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Religion in Korea: Of Faith and Freedoms

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Throughout history, religion has exerted a decisive influence on political decision-making in Korea. Identifying any single religion as the principal factor shaping Korean patterns of behavior, however, is far from straightforward. Korean culture is better understood as a melting pot in which multiple religious and philosophical traditions have intermingled. Religious traditions and doctrines persist in contemporary South Korean society, while North Korean policymakers maintain that their population has chosen instead to embrace the wisdom associated with the Kim family. Confucianism is frequently said to continue to shape patterns of behavior in both North and South Korea. Other accounts emphasize the considerable influence of Christianity. North Korea's first leader, Kim Il-sung, for example, grew up in a strictly Christian environment. In more recent years, by contrast, two South Korean presidents have been removed from office following allegations that, among other factors, excessive shamanic influence had led them to act improperly. Nor can the profound influence of Buddhism on the development of Korean culture reasonably be denied. This paper seeks to illustrate the richness of thought to which Korea's religious and philosophical traditions have contributed.

People visiting Seoul for the first time are often surprised by the large number of illuminated crosses visible on the buildings they pass on the way from the airport to their hotel. In a country whose religious and philosophical traditions have historically also been rooted in Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism, it may seem somewhat strange that Christianity holds such a strong position. Figures vary, but Christianity is the largest religion, and approximately 30 percent of South Korea's population identify as Christian.[1] Of the fourteen presidents who have held the highest office since the Republic of Korea was established in 1948, most have identified themselves as Christian.[2]

1 20 percent Protestant and 11 percent Catholic. https://hrcopinion.co.kr/en/archives/34782.

2 The first president, Syngman Rhee (president, 1948–1960), was Methodist; Yun Bo-seon (Yun Po-sun, 1960–1962) was Presbyterian; Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) was Presbyterian; Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) were Presbyterians; Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) was Catholic; and the current president, Lee Jae-myung, who took office in 2025, is Presbyterian. The recently removed Yoon Suk-yeol (2022–2025) was baptized Catholic but was a practicing Presbyterian.

In North Korea, by contrast, Christian influence is today largely nonexistent, but in the early twentieth century Pyongyang was described as the "Jerusalem of the East." A recently published book, Jonathan Cheng's *Korean Messiah: Kim Il Sung and the Christian Roots of North Korea's Personality Cult* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2026), describes how the first leader of the North Korean state, Kim Il-sung, grew up in a Christian home.

Religious freedom officially exists in both South and North Korea, but in practice the differences between the two Korean states are vast.[3] In the South, not only is Christianity strong, but Buddhism also has a conspicuous presence. Several Confucian traditions likewise remain alive. When it comes to religious influence on political decisions, however, it has been shamanic contacts that have caused problems for South Korean presidents in recent years. In the cases of both Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) and President Yoon Suk-yeol (2022–2025), the improper influence of shamans on political decision-making has been cited as one of the reasons for their removal from office. Shamans were influential in early Korean village communities, but they are usually regarded as something belonging to the past rather than to modern society. The notion that even heads of state and government in South Korea might be influenced by what many would call ancient superstitions has raised many eyebrows.

Shamanism

Shamanism has existed in Northeast Asia for as long as human beings have built societies there. In his study *Shamanismen in norra Asien* [*Shamanism in Northern Asia*], the Swedish scholar Jonas Stadling (1847–1935) described the important roles shamans played in early societies. Although most of what he reported concerned Siberian peoples, there are obvious similarities between his descriptions and the ways shamans have acted in both Korea and Japan.[4]

One clear similarity is bird symbolism. According to Stadling, the Yakuts used to mark shamans' graves with carved wooden birds in order to warn possible visitors not to touch them or come too close. When a shaman was called upon to cure someone possessed by an evil spirit, or to save the soul said to have left a sick patient, the shaman sometimes used symbolic birds to help capture it.

In Japan, bird symbolism is found in front of all Shinto shrines in the form of the gates called *torii* (鳥居), whose meaning may be translated as "a place where birds dwell." For example, an archaeological excavation just outside Ōsaka uncovered wooden birds attached to poles.[5] Outside Korean villages, poles with wooden birds, *sotdae*, were also often erected. The birds may have served to mark territory, much as Shinto shrines also did, to some extent.

Bird symbolism was also expressed in other ways. In the mythical account of the Japanese heroic figure Yamato Takeru, he is transformed into a great white bird after his death. His story resembles in many respects that of the Finnish hero Lemminkäinen in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, in which the hero's mother turns into a bird and flies over sea and land in search of her dead son. In Siberian shamanism, the soul of a dead shaman was believed to turn into a bird that could reach the spirit world with the help of its wings.

There are also other similarities between Nordic and Japanese mythology in regard to the roles

3 https://www.ui.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/asien/nordkorea/religion/x
4 Stadling (1912).
5 Ibid., pp. 31–32, 116–118; Ueda (1975), pp. 323–357.

of birds. A great three-legged crow, Yatagarasu, was said to have acted as a guide to Jimmu, the mythical first emperor of Japan. In Norse mythology, the god Odin was accompanied by the ravens Hugin and Munin, who supplied him with news of what was happening in the world.[6]

An important instrument for the typical shaman—whether in Lapland, Siberia, Japan, or Korea—was the drum. In Korea, the drum is important in most traditional cultural expressions, not least in the narrative art form *pansori*. The drumbeat in shamanistic ceremonies is said to summon gods and spirits and make their presence audible or palpable to the participants. It is also used to drive away unwanted or harmful spirits, to ritually purify the site, and to help the shaman enter altered states of consciousness through ritual.

In Korea, shamans were divided into two types: those said to have been chosen by the spirits, and those who inherited their abilities from their ancestors. The rites they performed had various functions, such as bringing about happiness and a fortunate future, curing illness, or guiding the soul of a dead person to heaven. The deities with whom the shaman came into contact could include the gods of the sun, moon, and stars, *ilwolseongshin*; the gods of mountains and rivers, *sancheonshin*; the Dragon King, *yongwangshin*; or the household god, *gashin*.

A female shaman is still called a *mudang*, while a male shaman is known as a *baksu*. Quite early on, however, female shamans became far more common in Korean society. They also assumed the role of female priests, leading national ceremonies and prayers for rain and so forth. Shamans also took part in ceremonies for royalty, and in some cases special temples were built for them. Naturally, shamans have also been widely consulted for purposes of divination.[7]

Today, shamans are perceived more as bringers of good fortune than as political advisers, and they are employed in ceremonies with strong elements of entertainment. A ceremony is called a *gut* and may be full of both humor and cynicism. A *gut* may be brief or last much longer—sometimes several days—provided, of course, that the person commissioning the ceremony can afford it. A *mudang* makes her living from her profession.

A ceremony normally proceeds as follows. First, the shaman tells the god associated with the place in question who has commissioned the ceremony and what gifts are being offered. She also recites prayers that for future well-being. She then explains which god has been invited to the ceremony and recounts the mythology surrounding that deity. This is followed by song, dance, or some other form of entertainment intended for the god. After further ritual elements, she finally conveys the god's message or wishes, before sending the invoked deity back. The *gut* performed by a *mudang* is filled with color, loud music, and dance, in which the audience may sometimes take part as well.[8]

Daoism

Not wholly related to shamanism, yet still a belief system that has exercised considerable influence on Korean culture, is Daoism. The chronicle *Samguk yusa* states, in the section "Daoism and the Downfall of Goguryeo," that the people of Goguryeo turned to Daoism during the reigns of the Tang emperors Gaozu and Taizong—that is, in the seventh century.[9]

6 Three-legged crows have been found in wall and ceiling paintings in old Goguryeo tombs in present-day Nampo, North Korea. Jeon (2008), p. 125.

7 Park (2002); Howard (1998); Im Sok-jae (2003).

8 Ibid., pp. 38–39; Halla (1980), pp. 13–14.

9 618–626 and 626–650, respectively. *Samguk yusa*, Book III, section 64, pp. 193–197. Several Korean states existed over the

Daoism also had some influence in Silla. King Hyoseong (r. 737–742) is said to have received a copy of Laozi's *Dao de jing* from the Chinese emperor, while Silla's elite troops are said to have been trained in Daoist principles of patience, simplicity, and harmony, together with the Confucian doctrine of loyalty, reverence, and righteousness, and the Buddhist teaching of compassion.

Definitions of what Daoism is, or was, tend to vary considerably.[10] On the one hand, it is described as a way of living simply and refraining from trying to alter the course of nature. Others regard Daoism as a systematization of a more respectable form of magic and animism. An important goal is to attain eternal life, and to this end it is necessary, among other things, to rid oneself of desire and ambition. Daoists have engaged in everything from alchemy to the preparation of medicines intended to prolong life.

In Korea, older folk beliefs, the interpretation of various omens, and outright occultism are often included under the term Daoism. It came to be integrated with indigenous shamanism, but it also had a major influence on the image of the ideal learned man, who would gladly withdraw to a hut or cottage in remote mountain country in order to devote himself to study. Different forms of divination—such as the hexagrams presented in the Chinese classic *Yi jing*—and the use of the symbols of yin and yang, as seen, for example, on the South Korean flag, are also usually attributed to Daoist influence.

Daoism certainly influenced the Donghak movement, which came to threaten the regime in the late nineteenth century. In comparison with Buddhism and Confucianism, however, Daoism has occupied a relatively unobtrusive place in Korean history.[11]

Buddhism

The *Samguk yusa* also contains accounts of how Buddhism reached the Korean peninsula. In the section "Sundo Brings Buddhism to Goguryeo," it is stated that an envoy, a monk named Sundo, was sent to Goguryeo in 372 with a Buddha statue and Buddhist texts from Chang'an in China. Two years later another monk, Ado from Jin, arrived. As early as February 375, the king ordered a temple to be built for Sundo, and another for Ado a year later.[12]

Another section, "Marananta Brings Buddhism to Baekje," states that an Indian monk named Marananta arrived in Baekje from Jin in 384 and was warmly welcomed at court. A temple for ten monks was built in the new capital, Hansanju. When King Asin, or Buyeo Asin (r. 392–405), was crowned in 392, a decree was issued permitting his subjects to worship the Buddha.

The following lengthy section, "Ado Brings Buddhism to Silla," describes how Buddhism also came to Silla, this time during the reign of King Nulji Maripgan (417–458), when the Indian monk Mukhoja arrived and began preaching:

> *But the Silla people, far from believing his strange teachings about Buddha and the Lotus Paradise, resented its denial of ancestor worship and of their traditional customs. The poor monk would have been killed by an angry mob but for the protection of Morye, a kindly villager who invited the stranger to live in a cave in his garden.*

course of history, most notably Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE), Silla (57 BCE–935 CE), and Baekje (18 BCE–660 CE). The principal dynasties were Goryeo (918–1392) and Joseon (1392–1897).

10 "If the Dao can be described, it is not the eternally unchanging Dao." The opening of the *Dao de jing*. Malmqvist (2008), p. 31.

11 Park (2002), pp. 47–56.

12 Ilyon (1972), section 59, Book III.

(…)

During the reign of King Picho (posthumous title Soji, 479–500) a monk named Ado, the high priest (…) came to Silla with three disciples and resided in Morye's home while preaching Buddhism to the people.[13]

The fact that knowledge of Buddhist ideas had reached Korea's rulers as early as the middle of the fourth century is supported by the discovery of Buddhist motifs in ceiling paintings in a tomb from that period near present-day Pyongyang. During the sixth century, many Buddhist monks from the Korean kingdoms travelled to China to learn more at various monasteries. When they returned, they also brought back the divisions that had emerged among Buddhist schools and sects.

When Silla succeeded in unifying the entire peninsula under one rule in 668, Buddhism gained strong influence. Korean Buddhism even came to exert some influence in China. The impact of Buddhism on the culture of Unified Silla was particularly visible in painting, literature, and architecture. The famous Bulguksa Temple in Gyeongju was founded in 751, while the celebrated Seokguram Grotto, with its magnificent Buddhist statue, was completed in 774. Both are on UNESCO's World Heritage List. In the northern neighboring state of Balhae, which existed from 698 to 926, Buddhism became the state religion.

One of the most important Buddhist sects introduced during the Silla period was *seon*, that is, the meditative school better known by its Japanese name, Zen. Many other sects were grouped under the collective term *gyo*, "studies," and were more academically oriented. One of the leading Buddhist figures was Wonhyo (617–686), whose name roughly means "original dawn." He intended to study in Tang China, but difficulties on the way caused him to change his mind and return. Instead, he devoted himself to writing various texts and commentaries that became highly influential.

Under Goryeo, Buddhism became intimately associated with the state apparatus and received strong support from public resources. For a time, however, the *seon* school was opposed because it was regarded as excessively radical. This changed thanks to the *seon* priest Jinul (1158–1210), who persistently argued that meditation and theory—that is, *seon* and *gyo*—could be combined. By the end of the period, the situation had been reversed: *seon* had developed into the dominant state-supported school, yet the conflict between the two did not re-emerge.

Toward the end of Goryeo, the Buddhist sects were also affected by the corruption spreading through society, and Buddhist priests encountered a certain degree of opposition, sometimes even contempt. Yet it was during this period that the magnificent *Tripitaka Koreana* was produced, comprising thousands of woodblocks containing the canonical scriptures. A first edition was completed in 1231 but destroyed by invading Mongol troops. The second was completed in 1259 and is still preserved at the mountain temple Haeinsa, near the city of Daegu in southern Korea.

At the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, Buddhism was seriously challenged by influential Neo-Confucianism, and the number of Buddhist temples was reduced from several hundred to thirty-six. Numerous restrictions were introduced, and monks and nuns were forbidden to enter the cities. Buddhist funeral rites, as well as the practice of begging, were also prohibited.

Hostilities diminished and many restrictions were removed, largely thanks to Queen Munjeong

13 Ibid., p. 180.

(1501–1565), who was married to King Jungjong, who reigned from 1545 to 1565. She was herself a Buddhist and succeeded in reversing the trend in a positive direction. She greatly admired the *seon* priest Seosan Hyujeong (1520–1604), who wrote a large number of influential texts.

Perhaps the most important reason Buddhism came to be viewed in a different light was the fact that Buddhist monks organized themselves into military units and actively resisted the invading Japanese forces of 1592–1598 under the leadership of the elderly monk Hyujeong. During the following centuries, *seon* and other sects were able to operate with relatively great freedom. The phenomenon of wandering monks, travelling from temple to temple in the mountains, became increasingly common, and many saw no difficulty in combining their spiritual quest with the study of Confucianism and Daoism.

After the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868, several Japanese sects began missionary work in Korea. This contributed, among other things, to the formation of the influential Won school, which sought to combine meditation with the study of texts and to reach a kind of compromise between different methods of teaching. *Won* means "circle," and the idea was that the circle should be complete, symbolizing the possibility of reaching agreement among all people.

When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, Korean Buddhism underwent several changes. Perhaps the most important was that the system under which congregations jointly owned and administered the temples was replaced by one in which abbots appointed by the Japanese governor-general became private owners of temple property. Such ownership could also be inherited. Priests who had previously lived in celibacy now began to marry and raise families, particularly those who saw no problem with Japanese influence. In 1920, the law was changed so that the Japanese government gained direct control over the thirty-one largest temples. During the Second World War, control became still stricter, and many art objects were also transferred to Japan.

After the war, the Jogye Order, which again preferred its priests to remain celibate, grew into the largest order, followed by the Taego Order, which includes both married and unmarried priests.

In South Korea, the post-war period has seen considerable tension between Buddhist orders and the government, mostly concerning competing rights and claims, but also between the orders themselves. Under the dictator Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s, the government tried in effect to transform temples into tourist facilities, which provoked widespread dissatisfaction. There have also been conflicts between Christian and Buddhist representatives, but these have subsided over time. A very popular practice in contemporary South Korea is for members of the public to spend short periods meditating with monks and nuns at temples, sometimes staying overnight as well.

In North Korea, Buddhists as well as Christians have been suppressed, even though the authorities officially claim that religious freedom exists. For a brief period, when South Korean tourists were allowed to visit North Korea in limited numbers, an old Buddhist temple near Gaeseong was one of the attractions. There were, however, no active monks or priests there.

Confucianism

It is unclear when Confucianism was first introduced to Korea. The earliest reference to anything resembling an established philosophical or religious system that might be classified as Confucianism appears in the chronicle *Samguk sagi*, "History of the Three Kingdoms" (1145). It states that special Confucian academies, based on the system in place in China under the Tang dynasty, had been established in the

three kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Confucian influence appeared relatively early in Goguryeo, but it was not until the seventh century—more precisely, in 651—that special Confucian academies, *gukhak*, "national schools," were established in Silla. They were expanded in 682, and in 750 they began to be called *taehakgam*, "national universities." In 788, the first national examinations based on the Chinese system were held, and only Chinese texts were available. Early Confucianism in Korea was practical in character and lacked many of the metaphysical elements that later came to form part of the state ideology.[14]

It was above all during the Joseon period (1392–1910) that Korea came to be strongly influenced by Confucian ideas, especially when an anti-Buddhist movement gained momentum among Neo-Confucian teachers and authorities. Buddhism was not entirely suppressed, but all ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and ancestral rites acquired Confucian features. Neo-Confucianism was founded on the thought of the Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who maintained that truth should be sought in external reality through study.[15] Confucianism had stagnated over the centuries and in China had been displaced by both Daoism and Buddhism. Zhu Xi revived the old ideas and also added ideas of his own. His practical teachings were combined with the view that harmony in the world could be achieved only if each person acted in accordance with his or her original nature.

An important Neo-Confucian ideologue was An Hyang.[16] He, like many of his colleagues, discussed such fundamental questions as good and evil, the origin of humanity and the universe, the relationship between *ui* (義; Chinese *yi*)—being righteous and performing rites and actions according to established rules—and the inherent force, *gi* (氣; Chinese *qi*), as well as the cosmos, in metaphysical terms. Also important were the relationships between ruler and subject, master and household, man and woman, father and son, and so forth. The national ideology, *Seongrihak*, was one of the principal strands of Confucianism and sought to explain most things precisely through *ui* and *gi*. All human beings are of equal worth and possess dignity. Human beings have a natural, innate moral sense. At the same time, all people also possess *gi*, which creates differing conditions and accounts for why some are intelligent while others are not.

Yi Seong-gye (1335–1408), the first king of the Joseon dynasty, who took the throne name Taejo,[17] established Neo-Confucianism as the state ideology. The state civil-service examinations became the basis for advancement within important institutions and even replaced the examinations formerly held for Buddhist monks. Politics and the educational system came entirely under the control of Neo-Confucian proponents. At this time, the national Confucian academy *Seonggyungwan* was also established in the capital; it became a political center as well. A number of *hyanggyo*, rural academies, were founded too. They were associated with Confucian temples, where various rites were performed. The *hyanggyo* more or less disappeared during the sixteenth century and were replaced by *seowon*, private institutes for the study of Confucianism. At Seonggyungwan, only sons of the ruling aristocracy, the *yangban*, could study. The curriculum comprised six subjects: proper conduct, music, archery, horsemanship, the Chinese classics, and mathematics.

The *yangban* found these theories well suited to support their explanations of social inequality and

14 Vargö (2019), p. 121.
15 Lodén (2016), p. 23.
16 Also called An Yu, 1234-1306.
17 Ruled 1398-1408.

their own superiority. As noted, social conditions in Joseon society were based on a division into four social classes, or castes: *yangban* (兩班), *jungin* (中民), "middle people," *sangmin* (常民), "common people / peasants," and *cheonmin* (賤民), "people of low status." In addition, there were the *baekjeaong* (白丁), those engaged in occupations regarded as impure, and the *nobi* (奴婢), who were effectively slaves. The state bureaucracy was in turn divided into *munban* (文班), civil administrators, and *muban* (武班), military officials. The center of governmental power lay, naturally enough, with the *muban*. The *jungin* were also involved in the administration of the state, but at a lower level. They were often badly treated by the *yangban*, but could in turn exercise authority over people from the lower classes.[18]

The differences between men and women were clear. According to the principles of *ui* and *gi*, it was evident from birth that they had different roles, and they were treated differently accordingly. If a boy was born, one would bow to the left of the doorway; if a girl was born, the bow was made to the right of the doorway. Girls and boys were not to sit beside one another while eating. Adult men were not to visit the women's quarters without good reason. Young men over the age of fifteen were not to sit with their sisters, and they certainly were not to play with them. Girls and boys were not allowed to joke with one another either. Naturally, they were to use separate toilets. Members of the upper classes who violated these rules received severe reprimands; members of the lower classes risked corporal punishment.

A woman's first duty was to serve her husband. She was expected to permit him almost anything and to forgive him if she thought he had done wrong. The husband's word was law. Above all, she was not to be jealous. Even if her husband had a hundred mistresses, she was not to object. According to *sam-jong-ji-do*, the three principles governing a woman's conduct were: she was to obey her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her son if her husband died. Women were considered by nature to be weak and should not strive for achievement. Women were to live as though they were afraid of something. The man's goal, on the other hand, was to seek education, manage his family, help govern the country, and strive to bring peace to the whole world.

The Joseon period thus represented a genuinely negative development for women. During the preceding Goryeo period, men and women could communicate with one another without major difficulty, and women could move about freely. Under Joseon, women were confined to the home and forbidden to visit Buddhist temples or the temples of the *mudang*, the shamans. If a woman needed to leave the house during Joseon, she had to wear a *jang-ot*, a cloak that also covered the head. Women's right to inherit land or other property largely disappeared during the seventeenth century, which of course weakened their position still further. Girls and young women were, in principle, unable to obtain an education. Families' principal aim for their daughters was that they should find a suitable husband and manage home and children properly.

Confucian hierarchical thinking also influenced views of the afterlife. Respect for parents and older relatives was to continue after death, as manifested in special ceremonies, *jesa*. Ancestors were to be venerated on the anniversaries of their deaths, on traditional feast days, and through ceremonies involving abundant food and fruit offerings. The performance of the ceremonies itself also followed hierarchical principles. Only the king could worship Heaven. Only governors or officials of equivalent rank could perform

18 Ibid., p. 123.

a ceremony for the god of agriculture, and Confucius himself could be worshipped only in designated temples. Ordinary people could conduct ceremonies only for their ancestors. At these rites, the eldest son of the principal wife could offer the first cup to the dead father's spirit, while the principal wife could offer the second cup. Thereafter, ceremonial cups of drink followed in a prescribed order. A corresponding hierarchy also applied to ceremonial bows.

For the *yangban*, this was part of daily life and might occur many times a year. At the same time, it was important to be somewhat sparing with ceremonies, since too many ceremonies tended to dilute their seriousness and make them seem like an everyday activity devoid of deeper meaning. The Confucian teacher Yi Yutae (1607–1684) considered that ancestor worship, or ceremonies honoring the ancestors, should ideally be held four times a year, once in each season. Three days before the ceremony, every member of the family was to cleanse both body and mind. One day before it, not only the house but also clothes and all household utensils were to be thoroughly cleaned. The food presented to the spirits, or souls, of the deceased was to consist of three or four kinds of roasted meat with vegetables, six kinds of fruit, a bowl of dried meat slices, rice, and a bowl of soup made from bean paste. A central function of the ceremonies was to reinforce cohesion within the family. In principle, only the closest descendants of the deceased could take part in the ceremony and subsequently eat the food, although this was a matter of interpretation. Being allowed to participate was a way of having one's closest kinship ties confirmed.[19]

A Neo-Confucian philosopher of great stature was Yi Hwang (1501–1570), also known by the pseudonym Toegye. His interpretation of the four most important virtues—benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—and the seven human emotions—pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire—led him to maintain that principle, or form, *i* (理; Chinese *li*), was more important than material force. He even considered *i* to contain a generative force, observable in the harmony between human beings and nature. Toegye debated the four virtues and the seven emotions, and their relationship to *i* and *gi*, with another philosopher, Gi Dae-sung (1527–1572).

Gi Dae-sung held that there were no separate virtues, but rather that they were contained within the seven emotions. Toegye's theories were also criticized by another important philosopher of the Joseon dynasty, Yi I (1536–1584), known by the pseudonym Yulgok. He opposed Toegye's dualism and argued that the source of generative force lay in matter and its own power. He maintained that, although all things were created by the two cosmic forces of *i*, principle, and *gi*, matter, principles were not an active factor; only *gi* could be active. *Gi* formed the basis of *i*. That is to say, principles are omnipresent, whereas matter is bound to the particular. For Yulgok, they could not truly be separated: they were intertwined. Neo-Confucian orthodoxy consequently split into two schools: *ipa*, the school based on principles, and *gipa*, the school that asserted the primacy of matter. These schools were also associated with different political factions, which over time came into conflict with one another over everything from affairs of state to minor practical trivialities.[20]

Yulgok's doctrine of pragmatism also came to be known as the realist school, *shilhak*, and its advocates continually sought verification and evidence for different theories. They were interested in Western science and also showed some interest in Christianity. It was not a philosophical school that in itself represented the

19 Lee (2016), pp. 9-15.
20 Park (2002), pp. 85-93.

government or the principal decision-makers, and although its advocates included people close to absolute power, their influence was limited. They advocated certain social reforms, for example opposing the overexploitation of slaves or seeking to make agriculture more efficient. They stressed that Confucianism also entailed respect for the broad masses of the people. The philosopher Yi Hyeong-won (1622–1673), better known by the pseudonym Bangye, proposed extensive land reforms, since he considered landholding—or, rather, the lack of it—to be a cause of peasants' poverty. He wished to redistribute land ownership so that those who cultivated the land would own it and could thereby contribute to state tax revenues. He also argued that trade was a cornerstone of a healthy society. Effective administration and rationalization were self-evident necessities to him.

Another Confucian thinker, Jeong Yak-yong (1762–1836), known by the pseudonym Dasan, was of similar thought. He was critical of Neo-Confucianism and of its assertion that human beings were fundamentally good regardless of what they did. Human beings instead had free will to choose whether to be good or evil. This was part of Heaven's mandate. He did not, however, wish to abolish class boundaries, but rather to strengthen them so that everyone would be clear about their roles. Dasan's economic policy held that a strong state was necessary, but that this could only be achieved if the welfare of the peasantry was guaranteed. After all, peasants were the main source of state revenue. He did not advocate private ownership by individual peasants; rather, he proposed the creation of a collective form of ownership. He wanted groups of thirty households to form the basis of a well-functioning system.[21]

Towards the end of the Joseon dynasty, Korea was under pressure from foreign powers while factional conflicts within the government and the royal family also contributed to weakening the kingdom. Tensions between social classes were likewise destabilizing, as was the ideological confusion produced by a range of foreign influences. Rebellions, large and small, began to become common, and proposals for solutions and new ideas multiplied. In this unstable environment, a highly important movement emerged, based on a mixture of religious and political ideas. It had in fact begun as early as the 1860s and rejected both Catholicism and the other religious ideas found within Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. It called itself *donghak*, "the Eastern Learning" or "Eastern School," in contrast to the "learning from the West," *seohak*, including Western influence more broadly. The movement was founded by Choe Je-u (1842–1864), whose pseudonym was Suun, and began in the Gyeongsang region of southeastern Korea.

According to the movement's texts, Suun came from a *yangban* family that had fallen on hard times. He therefore began to travel around the country in search of truth. Suddenly, he received a heavenly revelation and began to preach the will of Heaven. God gave him an amulet capable of curing illnesses and also taught him an incantation through which he could teach people to respect Heaven. *Donghak* was in fact a syncretic religion incorporating elements of shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Suun himself said that his religion was a combination of all the religions found in Korea. He wanted to establish a form of democracy, respect human rights, and create a paradise on earth—not one to be attained only after death. All human beings were of equal worth, and there was to be no discrimination on the basis of social status or gender; nevertheless, each individual had to learn self-discipline and cultivate himself or herself.

21 Ibid., pp. 98-101.

The movement became popular and had a considerable impact, largely because of its positive message: that something could be done about the misery that many people felt they were experiencing. Government opposition, however, was massive. Suun was arrested almost immediately and beheaded in prison in 1864. His death nevertheless seemed to give the movement more energy, even though it was forced underground. Suun was succeeded by his relative Choe Si-hyeong (1829–1898), who compiled the movement's ideas in a number of texts. In 1893, he travelled to Seoul with some forty followers to submit a petition arguing that the movement's founder had been unjustly executed and that the king should grant them the freedom to preach their doctrines. They knelt before the royal palace and remained there for several days before being forcibly dispersed.

In 1894, however, the movement developed into a powerful political organization whose followers came to pose a genuine threat to royal power. One of the movement's new leaders, Jeon Bong-jun (1853–1895), wanted to use violence against the regime, a course of action that Choe Si-hyeong counseled against. Eventually, conflict broke out between the factions, and Jeon's faction prevailed. Choe and the leader of Choe's troops, Son Byeong-jun (1861–1922), were forced to flee. Faced with the threat posed by Jeon's forces, the king asked China to send troops to help suppress the rebellion. This, in turn, provoked a Japanese response and led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Jeon was captured and executed. Choe Si-hyeong too was eventually captured and executed by strangulation in 1898. This was not enough to destroy the movement. In 1905 it renamed itself *Cheondogyo*, "the Religion of the Heavenly Way," and was led by a new leader, Son Byeong-hui—the same Son Byeong-hui who had fought against Jeon Bong-jun. Son was now accepted by the authorities and became one of the signatories of the Korean Declaration of Independence in 1919.

Christianity

The first contact between Korea and Christianity is sometimes said to have taken place in 1603, when a Korean diplomat brought back Christian literature—including Matteo Ricci's works—after visiting China. In fact, however, a Spanish priest named Gregorio de Cespedes accompanied the invading Japanese troops in 1592 and was probably also the first Westerner to set foot on the Korean Peninsula. One of the Japanese officers, whose surname was Konishi, was Christian and commanded eighteen thousand Christian soldiers. At that point, the persecution of Christians had not yet gathered momentum in Japan.

No Christian movement worth speaking of arose in Joseon, but in 1758 King Yeongjo[22] nevertheless felt compelled to ban Catholicism for the first time, branding it an "evil movement." In 1783, Yi Seung-hun (1756–1801), the son of another Korean diplomat, was baptized during a visit to Beijing. When he returned the following year, a successful Catholic congregation was established.

Confucian bureaucrats studied Christian values with curiosity, but it did not take long before they concluded that several aspects did not accord with their own thinking. Ancestor worship and Confucian rituals became genuine obstacles to the spread of Christianity. In 1791, when a court official gave his mother a Christian funeral and burned the tablets bearing the names of his ancestors, believing that they represented the wrong kind of idolatry, he broke decisively with the dominant tradition. This marked the beginning of an outright persecution of Christians.[23]

In 1866, the regent Daewongun ordered a full-scale massacre of Christians, resulting in the

22 His personal name was Yi Geum; he reigned from 1724 to 1776.
23 Park (2002), pp. 111–112.

deaths of eight thousand people, including nine French priests. Before that, the persecutions had led to large numbers of Christians being killed, especially in 1801, 1815, and 1827. According to some estimates, more than twenty thousand Korean Christians were killed during the first half of the nineteenth century. The first Korean Catholic priest, Kim Dae-geon (1821–1846), was one of them.

Approximately a century after the first contact with Catholics, Protestants also made their appearance. The interpreter aboard a British ship that made a brief visit in 1832 was the Dutch missionary Charles A. F. Gutzlaff. He managed to stay for a month in Jeolla Province in southern Korea, during which he did what he could to distribute Christian writings and medicines. He also brought potatoes and explained how they should be cultivated.

The next missionary to arrive was the Briton Robert J. Thomas, who preached for two months in Hwanghae Province, between Pyongyang and Seoul, in 1865 before being forced to flee to China after angering the authorities. In 1866, however, he returned aboard the American schooner *General Sherman*, which came to grief on the Daedong River in Pyongyang. All members of the crew were killed in fighting, and Thomas himself was executed by beheading.

As with Catholicism, the first Koreans in the Protestant church were baptized abroad. Four Korean merchants met Scottish missionaries in Manchuria and taught them Korean, whereupon they were baptized in 1876. They then translated the Gospel of Luke in 1882, and by 1887 the whole New Testament was available in Korean.

The various treaties Korea was forced to sign with foreign powers—with Japan in 1876, the United States in 1882, Germany and Britain in 1883, Italy and Russia in 1884, and France in 1886—made Christian missionary activity possible. The first American missionary arrived in 1884: the Presbyterian physician Horace Newton Allen. The same year saw the founding of the first Protestant church by the Korean brothers Seo Sang-ryun and Seo Sang-u in Pyongyang. More American missionaries arrived that year, most notably the Methodist Henry G. Appenzeller and the Presbyterian Horace G. Underwood. Further missionaries from the United States, Canada, and Australia arrived soon afterwards.

Horace Newton Allen worked in Korea until the end of the Joseon period. He also founded the predecessor to Seoul's highly regarded Severance Hospital, Gwanghyewon Hospital, in 1885. In 1884, Allen successfully treated an injury suffered by the government official Min Yeong-ik, which was certainly not to his disadvantage. Allen also enjoyed good contacts with the royal court and served as an American diplomat: first as secretary of the legation from 1890, and later as minister and consul general from 1897 until 1905, a highly turbulent period.

Christian missionary activity was highly successful, especially in northern Korea, not least because of the many hospitals and schools established by the missionaries. In 1885, Mary Fitch Scranton, the first missionary from the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, which formed part of the American Methodist Church, arrived. She was accompanied by her husband, William B. Scranton, who, like several others, was both a physician and a missionary.

Mrs Scranton established a special evening school for women because the prevailing customs prohibited women from being outdoors during the day. At the services she organized, she hung curtains between men and women, and also between the priest and the women in the church. Her purpose was not to uphold the old customs, but rather to make it easier for women to move about in society. She travelled throughout Korea and placed particular emphasis on visiting

families from the lower social classes. The first woman she baptized in 1895, however, came from the aristocratic *yangban* class.

At the turn of the century, most converts to Christianity came from the lowest social classes. The Christian idea of equality and the equal worth of all people was decisive for many of those who chose baptism. Efforts in health care, but also in education, were crucial in creating a positive view of the Christian presence. The schools founded—including the girls' schools Ewha in 1886, Chungshin in 1890, Baehwa in 1898, and Soongui in 1903—exerted a very important influence on the modernization and social change that took place. Christian missionaries were behind the founding of almost three hundred schools and forty universities. The education of women was nothing less than revolutionary.

During the Japanese colonial period, 1910–1945, Christian missionaries often took the Koreans' side and therefore came to be regarded with great suspicion by the Japanese authorities, who did what they could to obstruct Christians. Christianity had nevertheless gained such a foothold in Korea—above all in what is now North Korea—that it simply could not be eradicated.

As Japanese militarism became increasingly fanatical, the Japanese government also sought to make Koreans embrace Shinto and its emphasis on emperor worship. This, in turn, meant that the defense of Christian values came to be perceived as an anti-Japanese phenomenon. This has, in turn, helped Christian churches grow since the end of the Second World War.

Today, Christianity is the largest religion in South Korea, although it is divided among many different churches. In North Korea, few, if any, can call themselves Christian without suffering negative consequences. During most of the Edo period, 1603–1868, when Christianity was prohibited in Japan, a number of Christians nevertheless managed to preserve their faith for several centuries despite extreme persecution, strict prohibitions, and the risks to their lives. Something similar is probably not possible in North Korea.

Yet Kim Il-sung, the grandfather of the current leader Kim Jong-un, grew up in a Presbyterian environment. His mother, Kang Pan-sŏk, is commonly described as an active Presbyterian church member and deaconess. The family also had close ties to Christian networks within the Korean anti-colonial movement. He attended a mission school and was familiar with church life and biblical narratives. After the establishment of the North Korean state, however, churches were closed, church property was expropriated, and many Christians fled south.[24]

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24 For a description of Christianity in Korea, see also the chapter "Korean Christianity" in Vargö (2019), pp. 209–237.

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