



Korean Spirituality

BY DON BAKER

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Reviewed by Mary E. Connor

Korean Spirituality by Don Baker, a professor at the University of British Columbia, is an accessible and engaging guidebook to the distinctive religious and philosophical belief systems on the Korean peninsula. Its value is manifold. Because Korea has one of the most vibrant and diverse religious cultures of any nation in the world, lucid exposure to its beliefs and practices provides a model of how adherents of diverse faiths can get along harmoniously. An examination of Korean spirituality illustrates how differing religions can inspire and even modify one another when there is tolerance among the faithful. *Korean Spirituality* also helps us deepen our understanding not only of the Koreans, but also of the Koreans who live in the United States.

Don Baker defines spirituality as “attitudes and actions grounded in the belief that there are invisible forces more powerful than we are, and that through interaction with those forces we can better ourselves or make our lives more pleasant or meaningful” (5). He asserts that South Korea provides a foundation for studying modern spirituality because of the number and variety of religious and spiritual or philosophical beliefs that the people draw on to address the challenges of life. The many buildings for religious rituals, which have increased 500 percent since 1960, offer architectural evidence that the people of South Korea are highly religious. Yet even with this growing religious fervor, only slightly more than half of the population professes a specific religious

orientation (3). South Korea could be the only country with an ethnically homogeneous population in which the Buddhists and Christians are close to being equal in number. South Korea may also be the only industrialized nation where folk religion continues to exist and remains independent of any institutional control. Even those who considered themselves good Christians are still influenced by a folk tradition that is deeply embedded in the culture. In spite of differing beliefs and religious practices, these Koreans assume that they have to align themselves with some power greater than their own in order to overcome the limitations that they face as individual human beings. This assumption unites their approach to spirituality.

This book surveys folk religion and animism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and what he calls the new religions, such as Wŏn Buddhism. Baker analyzes the roles that religions have played in the past, identifies their commonalities, and explains how traditional Korean spirituality was primarily based on ritual and concerned with ethics. What people did was more important than what they believed, and their rituals emphasized the group, such as the family or the village. He notes that with Christianity, doctrine is emphasized and that the people enter “a personal relationship with that God above the individual’s relationship with his or her family, neighbors, or government” (62). In the final section of *Korean Spirituality*, the author examines spirituality in North Korea and how it is grounded in the political ideology of *juche*—the only form of spirituality available to the overwhelming majority of North Koreans. ■

MARY E. CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years and now serves as President and Program Director of the Korea Academy for Educators, a nonprofit organization that informs educators about Korean history and culture and the Korean-American experience. She is the author of *Asia in Focus: The Koreans* (2009) and the recipient of the Peace Corps Association’s Global Educator Award and the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award.

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