

KOREAN RELIGION

GRADE LEVEL: High School

SUBJECT: Social Studies, Religion

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Examine the integrated nature of Korean religion.
2. Investigate the different schools of thought that make up Korean religion.
3. Define the terms homogeneity, heterogeneity, tolerance, syncretism and exclusivity and apply them to both the Korean and American cultures.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Resource sheet (attached)
- Poster board or other material for graphic organizer

PROCEDURE:

1. Have students brainstorm the meanings of the following words: homogeneity, heterogeneity, tolerance and exclusivity. These concepts can be discussed in the context of how Americans are expected to be tolerant of people who are different from themselves, and the heterogeneous nature of the U.S. population.
2. Steer the discussion to Korean culture and inform students that Korea's population is very homogeneous. Koreans do not wrestle with issues of social diversity. Koreans demonstrate tolerance in their society when dealing with religion. Koreans do not regard religion in exclusive terms. In Korea, it is not unusual for people to align themselves with more than one religion.
3. Have students read the Background Reading either aloud or silently.
4. Break students into pairs or groups. Have them generate questions about Korean religion. Students should be encouraged to question any issues that puzzle them regarding the acceptance in Korean culture of belonging to more than one religion.
5. As a class, groups should share their questions. Refer to the vocabulary terms defined previously to explain how Korean religion is not exclusive.
6. After some discussion, break students back into their original small groups. Instruct students to create a graphic organizer, web or some type of visual aid to explain how different religions operate simultaneously in the lives of Korean people. The teacher can present a model, such as a series of interconnected circles that are labeled with each religion, and include details about each religion. Students should be encouraged to creatively depict how each of these religions maintains its own unique character, while co-existing in the lives of most Koreans.
7. Ask students to evaluate their visual organizers in terms of their depiction of the integrated nature of Korean religion. Conduct a class discussion that focuses on the most effective elements of each of the visual organizers created.

EVALUATION:

Instruct students to write a letter to a Korean student who is their age. Students may assume that it is acceptable to ask questions about Korean religious practices. Students should include questions that display an informed viewpoint. Specific references should be included to religions and practices. The letter should reflect an understanding of the syncretic nature of Korean religion as well as the possibility that these concepts may still be puzzling to American students, as this topic is very different from Western concepts of religion.

BACKGROUND READING

KOREAN RELIGION: AN INTEGRATED MOSAIC

Korean religion is characterized by its integrated nature. It is not monolithic, meaning that it is very hard to say exactly what it is. It has many ideas and values that operate at the same time, and in overlapping ways. Korean religion is syncretic. It consists of a variety of schools of thought that operate together at the same time. One of the unique aspects of Korean religion is the difficulty it poses in classification. It does not consist of neat patterns, which are easy to explain. Instead it mirrors the rich nature of Korean culture as it consists of a wide variety of both ancient and modern, foreign and indigenous and pantheistic and monotheistic themes. Just as Korea defies easy categorization with its many Chinese and Siberian influences, its religious character is also rich and varied.

When examining Korean religion, it is important to view it in terms of schools of thought, as opposed to specific religions or philosophies. This helps to explain how Koreans can be more than one religion at the same time. For Koreans, it is basic values and beliefs that are important; religious institutions are secondary in importance. Korean religion can be best understood as different modes of thought that may include specific practices.

The first mode of thought is the oldest of the Korean religions, the indigenous practice of Shamanism. Shamanism is rooted in nature and the belief that all things—humans, natural forces and inanimate objects—possess spirits. It involves the worship of protective deities. Currently, it is still practiced in Korea, and it is kept alive by Korean women who serve as *mudang* (the Korean term for fortune teller or shaman). Many Koreans today, despite their modern lifestyles, still go to a *mudang* to have their fortunes told, especially before engaging in very important life practices like marriage or starting a new business. If a Korean is experiencing difficulties they may ask to have a *kut* performed. A *kut* is a religious ceremony that is often intended to exorcise bad spirits or to make a connection with a dead ancestor. Other evidence of the presence of Shamanism in Korea can be found in the totems and stone piles that can be seen at entrances to many villages and rural towns. The totems are long poles, usually over seven feet tall, that depict spirits of the earth and sky that watch over and protect the villages where they are displayed. Stone piles are erected to fulfill the same purposes.

Another mode of religion prevalent in Korea is Buddhism. Buddhism is based on the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. He was a wealthy Indian prince who gave up all of his worldly possessions to find enlightenment through meditation and moderation. Buddhism was brought to Korea from India, via China, in 372 AD. Later, during the Silla Dynasty in 527 AD, it was adopted as the official state religion of Korea. Shamanism and Buddhism were not perceived as being in conflict. The two religions established common ground. Natural sites considered sacred by Shamanism became the sites of Buddhist temples. Protective Shaman deities such as tigers were integrated into Buddhist practices and works of art. Most Buddhist ceremonies and practices are carried out by monks. Women play secondary roles in the religious practices of Korean Buddhism.

Korean Buddhists have developed many interesting practices and ideas that are uniquely Korean.

The traditional call to worship in Korean Buddhist temples is made by using four unique instruments. The following symbolic instruments are used to invite worshipers to pray: a large bell is rung to awaken people, especially those who have become decadent; a drum, made of animal skin, calls upon animals; a cloud shaped gong calls the beings of the air; and a log carved and painted to look like a fish is played to call all of the creatures who live in the water to worship. Korean Buddhists invite all beings to listen to the teachings of the Buddha. Korean Buddhism is also very proud of the Tripitaka Koreana. It is a collection of over 80,000 carved wooden blocks fashioned in the 11th century. They were made to serve as protection from an invading force, and are considered to be one of the most complete texts of all Buddhist writings. When printed, the blocks make up 6,791 volumes. Korean Buddhism was eclipsed as a state religion by the adoption of Neo-Confucianism during the Chosŏn Kingdom (1392-1910).

Confucianism is usually considered as a code of ethical behavior, but the style of Confucianism adopted by the Chosŏn Kingdom was actually Neo-Confucianism, which combines elements of mysticism adopted from Taoism. Koreans actively engage in male-performed rites of ancestor worship. Korea is often depicted as the most Confucian country in Asia. Koreans have deep respect and reverence for family ties and for their ancestors.

Koreans have also adopted Western religion. Korea is the most Christian country in Asia. Over one third of Koreans classify themselves as Christians. Christianity is associated with modernity and equality. Many young Koreans are drawn to Western style churches that can be found throughout Korea. Despite the fact that as Christians, they are encouraged to be exclusive in their religious practices, many Korean Christians may visit fortune tellers. Also, most likely they believe in Confucian ethical codes towards their parents and ancestors, and take part in Buddhist rituals or holidays.

Korean religion is characterized by its syncretic nature. Different religions flow through peoples' lives at the same time. Religious practices take different forms, depending upon the individuals and their needs. Most Koreans subscribe to more than one religion. This is probably because religion in Korea represents a variety of modes of thought or simplifies their way of life. There is no conflict between these religions. Korea's population is very homogeneous and social harmony is highly valued. Korean religion is another element that reflects tolerance to ensure national harmony, and the identification with the community over the individual. Korean religion reflects a variety of outside influences as well as a will to integrate and preserve indigenous cultural practices.

(prepared by Karin Kopciak)