry is central to the academic field of the Comparative Study of Religion, which systematically examines the similarities and differences among diverse religious traditions. While encounters between religions can sometimes be sources of tension, they also present important opportunities for mutual enrichment. Historical evidence consistently demonstrates that religious differences have frequently escalated into conflicts.

Dialogue serves as a constructive means of encounter, developing deeper mutual understanding among religions and promoting peaceful coexistence. In the modern era, active exchanges between Eastern and Western religious traditions have spurred increased efforts in interreligious dialogue (IRD). In South Korea, where multiple religions coexist

vibrantly, engagement in IRD has rapidly expanded since the 1960s (Yun 1999, pp. 22–27). However, contemporary Korea is undergoing an unprecedented shift, with the proportion of individuals identifying as non-religious now exceeding half of the national population. Those unaffiliated with any religious organization are referred to by various terms, including “non-religious”, “religious nones”, “nones”, and “religiously unaffiliated.” Despite this significant demographic transformation, scholarly research on the impact of nones on IRD, religious conflicts, and coexistence remains limited, both in South Korea and globally.

The rise of the nones raises critical questions regarding their role in IRD and their impact on religious conflicts and coexistence. This paper explores these central issues, specifically analyzing how the growing presence of nones in South Korea may reconstruct the religious landscape within the framework of IRD. As South Korea experiences an ongoing trend of deepening secularization, these questions become increasingly pressing, offering essential insights into both the present and future religious dynamics of the nation. Historically, IRD in South Korea has been primarily driven by an intellectual approach that emphasized doctrinal commonalities among religious traditions. More recently, however, attention has shifted toward practical dimensions such as personal religious experiences and the notion of salvation. Within this evolving framework, “religious literacy” and “meditation” have emerged as important mediating concepts, with the potential to foster communication between religious adherents and nones and to mitigate religious conflict. South Korea offers a compelling case that illustrates these changing dynamics.

Despite the growing visibility of nones, empirical studies investigating whether they constitute a coherent or internally homogeneous group remain scarce. Moreover, few academic works have addressed how the rise of the nones may systematically reshape traditional IRD, influence patterns of interaction between religious and non-religious individuals, or affect broader conditions of peaceful coexistence. To address these gaps, this study adopts a twofold methodological approach. First, it presents a quantitative analysis of demographic trends and shifts in religious affiliation based on available statistical data. Second, it engages in a literature-based examination of the identity and diversity of the religious nones, drawing on relevant academic publications including journal articles and monographs. In addition, the study analyzes the historical development and dialogical modes of IRD in South Korea, alongside the increasing significance of religious literacy and meditation as emerging points of engagement. Ultimately, this research aims to lay the groundwork for future empirical investigations involving case studies, interviews, and participant observation.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 examines the history of IRD efforts in South Korea, situating them within the context of South Korea’s pluralistic religious landscape. It explores how South Korea’s dialogue initiatives have been shaped by global trends and highlights the rapid growth of religious nones as a crucial factor. Sections 3 and 4 analyze the transformations brought about by the emergence of nones, particularly in relation to the agents, content, objectives, and methods of IRD. These sections argue that future IRD must necessarily include nones and propose “religious literacy” and “meditation” as potential bridging mechanisms. Religious literacy equips community members with knowledge and fosters inclusive attitudes toward different religions, while meditation offers a shared experiential foundation, facilitating not only traditional inter-religious interactions but also engagements between the religious and the nones. Finally, Section 5 assesses the potential short-term and long-term impacts of the nones on religious conflict and coexistence in Korea.

2. South Korea's Multi-Religious Context and Interreligious Dialogue (IRD)

IRD encompasses interactions among individuals engaged in religious discourse, focused on religious themes, and pursued for various purposes, including persuasion, conversion, and mutual understanding. This paper conceptualizes IRD specifically as a communicative endeavor grounded in mutual understanding among equal participants, with the ultimate goal of promoting coexistence. Consequently, interactions primarily driven by persuasion or conversion, or those that incite conflict, cannot be considered as genuine dialogue. Moreover, authentic dialogue presupposes encounters among religiously diverse individuals, making it feasible only within or between communities marked by religious plurality. In this context, South Korea, with its dynamic and multi-religious society, serves as an ideal setting for IRD.

2.1. South Korea's Multi-Religious Context

In South Korea, various religious traditions have actively coexisted for an extended period (Baker 2008). While certain religions have dominated at different historical junctures, Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, alongside Western traditions like Catholicism and Protestantism, have been widely practiced. Shamanism has also maintained a long-standing presence, and numerous indigenous religions, including *Cheondogyo*, *Won Buddhism*, and *Jeungsangyo*, emerged in the modern era. South Korea's ability to sustain harmonious coexistence among various religious traditions without major conflicts represents a unique case in religious history. The following three defining features of Korea's multi-religious landscape serve as critical frameworks for understanding IRD.

Practical Religious Diversity. During the *Unified Silla* (676–935) and *Goryeo* (918–1392) periods, Buddhism was the dominant religion, whereas Confucianism became predominant during the *Joseon* Dynasty (1392–1910). However, even in these eras, multiple religious traditions, including shamanism, coexisted without instances of extreme violence.¹ Since the introduction of Christianity in the 19th century, South Korea has evolved into a fully multi-religious society, with no single dominant religion comparable to Christianity in Europe or Islam in the Middle East. Additionally, although precisely measuring the number of adherents is difficult due to low levels of institutional organization, Confucianism and shamanism continue to exert considerable influence in the country (Kang 1997, pp. 87–118). In summary, South Korea exemplifies vibrant religious diversity (J.-S. Kim 2000, pp. 43–44).

Balanced Distribution of Eastern and Western Religions. South Korea demonstrates a balanced integration of both Eastern and Western religious traditions. According to the 2015 *Population and Housing Census*, Protestants accounted for 19.7% of the population (9,676,000), followed by Buddhists at 15.5% (7,619,000) and Catholics at 7.9% (3,890,000) (Korea Statistical Office 2015). Similarly, a 2021 Gallup Korea survey reported that Protestants comprised 17% of the population, Buddhists 16%, and Catholics 6% (Gallup Korea 2022). The relatively balanced presence of Christianity from the West alongside Buddhism from the East is globally rare, presenting unique challenges for interreligious encounters and dialogue. The “balanced distribution” of religions in Korea developed gradually over an extended period, making it difficult to identify a single definitive cause. Nevertheless, it can be understood as the outcome of rapid social transformations since the nineteenth century, during which Catholicism and Protestantism expanded by offering forms of social consolation within a society where Confucianism and Buddhism had long been established as traditional belief systems. For example, Sung-Deuk Oak emphasizes that Protestantism

took root successfully by actively seeking “points of contact” between the Christian gospel and Korean cultural traditions (Oak 2013, pp. xvi–xviii).

A High Degree of Religious Freedom. As a multi-religious society, South Korea strongly upholds religious freedom. Although the late *Joseon* period (19th century) witnessed governmental persecution of Catholicism (Baker 2008, pp. 64–70), major religious conflicts have been rare in Korean history.² Today, South Koreans experience minimal social pressure when converting to a different religion or choosing to become nones, and families often include members with diverse religious affiliations. This high degree of religious freedom, characterized by flexible conversion and disaffiliation, has contributed to a highly competitive religious landscape in South Korea.

2.2. The History of Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) in South Korea

IRD is profoundly influenced by participants’ perceptions and attitudes toward the similarities and differences among religions. Overemphasizing similarities in dialogue risks overlooking the distinct characteristics of each religion, whereas hyper-focusing on differences may hinder meaningful communication. Effective dialogue requires participants to transcend stereotypes and prejudices toward religious others, fostering mutual respect and openness. The historical trajectory of IRD has been a complex and ongoing pursuit to establish and reaffirm these essential conditions.

IRD gained prominence in the West from the 1960s onward, initially spearheaded by Christian initiatives. Notably, the Catholic Church’s *Second Vatican Council* (1963–1965) and the establishment of the Ecumenical Dialogue Department by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1960 were pivotal developments (K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 64–72). Historically, Christianity upheld an exclusivist stance, encapsulated in the phrase “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church).” However, increasing interreligious encounters strengthened inclusivist approaches, such as Karl Rahner’s concept of “anonymous Christians”, which sought to incorporate other religious traditions within a dogmatic and inner-Christian framework (Rahner 1966, pp. 115–34). Eventually, pluralist perspectives emerged, recognizing the intrinsic value of different religions. John Hick was a leading proponent of this view, shifting dialogue frameworks from “Christ-centered” to “God-centered”, and ultimately to “Reality-centered” paradigms (Hick 1985).

However, Hick’s pluralist approach has been criticized for minimizing religious differences by interpreting diverse religious traditions as various culturally conditioned responses to the same Ultimate Reality. Critics argue that this perspective insufficiently respects the distinctive features of individual traditions, effectively reinterpreting them through the lens of a Western Enlightenment worldview. Such an approach, they contend, reflects an implicit universalism that imposes externally derived frameworks onto non-Western religions (Cobb 1982; Apczynski 1992). This tendency raises concerns that core aspects of certain traditions—such as the non-theistic orientation of Buddhism or the polytheistic elements of Hinduism—may be overlooked or misunderstood. Furthermore, Hick’s model tends to center dialogue on institutionalized religion and metaphysical concepts like Ultimate Reality, making it ill-suited to address the perspectives of religious nones and other non-religious worldviews that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary societies. This represents a significant limitation of his framework in today’s pluralistic and secular contexts.

In essence, attitudes toward IRD can be broadly categorized as exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist (Hick 1985, pp. 31–34; Han 1992, pp. 37–71). Understanding these categories is crucial for comprehending the complex dynamics of interreligious interactions.

In South Korea, IRD has closely mirrored global trends. While Korea has long maintained a multi-religious environment, systematic dialogue began in earnest in the 1960s,

initially led by Christian theologians such as Nam-dong Seo, Seon-hwan Byun, Dong-sik Yu, Kyung-jae Kim, and Jung-bae Lee, among others (Han 1992, pp. 37–71; J.-B. Lee 2007, pp. 46–47). Scholars of religious studies, including Hee-sung Gil, Yi-heum Yoon, and Jong-seo Kim, also played an active role in promoting dialogue (J.-S. Kim 2000, pp. 33–48; Gil 2002, pp. 1–28). Although Buddhist scholars such as Ki-young Lee and Yong-pyo Kim participated in dialogue, the movement was predominantly led by Christians (K.-Y. Lee 1990, pp. 207–26; Y.-P. Kim 2011, pp. 71–80). Buddhism’s relatively passive approach has been attributed to institutional exclusivism, Christianity’s assertive missionary strategies and unilateral attitudes, and a general lack of knowledge about other religions (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 46–47).³ The dialogue movement was largely shaped by the fact that nearly all theologians and religious scholars engaged in IRD had studied abroad, predominantly in the West. Even Buddhist scholars actively involved in the movement often had international academic experience.

In addition to intellectual dialogue efforts in theology, comparative religion, and Buddhist studies, distinctive practical movements emerged from a spiritual perspective to bridge religious differences. Figures such as Young-mo Yu, Seok-heon Ham, Heung-ho Kim, Hyun-ju Lee, and Ho-kyung Jeong sought a common foundation beyond religious boundaries through meditative and spiritual practices (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 65–68). These individuals aimed to transcend religious divides through profound spiritual experiences cultivated in personal religious practice. Such practice-oriented approaches continue to influence IRD efforts today.

In South Korea, IRD has mostly involved the country’s two largest religions, Christianity and Buddhism, with the central goal of encouraging peaceful coexistence. Dialogue has often been pursued from a pluralistic perspective, emphasizing that mutual understanding enriches each religious tradition. These dialogues have largely been dominated by theologians and religious scholars with extensive academic expertise, while most clergy and lay believers have rarely participated. Moreover, conservative religious groups have strongly opposed pluralistic dialogue initiatives from an exclusivist standpoint. The expulsion of Methodist theologian Seon-hwan Byun in 1992, who actively promoted dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, exemplifies the conflicts surrounding these interreligious efforts (Shim 2001, pp. 297–319). The South Korean IRD movement has experienced a notable decline since the 1990s, primarily due to its limitation as an intellectual effort facilitated by a small group of specialists and the rapid transformation of South Korea’s religious landscape, particularly driven by the rise of nones, among others.

2.3. *Changing Religious Landscape and the Rise of Nones in South Korea*

Since the 2000s, South Korea’s religious landscape has undergone meaningful transformations. Importantly, interactions with Islam, which had previously been minimal, have noticeably increased. This shift can be attributed to various sociopolitical factors, including the influx of international students, labor migration, intermarriage, and political asylum, all contributing to a substantial rise in the Muslim population. As a result, instances of social tension have emerged, such as the controversy surrounding the construction of an Islamic Mosque in Daegu (Chi 2023) and the debates over the arrival of Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island (Ko 2018). Simultaneously, evangelical Protestantism has adopted an increasingly fundamentalist stance on political and social issues, including homosexuality, thereby exacerbating religiously motivated tensions and conflicts (Kang 2020). Furthermore, the missionary activities and religious practices of newly emerging Protestant sects, such as “the Christian Gospel Mission (commonly known as JMS)” and *Shincheonji*, have had ongoing and profound social repercussions (Roh 2013; Seo 2024). In sum, religiously driven societal conflicts have intensified in contemporary South Korea.

Concurrently, the number of nones has risen rapidly. The global trend of increasing irreligiosity is evident, with the proportion of nones rising from 11.77% in 2007 to 16% in 2015 (Pew Research Center 2017). In the United States, the prevalence of nones reached 26% in 2023 (PRRI 2024). In South Korea, the growth rate of the nones has been even more pronounced. According to the Korean Statistical Office's Population and Housing Census, the share of nones increased from 46.9% in 2005 to 56.1% in 2015 (Korea Statistical Office 2015). Similarly, a Gallup Korea study reported an increase from 46.5% in 2004 to 50% in 2014 and 61% in 2021 (Gallup Korea 2022). A noteworthy generational disparity exists in religious affiliation: as of 2021, while 41% of individuals aged 60 and older identified as nones, this proportion surged to 78% among those in their teens and twenties.

However, as scholars have pointed out, nones in South Korea do not constitute a homogeneous group with a unified identity (Kang 1997, pp. 107–13; Woo 2016, pp. 43–46; H.-J. Choi 2019, pp. 14–17). According to Gallup Korea, in 2021, 23% of nones believed in the existence of the soul after death, while 45% accepted the concept of miracles (Gallup Korea 2022). A study conducted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in the same year similarly found that 24.4% of nones acknowledged the afterlife, and 34.9% accepted the existence of supernatural beings (The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2022). While the common characteristic among nones is their lack of affiliation with institutionalized religion, this does not necessarily imply adherence to a materialist worldview. Rather, their identities remain highly complex.⁴

The rapid transformation of South Korea's religious landscape, driven by the growing number of nones, has significantly curtailed IRD. Additionally, heightened tensions stemming from the influx of Muslim immigrants, the aggressive proselytization by new religious movements, and the increasing fundamentalist tendencies within religious groups have further intensified societal conflicts. Paradoxically, in a context where religious authority is diminishing and the population of nones is expanding, the need for IRD has become even more pressing. Nevertheless, the growing majority of nones and their multifaceted identities suggest that traditional approaches to IRD may no longer be viable.

3. The Shift in Dialogue Paradigm and “Religious Literacy”

The growing number of nones is profoundly reshaping South Korea's religious landscape across multiple dimensions. If this trend continues, the decline of institutional religions will become inevitable. The expanding presence of the nones is not only limiting IRD but is also poised to fundamentally redefine its paradigm—including its participants, content, objectives, and methods.

3.1. Agents, Objectives, and Themes of IRD

In South Korea, IRD has traditionally been conducted by individuals directly engaged in religious scholarship and theological discourse, including Christian theologians, scholars of religion, Buddhist academics, clergy, and a select group of devout practitioners. However, the fact that nones now constitute a majority necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of the agents of dialogue. The inclusion of nones as active participants is imperative. A discourse on religion that remains confined exclusively to religious affiliates can no longer retain its societal relevance if it systematically excludes the perspectives of the nones.

The diversification of dialogue participants brings about a corresponding transformation in both its objectives and thematic scope. Traditionally, IRD aimed to facilitate peaceful coexistence among religious communities by promoting an understanding of doctrinal commonalities and differences. However, contemporary discourse must extend beyond interreligious considerations to engage with the multifaceted intersections between reli-

gion and society. Core issues now include resolving personal and societal conflicts related to religious identity, formulating ethical and practical standards for religious practice, examining the evolving social functions of religious institutions, assessing the public utility of religious infrastructure and heritage, and addressing other related concerns.

The dispute over the construction of a mosque in *Daegu*, along with the societal disruptions caused by the controversial proselytization strategies and religious practices of emerging Protestant sects, began as intrareligious or doctrinal disputes but soon extended into broader concerns, such as urban planning and immigration policy. In an era of heightened social interconnectivity, religious conflicts increasingly produce immediate and far-reaching impacts on entire communities. Consequently, in a sociocultural landscape where the non-religious demographic continues to grow, IRD must be reframed to prioritize mitigating religion's potential societal externalities while simultaneously maximizing its constructive contributions to the public sphere.

In South Korea, both central and local governments are expected to act as key participants in IRD. Since the post-liberation period, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has been responsible for various administrative functions intended to encourage peaceful religious coexistence. These functions include facilitating dialogue and exchanges among religious leaders. The Religious Affairs Office currently implements state-funded initiatives to prevent religious discrimination and administers policies for the preservation and maintenance of Buddhist temples under the framework of cultural heritage conservation (Seong 2024, pp. 19–21). Given that nones now make up a majority, the Religious Affairs Office must justify the allocation of public funds for temple preservation under a framework distinct from previous rationales. Similarly, initiatives designed to prevent religious discrimination must be expanded beyond their current focus on central and local government officials and educators to cover a broader range of occupational sectors across society. Furthermore, the educational content of such initiatives must explicitly affirm that nones have the right to refrain from religious belief and that this right must be upheld and protected across all domains of social life.

3.2. *Interreligious Dialogue (IRD) and “Religious Literacy”*

Changes in the agents and objectives of dialogue are bound to bring about shifts in both its content and methods as well. Traditionally, the primary modes of IRD have included panel discussions, academic presentations, the publication of research papers and monographs, and interfaith gatherings. Notable institutions that have contributed to facilitating such dialogues include the Korea Dialogue Academy and the Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP), both of which have been at the forefront of cultivating interfaith engagement in South Korea.⁵ The shared goals of these organizations have been to promote an understanding of religious differences from a pluralistic perspective, facilitate interreligious exchanges, and encourage the peaceful coexistence of a variety of religious traditions. In the contemporary context, enhancing “religious literacy” among all members of society—regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof—has become essential for advancing social cohesion and improving individual well-being.

Within this evolving context, the concept of religious literacy has gained increasing significance. Religious literacy is defined as “the ability to understand the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in (American) public life” (Prothero 2020, p. 17). This concept emerged within the field of religious studies, grounded in the recognition that knowledge about religion nurtures attitudes of inclusivity and tolerance. Importantly, religious literacy is not intended to cultivate personal faith or religious devotion (Marcus and Ralph 2021, pp. 22–25). Rather, it serves as a foundational tool for navigating religious diversity in pluralistic so-

cieties. Religious literacy can also enhance traditional IRD, as engagement in such dialogue has been shown to actively reinforce attitudes of tolerance and inclusion (Ciocan 2024, pp. 526–39). In this way, religious literacy and IRD create a mutually reinforcing cycle that encourages greater religious tolerance. In South Korea, one of the most frequently cited obstacles to effective interfaith dialogue has been the lack of knowledge about other religious traditions (Gil 2000, pp. 25–26).

Religious knowledge is equally crucial for religious adherents. A comprehensive understanding of one's own religious tradition is not only a prerequisite for engaging in traditional IRD but also essential for creating meaningful interactions with nones. Uncritical certainty in one's own religion often instills a sense of superiority and exclusivist attitudes, thereby reducing dialogue and interaction to mere acts of persuasion or proselytization. In contrast, a more constructive approach to interreligious engagement requires "intra-religious dialogue", in which individuals deepen their understanding of their own faith before engaging with others. This process is essential to ensuring that IRD remains mutually enriching and free from coercive intentions (K.-J. Kim 1991, pp. 397–98).

Religious literacy equally contributes to the promotion of meaningful interactions between religious individuals and nones. A lack of religious understanding is often cited as the root cause of social prejudice and conflict, while enhanced religious literacy is seen as a pathway to greater social cohesion and civic inclusion (Jackson 2014). In secularized societies, religious literacy includes not only knowledge of religious beliefs and practices but also of atheistic value systems, thus serving as a tool for civic integration. It offers a shared platform for collaborative engagement across religious and non-religious communities, particularly in areas such as justice, peacebuilding, and environmental sustainability (Wright 2004). For example, the growing presence of Muslims in South Korea underscores the need for all members of society to acquire at least a basic understanding of Islam to cultivate greater cultural and religious tolerance.

Educational initiatives in this field aim to address the roles of both religious and secular perspectives in society from a neutral standpoint, thereby reducing mutual prejudice and laying a foundation for peaceful coexistence (Prothero 2008). Programs such as Harvard University's *Religious Literacy Project* have been recognized for fostering mutual understanding and easing social tensions in multicultural, multireligious contexts (Moore 2015). This emphasis on inclusive worldview comprehension in the public sphere aligns with Jürgen Habermas's call for dialogue within what he terms a "post-secular society" (Habermas 2008).

Building on this foundation, a range of practical strategies can be pursued. Above all, ensuring the neutrality of dialogue spaces and facilitators is essential. Expanded forms of IRD should be hosted in non-sectarian settings such as universities, public institutions, and civil society organizations. Facilitators should include not only religious leaders but also scholars of religion, sociologists, and other neutral actors. In addition, programs should be tailored to the diversity within the nones—for instance, meditation workshops may appeal to SBNRs (Spiritual But Not Religious), while initiatives focused on social justice may resonate with secular humanists or atheists. Finally, empirical and participatory research is needed to further demonstrate the value of including religious nones in expanded models of IRD and to develop effective practices for their engagement.

Additionally, the overwhelmingly high proportion of nones among younger generations makes them more vulnerable to exploitative or unethical missionary practices due to their limited exposure to religious knowledge and experience. In such instances, religious literacy can serve as an effective tool for addressing these challenges, equipping individuals with the knowledge necessary to engage with religion critically and constructively.

Thus, religious literacy should be integrated into civic education frameworks as a means of promoting the common good (Walker et al. 2021, pp. 1–16).

Contrary to common assumptions, a post-religious society—characterized by declining religious affiliation—entails an even greater societal awareness of religion and stronger commitments to tolerance. This need comes from the fact that, in an era of hyperconnectivity, where social exchanges have exponentially increased, religion remains a powerful force capable of intensifying conflicts. Moreover, the growing complexity of religious identity, fueled by the rise of nones, underscores the urgent need for a shared foundation for dialogue and engagement. Within this context, “meditation” as a spiritual practice is being re-evaluated and recognized as a potential bridge for fostering understanding across religious and non-religious divides.

4. The Potential of “Meditation” as a Common Ground

IRD in South Korea has not achieved great success. Religious traditions other than Christianity have generally been less involved in dialogue, and the number of active participants has remained limited. In fact, the IRD movement, which was relatively active in the 1960s, experienced a notable decline after the 1990s. The growing number of nones has further constrained the scope of IRD. Against this backdrop, meditation—a practice deeply embedded in various religious traditions—has emerged as a promising alternative framework for stimulating engagement (Y.-M. Song 2024, p. 52). The potential of meditation as a point of convergence in IRD, as well as in interactions between religious individuals and nones, is increasingly being recognized at multiple levels.

4.1. Establishing a Practical Common Ground

The attempt to establish a foundation for IRD through meditation has emerged multiple times both in South Korea and internationally. John Hick sought to create a universal common ground by shifting the dialogue from a “Christ-centered” perspective to a “God-centered” one. In response to critiques that his approach remained theistic, he later transitioned to a “Reality-centered” framework, emphasizing the practical dimension of salvation (Hick 1989, pp. 248–49). For Hick, salvation is not a singular event but an ongoing process of personal fulfillment (Hick 1989, pp. 300–1).⁶ By highlighting the impact of religious experience on real-life practice, Hick identified meditation as a means of directly encountering “Ultimate Reality”, the fundamental source of all religions (Hick 1983, p. 380). He argued that across religious traditions, Ultimate Reality is universally regarded as the object of both worship and meditation, thereby positioning meditation as a shared experiential foundation for IRD (Hick 1985, p. 249).

The “contemplative dialogue” proposed by Trappist monk Thomas Merton can be understood in a similar vein (Park 2024, pp. 59–105). Merton argued that meaningful engagement between religious traditions does not necessarily need to be grounded in doctrinal discussions but can instead be effectively facilitated through meditation and direct religious experience (Merton 1967, pp. 205–6). Merton actively engaged in various Eastern meditative traditions in an effort to integrate them with Catholic spiritual disciplines. Notably, while he initially held an exclusivist religious stance, his encounters and dialogues with Eastern religious traditions eventually led him toward a practical pluralism that sought spiritual fulfillment and salvation through contemplative practice. His approach exemplifies how meditation can serve as a transformative and integrative medium in interfaith engagement.

Similar approaches have also emerged in South Korea in the context of exploring the possibility of dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity (J.-Y. Lee 2005, pp. 167–84). Hee-sung Gil emphasized the necessity of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in South Korea

but acknowledged the significant theological differences—particularly regarding the concept of God—that made it difficult to establish a solid foundation for dialogue (Gil 2005, pp. 102–6). While Gil and other scholars recognized the pressing need for interreligious engagement, they also grappled with the challenge of bridging the doctrinal and philosophical divide between the two traditions. The breakthrough, however, was found in the personal experience and in the practice that enables such an experience—meditation (Byun 1982, pp. 153–79; Gil 2000, pp. 1–35; J.-B. Lee 2007, pp. 73–105; K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 7–56). Since Buddhism has long emphasized meditation as a core spiritual practice, and Christianity has rediscovered its own mystical traditions, some scholars argue that a shared spiritual foundation can be found in their respective contemplative practices.

For this reason, Meister Eckhart, a medieval Catholic mystic often referred to as an “anonymous Buddhist” (Graham 1963) has garnered considerable attention in Korea. Scholars have highlighted the striking similarities between Eckhart’s understanding of divinity and the Buddhist concept of “emptiness” (空, *Śūnyatā*). Additionally, Eckhart’s emphasis on “self-emptying” (*Gelassenheit*) and “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*) as essential aspects of the spiritual journey closely parallels Buddhist soteriological frameworks, positioning his mystical thought as a potential common ground for IRD (Byun 1990, pp. 358–59; Gil 2005, pp. 99–133; K.-J. Kim 2014, pp. 7–56). Thus, both the intellectual dimension—interpreting Ultimate Reality—and the practical dimension—mystical contemplation and spiritual practice—have been recognized as important points of convergence in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

The intellectual endeavor to identify doctrinal commonalities from a universalist perspective has faced substantial criticism for overlooking the concrete differences among religious traditions (Cobb 1982; Apaczynski 1992, p. 45). Such approaches have struggled to resonate with devout practitioners who uphold the absolute authority of their own religious doctrines. Thus, intellectual attempts to reconcile doctrinal differences have gradually shifted toward emphasizing individual religious experience and the practical dimension of salvation. This transition reflects a broader movement away from theoretical abstraction and toward a recognition of the tangible, positive effects of religion on human life. Within this context, the value of meditation has been rediscovered as a shared spiritual practice. Furthermore, as meditation becomes increasingly detached from its original religious frameworks, it has emerged as a significant point of convergence for both religious individuals and nones.

4.2. The Emergence of Meditation as a Common Ground

Recent trends in South Korean religion highlight the growing emphasis on individual engagement in meditation practices. A prominent example is the *Templestay* program, in which Buddhist temples offer laypeople the opportunity to experience traditional Buddhist practices, including meditation. Interestingly, the majority of participants join the program not with the intent of converting to Buddhism, but rather to seek physical and mental well-being through meditation.

Since the *Jogye* Order, the largest Buddhist sect in South Korea, first introduced the program in 2002, more than 6.4 million people have participated, with over half of them being non-Buddhists (Hanguk Munhwa Hongbowon [Korean Culture Promotion Service] 2022). Encouraged by the success of the *Templestay* program, the *Jogye* Order has expanded its approach beyond its traditional emphasis on *Ganhwa Seon* (看話禪, *Kanhwa Chan*) meditation, incorporating elements from *Vipassana* meditation in *Theravāda* Buddhism as well as mindfulness meditation popularized in Western contexts (Y.-S. Song 2016, pp. 607–39). However, an ironic contrast underscores the shifting landscape of contemporary South Korean religion: while the *Templestay* program has enjoyed immense success, the number

of registered Buddhist adherents in South Korea has declined by approximately 3 million (H.-C. Jang 2018, pp. 191–93). This irony encapsulates a broader trend in South Korean religion, where interest in spiritual practices such as meditation is growing, even as institutional religious affiliation continues to decline.

In response to modern spiritual aspirations, South Korean Catholicism has recently undertaken efforts to revive its tradition of spiritual exercises (H.-J. Choi 2012, pp. 137–56). Historically, the mystical tradition within Catholicism, which emphasizes spiritual discipline and personal religious experience, has remained on the margins, often subjected to skepticism and suppression. However, in recent decades, Catholic initiatives to rediscover and revitalize mystical traditions have gained momentum, leading to the popularization of contemplative practices that were once exclusively practiced by monastic orders. *Centering Prayer*, which originates from the medieval text *the Cloud of Unknowing*, has gained particular prominence (Keating 2007; J.-H. Kim 2011). In Korea, *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*, *Lectio Divina*, the *Jesus Prayer*, and other contemplative practices are now gradually spreading among the laity.

This trend reflects the growing contemporary inclination to seek physical and mental well-being, as well as existential meaning, through meditation—regardless of one’s religious beliefs. Meditation is rapidly expanding across various sectors of South Korean society, including psychotherapy, medicine, education, and corporate training, signaling its transition beyond traditional religious boundaries. A prime example of this trend is the widespread adoption of “mindfulness” meditation, which has its roots in Buddhist *Vipassanā* but has been adapted for secular settings through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Since the 1970s, Kabat-Zinn’s *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) program has introduced mindfulness into hospitals, schools, and corporate environments, enabling its use across diverse sociocultural contexts regardless of religious background (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Baer 2003; Brown and Ryan 2003). In parallel, the field of neuroscience has contributed empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of meditation in enhancing brain structure, cognitive function, and emotional regulation. These scientific findings have helped reduce cultural resistance to meditation and encouraged religious nones to adopt it as a tool for psychological well-being (Tang et al. 2015).

In an era marked by widespread stress and growing concerns over mental health, meditation has become a significant resource for stress management and the promotion of individual well-being (Creswell 2017). Recent research also suggests that meditation may foster prosocial emotions such as empathy and compassion (Goyal et al. 2014). Consequently, many individuals today engage in meditation not as a spiritual or religious act, but as a means of enhancing psychological health (Grossman et al. 2004), facilitating personal development and self-growth (Goleman and Davidson 2017), or deriving evidence-based practical benefits (Schmidt 2016). In response to this shift, forms of meditation that are perceived as religiously neutral—such as mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 1990), Transcendental Meditation (Ospina et al. 2007), and breathing meditation (Tang et al. 2007)—have gained broad acceptance and application in both clinical and everyday settings.

The modern tendency to selectively adopt and utilize meditation as a means of enhancing adaptability to life’s challenges is commonly categorized under the broad concept of “healing” (H.-R. Kim 2018, pp. 77–82). However, healing should not be hastily interpreted as the pursuit of a new form of religiosity, as the majority of nones do not engage in meditation with the intent of gaining religious insight or experiencing transcendence. Some nones deliberately seek to fulfill their spiritual aspirations through practices such as meditation while remaining outside institutionalized religious frameworks. This phenomenon is encapsulated by the *Spiritual But Not Religious* (SBNR) paradigm⁷ and is also linked to mysticism, which emphasizes extraordinary states of consciousness and transfor-

mative experiences (Parsons 2022, pp. 79–92). From a religious studies perspective, such trends align with the argument that personal religious experience, rather than doctrinal systems or institutional structures, constitutes the core of religion (James 1902, p. 36).

Korean religious traditions have long emphasized the significance of personal experience acquired through spiritual practice. In the modern era, South Koreans—regardless of their religious background—continue to selectively adopt and utilize various meditative and contemplative techniques according to their needs (Woo 2008, pp. 36–44). This strongly suggests that meditation can serve as a vital conduit for engagement between religious and nones in South Korea. This idea resonates with the religious approaches of figures such as Young-mo Ryu, Seok-heon Ham, and Heung-ho Kim, who sought to integrate personal spiritual experiences across different religious traditions through contemplative practices (C.-S. Lee 2009, pp. 65–68). The success of the *Templestay* program not only reflects a longstanding trajectory in Korean religious history but also reinforces the notion that meditation has the potential to serve as a common ground for both religious individuals and nones.

5. Conclusions: The Nones, Religious Literacy, and Meditation

The rise of nones in South Korea has emerged as a critical factor in reshaping both IRD and the overall religious landscape. How does the increasing presence of the nones influence religious conflict and coexistence in South Korea? In the short term, negative effects are anticipated. Some religious groups have responded to the rise of the nones by adopting strategies of heightened distinctiveness. Conservative Protestantism, perceiving religious disaffiliation as an existential threat, has sought to reinforce internal cohesion by adopting fundamentalist stances on political and social issues. Notable examples include recent anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Muslim movements. Additionally, some new religious movements, aiming to attract the growing non-religious demographic, have engaged in aggressive proselytization, further exacerbating social tensions.

These responses not only undermine IRD but also unnecessarily escalate competition and conflict among religious groups. Furthermore, such trends risk damaging the public perception of religion, potentially accelerating the growth of the nones and creating a vicious cycle of religious disaffiliation. The response of South Korean Protestant churches to COVID-19 provides empirical evidence of this phenomenon. Conflicts between certain churches and the government over restrictions on in-person worship, as well as the role of church gatherings in superspreading events, contributed to a decline in public trust in Protestantism and a decrease in its adherents (Seong 2021, pp. 112–19).⁸

In a highly competitive religious marketplace, a negative public image can be detrimental to the sustainability and growth of religious traditions. Contemporary individuals—characterized by high levels of education and a strong awareness of individual rights—are more critical of religion than ever before. Moreover, South Korea's tradition of peaceful religious coexistence remains strong.⁹ As nones surpass the majority threshold, this trend is expected to further reinforce the stability of religious coexistence. In other words, in the long term, the expansion of the non-religious demographic is likely to serve as a powerful force in nurturing interreligious harmony.

Sociological research suggests that the rise of the nones is prompting religious communities to reassess their roles in society and to engage in dialogue and cooperation with greater openness. In her analysis of the growing number of nones in the United Kingdom, Linda Woodhead argues that this demographic shift is compelling religious institutions and believers to reconsider their social identities and responsibilities. She anticipates that the emergence of religious nones will lead religious actors to recognize new social realities and adopt a more inclusive and dialogical stance (Woodhead 2016). Similarly, Steve

Bruce contends that the broader secularization process—marked by the declining influence of religion in modern society—is a major factor encouraging religious individuals to re-evaluate their engagement with the public sphere. He suggests that the diminished social authority of religion can serve as a catalyst for religious communities to adopt more open and cooperative approaches to intergroup relations (Bruce 2011).

Hans Küng famously stated: “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions” (Küng 1991, p. 31). However, the emergence of religious fundamentalism intertwined with political extremism in South Korea demonstrates that even in a post-religious society, religion can still serve as a source of conflict or worsen pre-existing societal tensions. As communities become more heterogeneous and fragmented—particularly with the rise of distinct religious and non-religious identity groups—the potential for social discord increases alongside religious diversity. In an era of hyperconnectivity, where differences in religious identity can easily escalate into conflict, the need to transform these differences into opportunities for dialogue, coexistence, and mutual development has become more urgent than ever.

The shifting religious landscape of South Korea suggests that IRD can achieve new breakthroughs at a practical level. Religious literacy enhances understanding of and tolerance toward the broader societal functions of religion, while meditation can serve as a shared experiential platform that promotes engagement and dialogue across religious and secular communities. Unprecedented changes are unfolding at a rapid pace, making it challenging to predict the outcomes with clarity. However, South Korea can be a crucial testing ground for these possibilities, offering a compelling case study that not only illustrates the evolving role of religion in modern society but also provides valuable insights into its future role in cultivating social harmony.

Nevertheless, these findings should be considered in light of certain limitations. This research does not yet provide a systematic analysis of the historical, social, and religious factors underlying Korea’s “balanced distribution” of Eastern and Western traditions, nor does it clearly link the rapid rise of Protestantism to the claim that the growth of nones is reshaping IRD. The diversity within nones (e.g., unbelief, disaffiliation, spirituality-seeking) remains largely unexamined. Future research will differentiate these subtypes through primary and secondary sources, empirical surveys, and targeted cross-national comparisons, thereby clarifying underlying mechanisms and offering practical implications for IRD in contemporary Korea.

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Notes

- ¹ Indeed, during the *Joseon* dynasty, Confucianism was institutionalized as the dominant state ideology, leading to the systematic suppression of other religious traditions. Buddhism was marginalized through measures such as temple closures and the confiscation of temple properties (J.-S. Choi 1994). Shamanism was similarly stigmatized as superstition, although it continued persist widely in popular religious practices (Yoo 1985). The introduction of Catholicism in the late eighteenth century further heightened religious tensions; its rejection of Confucian ancestral rites was perceived as a direct challenge to established social norms, resulting in severe state-led persecution.

- 2 Although Korean Protestantism achieved remarkable growth for various reasons during Korea's modernization process from the late 19th century onward (Pak 2002; S.-H. Jang 2018), it also faced significant challenges similar to those encountered by Korean Catholicism. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), Protestantism suffered severe suppression due to its close ties to nationalist resistance movements. Major oppressive policies included mandatory participation in *Shinto* shrine worship, the imprisonment of Christian leaders involved in independence activities following the March First Movement of 1919, censorship of religious publications, and forced organizational restructuring under colonial authority (H.-S. Kim 1994). Furthermore, Protestantism underwent severe persecution under the socialist regime established in North Korea after liberation (T. S. Lee 2010, pp. 60–72). This repression, coupled with the large-scale migration of North Korean Protestants to the South, significantly contributed to shaping the staunchly anti-communist orientation of South Korean Protestantism in the years that followed.
- 3 Kim Yong-pyo notes that Buddhism is exclusivist at the institutional level, inclusivist doctrinally, and pluralist at the experiential level (Y.-P. Kim 2000).
- 4 The term “religious nones” refers to a sociological category encompassing individuals who do not identify with any particular religious tradition. This group includes atheists, agnostics, and those who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNRs). In contrast, the concept of “the secular” denotes a condition or process in which religious authority and norms are marginalized or excluded from the public sphere. As articulated by Charles Taylor (2007), secularism primarily refers not to individual belief or affiliation but to the declining influence of religion in institutional, political, and societal domains. Meanwhile, the notion of “the post-religious” highlights a context in which traditional religious worldviews and institutions have significantly receded or lost their relevance in both social and personal life. This term is often used to describe the broader cultural shift away from institutional religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).
- 5 The Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP) was established in 1986 and comprises seven major religious orders in South Korea, including Catholicism, Buddhism, and Protestantism. It is an organization dedicated to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among different religious traditions in Korea. Its primary initiatives include IRD and cooperation projects, exchanges between South and North Korean religious communities, and international exchange programs. The Korea Dialogue Academy originated as the Christian Academy, founded in 1965 by Rev. Won-yong Kang to promote Christian engagement in social issues. In 2000, it was renamed the Korea Dialogue Academy, and it continues to implement various programs related to the role of religion in social participation, including IRD initiatives. (Korea Dialogue Academy, <http://www.daemuna.or.kr/ko> accessed on 14 August 2025).
- 6 Similarly, Paul Knitter transitioned from a theory-centered approach to IRD to a practice-oriented perspective, emphasizing a “common goal” centered on the concept of salvation (Knitter 1988, pp. 185–87).
- 7 The category “SBNRs”—those who identify as “spiritual but not religious”—refers to individuals who reject affiliation with institutional religious traditions while actively pursuing personal and inward forms of spirituality (Fuller 2001). SBNRs may be considered a subcategory of nones; however, the broader category of nones also includes atheists, agnostics, and others who do not engage in spiritual seeking. While the designation “religious none” is based on the absence of formal religious affiliation, SBNRs are defined by their proactive engagement in spiritual exploration and subjective experience, independent of institutional ties. In this sense, most SBNRs fall within the scope of the nones, but not all nones qualify as SBNRs. For instance, a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 35% of Protestants in the United States identified themselves as SBNRs (Pew Research Center 2017).
- 8 A 2023 survey conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea (CEMK) further illustrates this trend. Among non-religious respondents, only 8.8% expressed trust in the words and actions of Protestants, while a mere 3.2% identified Protestantism as the most trustworthy religion. In contrast, Catholicism (17.5%) and Buddhism (12.2%) received higher trust ratings. However, the most common response was ‘none’ (56.4%), reflecting the growing secularization of South Korean society (Gidogggyo Yulli Silcheon Undong [the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea. CEMK] 2023), <https://cemk.org/resource/29349/> (accessed on 14 August 2025).
- 9 For instance, Gil claims that Confucian cultural foundations and democratic institutions are often cited as key mechanisms for preventing the escalation of religious conflicts (Gil 2002, pp. 24–25).

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