

***Urban Aspirations in Seoul.*** Guest-edited by Jin-Heon Jung and Peter van der Veer. Special Issue of *Journal of Korean Religions* 7.2 (October 2016).

This edited volume is a comprehensive study on the dynamic religious aspirations of the capital city in South Korea. As the Max Planck Institute explored the relationship between the urban and the religious/ sacred in the context of Asian cities, the Seoul Lab team examined the ways the urban life of Seoul has been and is constituted across time and space. Through the multiple methodologies of fieldwork, history, social media, anthropology, and philosophy, journal editors, Jin-Heon Jung and Peter van der Veer argued that “Seoul’s compressed modernity exhibits a distinctive trajectory when viewed through the lens of religion” (p. 6). Religious aspiration is seen to uplift the spirit of the urban dwellers.

The first article (Huyn Mee Kim and Si Hyun Choi, “Engaged Buddhism”) introduces the Jungto (Pure Land) society established by Ven. Pömnynun Sunim in 1988. The society began in grassroots communities with the aim of solving social problems based on the teachings of Buddha. Since they address issues of greed, poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation in the daily lives of lay people, the new religious group of the *Jogyo* Order is depicted as an engaged urban Buddhist movement where non-religious young people in their 20s and 30s are empowered to seek peace of mind and structural reforms amidst the “burn-out cycle” of urban life. The in-depth interviews with forty people reflect Jungto’s principal mission of self-cultivation through concrete practice, a mission that has not only offered new vision for lay followers but also appealed to a wider population by involving the general public. The Seoul Islamic Masjid is a different expression of religious aspiration by outsiders. The construction process, its architectural structures, and exposed decorations of the building are evidence that multi-Islamic nations were interested in establishing the first Islamic organization in modern Korea. Doyoung Song’s “Ummah in Seoul” puts forward the view that the post-colonial nation was not overly familiar with Middle Eastern religion, but that economic issues (e.g., the oil crisis) under President Park Chung-hee matched well with the Islamic passion. The aspiration of Islam in Seoul originated from Malaysia, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Morocco, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Libya, and Kuwait in the 1960s. Nevertheless, “Ummah in Seoul” explains that despite the influx of Muslim migrants enhancing the diversity of the Muslim population, the number of Korean Muslims (40,000 of 175,000 in 2015) began to stagnate after the Middle East oil boom in the 1970s (p. 62).

Michael Kim’s “The Politics of Officially Recognizing Religions” approaches this topic from a historical perspective, examining the social works of Western missionaries that were successfully established in Korea before the advent of colonial rule (1910). The reason Christian organizations flourished was not a result

of the nationalist reputation they had gained through the March First Movement (1919), but rather their pursuit of education, medicine, and the other forms (orphanage, nursing house, and so on) of 'social work' they performed in Seoul (and Pyongyang). The Westerners' aspiration to socio-religious modernization challenged the colonial rule of Japan in the 1920s and the 1930s. Large-scale Christian foundations operated most of the educational facilities (over 558 of 655 colleges, schools, and centers). Medicine was another area where Christians dominated the field: Severance Hospital was used as an example. Catholics, Presbyterians, the Salvation Army, and Methodists undertook welfare works in the capital region. Thus, these Christian social works created symbols of Western modernity that appealed to the Korean population, while the relationship between Buddhism and the colonial state was complicated by the attempt of Japanese Buddhists to merge with their Korean counterparts. Social media has been one of the most visible platforms for promoting popular beliefs in recent years. Seung Min Hong's "Punching Korean Protestantism" explores the TV show *Theology Punch*, which treats rational and critical ideas on the spiritual authority of pastors and tithe. Unlike other religious media, this program goes beyond proclaiming alternative messages and opens up the very process of theologizing to the public by facilitating unrestrained debate. Online viewership surpassed expectations, and the show also entered the top five of all of CBS (Christian Broadcasting System)'s programs in terms of offline viewership. However, *Theology Punch* was also met with challenges as the producers received critical 'phone calls. The show that democratized theology had originally planned to make 100 weekly episodes, but was terminated after the fiftieth. Nevertheless, the aspirational character of the show has been recognized in the egalitarian view where everybody could participate, including theologians, pastors, laities, and unbelievers.

Jin-Heon Jung's "North Korean Migrants and Protestant Churches in Seoul" is a cultural anthropological study in which North Korean (N.K.) migrants who became Christians express their religious aspirations through performative rituals of violence and peace. The evangelical Church, along with the Korean government, participated in the process of subjectification of these individuals, as they are portrayed as the first unifiers of an imagined reunified Korea. Among them, two case studies of alternative religiosity imply that "the bodily-spiritual transformation of individual N.K. migrants into Christianity is not strictly teleological, but is more complicated, ambivalent, and diversified" (p. 124). The first case is about the former elite group converts who have been politically involved in balloon and leaflet campaigns in which they send CDs, USB sticks, and one US dollar. The second case is about those who came to the South as teenagers in the 1990s. They created a private organization called 'With-U (Unification)' to peacefully lead an alternative unification movement through music concerts and special lecture series. "The Dynamistic Philosophy of History" analyses a Korean

philosopher. Ham Sökhön (1901–1989), who was previously influenced by the non-church movement of the Japanese Christian Uchimura Kanzo (1861–1930) and the non-violence movement of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), attempted to emphasize the importance of history in his work. For him, the concept of history could be seen as “a whole of which various parts, such as individuals, groups of individuals, and events can be coherently connected” (p.151). As he also learnt about Christianity, Ham’s philosophy was developed with a Christian understanding that to view things in the world biblically means to view things historically from a cosmological perspective. The religious thought of ‘history’ is defined by the terms of ‘*Hananim* (God)’ and ‘*Ssi-al* (ordinary people)’; the dynamic process of moving from *Ssi-al* to *Hananim* is understood as history. ‘*Ssi-al*,’ which is comprehended as God incarnate in the phenomenal world, is regarded as the active agent in history. Korean history, including the colonial era (1910–1945), was interpreted as the history of ‘suffering.’

Ultimately, some parts of the first, third, and fifth articles are repetitious and there is no coverage of Confucianism and Daoism, but multi-disciplinary works contribute well to the social aspiration of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity in Seoul. The collected volume contains great sources of modern history and culture for readers who teach or study on the intercultural transformation of East Asian religions.

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