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Multilayered Faith and Interreligious Dialogue: A Case of Religious Hybridity in Korea and Its Implications for Formation

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Abstract: Comprehending and discussing Koreans' experiences of inter-religious dialogue requires a precise understanding of their religious hybridity. To this end, this article first delves into South Korea's multireligious and syncretic landscape. Subsequently, it focuses on the concept of *chungch' ũng-sinang*, or multilayered faith, highlighting how Koreans have constructed their own religiously multilayered and open internal structures based on their historical encounters with various religions. Finally, building on this understanding, this article examines how an in-depth understanding of Korean religious hybridity transforms our understanding of their experiences in inter-religious dialogue. Acknowledging their hybridity facilitates an understanding of experiences that go beyond mere acquisition of knowledge about others and a deepening sense of their identities—involving the discovery of internal otherness. While this approach may weaken the logic of religion, it can foster dialogue that is more liberating, formative, and humanizing.

Keywords: inter-religious dialogue; multilayered faith; religious hybridity; addversion; *chungch' ũng-sinang*; *gajong*; syncretism; conformation; internal otherness



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1. Introduction

In *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*, Jeannine Hill Fletcher draws our attention to Morwenna Griffith's contention that “we are all hybrids” (Fletcher 2005, p. 90). She rightly points out that no pure religious identity exists. Our religious identities are “constructed out of the intersection of multiple fundamentally defining features—religion, race, class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, profession, sexual orientation, and so forth” (Fletcher 2005, p. 88). Among these features, this study aims to highlight *religion*. Of course, one's religious identity reflects the religion with which one is associated. However, one's religious identity encompasses not only the elements of their own religion but also the values and experiences of other faiths that have shaped their land, culture, and people over time.

This fact is often less recognized, especially in inter-religious dialogue discourses in Western contexts. Moreover, in regions where one religion has long dominated, this hybridity of identity appears much less significant. However, this is not the case in South Korea and many other Asian countries. Regardless of their specific religious affiliations (if any), their religious identities are highly hybridized, comprised not only of the features mentioned above but also elements from both other religious traditions and their own (D. Chung 2001; C.-H. Chung 2001; Min 2012; J. H. Chung 2017). This is partly because various Eastern and Western religious influences have intersected and intermingled in Korea throughout the region's history. It is also because the ways in which Koreans associate with religion differ from those of Westerners. For this reason, discussions of Koreans' potential experiences of inter-religious dialogue must be accompanied by a deep understanding of their religious hybridity.

The aim of this study is precisely that: to examine in detail the characteristics of religious hybridity among Koreans, and subsequently to use this examination as a basis for a

discussion of Koreans' experiences with inter-religious dialogue. To this end, this study begins by revisiting the lived experiences of religion among the Korean populace. In this section, I attempt to unravel the complexity of religious life in Korea by scrutinizing how their multireligious and fluid religiosity manifests in their lives. The second section of this study focuses on more conceptual work. By addressing the concept of *chungch' ũng-sinang* (or multilayered faith) along with *gajong* (or addversion), I aim to offer a more constructive understanding of the inner structure of Koreans' religiosity. Finally, building on this understanding, I discuss the experiences that may arise from inter-religious dialogue among religious Korean people, especially Christians and Buddhists who are religiously hybrid or have multilayered faith. Additionally, I argue that their experiences include something more than simply expanded knowledge or increased understanding of others, as well as a deepening of their identities. Through such dialogue, they encounter not only the other external to them but also the other already present within them. I explore this distinctive experience in hopes of contributing to a different understanding of inter-religious dialogue today.

2. Dynamics Unseen: The Religious Landscape in South Korea

South Korea possesses several distinctive characteristics from a religious perspective. First and foremost, Korea is a multireligious country that has no dominant religion. According to the 2015 government census, slightly less than half of the population (43.9%) identifies with a religion, with most of them associating with Protestantism (19.73%), Buddhism (15.53%), and Catholicism (7.93%) (KOSIS 2017). These are the three major religions, but none of them dominates the scene. They are followed in prevalence by religions such as Won Buddhism (0.17%), Confucianism (0.15%), Cheondoism (0.13%), Daesun Jinrihoe (0.08%), and Daejonggyo (0.01%)—all of which, apart from Confucianism, are small ethnic religions (KOSIS 2017). While one might then understand Korea as a multireligious nation, the notably low proportion of its population that identifies as religious remains intriguing.

However, to fully comprehend the religious landscape of Korea, one must grasp the dynamics beyond the “numbers”. Regardless of one's religious affiliation, first of all, Confucianism is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the nation as in many other Asian countries. During the 500-year duration of the Joseon Dynasty, Confucianism served as the state religion. In the survey above, only 0.15% of Koreans identified Confucianism as their religion. However, being more than a singular religion, Confucianism in Korea has been an ideological framework that deeply influences the ethics and consciousness of the nation's populace. Second, affinity with shamanism also exerts a widespread influence, irrespective of religious adherence. The Daehan Kyungshin Association, the shamanic association in Korea, estimates that there are as many as 300,000 shamans in the country. While this estimate may not be entirely accurate, it significantly exceeds the numbers of Protestant pastors (98,305), Buddhist monks (36,877), and Catholic priests (5360) identified in a 2018 survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Ko et al. 2018). The Daehan Kyungshin Association's estimate of the number of practicing shamans implies that several million Koreans, at the very least, likely visit shamans once in a while. Of course, estimating the scale of shamanism in Korea is quite challenging. Practitioners often identify with a particular religion or none, and many of them regard shamanism as a part of traditional culture rather than a religion in its own right. However, the point is that shamanism exerts an immense influence on ordinary Koreans.

As unique as this complex and pluralistic religious landscape is the way Koreans practice their religions—the way they navigate life in this multireligious society. Numerous people often cross religious boundaries. Simple examples include Buddhists visiting shamans or Christian believers participating in Confucian ancestral rites.

These practices were apparent even to early Western missionaries. In a famous example, George Heber Jones, an American Methodist missionary who arrived in Korea in 1888, described the religiosity of Koreans as follows: “...while theoretically the Korean recognizes the separate character of the three cults of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shaman-

ism, practically they lie in his mind as a confused, undigested mass of teaching and belief, hopelessly intermixed and chaotic...” (Jones 1902, p. 39). He went on to illustrate how this mixed practice worked for an ordinary Korean man: “He believes in all three. He personally takes his own education from Confucius; he sends his wife to Buddha to pray for offspring, and in the ills of life, he willingly pays toll [*sic*] to Shamanite Mu-dang and Pan-su” (Jones 1902, p. 39).¹ Homer Hulbert, another early Protestant missionary from the United States, made a similar observation, describing the general Korean man as “a Confucianist when in society, a Buddhist when he philosophises and a spirit worshipper when he is in trouble” (Hulbert 1906, pp. 403–4).

To Western observers, these multireligious practices were unfamiliar and puzzling. Hulbert also struggled with these practices. However, he appeared to humbly acknowledge the limitations of his Western perspective and sense something beyond it: “We have no choice but to deal with these [religions] separately, but the reader must ever bear that in every Korean mind there is a jumble of the whole” (Hulbert 1906, p. 403). Hulbert’s assessment was not as negative as that of Jones, who described the religiosity of Koreans as “confused”, “undigested”, and even “chaotic”. While he may not have fully grasped the nature of Koreans’ religiosity, he seemed to implicitly perceive religiosity as historically inherent to Koreans. He identified a distinctive religious disposition whereby individuals had their own integrated structures within which they engaged in the practices of multiple religions. Hulbert commented that those religions “have all been shaken down together through the centuries until they form a sort of religious composite, from which each man selects his favourite ingredients without ever ignoring the rest” (Hulbert 1906, p. 403). In other words, they did not belong to various religions but rather the elements of various religions resided within each individual. Although he lacked the vocabulary to provide a more elaborate description, he was correct in viewing Korean life as syncretic, with various religious traditions serving less as a simple mess than a mundane yet idiosyncratic aspect of Korean religiosity.

The religious and social landscape of Korea has changed significantly since Hulbert’s time. Religious affiliation with Christianity and Buddhism has intensified. More than one-fourth of modern Koreans identify as Christians, either Protestants or Catholics, and the teachings of Confucius are no longer taught in traditional academies (namely *seo-dang*). Korean medical facilities and education standards are the highest in the world, and psychiatric hospitals and counseling centers are ubiquitous throughout the country. Nevertheless, Koreans’ religiously pluralistic lifestyle remains. Confucian and Buddhist teachings and worldviews are still deeply ingrained in the minds of Koreans, and many Koreans continue to observe the ancestral rites and moral guidelines of Confucianism regardless of their religious affiliations. When someone passes away, some Christians still observe the “49th day after funeral ceremony”, which originated from Buddhism, or the “3rd day after funeral ceremony”, which originated from Confucianism.²

Furthermore, regardless of education or religious affiliation, many people still visit shamans in mundane situations or when facing problems that modern science or medicine cannot solve. In a recent survey, approximately 41% of respondents reported having visited a shaman or a fortuneteller at least once in the five years (2017–2022) preceding the survey (Public Opinion within Public Opinion 2022, p. 4). Indeed, 23% of Protestant Christians, who historically and doctrinally have been most antagonistic toward shamanism, reported having visited a shaman or a fortuneteller, followed by 39% of Catholics and 62% of Buddhists (Public Opinion within Public Opinion 2022, p. 4). Scandals connecting politicians and shamans emerge persistently. Movies and dramas based on shamanism continue to attract popular attention, and the practice of consulting fortunetellers before marriage remains prevalent. Moreover, a considerable number of people still perform *gosa* (either casually or formally)—a shamanistic ritual that involves offering food to the spirits to avoid misfortune and bring good luck—when they buy a new car, start a new business, or even before filming a new movie. Put simply, while the appearance of popular prac-

tices may have changed somewhat, Koreans continue to engage in syncretic practices that transcend religious boundaries.

Though not always a source of pride, this religious fluidity is indeed a unique characteristic of Koreans. They relatively easily transcend religious boundaries and internally incorporate a diverse array of religious elements. This holds true for those with and without religious beliefs. Anecdotally, many people who do not identify with any particular religion also visit fortunetellers, temples, or churches when they feel the need (Baker 2008, p. 5). Thus, Koreans may appear highly religious even though the percentage of Koreans who identify as religious adherents is relatively low. Overall, the numbers do not capture the unseen dynamics at play.

3. Unveiling Korean Religious Hybridity: Exploring *Chungch' ũng-sinang* or Multilayered Faith

3.1. Multilayered Faith

The syncretic and multireligious nature of religiosity is a phenomenon observed across many countries in Asia. However, each country's historical experiences with religions are different, which have shaped their religious mindsets and attitudes distinctly. Therefore, although often described with terms such as religious hybridity or religious syncretism, the differences between these countries persist. In this regard, the concept of *chungch' ũng-sinang* (중층신앙, 重層信仰), or “multilayered faith”, effectively captures the unique attitudes toward religion that have emerged from the historical experiences of Koreans. It also aptly explains the background of the aforementioned phenomenon in the Korean context.

Chin-Hong Chung emphasizes that there are no “pure” Christian or Buddhist Koreans because their inner structures are *multilayered*, with other religious elements present alongside those of their current religions. He argues that the Korean people had two primitive religious orientations before the introduction of foreign religions to Korea. One was toward the “heavens”, which they viewed not necessarily as a singular monotheistic entity but as a sacred place from which they originated and their normative framework and guiding principles arose (C.-H. Chung 2001, p. 13). The other was directed at the “power” that was supernatural, immediate, and healing. Each of these, respectively, manifested in Koreans' primordial religious narratives and shamanism (C.-H. Chung 2001, pp. 12–17). Along with many other Korean scholars, Chung contends that as foreign religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity were accepted, they were, in a sense, *layered* into these original religious motives in the minds of Koreans rather than replacing them (C.-H. Chung 2001, p. 27; D. Chung 2001; J. H. Chung 2017).

Even when Buddhism and Confucianism dominated as state religions, Korean people's primitive orientations toward heaven and power remained steadfast. Indeed, both the dominant religions and individual Koreans integrated these orientations. Externally, as part of the process of indigenization, each religion underwent a certain degree of integration with Koreans' inherent aspirations toward heaven and power, reflecting in their own forms (Kim 2014, p. 161). Internally, people continued to seek experiences with heaven and power from time to time by praying to the heavens or consulting shamans, even while generally conforming to the practices and culture that those public religions required. In short, despite substitutions in official religions in the public sphere, a certain degree of integration or cumulation, rather than replacement, prevailed in the personal realm.

Chung refers to the religious faith that emerged from this historical experience as multilayered faith (C.-H. Chung 2001, p. 29).³ According to him, this faith is an outcome of a “creative application of the spirituality” with which one “embraces both historical progress and pluralistic realities, while continuously advancing through an exploratory process” (C.-H. Chung 2001, p. 32). In other words, this faith is an outcome of constant integration and synthesis—or “conrescence”, in Whitehead's language—through which one embodies “constructive relativity” or “hybridity”. Thus, religious Koreans are those who have a religious commitment generally to one religion but simultaneously maintain

worldviews, rituals, practices, and religious sensibilities inflected by many elements of other religions.

In one sense, this concept explains the *multireligious* nature of Korean religiosity. In another sense, it elucidates the religious fluidity observed among Korean people—or, one might say, the *boundary-crossing* nature of Korean religiosity. Since religious otherness is ingrained within Koreans and embracing plurality is a part of their spirituality, they find it easier to traverse religious boundaries. Moreover, this concept has an implicitly *progressive* nature, suggesting that the faith of Koreans lies in a structure with the potential to seek and accept any new “layer” when a new religion or ideology appears to fill gaps or better fulfill religious needs experienced within their current religions. In such instances, one’s multilayered faith would either integrate these additional elements while maintaining its own “name” (one’s confessing religion) or undergo a “relabeling” (changing their religion) while preserving, to some extent, its previous content.

3.2. Multiple Religious Belonging? New Age Religiosity?

Chung describes the complexity and uniqueness of multilayered faith as follows:

“Such faith is not an absolute dedication to the one [religion]. It encompasses other demands that cannot be satisfied by it alone. However, this does not mean simultaneous absolute dedication to the multiple [religions], as it is an impossible reality within a multilayered faith. Moreover, it is not a syncretic faith attempting to blend multiple religions into a single new form of religiosity. Nevertheless, absolute dedication to the chosen religion is not impossible. In fact, it is practically always possible. However, this dedication does not structure absolute persistence. Yet, transitioning to another religion cannot be termed as apostasy either. It is a matter of selective emphasis, not selective choice. It is often the best decision given the circumstances. Therefore, conversion in the strictest sense is not practical” (C.-H. Chung 2001, pp. 30–31).⁴

While this material provides a useful comparison with other proximate concepts, an elaboration of Chung’s succinct and relatively narrow definition would be beneficial. First, as Chung points out, multilayered faith is not synonymous with what we today refer to as “multiple religious belonging”. In Korea, a significantly small number of people might identify themselves with multiple religious belonging—committing fully to more than one religion—and my understanding is that their religiosity may be understood as one manifestation of multilayered faith. However, multilayered faith does not necessarily seem to entail or signify multiple religious belonging. In the Korean context, at least in my observation, multilayered faith is often used to denote that even if individuals adhere to a single religion, their inner religious structures are often multilayered.

Second, multilayered faith does not necessarily refer to a form of religiosity in which one explicitly seeks to create a new syncretic religion, or what Phan or Cornille would call “New Age religiosity”, where individuals selectively adopt elements they find most satisfying from various religions (Cornille 2002; 2003, p. 44; Phan 2003, p. 497). Multilayered faith would lead to creative transformations of one’s religious beliefs and practices, but that does not mean that multilayered faith involves or essentially results in “postmodern religion shopping”. Furthermore, this term does not necessarily imply a lifestyle where people exist in non-committal manners between multiple religions, either. As mentioned above, many Koreans engage in various religious activities without belonging to any particular religion, and they may also incorporate elements of multiple religions within their mental framework. However, what best explains their practices might be “spirituality”, not “faith” (Baker 2008, p. 5).

3.3. No Conversion, Addversion

Chung’s description also highlights an interesting relationship between multilayered faith and conversion. He argues that, for those with multilayered faith, “conversion in the strictest sense is not practical”. In other words, conversion for Koreans should not be un-

derstood as completely leaving one's religion and joining another. Changing one's religion is, in Chung's view, "a matter of selective emphasis, not selective choice", meaning that such individuals continue to hold their previous religions but choose to dedicate themselves explicitly and consciously to another religion from a certain point of their lives. Of course, this is an academic analysis and does not imply that individuals are clearly aware of their religious conversions as "[shifts] in emphasis" or that they consciously act in such a manner. Generally, individuals approach their conversions with a sense of "crossing a river they cannot retrace". However, from a multilayered faith perspective, conversion arguably never constitutes a complete departure. Following this logic, Chung contends that "conversion in the strictest sense is not practical".

If the concept of conversion in its strictest sense is impractical, what term can we use to describe individuals transitioning from one religion to another? How might we elucidate this "shift in emphasis"? In this regard, Philip-Ho Hwang proposes that what Korean people experience is not "conversion" but "addversion" (a term coined by him). In Korean, he refers to addversion as *gajong* (가종, 加宗), meaning "adding religion", changing one vowel from "conversion" (개종, 改宗, pronounced *gaejong*) and matching it with a different Chinese character. This term refers to the addition of a new religion to one's pre-existing religious beliefs, ideas, or practices. According to him, conversion, which demands the "either-or" choice, is a "vestige of western thought permeating into eastern paradigms" (Hwang 1996, p. 233). Elaborating on an idea put forward by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Hwang asserts that personal faith, as well as religion per se, is "cumulative" (Hwang 1996, 237; Smith 1963, pp. 154–69), describing the process of *gajong* or faith cumulation that Korean people experience as follows: "Koreans unconsciously hold indigenous shamanistic beliefs, upon which they subsequently layer Confucian ethics. Furthermore, they add Buddhist or Christian beliefs on top of these pre-existing layers of shamanistic and Confucian influences" (Hwang 2000). Thus, *gajong* is a highly helpful and suitable term that successfully elucidates how those with multilayered faith transition to another religion, a phenomenon insufficiently explained by the term "conversion". This term presents such transitions as an accumulation of layers rather than a "color change from one to another". That is, multilayered faith is the product, while addversion is the process.

In short, the combination of *chungch' ũng-sinang* (multilayered faith) and *gajong* (addversion) provides insights into Koreans' religiosity, elucidating both how Korea's syncretic and fluid religiosity has developed and what it looks like. Moreover, it highlights Koreans' religiosity as an organic construct that can accept novelty and evolve rather than being fixed and subordinate to essentialized truth. It underscores that although Koreans often demonstrate loyalty to one religion, they remain structurally open organisms, like "flowerbeds", retaining elements of shamanism and Confucianism while also remaining receptive to new influences that may enrich their lives. Those with a reasonable understanding of the religious landscape in Korea might find this explanation of Korean religiosity somewhat incomplete because it fails to account for the prevalence of fundamentalism and exclusivism among Koreans, particularly among conservative Protestant Christians. Why do Korean Christians, who possess such multilayered faith, exhibit exclusivist and aggressive attitudes toward other religions? However, this question needs to be reframed: Why do those Christians, who are exclusive and aggressive toward other religions, still visit fortunetellers, perform ancestral rites, seek shamanistic and exorcistic experiences, and shape church culture in such a Confucian manner? These are chronic ironies within Korean churches. Moreover, multilayered faith provides a fitting explanation for such ironies. Korean Christians' exclusivism is a deliberate action occurring in the domain of consciousness, whereas their syncretistic practices represent manifestations of multilayered faith functioning in the realm of the subconscious. Therefore, such exclusivism or purism could be considered close to self-negation.

4. Encountering Internal Otherness: Dialogues between Christians and Buddhists

Our task now is to explore inter-religious dialogue among Koreans with multilayered faiths. What distinctions might arise, and what possibilities and potential does such dialogue hold? As in many other inter-religious dialogues, inter-religious dialogue among religious Koreans primarily leads them to experience what I call the “double effect”, whereby participants’ understanding of themselves and others expands (Berling 2007, p. 34; Shafiq and Abu-Nimer 2007, p. 2). Engaging with people with different belief systems can enhance one’s understanding of others and prompt comparative assessments, compelling individuals to re-evaluate their faith from new perspectives. This is a standard educational effect of inter-religious dialogue (Boys and Lee 1996, p. 455). However, for Koreans whose faiths are inherently multilayered, experiences of inter-religious dialogue and the learning that follows can transcend this conventional impact.

Above all, inter-religious dialogue for religious Koreans can serve as a venue for encounters with forms of otherness that are both external to themselves and that have long existed within the deep strata of their own religiosity. Yongho Francis Lee provides an illuminating example of such an experience. In “Becoming a Christian and Practicing Comparative Theology for a Korean Theologian”, he shares his experience studying Buddhism, describing how, as a Korean Catholic, he felt “familiar from the beginning” with the Buddhist worldview while finding that “Christianity was foreign” (Y. F. Lee 2020, p. 231). He goes on to explain how his experience differed from that of other Western Christian scholars with whom he studied:

“[T]hrough my academic study of Buddhism, I brought up into my consciousness the Buddhist elements embedded in my worldview without my being aware of them... This is the opposite of the method of interreligious learning engaged in by most western comparative theologians, for example, those who study Buddhism... The more I learn about Buddhism, I realize how much it has made up significant parts of my linguistic, cultural, philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic frameworks. I also recognize that my Christian life is greatly connected to Buddhism”. (Y. F. Lee 2020, pp. 231–32)

In my view, this description evokes an encounter with *internal otherness*. Specifically, he describes an encounter with *direct otherness*, meaning the elements of the interlocuter’s religion exist within oneself. Like him, many Korean Christians would likely unearth certain Buddhist ideas and terminology, albeit partial or fragmented, within themselves if they studied Buddhism and engaged in dialogues with Buddhists. This embedded material could include not only elements syncretized into their own religion such as the concept of the “100-day prayer” or the term *jangno* (elder) (originally a Buddhist term), but also mundane philosophies such as *inyeon* (hetu-pratyaya) or *eopbo* (karma) that have been integrated into their own personal thinking. Meanwhile, Buddhists are far less likely to find substantial elements originating from Christianity within themselves, given that Buddhism arrived on the Korean Peninsula significantly earlier than Christianity. However, engaging in dialogue with Christians or learning Christianity may lead Buddhists to discover other types of internal otherness within themselves (and this is true for Christians as well): *shared otherness*—elements mostly stemming from shamanism and Confucianism. Lee does not mention this notion in his essay, but exchanges regarding the ways elements of traditional Korean ideas—e.g., the orientations toward heavens and power—are intertwined with lived religion and practices can reveal such shared otherness. Participants in inter-religious dialogue can thus discover that, while their religions may differ, common orientations exist across traditions. Eventually, such dialogue will enable participants to encounter and affirm their *multilayeredness* and *interconnectedness*.

Unfortunately, most inter-religious dialogues in Korea have not yet actively explored this distinctive aspect of Korean religiosity. Efforts to foster dialogue began in the 1960s, and meaningful conversations have been attempted through institutions such as the Christian Academy and Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP). However, in many

cases, dialogues have typically been either formal, dialectical, political, male-centered, or primarily involved religious leaders. There have also been attempts to organize youth gatherings like the “Religious Youth Peace Camp” or “Peace Link”, but the emphasis has usually been on religion rather than individuals, thereby promoting the logic of religion prevailing. The possibility of one’s own followers experiencing creative spiritual exploration by deeply engaging with religious diversity (i.e., performing comparative theology) or undergoing conversion to another religion has been strongly constrained, and the hybridity of the participants has not been adequately acknowledged. Rather, there has been a tendency for participants to be assumed as purely Christian or Buddhist, with more focus placed on the events themselves or on comparative dialectics shared by the representatives rather than on the spiritual formation of ordinary individuals with multilayered faiths.

Problematically, even if these conversations involve ordinary believers, such an approach should be cautioned against because it carries the potential to make the dialogue oppressive, colonial, and dehumanizing to the participants. It can make the dialogue oppressive if it does not allow the participants to be authentic themselves and fully present in the dialogue as subjects. Additionally, if the dialogue perceives religious individuals as belonging to one specific religion and lacks recognition or space for those who do not fit into that category, it can be considered that another form of colonialism influences the dialogue.⁵ In the Korean context—and, indeed, wherever one may be—one is never a subordinate or a possession of a religion (J. C. Lee 2019, p. 404). The dialogue may also be called dehumanizing if it removes individuals from the dialogue, leaving just religion.

Indeed, such dialogue devolves into a practice that contradicts the religiosity of Korean practitioners and reinforces essentialism. Moreover, because it fails to reflect the distinctive religiosity of Koreans, it renders people’s engagement in dialogues only superficial and makes it difficult for individuals to accept dialogues as an ongoing and necessary practice for their religious journeys of growth and enlightenment—that is, formation. In this sense, dialogues that uncover internal otherness are not only experiences that religious Koreans can uniquely achieve through inter-religious dialogue but also a path worth pursuing. Such dialogues can be emancipatory and formative. Participants can engage with their authentic selves, freely explore questions about their inner religious diversity, and discover and navigate their *multilayeredness* and *interconnectedness*.

Fostering such dialogue necessitates a transformation in the underlying premises of existing inter-religious dialogue. First, inter-religious dialogue should shift from being about or for religion to being about or for religious individuals (J. C. Lee 2019, 404; Han 2020, p. 102). Second, the purpose of such dialogue should shift from seeking to discover the essences of given religions through comparison to helping religious individuals discover their true selves (*cham-na*), their multilayered faith, or their hybridity. Third, inter-religious dialogue should be perceived not merely as a bilateral dialogue between two parties, even if all participants identify themselves with two religions, but as a multilateral dialogue among participants with various religious orientations. Indeed, recognizing and restoring each participant’s spiritual agency will make such dialogues more personalized and democratized. Lastly, inter-religious dialogue should not only be about acquiring knowledge but also about spiritual enlightenment and progress, ultimately becoming a time of formation and transformation.

In addition, efforts from participants are required. They need to engage in such dialogue not only as inter-religious dialogue but as what Panikkar terms “intrareligious dialogue”. As renowned as it is, Panikkar emphasizes that the essentialist conception of religion reduces faiths to mere “names” and turns them into “idols”, which “we must constantly kill” (Panikkar 1999, p. 100). To shatter the idolized religion and foster individuals’ spiritual journeys, he proposes engaging intrareligious dialogue, which transcends rational and external dialogues, involving earnest internalization, critical self-reflection, and serious inner struggle through internal conversations within the individual participants (Panikkar 1999, p. 114).

Inviting Korean religious practitioners to engage in intrareligious dialogue may not be easy because the misconception of religious identity as sameness is deeply entrenched, and many have not learned to critically examine it. However, it is highly necessary (J. H. Chung 2017, p. 213). Quoting Seok-Heon Ham, Moon Dock Han emphasizes the significance of self-reflection and critical reasoning for Korean religious people (Han 2020, p. 220). In particular, he argues that critical reflection on multilayered faith and addversion through inter-religious dialogue and encounter can save people from “idolatry, fanaticism, and self-righteousness” (Han 2020, p. 224). Intra-religious dialogue is also necessary because it enables participants to reflect on who they are and reach new levels of integration. It can thereby lead participants to more relevant, peaceful, and integral forms of faith, or help them establish new relationships with their own religions, or even lead them to leave their religions and move to another. In any case, it will serve as another experience of addversion. While this certainly goes against the conventional purpose of inter-religious dialogue, there is no reason to oppose it if one seeks liberation from the illusion of religion as sameness and religious identity as subordinate to religion while pursuing a reflective spiritual journey in search of truth (Panikkar 1999, p. 74). This goal requires intra-religious dialogue with openness, honesty, critical reflection, and a vision for novelty. Ultimately, such dialogue will help participants see themselves as they are and continue their journeys through ongoing “coformation” with others (Peace 2020, p. 204).

5. Conclusions

This article began with an exploration of the phenomenon of Korean religious syncretism and fluidity. It then discussed *chungch’ ūng-sinang*, or multilayered faith, as a concept that elucidates the discussed phenomenon. In this approach, I aimed to provide a thorough explanation of Korean religious hybridity and address inter-religious dialogue among Korean religious individuals with multilayered faith. In the final section, my discussion centered on the possibility and necessity of dialogue in which participants encounter internal otherness. I also described the necessary conditions for its realization and expressed my belief that such dialogue can be liberating and formational.

Admittedly, this is quite a daunting vision. Given the actual religious context in Korea, not to mention religious hybridity, even discussing inter-religious dialogue itself is sometimes not easy. While many people pursue religious harmony among different faiths, quite a few still oppose it or openly show hostility towards other religions. Especially within Protestantism, Byun Sun-hwan, the former president of the Methodist Theological University, who argued for the possibility of “salvation outside the church”, was excommunicated in 1992. Furthermore, Sohn Won-young, a professor at the Seoul Christian University, has been involved in a lengthy legal battle against his school since 2017. The school attempted to fire him due to his support for a Buddhist temple that was vandalized by a Christian. In such a situation, discussing inter-religious dialogue that emphasizes religious hybridity entails the challenge of overcoming a double barrier.

Recognizing and promoting religious hybridity is challenging not only for religious individuals with exclusivist perspectives but also for those who understand the necessity of inter-religious dialogue. In response to this study, one might ask: Is this way of engaging in dialogue—valuing and emphasizing the hybridity of participants—what we really want? As Cornille points out, it is true in one sense that “[o]n an institutional level, religious hybridity can threaten the continuity of religious traditions” and “lead to the erosion of religious commitment” (Cornille 2021, pp. 11–12). However, Panikkar emphasizes that “dialogue takes place without foreseeable results and independent of human will. No one knows what the outcome of the encounter will be” (Panikkar 1999, p. 114). As he notes, exchanges that begin with fixed conclusions or restrict the scope of topics to discuss do not constitute genuine dialogue. Furthermore, concern about weakening an institutionalized religion and people’s commitment to it derives from a fundamentally Western perspective. Although modern religious individuals in Korea are concerned about the size of their institutions and the loyalty of their adherents, the notion that one must belong to a religion

and be committed to its community and institutions is not indigenous to Korea. It is also worth considering whether the founders of specific faiths tried to bring people emancipation and freedom via their teachings and wisdom, or if they were more concerned with the establishment and flourishing of institutionalized religion. In this regard, I find no reason to avoid promoting a dialogue that emphasizes participants' hybridity, as well as their active reflection and (trans)formation.

While this study focuses narrowly on the dialogues between Korean Christians and Buddhists based on Korean religious hybridity, given that—as Fletcher reminds us—we are all “hybrids”, its content may resonate with individuals from different regions, cultures, and historical backgrounds. I sincerely hope that this humble study of religious hybridity in Korea may contribute, even if only slightly, to bringing forth a new perspective and fostering new discussions in inter-religious dialogue discourses.

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Notes

- ¹ Mu-dang and Pan-su (or simply “mudang” and “pansu”) are types of Korean shamans. Mudang typically, but not exclusively, refers to a female shaman who communicates with spirits, while pansu generally refers to a visually impaired man who practices fortunetelling or exorcism.
- ² The Roman Catholic Church in Korea has officially integrated the “3rd day after funeral ceremony” into its liturgy, but not the “49th day ceremony”. Most Protestant churches reject both traditions, believing them to be incompatible with Christian beliefs. However, many Korean Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, feel compelled to perform certain actions for mourning the deceased on those days, and they observe these days either by having a service or Mass, in a traditional way, or in their own creative way.
- ³ In his English abstract, he describes this multilayeredness simply as “Korean religious syncretism”, but multilayeredness is a more direct translation of the Korean term he used, conveying the depth of the term's meaning more precisely (C.-H. Chung 2001, 33). Yongho Francis Lee describes this phenomenon simply as “religious multiplicity” (Y. F. Lee 2020).
- ⁴ The original text was in Korean. I, the author, have translated it as literally as possible into English.
- ⁵ The Korean sociologist, Young Bin Lim, points out that the low percentage of Koreans who identify as religious stems from this very method of surveying religious belonging, which is based on a Western understanding of religion and only inquires about religious affiliation with institutional religions (Lim 2018, p. 128).

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