

Book Review 【書評】

Donald Baker,
Korean Spirituality
(Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008)

James H. GRAYSON*

Korean Spirituality is an important contribution to the already existing meagre resources on Korean religions available to the general reader. Part of the University of Hawai'i Press's series "Dimension of Asian Spirituality," this book does not consider the history of contemporary Korean religions as such, but rather examines Korean religious practice and religious attitude or focus.

Don Baker asserts that at the heart of Korean spirituality – which is distinct from any attachment to a particular religious tradition – is the belief of the Korean people that humanity is essentially (innately) good, and that there is a dilemma when people recognise that they have not achieved all the things in life to which they think that they are entitled. He uses this idea as a means to analyze the various historic religious traditions present in Korea, including the folk traditions, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Christianity and the new religions. There is also a final chapter (oddly called an appendix) in which the political cult of Kim Il-sŏng of North Korea is considered in a spiritual context. In doing so, he explicitly states that religiosity and spirituality are different but related matters. The first refers to adherence to a particular institutionalised form of "religious" practice, while spirituality is a broader term to encompass practices which lie

* Emeritus Professor of Modern Korean Studies, School of East Asian Studies, The University of Sheffield (UK).

outside of institutions and are general attitudes which may be prevalent in the broader society of Korea.

In Chapter 6, Baker introduces the idea of "spiritual gaze" to describe the way in which religion or spirituality is practised. There are two types of gaze, one anthropomorphic and the other anthropocentric, to describe the focus ("gaze") of the devotee, that is, is one praying to an external being/force to receive some benefit, while the other is the cultivation of the self to use a Confucian expression. All of these terms are novel and innovative ways of trying to describe what it is that people do and why they do it by moving away from the more traditional focus on formal descriptions of belief and detailed descriptions of the forms of rituals. The book attempts to get the reader to understand the unique character of the spiritual nature of the Korean people.

Even while valuing the different approach which Baker has taken to look at the religious life of Korea, I have questions about some of the issues raised or the points of view taken by the author. To begin, I am not convinced that there is anything uniquely Korean about the idea that people are uneasy about not having achieved the goals which they would have wished to attain. This seems to me to be basic to a lot of the life of the world's religions. In particular, the distinction which Baker makes between "religion" and "spirituality" seems to me to be little more than the distinction made between institutional and popular religion. On page 5, he states that one who is religious can also be spiritual, but one who is spiritual need not be religious. I think it is better to talk about institutionalised or formal "religion" and popular or "folk" religion. Followers of either pattern have a spirituality or religious practice and attitude which is characteristic of that particular religion.

On page 9, he states that because Christianity and Islam place a high emphasis on specific theological concepts, consequently they place a lesser emphasis on ethics. This I found an extraordinary statement. If by ethics we mean

interpersonal moral activity, in both of these monotheistic religions faith in God is grounded in ethical action. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew clearly states that caring for those less well off than we is a commandment. Likewise, one of the five pillars of Islamic faith is the giving of alms and the care of the widow and the orphan. Moreover popular religions wherever they are found are notable for their lack of an explicitly stated moral code. Generally the focus of religious practice here is the obtaining from a powerful spirit of some material or social benefit regardless of the moral character of the supplicant. By ethics Baker appears to mean that popular Korean religion focuses on the effect of an individual's behaviour on their group (family, clan, etc.). This view does not seem to me to be distinctive of Korean folk religion, but of religions in general. I think that he needs to give a clearer definition and designation of those activities which he terms "ethics" because the definition which he uses does not seem to fit either the normally understood meaning of that word, nor the particular cases which he cites.

On page 14 following, Baker talks of the goal of Korean spirituality as the attempt to achieve sagehood. The "sage" or *kuncha* (君子) is a particularly Confucian term, and although the achievement of this state was a goal of Confucianists, I am not sure that one can use this term to describe the life goals of the Korean practitioner of any of the popular religious practices. Clearly, sagehood is not a goal of a Buddhist monk. Linking the concept of "sagehood" to "sainthood" in the case of Christianity also blurs the distinctions between Christian and Confucian concepts. I think that the goal of popular practice at the village level as discussed on page 15 is really the obtaining of tangible, this-worldly benefits for an individual or a group to which an individual belongs.

In Chapter Three, the author discusses "China's Three Teachings in Korea," viz, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Baker provides an interesting practical overview of the history and state of Buddhism and Confucianism in Korea. However, I disagree with the introduction of Daoism as a formal element

in Korean religious life. In China, religious Daoism is a broad tradition of different sects born out of the folk traditions of the country. In the sense of an institutionalised tradition of religious practice, Daoism has never existed in Korea. Much of what Baker (and others) identify as "Daoism" is little more than the absorption by the ancient Korean kingdoms of various Chinese popular religious practices, concepts, and artistic forms and images. In other words, ancient Koreans were adopting aspects of Chinese culture, but they were not adopting formal, institutionalised religious practices and beliefs, or sects. Baker cites (p. 55) the destruction of a "Daoist" (i.e., Chinese) shrine in the 1590s as the destruction of a unique structure which was never replaced. In fact, shortly after the beginning of the seventeenth century, a grand Chinese shrine was built to honour the Chinese soldiers who had died in Korea in a joint Sino-Korean venture to defeat the Japanese who had invaded the peninsula. This is the Tongmyo (東廟) which still exists. In fact, subsequently three other similar shrines were built at the remaining three cardinal directions around the Korean capital. These formerly quasi-state shrines were dedicated to Chinese deities, as is another private shrine on Nam-san mountain in Sŏul. These shrines are clearly "Chinese", but they are not in any way "Daoist"; they either were part of a former imperial cult, or were private cult centres.

In his discussion of Christianity in Chapter 4, Baker remarks that Christianity introduced the idea of "shin" (in full *sinang* 信仰) as referring to doctrinal beliefs and theological concepts rather than to the original meaning of *sin* as trust. In fact, the theological sense of faith or belief is "trust" so that the use of *sinang* is a subtle translation of the two concepts of "trust" and doctrinal ideas. However, what Baker points to is correct, that Christianity introduced the idea of fideism, a set of clearly set out concepts which informed the trust which believers put in the deity they worshiped.

In his discussion of the origins of Protestant Christianity beginning on page 70, he mentions that one of the reasons why this branch of Christianity grew so

rapidly was because of the large numbers of well-endowed missionaries who worked to propagate Presbyterianism or Methodism. If one were to compare similar missions in Korea with those in China, it is quite clear that not only were the Chinese missions better endowed, they had less success than did the missionaries in Korea. His discussion also ignores the important point that from the beginning, Korean converts themselves were energetic evangelists. Baker does not mention that the New Testament was translated before there were any missionaries in Korea, and that due to its circulation in Korea prior to their arrival, there were already small "Protestant" communities when missionaries first arrived.

On page 74, the author makes the surprising statement that after fifty years of missions, there were *only* four hundred thousand Protestant Christians in Korea! Not only is this a greater number proportionate to the population than the number of Protestants in China at that time where missions had been conducted for a longer period, it is also much greater than the Early Church over a similar initial period. The sociologist Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity* suggests that after 70 years (by A.D. 100), the Early Church would have had no more than 7,530 members or 0.0126 per-cent of the population of the Roman Empire.¹ By contrast, after fifty years Korean Protestants alone would have been over 1.5 per cent of the population in Korea. Rather than being an insignificant group, the Korean Protestant community had expanded at an extraordinary rate, and largely due to self-evangelism.

I think that it would have been good for the author to give the names of particular institutions and practices rather than simply describing them, as this would help fix the practice in the reader's mind. One example of this is the Protestant substitute for Confucian ancestral rituals. He gives the name *chesa* for

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 7.

the Confucian rituals but does not give the name *ch'udo yebae* for its Protestant equivalent.

In spite of these comments and some quibbles, this book makes an important contribution to the study of and the extension of general knowledge about religions in Korea by getting the reader to understand how Koreans practice their spirituality. I recommend it highly to students and general readers who are interested in the religions of eastern Asia.