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## Religious studies as a modern academic discipline in Korea

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a historical and institutional overview of the discipline of religious studies in Korea. It first reviews four early sources of comparative studies: work by Christian missionaries; by Japanese scholars during the period of colonization by that nation; by nationalist Korean scholars who reacted against colonization; and by Korean Christian theologians. The founding of the Korean Association for the History of Religions (KAHR) in 1969 was a key point in the professionalization of the discipline. The field became more firmly established in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has diversified in recent years with a new generation of often foreign-trained scholars. The article ends with a brief discussion of potential contributions that the discipline could make to current debates of national significance.

### KEY WORDS

Buddhism; comparative religion; history of religious studies; Korea; New Religious Movements; religious studies in Korea; theology

### Introduction

In Korea, the rigorous comparative/critical study of religion does not have a long history, in contrast to studies within the different religious traditions. In research institutes this is due to a stubborn prejudice that the study of religion should not be established in the public university setting because it belongs in theological colleges or institutes ‘self-described’ as ‘religious.’ The subject is poorly understood outside the departments of religious studies that have already been established at several universities. Many people, including academics, tend to confuse the discipline of religious studies with the kind of ‘theological’ activity that exists within the life of different religious traditions.

The most important issue for ‘religious studies’ is distinguishing itself from confessional studies of religion. This has led to concerns with the word ‘religious’ in the name of the discipline. Recently, seeking to attract prospective students, several departments have changed their name to ‘religious culture’ and/or ‘religion and culture.’ In extreme cases, like the department of Korean cultural studies, the word ‘religious’ or ‘religion’ is dropped. In part reflecting this rejection of the defining feature of the discipline, and despite the interest that has been shown by many foreign scholars about the situation in Korea, scholars working within religious studies in Korea have yet to contribute significantly to international publications. I have been unable to find any research that deals directly with the status of religious studies in Korea as a modern academic discipline, apart from some individual studies of Korean religion(s) that have been published in

foreign academic journals and collections published in Europe and North America, except for an introductory simplified article that discussed Korean religious studies as a part of continental East Asia (Alles 2008, 175–185).

This article will focus on the Korean Association for Religious Studies (KARS), attending to its historical background, the orientation of papers that have been published in its official journal, and its impact on the formation and the development of religious studies within Korea. The collective membership of KARS and the range of their experiences offers us a unique way to describe the methodological tensions and the personal religious trends which have existed among the various Korean scholars of religious studies. By examining the membership of Korean Association for Religious Studies we also have a collective container for examining the scenario of the academic study of religion in the university setting.

### Research trends prior to the formation of the KAHR in 1969

I will begin with investigators who began to write prior to the creation of the KAHR in 1969. As mentioned above, an abundance of material exists within Korea's religious traditions. Buddhist and Confucian materials are especially rich, in contrast to what we find in the older traditions as in Shamanism and Taoism and in the more recent additions which have been coming from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. These branches of Christianity began to elicit scholarly interest rapidly after arriving in Korea in the 19th century. Currently, New Religious Movements have themselves begun to collect materials in a systematic way rather than wait for the kind of work that can be done by outside scholars. In the pages that follow, I will not consider the rich theological studies of a specific tradition to which a given scholar may belong, but will focus on comparative or critical analyses of religious traditions.

In general terms, four research trends in the study of Korean religions can be detected prior to 1969. The first was the study, by Western missionaries, of rival Korean religions from the late 19th to the middle of the 20th centuries. During this period, as was often the case with analyses elsewhere when these were undertaken by Christian missionaries, many studies of the existing Korean religions were conducted in a spirit of judgment and rebuke. Most of these studies regarded traditional Korean religion as some form of idol worship, although a few works attempted to understand Korean religiosity for the purpose of encouraging more effective forms of missionary work. Occasionally, writers investigated native religious traditions for reasons having to do with intellectual curiosity and an anthropological desire to explain the rationale of 'primitive' practices for the benefit of readers 'back home.' Although the Christian missionary movement ended more than half a century ago, as the new Christian churches became a part of the national institutional framework, this trend still endures and continues. In inverse form, it continues among Korean Buddhist or New Religious Movement missionaries living and working abroad in other countries.

A second trend comes to us from the era of Japanese colonial rule: the research of Japanese scholars on Korean religions (Kim 2010, 32–33). Notable achievements include the following: Mishina, Shōei (1902–1971) who investigated ancient religious beliefs in Korea; Takahashi, Torō (1878–1967) who studied religious documents in the Joseon Dynasty period; Eda, Toshio (1898–1957) who systematically classified Korean Buddhist

texts; and Murayama, Chijun (1891–1968) who did groundbreaking work on Korean folk religion and New Religious Movements. However, arguably, the most important work was done by Akamatsu, Chijō (1886–1960) and Akiba, Takashi (1888–1954) who both tried to articulate a comprehensive understanding of Korean religions that was based on an understanding of critical methodologies. As previously noted, Akamatsu introduced the practice of modern academic scholarship into religious studies at Keongseong Imperial University after his appointment as the first professor in this department in 1927. Akiba, who had trained under Bronislaw Malinowski at London University, employed field research to study Korean Shamanism from a socio-anthropological perspective. His contributions were as much theoretical as they were empirical: he tried to find commonalities between Korean Shamanism and forms of Shamanism in other countries.

These examples continue to be relevant in the academic study of Korean religions, despite criticism from some Korean scholars due to what they consider to be a perspective on Korean culture that is colored by Japanese imperialism. Nevertheless, the most important Japanese scholars, especially Akiba, would shape the agenda of Korean scholars of Shamanism until the formation of the KAHK in 1969. Indeed, even in that organization's early years, Japanese scholarship would remain a dominant influence not only in the collection of research materials but also in the perspectives brought to the field. For some years, practices and theoretical approaches that were associated with English-speaking universities were much less significant in Korea.

A third trend is research by Korean scholars during the time of Japanese colonial rule, which often encouraged a nationalistic orientation in their study of religion. Many sought to revive the Korean nationalistic spirit through their studies of Korean religions and many tried to appeal to fellow Koreans in opposition to Japanese kind of research. Notable figures in this revanchist approach to religious studies included Park, Eunshilk (1859–1925)<sup>1</sup> and Shin, Chaeho (1880–1936).

However, we can also find in this period two exceptional scholars, Yi, Neunghwa (1868–1943) and Choe, Namseon (1890–1957) who emphasized the importance of theory and a broader perspective that could transcend the colonial-nationalist binary. Especially notable was Yi's attempt to classify Korean religious materials in light of religious self-perceptions. His phenomenological studies would lead to a posthumous form of recognition that was given to him as the father of the modern academic study of religion in Korea. In 1992, the Korean Association for Religious Studies hosted a conference on 'Yi, Neunghwa's Religious Studies' and nine scholars presented papers on Yi's life and thought. The papers would later be published as an edited collection (Yi 1993a, 9–21, 1993b, 199–204; Seu 1993, 23–44; Yang 1993, 45–65; Son 1993, 67–86; Choi 1993, 87–108; Kim 1993a, 109–130, 1993b, 131–172; Shin 1993, 173–198). Yi's studies were revolutionary in the sense that he attempted to study religions comparatively rather than to analyze in detail the inner dynamics of any specific religion.

For his part, Choe, Namseon was more open than others with respect to the influence of current Western scientific theories of religion which included a number of evolutionist perspectives. In a period that was dominated by Japanese scholarship, an alternative approach to religion could begin to appear in a way that offered a fresh start, presenting new insights for the study of Korean religions.

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, Korean persons' names are written with a family name first.

A fourth trend developed among Korean theologians in the 1960s, at a time when Korean Christianity was witnessing an explosive growth in its numbers. But, in conjunction with the development of Christianity's new position within Korean culture, a more conservative posture was exhibited with respect to other traditions. This was especially the case with Protestants. Within the Catholic world, in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council exercised a moderating influence both on the worldwide Church and also on the Church within Korea. Although the situation is showing some signs of change, religious and cultural conservatism continues to be a defining characteristic of Korean Protestants. Yet, in the 1960s, a nucleus of open-minded, creative Protestant intellectuals began to take a different direction in ways which paralleled the kind of scholarship which can be found within the conduct of modern religious studies in other parts of the world.

Among various works, the most important contribution of Korean Protestants was the volume *Comparative Study of Religions* [비교종교론], published in 1960 by one of the most important Christian publishing companies. Its author was Chae, Pilguen, a Protestant theologian. Although he stated, in the introduction, that he was writing as a theologian, the book displayed a balanced understanding of comparative religion and of comparative theories about religion. Despite its origins, it became an introductory comparative religion text within Korean universities (Yun 1998, 165). Its first four chapters introduced current Western approaches to religious studies: positive and negative theories of religion; the methodological issue of comparative religions; origins, definition, constituent elements; and overarching categories of religion. In Chapter 2, Chae developed the historical background of religious studies and how its subject matter relates to adjacent disciplines like theology and philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, and the sociology of religion. Finally, in later chapters, Chae offers accounts of various religions: Confucianism; Taoism; Brahmanism; Hinduism; Buddhism; Zoroastrianism; Judaism; Christianity; Islam; Shamanism; Shintoism; Jainism; Manichaeism; Baha'i; Mormonism; and the Korean New Religions.

Three years after Chae's work appeared, a second influential work from a Protestant theologian appeared, only this time it focused entirely on Korea rather than on world history. Kim, Deukhwang, an independent theologian and scholar who was not affiliated with any academic institution, produced in 1963 his *Korean Religious History*, under the imprint of the Appel Publishing Company. In comparison to Choe's book, it could not be counted as a truly comparative study. But, nonetheless, Kim's work attempted to convey a comprehensive historical understanding of the various Korean religions, something that had been almost impossible to find prior to the publication of his work. Kim's *Korean Religious History* was a seminal effort to understand the contours and the varieties of Korean religious history.

The third significant contribution from a Protestant theologian active in the 1960s came in a series of books by the Western-trained Methodist Yun, Seongbum, best known for his *Christianity and Korean Thought* [기독교와한국사상] which was published in 1964 by the same Christian publishing company that had produced Choe's *Comparative Study of Religion*. Yun focused on the relation between the late arrival of Christianity and the previously established religious traditions. Yun sought to find seeds of Christianity that were already present in some way within the various Korean religions, in order to indicate how the newer religious tradition could begin to sink deep roots into

the indigenous religious soil. Through his critical comparative studies of Christianity and other religions in Korea, the Methodist school of theology that Yun founded, and which is continued by his disciples, is renowned for its commitment to the study of indigenous theology. Later Yun's theological perspective influenced some Korean theologians' concern, including Ryu, Dongshik's theology on the relation of Christianity and other religions in Korea.

### The early years of religious studies in Korea and the Korean Association of the History of Religions (KAHR)

Religious studies as a science of religion was introduced into Korean academia during the era of Japanese colonial rule. Institutionally, it did not begin as an independent department but rather as a major in the study of religion within the School of Law and Arts at Kyeongseong Imperial University in 1926. Akamatzu Chijō (1886–1980) was appointed as the first Professor of Religious Studies in 1927. Later, after independence from Japanese rule, a distinct Department of Religious Studies was formed with the creation, in 1946, of Seoul National University (SNU) from what had been Kyeongseong Imperial University. This department became the only academic home for religious studies in Korea until the formation of a second fully independent department at Sogang University in 1981.

Several distinct features are evident in the early period of religious studies in Korea. First, reflecting its introduction by Japanese scholars of religion, the Japanese perspective on the interpretation of religious studies would deeply color the field. Even after the advent of Korean independence, this tincture continued to manifest itself. Japanese scholarship in religious studies had been influenced by European and especially German scholars of theology and religious studies (Alles 2008, 201). Most works had been translated from German into Japanese and introduced into Korea in that form. Hence, it was easier for Korean students and scholars to continue reading Japanese materials than to work with the few works available in English, French, Italian, Russian, and others.

However, in the aftermath of independence, several scholars became acquainted with English-language works, sometimes through training in North America. Usually, they had attended divinity schools where they had taken courses in 'world religions' as part of their studies. Hence, in the early development of this field in Korea, as had also been the case in Europe and North America, tensions soon arose between religious studies and theology in both scholarly and also in profoundly personal ways, notoriously so, for instance, in the Department of Religious Studies at Seoul National University. The disputes that arose between Shin, Sahoan (1919–2005) who had been trained at Drew University as a New Testament scholar, and Chang, Byunggil (1911–1998), a scholar of New Religious Movements who had been influenced by the spirit of religious studies in Japan, would become so vehement that their quarrels would be passed on to a younger generation of SNU-trained scholars.

Prior to Shin's retirement from Seoul National University, his Christian apologetic ethos would influence many Korean intellectual Christians. In particular he publicly criticized all Korean New Religious Movements, especially the Unification Church, with strong support for this criticism coming from conservative Korean Christians. However, after his retirement, a critical backlash against Christian-oriented religious studies began to gather strength. Unfortunately, however, it led to a counter-bias

against the academic study of Christianity, as the latter was seen as a return to the old days of the Shin-style apologetics. In its place, scholars of religion began to emphasize the study of other Korean religions, especially Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism; the study of New Religious Movements; and critical and theoretical articulation discussions of the nature of religious studies. Christianity was all too often relegated to the study of theology. Hence, in response, Christian theologians and intellectuals in seminaries and theology departments tended to assume that religious studies would always inevitably function as some kind of adversary. Although many on both sides tried to remedy this situation, many distinguished theologians continue to hesitate and to display varying degrees of reluctance with respect to potentially becoming members of the Korean Association of Religious Studies (KARS).

In part, this continuing friction arose from the origins in 1969 of the Korean Association for the History of Religions (KAHR), since the period of its founding coincided with a heightening in tension and debate which was then occurring about the respective roles and place of theology and religious studies. The founding of this new association was initiated by several members of the Religious Studies Department at Seoul National University, with the support of Buddhist, Confucian, and New Religious Movement scholars who were teaching at universities that had been established on a religious foundation, unlike the state-funded Seoul National University: e.g., Dongguk University, a Buddhist foundation; Seonggwenkwon University, a Confucian foundation; and Wongang University, a Won Buddhist foundation. (Won Buddhism had been established as a New Religious Movement, an offshoot of Buddhism.) In addition, some scholars of Shamanism and Korean folk religion would also join this association in the early years. Scholars from Christian theological schools were few in number.

However, apart from some members of the Religious Studies Department of Seoul National University, most of the early KAHR participants lacked a comprehensive understanding of religious studies as a rigorous academic discipline. They displayed more interest in their own religious traditions than in engaging in any kind of comparative critical study: Buddhist scholars concentrated on Buddhism, Confucian scholars on Confucianism, and Won Buddhism scholars on Won Buddhism; early studies of New Religious Movements and folk religions including Shamanism similarly shared in this narrow perspective.

Nevertheless, shortly after the formation of the KAHR, some members attempted to seek a broader approach to the field in monthly seminars, an experiment that lasted for about two years. The seminar leaders would select papers from foreign religious-studies journals for discussion, often in order to indicate the scholarly ideals which existed in the study of religion, and they also would invite papers from international scholars in the field. The homegrown research of Korean scholars, when combined with papers presented at an international conference, would form the basis of an official journal that was launched by the KAHR in April 1972: *Korean Religious Studies* [한국종교학].

The first issue in this journal contained 11 papers from a base of Korean researchers as well as contributions from one American (King 1972, 157–167) and three Japanese scholars (Hori 1972, 124–130; Nakamura 1972, 138–156; Nakashima 1972, 131–137). The range of research topics exhibited by the Korean authors was quite balanced, corresponding to the general scope of the journal's title, avoiding doctrinal exposition and attending instead to the wide gamut of 'Korean Religious Studies.' All papers approached the topic

through some kind of phenomenological analysis and not by way of an apologetic perspective. Three papers dealt with typological issues with respect to faith and belief systems as one finds these (Ryu 1972, 5–25), respectively, in ancient Korea, in the Buddhism of the late Silla period (Suh 1972b, 26–39), and in Buddhist Yoga thought (Hwang 1972, 61–78). Three other papers focused on Korean Shamanism (Suh 1972a, 40–51), New Religious Movements (Chang 1972, 52–60), and ancient Chinese faith and sacrifice in relation to the history of religion. One paper addressed methodological issues in religious studies. Among the three papers that were contributed by Japanese scholars, pride of place went to I. Hori's keynote speech on 'The Social Role of Folk Religions' at the KAHR's organizing conference. The other Japanese contributions were H. Nakashima's 'Religion and Society in Japan' and H. Nakamura's 'Pure Land Buddhism.' The last paper came from an American scholar, Winston L. King of Vanderbilt University: 'Sunyata as a Master-Symbol.'

Although this was counted as the first issue of *Korean Religious Studies*, the organization's official journal promptly became dormant for almost 14 years. The time lapse until the next issue was the result of the lack of serious young scholars trained in religious studies. It also reflected emerging tensions between the discipline of religious studies and the respective study of each religious tradition in different departments. Time had to pass until a second generation of scholars in religious studies returned to Korea from study abroad and began to teach in distinct departments of religious studies in the 1980s. Especially notable was the formation, in 1981, of a new Department of Religious Studies at the Jesuit-founded Sogang University. Originally the board, composed of Jesuits of the Korean Society of Jesus, had intended to open a Department of Theology. The proposed plan fell afoul of current rules of the Korean Ministry of Education. As a fallback, the plans for a department dedicated to theology led to the development of the Religious Studies Department.

For this reason, the department was initially constituted by several members of the theology faculty and only one religion-studies scholar, Kim, Seunghye, whose field was religion in China. Later Keel, Heesung joined this department. His special field was Buddhist studies. Kim and Keel had both been trained with a religious-studies orientation at Harvard University, and both were influenced by the teaching and work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In comparison to the number of Catholic theologians at Sogang, the number of faculty that were devoted purely to religious studies was small. However, these two scholars came to lead the department in close collaboration with their theologian colleagues. The scholarship of the department at this point focused primarily on personalistic and dialogical approaches to the study of religion, although some emphasis was given to the comparative study of multiple religious traditions.

At roughly the same time, at Seoul National University, a scholar trained at Northwestern University in Illinois, Yun, Yeeheum, was added to the Department of Religious Studies as the first member with a PhD in religious studies. After his appointment, he emphasized the importance of a historical approach, rejecting the sufficiency of a phenomenological approach. A second front at SNU was opened with the arrival of Chung, Chinhong, who had been trained in religious studies in Korea and the San Francisco Theological Seminary. He brought to Seoul National University and to Korea an immersion in the work of Mircea Eliade and a phenomenology of religion school. These four scholars at Sogang University and at Seoul National University sought to rejuvenate the

KAHR and, in 1986, its journal was revived with a name change: from *Korean Religious Studies* to *Studies in Religion* [종교연구]. Under its new guise, the journal appeared annually until 1996. As a sign of the growing maturity arising within religious studies in Korea, it appeared twice-yearly from 1997 to 1999 and then, in 2000, thrice-yearly and then finally, from 2001 to today, quarterly. The journal would receive official recognition from the Korea Research Foundation in 2005 and, currently, it is recognized as the most comprehensive peer-reviewed academic journal on the study of religion in Korea.

It has dealt with diverse special issues over the past quarter century. The range and scope of topics covered in the journal was extensive and comprehensive: the relation of Korean culture to its religious traditions; problems in the translation of scripture; the encounter of Western and Eastern religions and their impact on contemporary culture, religion, and literature; the role of religion in the work of Yi, Neunghwa (1868–1943); religion and the environment; the historiography of Korean religions; religion and ritual; Korean religions in the 20th century; religious studies in the 21st century; nationalism and religion; gerontological issues and religion; Korean religions and politics since independence; mythical imagination and religion; the trend of inter-religious collaboration; religion in North Korea; the cultural content of religion; the myth of the goddess; and, lastly, religious education and religious policy.

During these years, a new variable emerged. Several new religious-studies departments at Christian universities were established in the late 1980s and early 1990s, encouraging a more frequent publication of the KAHR's official journal. Three religious studies departments were established at Protestant universities (at Methodist Theological University, Hanshin University, and Kangnam University) either under the name of Religious Studies or the Philosophy of Religion, and at Catholic universities two new departments were created in religious studies. But, in contrast, no separate departments of religious studies were founded at any of the Buddhist or Confucian universities. However, in the prestigious non-religious Academy of Korean Studies, a new major in religious studies in humanities was established, while in the Universities of New Religious Movement efforts were made to create departments in this field, first at Daejin University in its Department of Religious Culture, and then, in 2013, at Joongwon University in its Department of Religious Studies.

A number of countercurrents are present within the field of religious studies in Korea which should be noted. Because of pressures that are being exerted from an impending demographic crisis that has been occurring at Korean universities, several departments that had been devoted to religious studies have had to change their names and broaden their mandates. For example, the Department of Religious Studies at Wongwang University, founded by a New Religious Movement within Korean Buddhism, changed its name from Korean Religious Studies to Korean Cultural Studies. At Kangnam University, the Department of Philosophy of Religion, in the School of Theology, has transitioned to become the Department of Philosophy, in the College of Humanities.

Under whatever name, departments of religious studies remain relatively rare in Korean universities compared to other popular departments within the humanities. Nevertheless, many scholars from Christian, Buddhist, Confucian, New Religious Movement, and even non-religious backgrounds have shown a deep interest in religious studies, as shown by the healthy status of its signature professional organization. Currently, on its rolls, there are more than 300 members, with eight executive officers and 52 trustee board

members. To signal its breadth of focus, the organization changed its name in 2013: from the Korean Association of the History of Religions (KAHR), a name that had been chosen to parallel the International Association of the History of Religions, to the Korean Association for Religious Studies (KARS), to reflect and indicate a more inclusive attention to religious phenomena and methodological issues.

The KARS is currently organized into about 15 panels: 13 topical panels (religion and religious studies; Korean religion; Shamanism and folk religions; Hinduism; Buddhism; Confucianism; Judaism and Islam; Christianity; the psychology of religion; the sociology of religion; religious education; New Religious Movements; religion and gender) and two that are defined according to the class of participants (graduate students and foreign scholars, the latter group functioning in English). The association holds two conferences each year, usually in May and November. Generally, it selects a central theme that is related to key issues in Korea and the world. Often it invites three main keynote speakers in addition to more than 70 papers which are presented in the various panels.

### Research trends since the 1980s in KAHR/KARS and elsewhere

As discussed above, the development of religious studies in Korea, as currently understood, resumed in the 1980s with the revitalization of the KAHR and the re-launching of its journal in 1986. Guiding the resuscitation were four key personnel: two from Seoul National University (Yun, Yeeheum, who assumed the presidency of the KAHR and Chung, Chinhong) and two from Sogang University (Keel, Heesung and Kim, Seunghye).

Each of the four contributed a paper to the resumption of the KAHR's journal. The contents of this first issue were determined by the subject matter of the annual KAHR conference, which had focused on 'the matter of religious education in publicly funded schools from the elementary and the secondary schools to higher education in university.' In Korea, most schools and universities, irrespective of their status as private or public institutions, annually receive monetary support from the Korean Ministry of Education. These funds are crucial for their operation. Public funding raises questions about church-state relations, creating difficulties for the study of religion. Accordingly, the four scholars chose to address the issue by including the conference deliberations in this first edition. The conference presentations and a subsequent journal article by the KAHR President, Yun, Yeeheum, dealt with 'Religious Education in the Cultural Context of Pluralistic Religions' (Yun 1986, 3–10). Keel, Heesung of Sogang University analyzed 'The University and the Study of Religions (Keel 1986, 11–20): The Historical Context and Mission of Modern Religious Studies.' Chung, Chinhong considered 'Public Education and Religious Education, With Reference to the Curriculum Development of Moral Education in Elementary and Secondary Education' (Chung 1986, 21–37). And the fourth member of the group, Kim, Seunghye, chose to present her views on 'The Foundational Structure and Features of the Chinese Religions' (Kim 1986, 38–72). Three other articles rounded out the issue (Yi 1986a, 73–90, 1986b, 91–115; Choi 1986, 116–151).

The third issue (the second in the new series) appeared in 1987, and it further explored methodological and phenomenological issues in the study of religion in terms of their application to the Korean situation. Subsequent issues would also frequently revolve around special themes thought relevant to the field and to current conditions as these

existed in Korea. Compared to the number of scholars who were concentrating on their own specific religious traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, and so on), the total that were involved in religious studies remained small. However, these four key members continued to provide guidance within the field with clarity and vision until, in the 1990s, young scholars trained in Korea and abroad, especially in the US and Canada, could begin to improve the quality of the KAHR's journal and to enrich the association's discussions.

In addition, several foreign scholars in the discipline also contributed articles to the journal. In 1990, for example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith offered his analysis of 'Scripture' in its pages (Smith 1990, 149–183). In the 2000s, the journal's table of contents listed a larger number of foreign scholars who brought their expertise to the field, especially with respect to the critical study of religions in general. Donald Wiebe contributed two articles on methodological issues in 2000 (Wiebe and Hwang 2000, 29–34; Wiebe 2000, 1–24) while Brian Rennie discussed the thought of Mircea Eliade in 2002. With their help, the journal kept itself up to date with current research in Western religious-studies departments that Korean scholars could then apply within the context of their own religious traditions.

Korean scholars of religious studies also began to participate in conferences with colleagues at other East Asian universities, first with Japanese, then with Chinese scholars. A recurring theme would be the effort to identify a particular Asian perspective on religious studies. The regional network of scholars, including the Korean contingent, has been particularly interested in the spread of New Religious Movements throughout East Asia, in part due to the intellectual leadership that was shown by Shimazono Susumu of the University of Tokyo. Among the four key members in the KAHR, only Chung, Chinhong, functioning as the network leader in Korea, has been actively involved in this regional research program. The other three – like most Korean scholars of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity in Korea and East Asia – have shied away from participating in this network, in part because of the dominant research focus on the study of contemporary New Religious Movements.

On the other hand, Yun, Yeeheum of Seoul National University devoted himself to the study of Korean religions vis-à-vis the history of the major world religions and later established a research center for the study of contemporary Korean religions, which included the various Korean New Religions. Additionally, the two Sogang University leaders focused on establishing their own dialogues between the various religions and the life of the different East Asian cultures. Keel, Heesung developed an in-depth comparative study of Buddhism and Christianity both in Korean and in English, and he later published a monograph on the thought of Shinran in the context of Japanese Buddhism (Keel 1995, 1999). After his retirement, he founded an institute on Ganhwa Island for the sake of fostering interreligious education in Korea. His colleague, Kim, Seunghye, focused on studying ancient Confucianism in her early research, although her interests later broadened to include contemporary Confucianism and contemporary Taoism. At the same time, she founded an interreligious dialogue institute within her religious community and she continued to collaborate with Keel, Heesung and other scholars from religious traditions that differed from her Roman Catholic affiliation.

Since 1990, leadership in the field of religious studies in Korea has expanded to include a group of younger scholars who were trained either in Korea or abroad, most of them former students of the KAHR Big Four. The two early departments have added new

faculty members, and other universities have established their own majors in religious studies. In the process, appointments have been made of scholars who were trained not in departments of religious studies but in related fields such as anthropology, sociology, theology, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Because of this diffusion in background and interests, questions about the identity of religious studies would accordingly re-emerge in the 21st century, especially among younger scholars who sometimes could not identify with religious studies as it was understood by most of their senior colleagues. Their feelings of discomfort replayed some of the older conflicts that had existed between religious studies and other disciplines.

The old and new points of friction within religious studies in Korea have thus led to its division into two separate streams that now threaten to become distinct branches. One, especially popular among scholars who were fully trained in Korea, emphasizes a distinct identity for religious studies that points to a real distinction between it and other disciplines. The other stream, where PhDs from foreign universities predominate, is more open to input from other disciplines when these study religious phenomena and when they actively seek some form of interdisciplinary collaboration. Among the four key KAHR scholars, Chung, Chinhong, due to his meta-theoretical and ideological view influenced phenomenologically, has been forthright in highlighting a unique identity issue for religious studies that is distinct not only from theology but from other academic disciplines as well. To pursue this goal, he and a band of disciples have established a research institute outside the university context that investigates Korean religious culture. Some young graduate students, some older scholars that were trained if not by Chung then usually in Korean universities, and a few Japanese religious scholars have joined this institute as full members and they have established a new association that is affiliated with it.

Related to this division is a larger identity crisis that has been emerging among scholars who were trained in particular religious traditions other than in the Korean New Religious Movements. Indeed, after the leadership that was displayed by the four KAHR pioneers, most presidents of the association have been New Religious Movement scholars, including two from the New Religious Movement variant known as Won Buddhism. In contrast, scholars who were concerned with the Abrahamic traditions have typically participated in their own academic associations, while those involved with Eastern traditions can choose among a number of Eastern philosophical associations. The future of the KAHR/KARS style of religious studies in Korea depends on the creation of an inclusive academic environment that is transdisciplinary. This broad methodological space will allow scholars of various religious traditions to engage in their own academic pursuits. At the same time, it will foster dialogue with scholars examining religious phenomena through other academic silos.

In conjunction with the expansion of the KAHR/KARS since the 1980s, several other academic associations have come into existence to study religion, often with degrees of overlapping membership. Two of the new additions merit special mention.

One is the Korean Association for the Study of New Religious Movements, with a membership roster that closely matches that which belongs to the KAHR. Active members of the more specialized group tend to come from the Korean New Religious Movements such as Eastern Learning, Daesoon Thought, the Unification Church, Won Buddhism, and other groups of non-Korean origin. To date, research published by this association has focused almost exclusively on origins, developments, and doctrines of particular

movements. Empirical research is very rare. A fruitful area for future work could be the varieties of religious experience that exist among individual communicants.

The other notable addition is the Korean Association for Religious Education, organized by Park, Sunyoung, a former Buddhist monk who teaches at Dongguk University (by origin, a Buddhist institution). Park and his followers inaugurated an association that was focused both on education and on religious studies. The organization's leadership originally derived from traditional Buddhist circles but, more recently, this has shifted to Won Buddhism, its New Religious Movement variant. The membership and research program of the Korean Association for Religious Education have reflected these trends. Although some Roman Catholic and some Protestant scholars have participated in the work of this association, many scholars of Christian religious education have been reluctant to join, working instead through their own associations.

As a result of these divisions, interest in these matters has been slow to gain any kind of momentum in Korea, despite a growing interest in North America and Europe that a more comprehensive form of religious education should be developed as part of a broader form of civic and moral education as we try to respond to the tragedies of 9/11 and other variables. Religious educational institutes and schools have yet to engage seriously in questions that have to do with faith, pluralism, and the broader purposes of education for the development of civic virtues in a religiously pluralistic world.

In addition to these two non-KAHR/KARS associations, three relatively small organizations should also be mentioned. One is the Korean Association of the Sociology of Religion, a subdivision of the Korean Association of Sociology. A second deals with issues of religion and science; and, although most participants are scholars of religious studies and theology, it has recently changed its name to being the Society of Scientific Thought. Members host a monthly reading group that deals with issues pertaining to religion and science. The third group is the Korean Association of Literature and Religion, within which several key members of the KARS currently participate.

This level of attention displayed by KARS leaders in the younger, more interdisciplinary organizations is comparatively recent. Active collaboration with the Korean Association of Literature and Religion did not begin until 2013, but it led in July 2014 to a joint conference on Religious Studies and Literature. In October 2014, KARS followed up with a joint conference with the Korean Association of Sociology of Religion on the theme of 'religion, disaster, and death.'

Finally, it should be noted that several institutes, established in affiliation with religious-studies departments, now publish their own academic journals. Although articles written in English can be submitted to these predominantly Korean-language publications, it is difficult for foreign scholars to access them easily. One exception to this rule has been the Institute for Religion under the Sogang University Department of Religious Studies which, in 2010, launched its *Journal of Korean Religions*, to date the only English-language journal that is exclusively focused on the subject. A well-received peer-reviewed publication, it received recognition in 2014 when it was listed in the Thomson Reuters Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI). In addition to the *Journal of Korean Religions*, other journals also publish English-language work by scholars in Korean religious studies, but as part of a wider agenda that covered Korean history and society, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity.

## Conclusion

Despite Korea's long and diverse history of religious traditions, the emergence of Korean religious studies as an academic discipline is a rather recent phenomenon. Its starting point was in the 1960s, though it only began to achieve momentum in the 1980s with the appearance of the KAHR/KARS quadrumvirate. Perhaps understandably then, the field still faces difficulties in defining its purposes and research parameters.

The principal identity crisis remains a dualistic distinction between supposedly scientific or objective 'religious studies' and theological studies within Christianity and other religious traditions. This out-of-date prejudicial tension still lingers in state/public and denominational institutions. Unfortunately, this inherited species of dualism continues to pose barriers to cooperation with many scholars of religious traditions who come from the Abrahamic and Eastern religions. The future development of Korean religious studies depends on the resolution of this conflict.

At this point, the creation of other new, independent departments of religious studies in Korea seems unlikely. Instead any growth will probably occur within existing academic departments that are focused on Buddhism, Confucianism, the New Religious Movements, and Christian theology in universities and even in religious schools that have recognized that they should open their doors to new faculty that have been trained in religious studies, in order to deal with the phenomena of religion in the world. In 2014, a graduate school of divinity which belongs to one of the major universities has recently created a new major in religious studies. This development was not greeted with the suspicion that would once have been aroused because most recently trained scholars in theology no longer approach the topic with the aggressive confessional pronouncements that were common in the early period of the evolution of the KAHR/KARS. As the ideal of sound scholarship spreads, there is ample room for religious studies and theological studies to collaborate with each other in the service of a deeper understanding of religion and humanity. The central problem for the KARS will be how to create room for this dialogue so that it can prosper under its leadership.

The second problem is the imbalance between religious populations and key personnel in religious studies, both within academic departments and also within the KARS. The religious demographics in Korea show a balance among religious and non-religious, Christian, and Buddhist groups that is missing in the research interests of scholars in the field. Perhaps as part of the reaction against theological biases, research has often focused on the fascinating, but in terms of sheer numbers, greatly over-represented adherents who belong to the various New Religious Movements. This trend within the KARS requires radical rethinking in order to reflect the reality of the situation of both the study of religion and non-religion like that of atheists, agnostics, and others not to be categorized as the usual religious phenomena in Korea.

The third problem is that the discipline of religious studies in Korea has not progressed sufficiently from its roots in the debates that occurred within the field within Western academic departments in the 1960s. Terms that were common in the early period, belonging to the phenomenology of religion movements – confessional studies and dogmatism, reductionism, and historicism – have remained at the center of a movement that has sought to define religious studies against both theology and the social sciences. Fortunately, some meta-theoretical issues developed in the naturalistic and the cognitive

study of religion have been introduced, but they are not creating specifically Korean spins for the new development in religious studies. Nevertheless, for the further development of religious studies in Korea, theoretical and methodical discourse needs to move beyond the limitations of a phenomenological perspective.

A final problem stems from confusions and tensions regarding the public role of religion in Korea. Since the crucial intervention at the time of the re-launching of the official KAHR journal, scholars of religious studies have not been sufficiently concerned with this topic. However, this could be a propitious moment for reconsidering the use and abuse of religious education as a consequence of recent media attention given to a report about a Buddhist student who refused to take religious education in his school. The issue had arisen because almost three quarters of Korean secondary schools were started as Christian institutions, and they have often maintained religious-education programs despite receiving government funding. Problems were exacerbated in the years of the previous Korean administration, due to the favoritism that was shown toward Christianity by various government offices (Kim 2013, 198–200).

Generally speaking, Korean Buddhism has been overly generous in reacting to the biased discourse of Christianity against it in modern Korea, though tempers have grown shorter in the wake of these recent conflicts. Resentment about exclusion has also increased within other religious traditions and, with them, potential for religious friction within the permutations and shifts that have been occurring within Korean culture. It has therefore become very difficult to initiate dialogues about religious traditions within the public sector of Korean life, whether at educational institutes, government offices, political meetings, business organizations, or even within religious meetings. The place of religion in the public sphere is emerging now as a key area for future research in Korea, the broad field of religious education being only a crucial starting point.

These changing conditions will accordingly require students and scholars of religion to investigate and critique a dogmatic perception still prevalent in Korean society: an inflexibly mechanical belief in the separation between church and state, between the practice of religion and the conduct of public life. On the one hand, a belief in this separation continues to mask the existence of biases operative in Korean life. On the other hand, a belief in this separation serves to discourage valuable conversations about the meaning of religious and spiritual values within both private and public life. In the near future, religious-studies scholars in Korea will need to engage more actively with these issues. As one option, they could ask how it might be possible to develop a new curriculum that could relate the meaning of religious and spiritual values to the work currently being done in Korea in the field of law and public policy.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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