



A New Axial Age?

New Global Religions Emerge in Asia

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Thirty Years of CESNUR

- CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was established in Italy in 1988 to offer a professional association to international scholars of new religions and to document the global religious pluralism. It has organized 30 international conferences throughout the world, has published more than 100 books, and operates three different large Web sites



A rare image of CESNUR's first conference, 1988

Bad Timing?



- When CESNUR was started, new religions were not taken seriously and dismissed as mere curiosities. The prevailing orthodoxy among European scholars of religion was that religion was declining, and – in the famous words of anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1923-2015, left) – “the evolutionary future of religion is extinction”

Modernity and Disenchantment

- Scholars never really agreed about what modernity exactly is, but in the 1970s-1980s many believed that it determined what Max Weber (1864-1920) called “disenchantment,” i.e. the demise of belief in supernatural forces, replaced by a general confidence in science and materialism
- Peter Berger (1929-2017) added that modern religious pluralism would contribute to the demise of religion: if several religions coexist, many would end up believing that none is true



American Exceptionalism



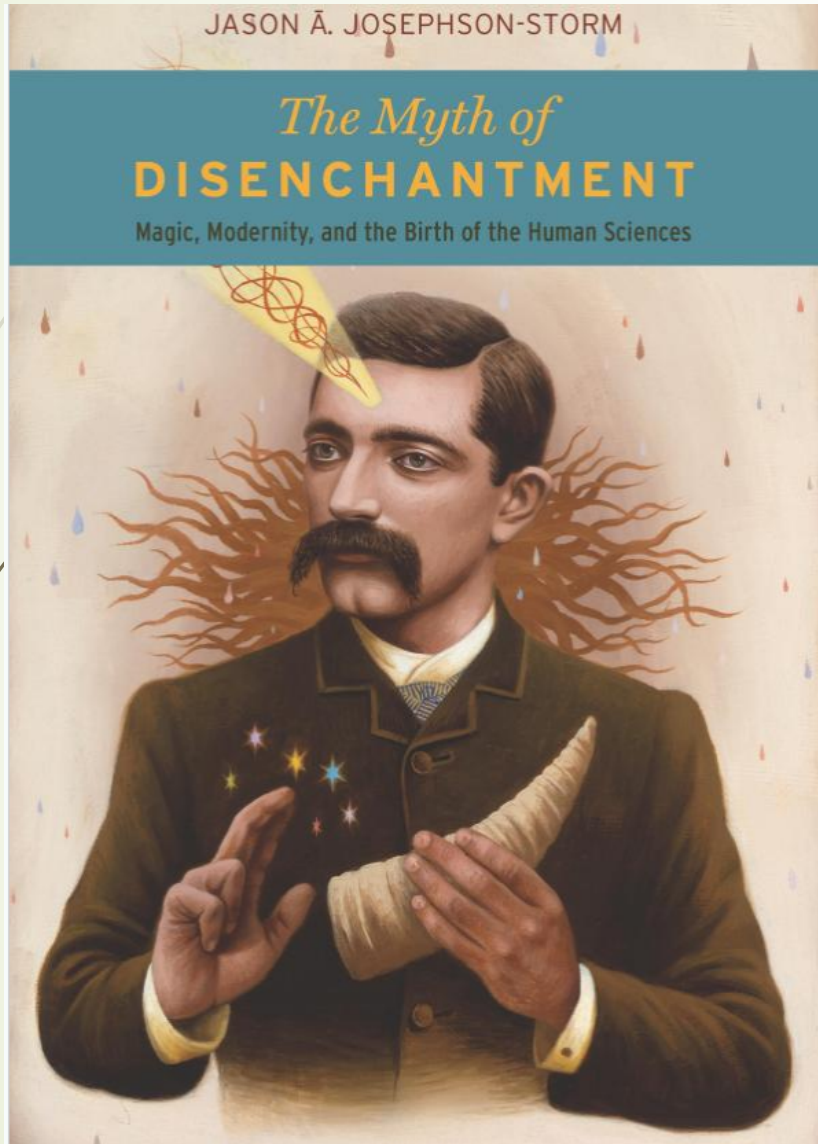
- To his credit, later in life Berger started suspecting that his theory of secularization was not universally true. He noticed that in the U.S. religious pluralism and technological progress coexisted with a presence of institutional religion significantly higher than in Europe, and started supporting the idea of an “American exceptionalism” in religion

European Exceptionalism

- Later still, the same Berger and others realized that rapidly modernizing countries such as South Korea, Turkey, or Taiwan behaved very much like the United States, and religion was actually growing there. They concluded that perhaps the classic secularization theory, implying that modernity caused the decline of religion, was true only in Western Europe, which had its peculiar “European exceptionalism”



Multiple Modernities



- But even in secular Europe, there are areas where religion grows. Sociologists of religion retreated to the humbler theories of “multiple modernities” (each local situation is different from the others), “multiple secularizations,” and processes of “re-enchantment” going on and countering “disenchantment” – unless, as Jason Josephson-Storm maintains in a controversial but important 2017 book, disenchantment in fact never happened

Western Esotericism

- One of Josephson-Storm's main points is that Western esotericism, regarded by post-Enlightenment culture as "rejected knowledge," and once despised by the academia, was in fact strictly intertwined with modernity and even with modern science. Several prominent Scientists were Spiritualists. It is also the case that founders of modern art such as Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) were members of, or close to, an esoteric movement such as Theosophy



Mondrian's *Evolution* (1911) clearly alluded to Theosophical initiation

But Do We Know What “Religion” Is?

- Finally, scholars of religion agreed that they do not share the same definition of religion. Some forms of religion may actually decline, while others grow. For some, *spirituality* replaces religion, although how to define spirituality is also a matter of controversy. And, while some *old* religions decline (but not all: Islam is still growing), *new* religions arise





The Axial Age

- That global new religions appear today runs counter the traditional theory, elaborated by Karl Jaspers (1883-1969, left), of a unique and unrepeatable “Axial Age,” from about 8th to 3rd century BC, when in both East and West all the great religions appeared

A New Axial Age

- ▶ But perhaps today we are in a second “Axial Age,” with new world religions emerging since the 19th century, some of them with more members than Judaism (13 million), including the Mormons (15 million), the Jehovah’s Witnesses (13,5 million), and the neo-Buddhist Soka Gakkai (14 million)



Mormonism goes global: the new Temple in Paris (2017)

Why New Religions?



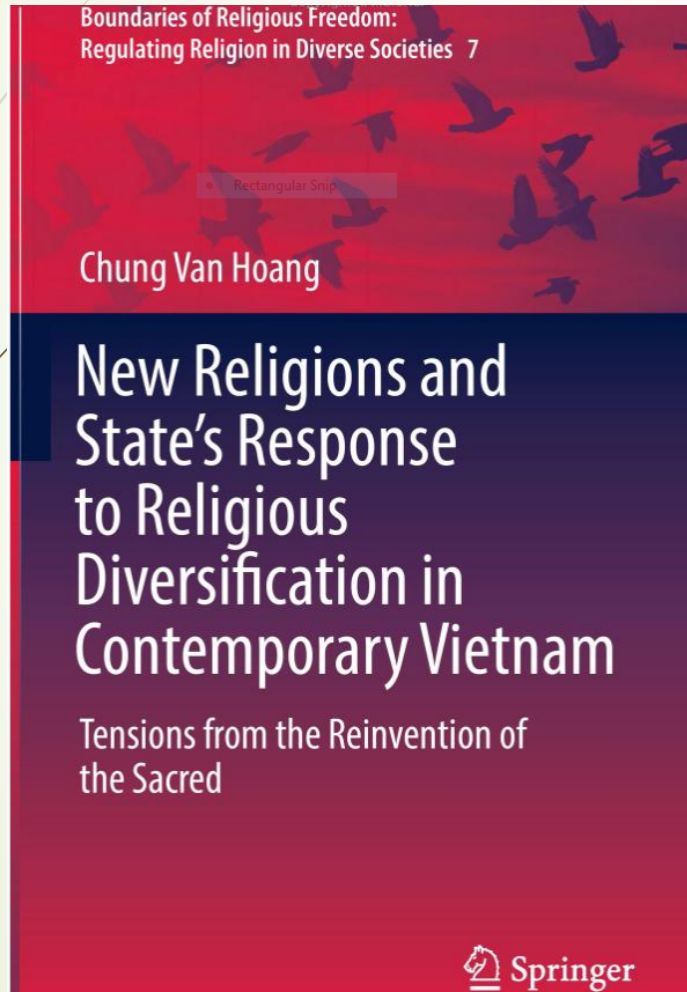
- There are literally hundreds of theories why new global religions started appearing in the 19th and 20th century. What several theories have in common is the idea that, after the French and the Industrial Revolutions, the world was confronted by unprecedentedly rapid changes and the feeling of an “accelerated history.” Although older religions tried to adapt to such changes, some of them successfully, many believed that they were no longer adequate to the new times

New Religions: Where?

- In some areas, the change was even more rapid than elsewhere. It is not coincidental that several new religions, including Spiritualism and Mormonism, appeared in the 19th century in the U.S., and particularly in the State of New York. And it is not coincidental that some Asian countries, faced with imperialism, colonization-decolonization processes, wars, and sudden economic development produced an astonishing number of successful new religions. They include South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Vietnam



Case Studies: Vietnam and South Korea



- In his 2017 book, Chung Van Hoang mentions dozens of Vietnamese new religions. Most of them grew after the 1986 “Renovation” policy was introduced, but some, such as Cao Dai and Hòa Hảo, date back to the early 20th century and represent a distinctive Vietnamese way of coping with colonialism and the encounter between traditional and European cultures

Cao Dai's Uniqueness

- Countless new religions (thousands in Africa alone) tries to put together local traditions and missionary Christianity. The uniqueness of Cao Dai was that it included a third element. It is rooted in local Vietnamese-Asian Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) and influenced by vernacular missionary Catholicism. But it also includes crucial elements from *Western Esotericism*, as its founders interacted with cultivated French colonialists who were not necessarily Catholic and often followed alternatives to Catholicism, including Spiritualism and Theosophy



Cao Dai's Success



- There is little doubt that Cao Dai has been phenomenally successful (6 million members, if one counts the schismatic branches). Why? I personally believe that its success is precisely due to its **ability to integrate Western esotericism** in its religious synthesis. This offered two distinct cultural advantages to Vietnamese members: they came to share a language with the French colonial upper class, and their traditional beliefs in spirits and divine revelations, dismissed as superstitious by Catholic missionaries, were legitimized through the Spiritualism and occultism that coexisted with science in the culture of the (largely anticlerical) French elite

Cao Dai's Great Intuition

- ▶ The genius of the founders of Cao Dai was to understand what scholars of the “re-enchantment” would have discovered only much later, i.e. that Western esotericism and beliefs such as Spiritualism were central rather than peripheral in the modernist project. They coexisted among Western elites with both confidence in science and criticism of traditional Christianity. Cao Dai's “canonization” of French modernist, anticlerical and Spiritualist writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885) epitomized this intuition



Korea's Religious Revival



- In Korea, social unrest, confrontation with Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Western imperialism, and the persuasion that the traditional Three Teachings had been unable to criticize dramatic social injustice opened the way in the 19th and early 20th century to two different phenomena: the success of Christianity, and the birth of non-Christian Korean new religions

Korean Christian New Religions



- Not only does Korea host some of the largest Korean congregations in the world (including Seoul's Yoido Full Gospel Church), it has generated a number of *Christian* new religions. These, however, have either become well-known, such as the Unification Church founded by Reverend Moon Sun-Myung (1920-2012), or multiplied their members, such as the World Mission Society Church of God, who believes that its leader Zahng Gil-jah (left) is the incarnation of God the Mother, *outside of Korea*

Korean Indigenous New Religions



- Within Korea, non-Christian new religions gained more followers than Christian new religions (although less than mainline Christian churches). From 1860, when Donghak was established, Korea had in turn an impressive flourishing of new religions, including Ch'öndogyo (an offshoot of Donghak after its 1894 peasant revolution [left] failed), Won Buddhism, Taejonggyo, and the different branches of Jeungsanism

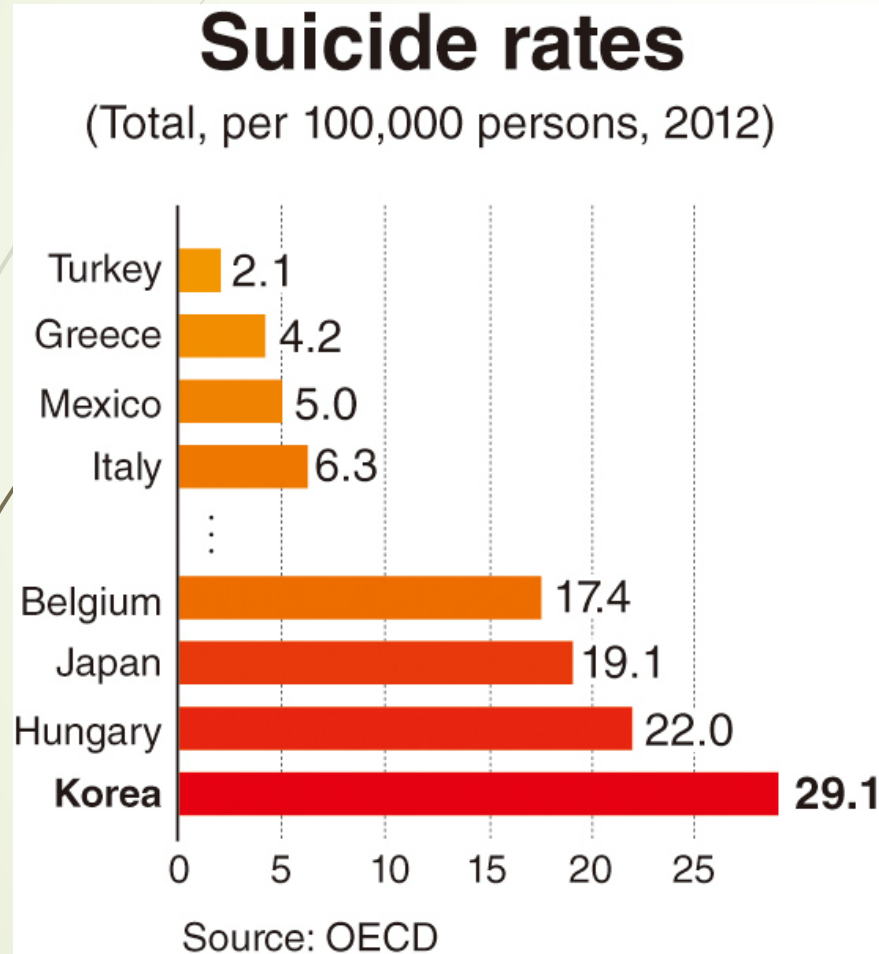
A Question of Statistics

- Statistics are a matter of contention, but many scholars believe that in the first half of the 20th century Korean new religions had *more* members than traditional religions, and their membership today is still in the millions. Some of them are also expanding internationally



Won Buddhism's children retreat in the U.S.

Why Their Success?



- Explanations of the phenomenal success of Korean non-Christian new religions usually mention their role as answers to a situation of anomie caused by cultural and economic transformation (South Korea has the world record of suicides), and an element of millenarian protest against political corruption and social injustice

Religious Reasons

- However, American scholar Don Baker (right) argued that we cannot understand Korean non-Christian new religions without considering that their members also seek a specifically *religious* experience and are dissatisfied with mainline religions



Choi Je-u and Donghak



- At the origins of the flourishing of Korean new religions is Choi Je-u (1824-1864), who in 1860 claimed to have received a revelation from *Sangje* (the Supreme God). He founded a new religion called Donghak ("Eastern Learning," as opposed to "Western Learning," i.e. Christianity), criticizing at the same time the corruption of State Confucianism

Donghak's Failure



- Choi was executed in 1864, but Donghak continued and played a major role in the peasant rebellion of 1894. The Donghak rebels came to control a significant part of the Korean territory, before being defeated by the Korean government, supported first by Chinese and then by Japanese troops

Kang Jeung-san



Kang (left) as played by senior Korean actor Jeon Un (1938-2005) in the 1984 movie *The Road to Peace and Harmony*

- ▶ The context of the Donghak revolution is crucial to understand Kang Il-Sun, known to his disciples as Kang Jeung-san (1871-1909)
- ▶ Kang predicted that the 1894 Donghak rebellion would fail, and persuaded his followers not to participate in the fighting. He insisted that the renewal of the world would be achieved by peaceful means only

Social Justice



- Kang believed that the social claims that motivated many to join the Donghak Revolution should be affirmed through a change of hearts and lifestyles. One day, he announced, “there will be no discrimination between the noble and the low, or legitimate and illegitimate children,” and “the predominance of men over women” would also end

The Rise and Fall of Bocheonism

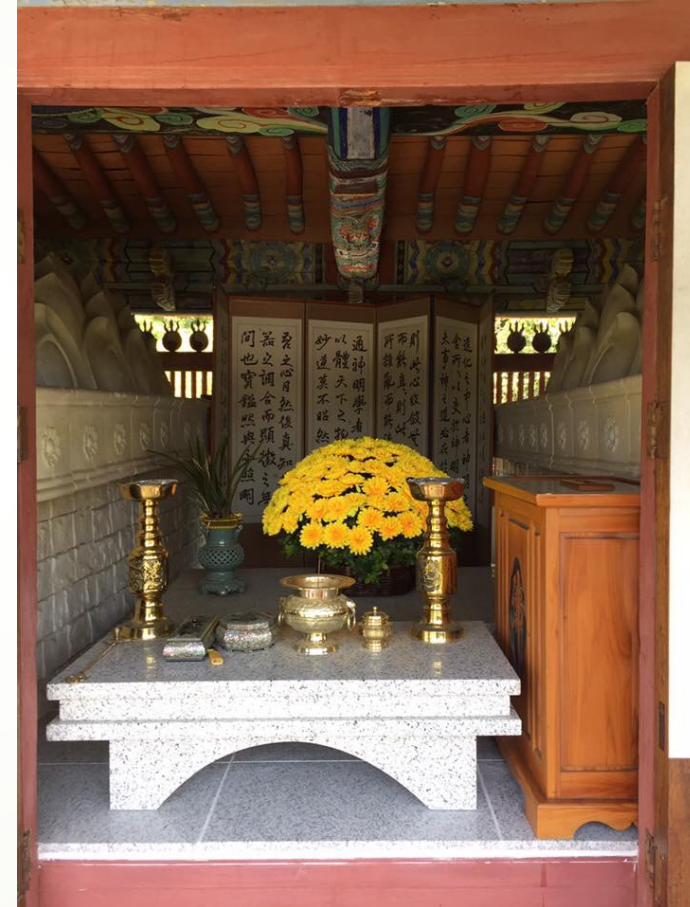


Sipil-jeon Building in the headquarters of Bocheonism in Jeongup

- Kang did not appoint a successor, and his movement generated some 120 different new religions in Korea. In the 1920s, the largest branch, known as Bocheonism ("Doctrine of Universal Heaven"), became the largest Korean religion, with a majestic temple rivaling the Royal Palace. It was eventually destroyed by the Japanese, and Bocheonism declined

From Kang to Jo Jeongsan

- ▶ Jo Cheol-Je, known to his disciples as Jo Jeongsan (1895-1958), was not a direct disciple of Kang Jeungsan but claimed to have received a revelation from him. He was recognized by Kang's sister, mother, and daughter (although the daughter, Sun-Im, 1904-1959, later started a separate branch) as the future leader Kang had announced in his prophecies



The remains of Kang and his wife, said to be currently at the headquarters of Jeungsan-beopjongkyo, Sun-Im's branch

From Mugeukdo to Daesoon Jinrihoe



Jeongup, area where the first headquarters of Mugeukdo were once located

- ▶ Jo incorporated a new religious order in 1925 in Jeongup, with the name Mugeukdo. Because of the Japanese campaign against new religions, Jo was forced to dissolve Mugeukdo in 1941. After the war, he reconstituted the movement and in 1950 gave it the name Tageukdo. His successor Park Wudang (1917-1995 [lunar calendar], or 1918-1996 according to the solar calendar), after further schisms, established Daesoon Jinrihoe in 1969

Daesoon Jinrihoe: A Success Story



- Statistics are controversial, but Daesoon Jinrihoe claims some six million members and may well be the largest Korean new religions today. The educational and charitable activities of Daesoon Jinrihoe greatly benefited the public image of the movement, which is increasingly regarded in Korea as a legitimate part of the country's religious pluralism

Haewon Sangsaeng



- Why is Daesoon Jinrihoe successful? I believe many Koreans are attracted by its practical, this-worldly spirituality, expressed in its central principle of “the resolution of grievances for mutual beneficence” (*Haewon sangsaeng*, 解冤相生). Korea experiences both social unrest, with problems for coping with rapid transformation, and tensions with North Korea. *Haewon sangsaeng* promises to heal old enmities, promote peace, and open the road to a millenarian Later World

New Large Religions? Yes



Paul Spella / The Atlantic

Why Are There No New Major Religions?



- In August 2017, *The Atlantic* asked this question. But the question was in itself wrong. There are indeed large new religions: only, Western public opinion, and even most Western scholars, do not know about them

But Do They Have a Global Future?

- A different question, however, makes sense. Do religions such as Cao Dai and Daesoon Jinrihoe, with millions of followers in their home country, have a global future? The fact that only a few texts are translated into Western languages, and only a handful of leaders speak English, remains a significant obstacle. Globalization, at any rate, seems to be in the movements' future



Cao Dai and Daesoon Jinrihoe's delegates at the Turin, Italy, Book Fair 2017



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