GLOBALIZATION AND RELIGION:
THE CASES OF JAPAN AND KOREA

Nobutaka Inoue

INTRODUCTION

Historically speaking, the religious centre of East Asia was China, which greatly influenced Japanese and Korean religion by introducing Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism to these countries. During the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, a reverse route of religious influence saw Japanese religion penetrating into China and Korea. This new relationship was basically of a different character, since it came about as a result of Japanese political control of Korea and the military invasion of China. As a result, most Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and local branches of sectarian Shinto established in China and Korea by the Japanese were destroyed or abolished after World War II. In spite of this, some new religions continued their missionary activities throughout the twentieth century, gaining a certain number of foreign followers.

Since the 1980s, through the process of globalization, the religious situation in East Asian countries has begun to change. Mutual influences have increased rapidly and some sects or churches seem to have greatly increased the number of their foreign members. Soka Gakkai, as a typical example, presently has several hundreds of thousands of Korean members.

In the process of modernization, Japan and Korea were somewhat similar in the ways that traditional religions responded to modernity and new religious movements formed in response to the challenge of new social conditions. In the case of Japan, the quite unique danka system (the patronage system of Buddhist temples) was established already during the Tokugawa era and continues to this day. Yet the actual connections

1 By contrast, Japanese religions established in Hawaii and North America at this time were able to continue their activities after World War II, functioning not only as foreign branches of Japanese religious groups, but also as community centres for Japanese Americans.
between each temple and the people in the local area have gradually become weaker over time. On the other hand, the connections between local shrines and *ujiko* or shrine parishioners deepened after the Meiji Restoration in the wake of government policy, which treated shrine Shinto as a national ritual system. After World War II, however, the new constitution enshrined the principles of the separation of church and state and of religious freedom. This resulted, to some extent, from Japanese people’s self-examination of the negative effects of the deep connection between the state and shrine Shinto just before and during the war, but also from strong demands by the occupation forces after the war. Based on these principles, shrine Shinto was henceforth treated the same as other religions, resulting in a weakening of the commitment of people to local shrines.

While traditional religions had to respond to modern transformations, new religions appeared one after another in the course of modernization. By the latter half of the twentieth century, about ten percent of the Japanese population had links with new religions. Compared with new religions, the Christian population remains under one percent even now, and in spite of the fact that Roman Catholics and numerous Protestant denominations have been active in the country since the beginning of the Meiji era. Moreover, about twenty percent of Christians in Japan are members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which is sometimes regarded as a new religious movement in Christianity, established in the USA.

In Korea, by contrast, no parallel *dankha* system was established and the social influence of Buddhism was less than in Japan as the Chosun dynasty supported Confucian ideology as spiritual background. For the Korean people, Confucianism functioned as family ritual, without tight religious organization. While Confucianism gradually decreased in social influence during the course of modernization, Korean Buddhism was greatly influenced by Japanese Buddhism after the conclusion of the Second Korea-Japan Agreement in 1905. Some Korean Buddhist monks, under the influence of Japanese monks, married.\(^2\)

While traditional religions were facing the problems of modernity just as in Japan, new indigenous religious movements also arose in Korea.\(^3\)

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2 In Japan, marriage of Buddhist monks became a matter of the individual monk’s decision in 1872 by the order of the Ministry of Religion.

3 In Korea, new religions are sometimes categorized as ‘ethnic religions’.