

# Religious Diversity in Korea

By Don Baker

Since the mid-1960s, when the gates for immigrants from Asia first opened wide in North America, more and more signs in Korean have appeared on the streets of both the US and Canada. Many of those signs advertise restaurants or shops selling Korean food. However, a significant percentage of those signs appear in front of church buildings and proclaim that a Korean congregation worships within. The overwhelming majority of those congregations are Protestant. A 2012 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 61 percent of Korean-Americans are Protestant Christians. Another 10 percent are Catholic. Only about 6 percent are Buddhists, while the remaining 23 percent told Pew they are unaffiliated.<sup>1</sup> It would not be unreasonable, therefore, to assume that, since a majority of those of Korean descent on this side of the Pacific Ocean are Christian, on the other side of the Pacific, in Korea itself, the majority of the people living there surely must also be Christians. However, that assumption would be incorrect.

Rather than being a majority Christian nation, Korea has instead one of the most diverse religious landscapes on this planet. If we view Korea as a whole, which is a reasonable way to view the Korean peninsula since it was not divided into two countries until 1948 and had been united for a thousand years before that tragedy occurred, we will immediately notice the great difference between the northern and southern halves of Korea.

North of the demilitarized zone, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), there is little evidence of the sort of organized religious activity seen in other countries. The government of the DPRK reports that there are small Buddhist, Protestant, Catholic, and Cheondogyo (an indigenous Korean new religion) communities there, but all together, they have fewer than 50,000 members. The state ideology of *Juche* may be viewed as the equivalent of a religion, since it demands the same level of commitment many religions demand. Moreover, it has sacred writings (the writings of the three Kims who have led the DPRK since it was founded in 1948), sacred rituals (ritual displays of respect for the Kims), sacred objects (images of the Kims), and even sacred sites (places where the Kims are said to have been born). However, whether or not *Juche* should be listed as a religion, since the DPRK claims that the vast majority of its citizens are adherents of *Juche* and *Juche* only, it is clear there is not much religious diversity there.

However, south of the demilitarized zone, in the Republic of Korea, the religious landscape is very different. Both Gallup Korea (an analytics firm) and the South Korean government



Full Gospel Calvary Korean Assembly of God Church in Flushing, New York. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Heide Pinkall.

regularly poll South Koreans to determine their religious affiliation. In 2014, Gallup, and an official government census later in 2015, found that approximately half of those they polled said they had no specific religious affiliation, but the other half were divided among Protestants (around 20 percent of the overall population), Buddhists (between 15 percent and 22 percent), Catholics (7 percent to 8 percent), and a few members of smaller religious communities. No single religious community can claim even a quarter of the population. Korea is the only country on earth in which Protestants and Buddhists are that close in terms of the percentage of the population they claim.

Moreover, not only is South Korea the most Protestant country in Asia in terms of the percentage of its people who call themselves Protestants, it also ranks no. 3 in Asia, behind the Philippines and East Timor, in the percentage of its population who attend Catholic worship services regularly. In addition, South Korea, with 234 Confucian shrines, has the largest network of such shrines per capita of any nation. Even though neither Gallup nor the census found many self-proclaimed Confucians, further evidence

for the continuing strength of Confucianism lies in the fact that around 90 percent of South Koreans regularly honor their ancestors with Confucian-style ancestor memorial rituals in their homes. That includes many Christians who use modified Confucian rituals that exclude the spirit tablet their pastors have told them are forbidden.<sup>2</sup>

As already noted, South Korea also has a large and vibrant Buddhist community. The many Buddhist temples, over 15,000 of them, that dot the



Visitors paying homage to North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung (left) and Kim Jong-il (right) at the Mansudae Grand Monument in Pyongyang, North Korea. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/t8uvthe>.



South Korean shamans perform a requiem exorcism for the victims of the 2014 Sewol Ferry tragedy at a port in Incheon, west of Seoul, South Korea. Source: © Alamy Live News/Lee Jae-Won/AFL0.

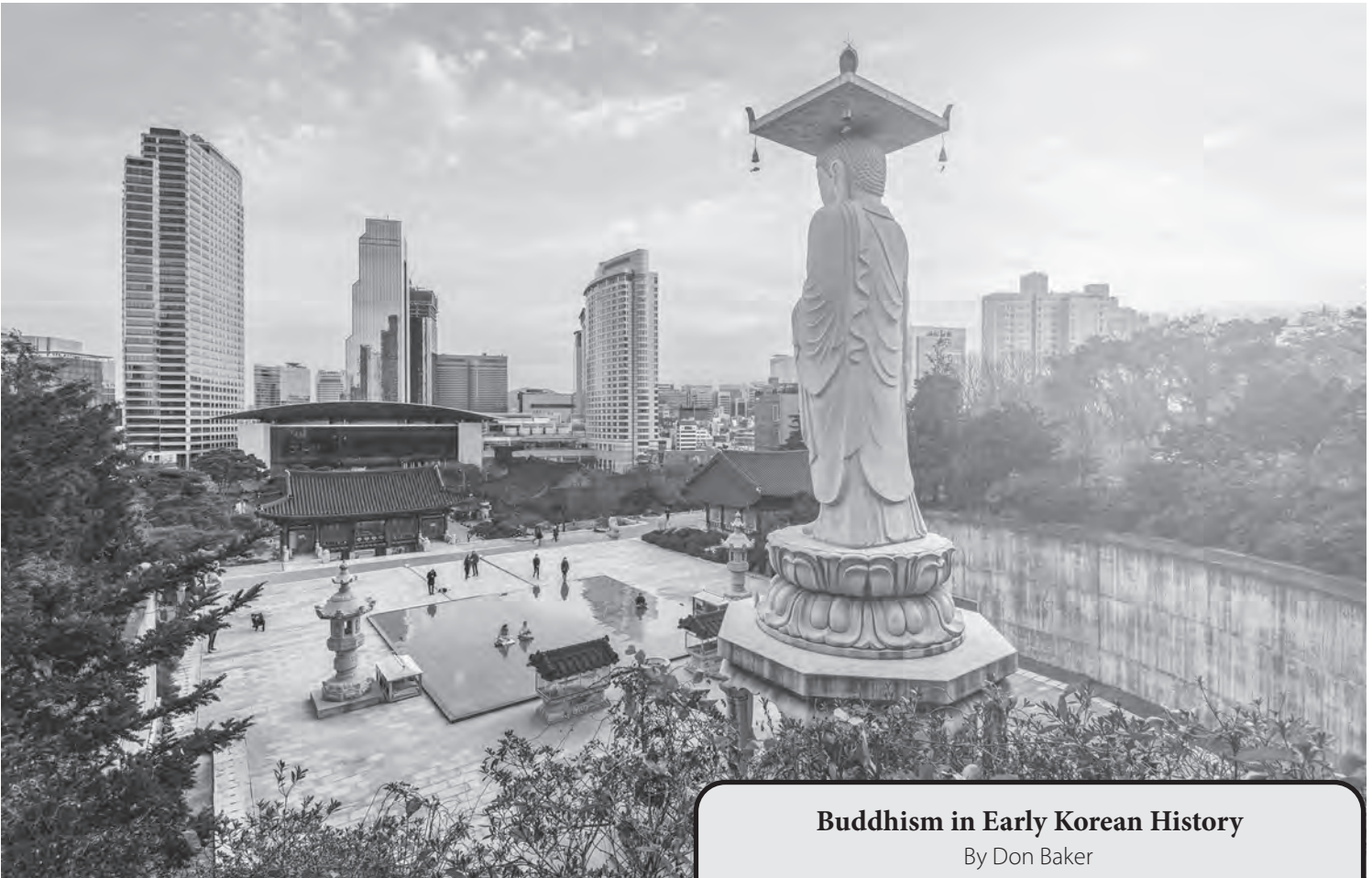


Maitreya Buddha at the Daesoon Jinrihoe Geumgangsan Toseong Training Temple in the foothills of the Geumgangsan Mountains, South Korea. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/uts3cwo>.

landscape constitute physical evidence. But those are not the only temples available to the religiously active. An informed observer would also notice quite a few worship halls constructed by Korea's various indigenous new religions. Two of those homegrown religious organizations, *Won* Buddhism (an offshoot of mainstream Buddhism) and Daesoon Jinrihoe (a religion focused on worship of a man who lived in Korea a century ago, who they believe is an incarnation of God), have enough followers to operate their own universities and medical centers.

Another sign of the diversity of Korea's religious culture is the presence of shamans performing rituals in even the most developed sections of South Korea's most modern cities. In contrast to the typical fate of folk religions when confronted with industrialization, shamanism—focused on ritual interactions with a large number of different spirits—is thriving in modern Korea. Since shamanism is not an organized religion, there is no central office to keep track of how many shamans there are. Nevertheless, knowledgeable observers estimate there may be as many as 300,000 practicing shamans in South Korea today.<sup>3</sup>

What makes Korea's religious diversity even more remarkable is that, for most of its history, it did not have the ethnic diversity we see in most other countries, such as Singapore, also known for religious diversity. For centuries, Korea combined religious diversity with ethnic unity. The vast majority of Buddhists, Christians, practitioners of Confucian rituals, and patrons of shamans and new religions are ethnic Koreans. Religious differences do not signify ethnic differences. That may be one reason religious conflict is rare. Another reason may be that no one religious community can claim to represent more than a quarter of the population. Since they are all minority religions, they must get along. South Korea's religious diversity thrives in an atmosphere of religious tolerance. One sign of the mutual respect South Koreans have for each other's religious beliefs is that



A seventy-five-foot-tall Maitreya Buddha overlooks the city from the Bongeunsa Temple in Seoul, South Korea. Source: ©123RF/Nattanai Chimjanon.

both Christmas and Buddha's birthday are national holidays. The world saw another sign of the religious tolerance that characterizes South Korea at the 2009 state funeral of the former president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae-jung. At the event, even though Kim himself was a devout Catholic, prayers were led in turn by Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, and Won Buddhist clerics.<sup>4</sup>

### Religiosity without Religious Boundaries

Another reason for the atmosphere of religious tolerance that generally prevails in Korea today may be the legacy of a blurring of religious boundaries that traditionally characterized Korean religiosity. In premodern Korea, the term "Buddhist," for example, applied primarily to monks and nuns. Laypeople who might visit a temple to pray or benefit from a ritual were not normally called Buddhists. Similarly, the label "shaman" was applied to individuals who possessed a special ability to communicate with supernatural beings through ritual, not the people who attended those rituals.

In contrast to what we see today, those who availed themselves of the services of professional ritual specialists were not necessarily considered members of the same religious community as those specialists. Nor were there hard and fast lines dividing what we now see as separate religious orientations. The average premodern Korean could, and did, participate in Confucian rituals, patronize shamans, and pray at Buddhist temples on the same day without any concern for inconsistency. There was little sense among the laity of exclusive religious affiliation.

### The Challenge Christianity Posed to Korea's Traditional Religiosity

This changed with the arrival of Christianity in the form of Catholicism in the late eighteenth century. Catholicism was the first monotheistic religion on the Korean peninsula. One feature of monotheism is that it demands

## Buddhism in Early Korean History

By Don Baker

**K**orean Buddhism's promise of salvation and its promise of immediate practical benefits have been present since the beginning. Buddhism first gained a foothold in Korea more for political than for religious reasons. In the fourth century, three kingdoms competed for control of the Korean peninsula. Two of them, Goguryeo (trad. 37 BCE–668 CE) and Baekje (trad. 17 BCE–660 CE), learned about Buddhism from states in northern China caught in a similar competitive environment. Centralization of authority and power was essential for survival. Chinese examples suggested to Korean kings that central government support for monks worshipping a deity such as Buddha might be a powerful tool for overcoming the decentralizing influence of Korean folk religion, with its anarchy of local deities. The traditional dates for the first official sponsorship of Buddhist monks by Goguryeo and Baekje are 372 and 384, respectively, a time when fighting on the peninsula was particularly intense and when those two kingdoms established effective centralized governments. The third kingdom, Silla (trad. 57 BCE–936 CE), did not overcome the local aristocrats' resistance to Buddhist reinforcement of monarchical authority until early in the sixth century.

The assumption that Buddhism would support centralization of authority was only one reason Korean kings welcomed monks to their courts. Several kings were impressed with the ability of monks to heal them or other ill relatives. The monk Il-yeon (1206–1289) proudly relates several such instances of miraculous healing of royalty in his *Samguk yusa* (*The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*).

The pursuits of secular health and power were not the only reasons Koreans were drawn to Buddhism early in their history. Some were also attracted by its religious promise of salvation from the problems attachment to things of this world brings.



Jeonju Confucian School holding their unique and traditional coming-of-age ceremony in Jeonju, South Korea. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Yeongsik Im.

exclusive devotion. Monotheists are not only supposed to display ritual devotion to their God, they are supposed to refrain from any ritual display of respect for supernatural beings who, in their view, do not recognize the authority and superior position of the one true God.

Such devotional religious exclusivity was reinforced by another new feature of religiosity Catholicism introduced to Korea: confessionalism. Unlike patrons of Buddhist temples, Confucian shrines, or shaman rituals, Catholics were expected to “confess” belief in certain specified doctrines. Unless you believe that Jesus Christ is God, for example, you are not normally considered a Christian. This is faith-based religion. Traditional Korean religion is ritual-based. I have attended many Buddhist services and shaman rituals in my many years of studying Korean religion, but I have never been asked by the celebrants of those rituals if I believe that Buddha was God or believe the various spirits that appear in shaman rituals are real. All that matters is that I am respectful during the performance of the ritual. How I behave is much more important than what I believe. Such lack of concern for doctrinal conformity made it easier for premodern Koreans to cross religious boundaries.

The imported notion of specific and exclusive religious affiliation, defined by doctrinal conformity, that Catholicism introduced to Korea was reinforced by the arrival of Protestant missionaries one century later, at the end of the nineteenth century. Protestants, just like their fellow Christians who appeared in Korea a century earlier, are monotheists who insist that belief in the true God is essential and that any ritual behavior that appears to challenge the monotheistic core of Christian faith is unacceptable. This was a radical challenge to traditional religiosity on the Korean peninsula.

That challenge was underlined by the tendency of Christians to congregate in groups of like-minded individuals who meet regularly to join together in worship of God. Such congregational gatherings set Christians apart from non-Christians in Korea, who traditionally did not form groups composed of both laypeople and religious professionals (such as Buddhist monks or shamans) in regular ritual displays of worship. Instead, in traditional Korean religiosity, rituals were held on an ad hoc basis when indi-

viduals felt the need to ask supernatural entities for assistance. Since each occasion for interacting with spirits might be different, the people who gathered together for those rituals were usually different. Moreover, before Christianity showed them they could do so, laypeople normally did not engage in communal prayer. Before the arrival of Christianity, Koreans did not tend to join congregations.

Many Koreans today continue to resist that Christian challenge to the ways they have exercised their religiosity for generations. Shamans and their clients, for example, as well as many Buddhists, do not accept this imported notion of what religiosity entails. They do not equate sponsorship of, or passive participation in, a ritual as indicating the adoption of a specific religious identity. That is the reason clients of shamans do not show up as a distinct category of “shamanists” in either Gallup polls or government censuses. They would not consider themselves members of a shamanic religious community just because they may pay a shaman to perform a ritual for them. And that is the reason few people say they are Confucians, even though the vast majority of South Koreans honor their ancestors with Confucian rituals. Most Koreans do not believe that hosting a Confucian-style ancestor memorial service for their parents makes them Confucians.

The difference between those Koreans who engage in religious activities as self-identified members of specific religious communities and those who also engage in what others might consider religious activities but who do not consider themselves to be religious is not the only evidence of diversity in Korean religiosity. An equally important division is between religious communities that are anthropocentric and religious communities that are theocentric.

### **Anthropocentric and Theocentric Religions in Korea**

Anthropocentric religiosity challenges traditional Western notions of religiosity since it entails religion without God. Anthropocentric religiosity focuses on human beings instead. One example of anthropocentric religiosity in Korea is Confucianism. Confucians traditionally believe in spirits, but those spirits are the spirits of ancestors. They do not engage in ritual

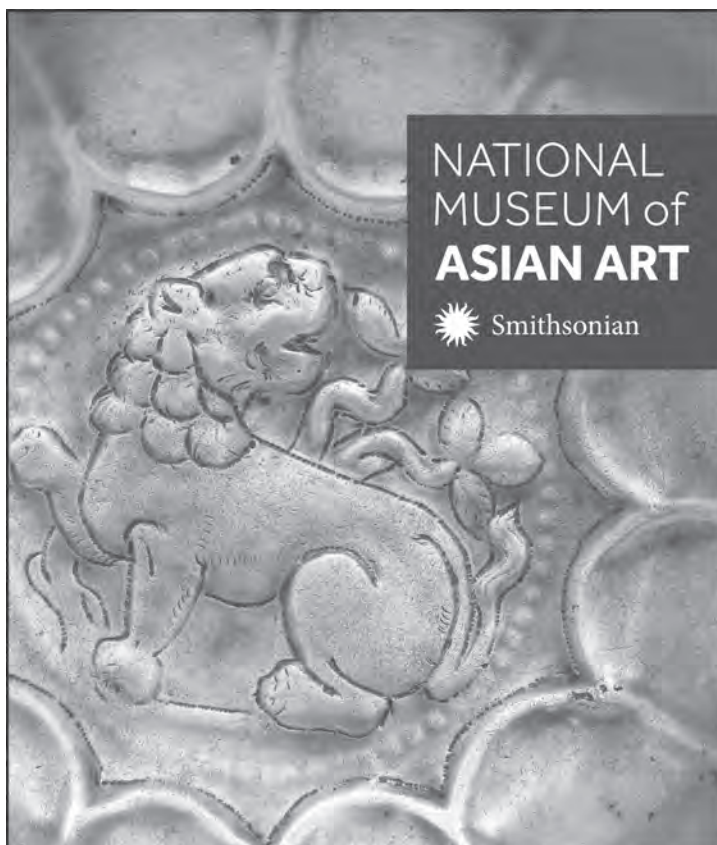
worship of any god. Instead, they engage in rituals that remind them of the debt they owe their human ancestors. At the core of Confucianism is a moral code that prescribes how human beings should treat one another, including how they should treat those humans who are deceased. There is no Confucian commandment to honor God. Nor do Confucians fear that if they misbehave, God will punish them. They believe that if they live moral lives, they will be remembered after their death as moral, and if they are immoral, their descendants will be embarrassed. That for them is enough of an incentive to try to behave in an ethical manner.

Another example of an anthropocentric religion in Korea is Won Buddhism. Won Buddhism is a new religion (founded in Korea in 1916) with Buddhist roots. Even though it calls itself Buddhist, there are no Buddhist statues in its temples. Instead of Buddhist images, there is only a circle on the wall above an altar. That circle is a symbol reminding us that everything in the universe is connected in that everything is nothing more than another manifestation of the impersonal Buddha-nature that is ultimate reality. Won Buddhists do not pray to Buddha. Their moral code instead tells them to cultivate gratitude toward their parents for giving them life, toward nature for providing the biological necessities of life such as air and water, toward the broader human community for doing things for them they cannot do for themselves acting alone, and toward law, which provides the order they need to survive and thrive.<sup>5</sup> Notice that there is no injunction to cultivate gratitude toward a supernatural creator.

Mainstream Buddhism also provides an example of anthropocentric religion. Buddhism is a big tent under which both theists and nontheists take shelter. Many meditating Buddhists fall under the nontheist category. They will tell you that belief in Buddha as a supernatural being separate and distinct from ourselves is a misunderstanding of what the term “Buddha” means. Buddha, they argue, refers not to a particular supernatural personality but to Buddha-nature, the uncaused and unchanging impersonal thusness that underlies the phenomenal world of constant change and separate and distinct entities. Anthropocentric Buddhists will tell you that the purpose of meditation is to relieve individual suffering by cultivating awareness that the world of everyday experience is ultimately not real (since, for Buddhists, ultimate reality is defined as that which is unchanging). Once we realize that the phenomenal world is not real, we will not cling to it in the vain hope that we can find lasting happiness in it. There is no god in this Buddhist approach to salvation. Instead, we are supposed to save ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside these anthropocentric forms of religiosity in Korea, there is also theocentric religiosity, both polytheistic and monotheistic. Polytheism is evident in Korea’s shamanism. A typical shaman shrine (which is usually in the shaman’s home rather than in a dedicated worship hall) will have painted images of various supernatural beings, some of them deified humans from Korea’s past, some of them borrowed from Buddhism, and some of them representing Korea’s folk traditions. In a shaman ritual, the shaman (who, in sharp contrast to other ritual celebrants in Korea, is almost always a woman) may claim to be possessed by either the spirit of one of the gods in her shrine or by the spirit of someone now deceased who is important to the client sponsoring that ritual. The purpose of a shaman ritual is not to worship God. It is either to have contact with someone recently deceased or to enlist, through bribes or threats, the assistance of a supernatural personality somewhat more powerful than a typical human being. The gods of shamanism do not take the capital G of an all-powerful God. They are gods only in that they are invisible, have personalities, and can intervene in human affairs.

Popular Buddhism, in contrast to meditative Buddhism, can also be seen as polytheistic. Though some Buddhist scholars will tell you that the various statues seen in Korea’s Buddhist temples are nothing more than different versions of the one Buddha, most devotees view those statues as representing powerful separate and distinct supernatural personalities. That polytheistic understanding is reinforced by the fact that the focus



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Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral in downtown Daegu, South Korea. Built in the late nineteenth century, it was one of the first of its kind in the region. Source: © Shutterstock.

of your gaze when you enter the main worship hall of a Buddhist temple will be three statues of three different Buddhist deities. Moreover, a large temple complex will have other Buddhist deities enshrined in their own worship halls. Devotees will often make the rounds, bowing to and praying before several different Buddhist images on a single visit to a temple.

Christianity is strikingly different from all those traditional Korean approaches to religion. Christianity is not only theocentric, it is unequivocally monotheistic. Whether they are Catholics or Protestants (the Orthodox and Anglican communities have very small footprints in Korea), all Christians in Korea agree that there is only one God and that, though he took human form and lived on earth 2,000 years ago, he is truly God with a capital G, and therefore cannot be compared to the types of spirits other religious communities in Korea talk about. Moreover, their absolute theocentrism tells Christians they need to meet regularly with others who share their theocentrism in order to offer God the praise and worship they believe he deserves. This staunch belief in one God and one God only, with its accompanying congregationalism and confessionalism, has now been embraced by around 30 percent of South Koreans, anchoring one end of a broad spectrum of religious beliefs on the southern side of the DMZ that divides the Korean peninsula.

Differences over theology are not the only line along which we can plot diversity in Korean religiosity. There is also significant geographic

diversity. We already noted that South Korea, with its pluralistic and vibrant religious culture, is very different from North Korea, which is dominated by the state ideology (with religious overtones) of Juche. However, if we confine our gaze to South Korea alone, we still find that geography matters. In South Korea's northwest, Seoul—the capital and largest city in the country—is 25 percent Protestant and 11 percent Catholic, according to the 2015 census figures. Only 11 percent of Seoulites says they are Buddhists. In the southeastern city of Busan, which is the second-largest city, 28 percent are Buddhists, while only 12 percent are Protestants and 5 percent are Catholics. The entire northwestern area around Seoul shows the same imbalance in favor of Christians that Seoul does, while the southeastern area centered on Busan shows the same imbalance in favor of Buddhists that Busan shows. Moreover, the southwestern side of the peninsula shows the same imbalance of many more Christians than Buddhists, like we see in the Seoul area; while north of Busan, we find many more Buddhists than Christians. A religious map of Korea shows two different South Koreas, one more Christian in the west and one more Buddhist in the east.

We also can see a generational divide. According to the same 2015 census that revealed the regional difference in religiosity, South Koreans fifty years old or older are more likely to be Buddhists than Protestants or Catholics, while Koreans between fifteen and fifty, if they are religious, are much more likely to be Protestants than Buddhists. Moreover, Koreans over fifty are more likely to say they have a specific religious orientation. The reverse is true for those under fifty. In fact, the younger they are, the less likely they are to identify with a particular religious group. In 2015, over 60 percent of those in their teens, twenties, and thirties said they are not part of any religious group.

Not only can we find many different expressions of religiosity in Korea, we also find, on both halves of the Korean peninsula, substantial numbers of people who say that they are not religious at all. Such religious diversity, rare in a world in which most countries are dominated by one religion or ideology, is one of the reasons I have found Korea such a fascinating place to explore. ■

## NOTES

1. "Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, last modified July 19, 2012, <https://tinyurl.com/vplo9gx>.
2. Clark Sorensen and Sung-Chul Kim, "Filial Piety in Contemporary Urban Southeast Korea: Practices and Discourses," in *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*, ed. Charlotte Ikels (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004), 173.
3. Choe Sang-hun, "In the Age of the Internet, Korean Shamans Regain Popularity," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/yxl9wr75>.
4. See the report on the website run by Korea's largest Buddhist order, the *Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism*, "The Passing of Former President Kim Dae-jung," accessed January 3, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/wtul455>.
5. More information on Won Buddhism can be found at <http://wonbuddhism.org/#/>.
6. Stephen Batchelor's *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010) is an approachable exposition of this approach to Buddhism.

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