

# DECODING KOREA'S RELIGIONS

**GRADES:** 7-8

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**SUBJECT:** World History, Current Events, Religion

**TIME REQUIRED:** Six class periods

## **OBJECTIVES:**

1. To identify the founding tenets of Korean Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity.
2. To identify and sequence cultural and political events influencing the rise of each religion in Korean society.
3. To analyze, draw conclusions and evaluate the positive effects of each religion on Korean society.
4. To analyze, draw conclusions and evaluate the negative effects of each religion on Korean society.
5. To hypothesize the effectiveness of the function of each religion to answer key questions about the lives of its followers.

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Handout 1: Korea's Four Major Religions (attached)
- Handout 2: Decoding Korea's Religions Table (attached)

## **BACKGROUND:**

### Shamanism

1. Belief in a world of many gods, demons and ancestral spirits
2. Gods and spirits respond to shamans
3. Most Korean shamans are women but there are some men
4. A shaman mediates among gods, spirits, and humans through rituals
5. Gods and family spirits can influence wealth, health, male offspring and longevity
6. One of the ancient religions of the Korean people
7. Practices integrated into most Korean religions

### Buddhism

1. An Indian religion introduced to the Korean peninsula from China during 4th century CE
2. Some monks were miracle workers and fortune tellers, others were scholars
3. Kings and aristocrats built many temples, pagodas and Buddhist images
4. The main state religion in Korea from the 6th century to 14th century CE
5. Believers worship Buddhas and hope to be reborn in a Buddhist paradise
6. Monks and nuns practice meditation (Zen, known as Sŏn in Korean) and strive for enlightenment
7. During the Chosŏn kingdom (1392–1910), kings ruled that Buddhist monks could not enter the capital city, Seoul.

### Confucianism

1. Concerned with how to rule people wisely and how to make people good
2. Based on the writings of Confucius (6th century BCE) and Mencius (4th century BCE), and later the commentaries of Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE)
3. Teaches the importance of relationships between people and how to act appropriately

4. Includes ancestor worship, as well as the royal worship of heaven, earth and the gods of the soil and grain and the veneration of Confucius and other Chinese and Korean sages
5. The state ideology of Korea during the Chosŏn kingdom (1392–1910)
6. Important writings (the Confucian classics) were the basis of civil service examinations

### Christianity

1. Belief in God, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit
2. Early missionaries taught human equality and built hospitals and schools
3. During the colonial period (1910–1945), many people converted because Western thought was considered rational while traditional Eastern thought was considered irrational
4. Church communities provided a way for Koreans to organize against the Japanese and to preserve their “Koreanness” during the colonial period
5. Flourished during the period of modernization
6. Many youths in South Korea today are Christian
7. Many believe that devout practice will bring prosperity and health

### **PROCEDURES:**

1. Ask students to brainstorm a definition of religion. After soliciting volunteer responses, read the following definition of religion: A system of beliefs and practices through which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. Students then brainstorm the ultimate problems of life and discuss them. Following this discussion they will brainstorm a list of world religions. A description of the unit and the key questions to be answered is then presented. At the conclusion of the class, students will write one factual question and one open-ended question they have about Korea’s religions.
2. Homework: Students will interview parents about key cultural and historical events in their lifetimes. For example: the advent of cell phones, the Gulf War, the Clinton presidency. They are to ask their parents how these events have influenced or changed their lives in tangible and intangible ways. Did they change or alter their religious or moral beliefs because of the events? If so, how?
3. Discuss parent interviews and conclusions in class.
4. Students read Handout 1: Korea’s Four Major Religions. Give students Handout 2: Decoding Korean Religions Table, and fill in key tenets of Korean Shamanism. Ask the following question: Thinking back to your brainstorm on ultimate problems of life, which tenet provides a solution to one of life’s problems? Students then hypothesize, on the chart, the positive and negative impacts of shamanism on Korean culture.
5. In-Class Computer Lab Activity: Research and create a timeline of Korea from the Neolithic age to the present. Identify 10 to 15 events that could possibly have influenced the religious beliefs of Koreans. For each event, hypothesize which problems or questions people might have needed solutions or answers for. Discuss results.
6. Students read section on Buddhism in Handout 1 and repeat the procedure in Step 4.
7. Students read section on Confucianism in Handout 1 and repeat the procedure in Step 4.
8. Students read section on Christianity in Handout 1 and repeat the procedure in Step 4.

### **EVALUATION:**

1. Have students complete four rows on Handout 2 with information on each religion’s tenet and its positive and negative impacts on Korean society. In groups of four, have students synthesize information into a fourfold display with one quadrant for each of the four religions. Each poster quadrant must display in a creative, thoughtful style the information from Handout 2. Color identification should be made of similarities and differences in each religion.

2. Each individual student will brainstorm possible theories about how each of Korea's main religions tries to answer life's problems. Each student will write an expository essay explaining four answers provided by the religions. This can be one answer per religion or four answers for one religion.

**ENRICHMENT:**

1. Design a graph displaying current membership of each religion.
2. Design a graph displaying regional concentration of each religion.
3. Simulate a day in the life of a Buddhist monk, a shaman, a Confucian teacher, etc.

## HANDOUT 1: KOREA'S FOUR MAJOR RELIGIONS

Adapted from [www.tour2korea.com](http://www.tour2korea.com) → Religion

### **SHAMANISM**

Various shamanistic practices are well developed in Korea. Korean shamanism has deep roots in folk beliefs from ancient times. It is closely related to the primitive cult of communal worship rites offered to the gods of heaven, and infused with Buddhist tradition.

#### **History**



In ancient times these heavenly rites doubled as agricultural rites in prayers for abundant harvests. Shamanism thrived during the time of the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE) and the Koryŏ kingdom (918–1392), whereas it was oppressed during the Chosŏn kingdom (1392–1910) and the Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945). The Chosŏn kingdom's mainly Confucian society did not allow the practice of shamanism to flourish, but it was tolerated. All folk religions were forbidden by the Japanese colonial authority. Post-liberation Korean shamanism was further weakened over time as a result of modernization and westernization. However, even with the development of a technological society, shamanism still influences parts of Korean life.

#### **Unique Characteristics**

One trait which distinguishes Korean shamanism is that it seeks to solve human problems through a meeting between humanity and the spirits mediated by the shaman. This characteristic is clearly seen in the various types of the *kut* (shamanistic rite) which are still widely observed today. The *kut* is a rite in which the shaman offers a sacrifice to the spirits and, through singing and dancing, begs them to intercede in the fortunes of the world. The shaman wears a colorful ritual costume, speaks in a trance as a spiritual oracle, and sings and dances to the accompaniment of music. Three elements are seen as essential in a *kut*: the spirits as the object of folk belief, the believers praying to those spirits and the shaman mediating between the spirits and the believers. The characteristics of the *kut* will vary depending on the region and purpose, but some of the most representative are the *byŏlsin kut*, which asks the gods for peace and an abundant harvest; the *byŏng kut*, which asks for the recovery of sick family members; and the *nara kut*, which asks that the demands of the king be met. There is also the village *kut* that brings together local townspeople to perform ancestral rites.



#### **Shamanism in Today's Society**



Features of Shamanism still exist in modern society. Shamanist belief can be seen in the presence of *mudang* (shamans), *jŏmjip* (fortune telling establishments), *kut* and *saju* cafes (fortune telling cafes) in contemporary Korean life. The overall strength of Shamanism has decreased partially due to Christianity spreading its roots throughout Korea, but in times when a decision must be made or one struggles with an obstacle in life, fortune tellers are still sought out. Employment, examinations and wedding matters are all common reasons for people to see fortune tellers. Peoples' fortunes and misfortunes can be predicted through the shaman. Some fortune telling establishments have become so well-known for their accurate predictions that they not only cater to everyday people, but also to celebrities. The Miari area is home to many

fortune telling establishments in Sŏngbuk-ku. Recently, many young people have started going to *saju* cafes to have their fortunes read while enjoying a cup of coffee. Here they can tell the fortune teller their date and time of birth for a reading. Sinch'on and Apgujŏng are hot spots for *saju* cafes.

On the other hand, the Korean people still consider traditional shamanism important and have designated it an important intangible treasure. Many regions hold festivals honoring this tradition, including Kyŏngsangbuk-do Province's *Haho Byŏlsin Kut Tallori* (traditional masked-dance drama), which asks the gods of the village for peace and a plentiful harvest. The port city of Pusan holds the *Donghaean Byŏlsin Kut* and the province of Kyŏngsangnam-do holds the *Namhaean Byŏlsin Kut* to pray that fishermen bring in a bountiful catch. These festivals have all been named important intangible treasure preserving the culture of shamanism.

## **BUDDHISM**



► Songkwangsa Temple on Mt. Chogyesan, the headquarters of the Zen sect for over 300 years

Throughout the history of Korean Buddhism, the Korean style of Buddhism could be understood both academically and practically. The Avatamsaka Sutra and the Lotus Sutra were the main focus of study in Buddhist academic study. As for the practice, Pure Land and Sŏn Buddhism have been the most popular and effective ways of practicing. Pure land Buddhism concentrates on Amitabha, the Buddha of Universal Light, and Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Sŏn Buddhism (known as Chan in Chinese and Zen in Japanese) emphasizes meditation and direct experience over concentration on studying the texts.

Although Buddhism was first introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE – 668 CE), the distinctive character of Korean Buddhism emerged during both the Unified Silla (668-935) and the Koryŏ (935-1392) periods. During these two periods Korean monks continually traveled to China to study new Buddhist ideas. After mastering their study, some Korean monks remained in China, but most of them came back and tried to introduce new Buddhist ideas to Korean culture and people.

The study of Avatamsaka Sutra and the practice of Pure Land Buddhism were popular during the Unified Silla period. Masters Wonhyo and Uisang were important monks who introduced and adopted these two ideas to Korea. Wonhyo wrote many important treatises in which he explained 'One Mind', the interrelatedness of everything in the universe. The development of this view was due to an event in his life.



Wonhyo and his friend, Uisang, departed for China to study Buddhism. One night during the journey, Wonhyo awoke thirsty. Searching around, he found a container with delicious cool water in it. He drank the water. The next morning, he realized that the water was in a skull. Suddenly he attained enlightenment. Then instead of going to China, he came back home.

Master Uisang arrived in China and studied for ten years under a great master. When he returned home, he presented a poem to his teacher. This poem, which is the shape of a seal, contained the essence of Avatamsaka Sutra.

► Wonhyo and Uisang

Towards the end of the Unified Silla period, the Sŏn school was introduced from China and this added a new dimension to Korean Buddhism. Nine different schools emerged. They were known as the Nine Mountains of Sŏn.

During the Koryŏ period master Jinul (1158-1210), known as Bojokuksa, founded Songgwangsa Temple on Mt. Chogyesan, which remained the headquarters of the Sŏn sect for over 300 years. The Nine schools of Zen were unified by Master Taego (1301-82) under the name of Chogye, which has remained the main sect to this day.



Since being brought to Korea in the late fourth century, Buddhism has evolved under the influence of Korean culture. Based on the Buddha's enlightenment and teachings of wisdom and compassion, Korean Buddhism was created on the Korean soil by the Korean people. It has three unique characteristics compared to Indian and Chinese Buddhism.



Firstly, Korean Buddhism is universal and liberal, especially in solving cultural problems. When Buddhism first encountered Korean culture, the relationship was reciprocal and peaceful. On the one hand, Korean Buddhists accepted the traditional Korean culture; but on the other hand, they developed new meaning and value from the culture. Accordingly, Korean Buddhism has adjusted to Korean culture.

◀ Three Buddhas on Mt. Namsan, Kyŏngju



Secondly, Buddhism plays a unifying role in Korean society. From the beginning, it has played a vital role in times of turmoil. While searching for its religious goals and ideologies, it has always been concerned with national glory and peace. Throughout the long history of Korean Buddhism, it has helped to protect the nation on many occasions. For example, during the fifteenth century, Buddhist monks became soldiers and rose up to protect the nation against the Japanese invasion. As a result, Korean Buddhism was called 'protector of the nation.'

▲ These woodblocks that make up the *Tripitaka Koreana* are an artistic and cultural achievement, and a testimony to Koreans' devotion to Buddhism.

Thirdly, Korean Buddhism symbolizes harmony. It has not only reconciled conflicting religious ideas and schools, but also harmonized religious disagreements between theory and practice. Overcoming philosophical conflicts, Korean Buddhism has developed through the deeds of a long line of eminent Korean practitioners. This harmonious character was started by Master Wonhyo (617-686). With a philosophy of reconciliation, he harmonized various doctrines at a higher stage. Later, Master Taegak Uich'on (1055-1101) and Master Bojo Jinul (1158-1210) continued in the same manner. Uichon recognized the logic and value of Wonhyo's conciliatory philosophy and tried to unite Korean Buddhism by combining theory and practice. Jinul also combined theory and practice in his creative movement of practicing meditation and wisdom together.



## **CONFUCIANISM**



Jongmyo Jerye

Confucianism, an ancient Chinese way of thought which spread through much of East Asia, is often described as a religion. Perhaps a more accurate definition of Confucianism is that it is a detailed code of interpersonal behavior. In cultures where it is embraced, Confucianism is a practical political and social doctrine.

Confucianism became a common philosophy in ancient Korea. When it came into contact with fundamental Korean sentiments, Confucianism brought about profound changes and exerted considerable influence on the Korean people. It has been an indispensable component of the Korean moral system, way of life and national laws.

Confucianism, which was the major philosophy of the Chosŏn kingdom, eventually gave rise to Silhak, or practical learning. Confucianism has deeply permeated the consciousness of Korean people and can be seen today in many forms, including two ceremonies that continue today: Chongmyo Jerye, the royal ancestral service at Chongmyo Shrine and Seokjŏn Taeje, the worship rites at the *Sŏngkyunkwan* in honor of Confucius, his disciples, and other celebrated Chinese and Korean Confucian scholars.

Kung Fu-tzu, known in Western countries as Confucius, lived in China around 500 BCE. He was a teacher who offered his students a system of order during a period when China was disrupted by warfare. One of Confucius' most important teachings was that there was a proper order to all things in the universe, including human society. Confucius taught that within and through this social order, peace and harmony could be achieved if every person knew his or her proper place in society and upheld the responsibilities of that place. In Confucianism, this idea is summarized as follows, "Let the ruler be ruler, the subject be subject, the father be father, and the son be son." Through the definition of five basic relationships, Confucianism provided a simple guide for ordering the family and society. The five moral disciplines to govern the five human relationships were the following:

1. Justice and righteousness should mark the relations between sovereign and subject.
2. There should be proper rapport between father and son.
3. Separation of function between husband and wife.
4. The younger should give precedence to the elder.
5. Faith and trust should reign over relationships between friends.

In all familial relations, respect of parents and grandparents, which is called filial piety, had supreme value. The elderly were considered superiors. As such, total obedience was given to them by the rest of the family. At least in theory, quarreling, loud talking, smoking and drinking alcohol were not permitted in their presence. In turn, the elders had to treat the younger generation with affection and discretion. They could be strict, but not cruel.

While the husband/father was supreme within the family he, in turn, was subservient to the emperor or national leader. All people had the responsibility of honoring and obeying their ruler. However, this responsibility worked two ways. The ruler also had responsibilities to his people. He had to protect them, insure their welfare and above all, set good examples for them through his own actions. Confucius thought that if a ruler was honest, his people would follow him in honest behavior. But if the ruler was corrupt, how could he expect anything different from his subjects? The ruler also had a responsibility to follow the laws of heaven. If the ruler failed in his obligations, social and economic chaos might follow, and the people would have to overthrow the ruler. Confucius taught that if everyone upheld these five basic responsibilities and relationships, social and political order would prevail throughout the country.

## **CHRISTIANITY**

Protestantism came to Korea after the signing of the Korean-American Treaty in 1882. Because Christianity challenged the basic values of Chosŏn society, its believers were subject to persecution in the early years, but as Christians took an increasingly active role in the anti-colonial struggle against the Japanese and churches promoted more educational opportunities, Christianity gained acceptance. Today Korean churches evangelize abroad, and approximately 25% of the Korean population is Christian.

Catholicism first came to Korea as a western scholarly pursuit. Korean missions to the imperial court of China took an interest in Jesuit missionary books and brought them back to Korea. In 1784 the first Korean was baptized in

Beijing and returned to Korea to set up a house of worship. Despite considerable persecution by the government, numerous people joined the Catholic Church. Presently, over two million people belong to the Catholic church.

## **PROTESTANTISM**

Korea was first introduced to Protestantism by Western missionaries in the 19th century. In 1884, R.S. Maclay of the Northern Methodist church received permission to establish educational institutions and medical facilities. This resulted in the establishment of the first hospital, Chejungwon Hospital, and the first modern school known as Paejae Hakdang. Subsequently, while American missionaries, H.G. Underwood of the Northern Presbyterian Church and H.G. Appenzeller of the Northern Methodist Church visited Korea they actively organized missionary activities. Simultaneously, Protestantism was creating a renaissance of sorts, with more liberal thoughts on issues of equality and woman's rights, which the strict Confucian hierarchical tradition would not permit. This liberalization allowed those oppressed, and even imprisoned, to enjoy new freedoms. These freedoms came to an end during the Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945) when the Japanese pushed Shintoism on the Korean people and oppressed all other religions resulting in many martyrs. After liberation, in 1945, Korea once again began to experience religious freedom.

### **Protestantism in Today's Society**

Approximately 38% of the population that has a religion is Protestant, with the other two major religions being Catholicism and Buddhism. Branches of Protestantism in Korea include the Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, and the Presbyterian, just to name a few. Some of the most well-known churches are Yeouido Full Gospel Church, Somang Presbyterian Church, Onnuri Church, and the Sarang Community Church. The Yeoido Full Gospel Church is recognized not only for large structural size, but also for its approximate 700,000 worshippers. Recently, many churches are offering sermons in foreign languages along with diverse activities for foreigners every Sunday.



Chŏng-dong Church, Korea's first protestant church, offers visitors a historical look at Protestantism in Korea. Located behind Daksu Palace and designated historic treasure No. 256, this church was built in 1896 in a American-style of architecture. Known for its simple beauty, it attracts those looking for a lovely spot, while at the same time fulfilling the interests of those fascinated with the Church's historical background.

## **CATHOLICISM**

Catholicism first reached Korea after the Japanese invasion of 1592-1598, when the well-traveled Sukwang Lee read the writings of Mateo Ricci and introduced them to Korea in his books on Catholicism. Furthermore, in Beijing, Kyun Hŏ (1569-1618) obtained Catholic texts and returned with them to Korea, becoming one of Korea's first Catholics.

At the time the Catholic Church was established in Korea, during the latter part of the 18th century, the omnipresent Confucian society severely oppressed Catholics. This continued until the end of the 19th century. Some of the most well-known cases of mass persecutions are the Sinyu Persecution of 1801, Kihae Persecution of 1839, Pyeongo Persecution 1846, and the Pyeongin Persecution of 1866. In 1876, as Korea was opening its doors to the west, conditions for Catholics began to improve. This period of improvement ran into some obstacles during the Japanese Colonial Period of 1910-1945, when the Japanese ruling authority oppressed Catholics. During this time the Catholic Church managed to keep education, medical care and other missionary works alive. From this period on, Catholicism penetrated Korea's society with a major increase in the number of churches and believers. In 1969, Cardinal Su -hwan Kim was appointed the archbishop of the Seoul archdiocese, and in 1989, Pope John Paul II visited Seoul to attend the 44th International Eucharistic Congress.

### **Catholicism in Today's Society**



Presently, Korea's three major religions are Catholicism, Protestantism and Buddhism. Some of Korea's most famous cathedrals include Myŏng-dong Cathedral and Chŏn-dong Cathedral. There are many other historical Catholic sites remaining in Korea, including Jŏldusan Martyrs' Shrine in Seoul, Jŏldusan Martyrs' Memorial Museum, and Martyrs' Mountain (Chimyŏngjasan). Among these historical sites, the Myŏng-dong Cathedral is regarded as the symbol of Catholicism in Korea. The cathedral was completed in 1898 in a western-style of gothic architecture.



**HANDOUT 2: DECODING KOREA’S RELIGIONS TABLE**

	TENETS	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
SHAMANISM			
BUDDHISM			
CONFUCIANISM			
CHRISTIANITY			