

Religious Harmony and Religious Peace Movement in a Multi-Religious Society of Korea

No Hi Pak

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The Importance of Interfaith Cooperation for Securing Peace in the 21st Century



Most esteemed panels and fellow participants,

Good afternoon!

As a religious believer from Korea, It is my great honor to be given this opportunity to speak to you today about 'Religious Harmony and Peace Movement in a Multi- Religious Society Korea'.

I believe that our eternal hope as humanity is to construct a peaceful world, and this very hope is the Will of God. However, when we look back upon human history, we cannot deny that it has been a continuation of wars and massacres.

Though we are now living in the 21st century, a time of the most advanced civilization, the fact that massacres and wars are still taking place in diverse forms in various parts of the world cannot but be a tragedy for humanity.

Moreover, when we come to face with the incredible truth that much of such violence and wars are caused by religious conflicts and struggles, despite the fact that religion itself strives to build an eternal world of peace, we have no choice but to feel overwhelming anxiety and despair.

Today, as a representative of Korean religious believers, I would like to speak to you shortly about how we believers living in Korea, a multi-religious society, are working to overcome conflicts between religions and to practice a 'culture of peace' based on dialogue and tolerance between religions.

Historically, Korea is a religiously plural society and it could be said that Koreans are very devout believers.

Based on the statistics (of 2005) on religious believers, the percentage of religious believers is 53 percent of the total population of Korea, of which the majority are members of the three major religions:

Buddhists amount to 42.9%, Protestants 34.5%, and Catholics 20.6% of the total.

Confucianists are a very small minority in terms of religion, and the rest believe in a diverse variety of autogenic religions.

From the historical viewpoint, all religions in Korea have been introduced, not through external influence or coercion, but through the voluntary research and introduction of Koreans themselves.

The Korean Peninsula is geopolitically situated at the eastern end of the Asian continent. That is why since then to the modern times, new knowledge, technology, culture and religion have been introduced to the Korean people through the Asian continent, mainly through China.

Buddhism is the most widely believed religion in Korea. It was first introduced from China in c. 370 A.D. to Goguryeo(고구려) and Baekje(백제). They are two of the three kingdoms then in existence in the Korean Peninsula. And later to Silla in c. 570 A.D. Buddhism was introduced from Goguryeo

For the first time in the history of Korea which had been a shamanistic society, Buddhism was introduced as a systemized religion and, after then for more than one thousand years, remained as the leading religious ideology of the kingdoms of Silla and Goryeo.

At that time Buddhism was first introduced, Goguryeo and Baekje accepted it from China without any struggle, but in Silla there were social and political conflicts in some degree.

However, all in all Buddhism harmonized with the shamanism of Korea and came to take root without much resistance from the people. And when it was established as the national leading ideology it started to exert a great influence.

Even now, the results of the prosperous development of Buddhist culture still remain as some of the most splendid cultural heritage of the Korean history.

During 500 years of Goryeo dynasty, however, Buddhism became a political power subsequently but became extremely corrupted at the end.

In 1392 a new dynasty called Chosun was established in the Korean Peninsula, and the revolutionists who built this new dynasty rejected the Buddhism.

And instead they chose as the new national leading ideology the ideas of Confucianism from China which was rooted

amongst the leading class as a new, noble philosophy.

At that time, Chosun dynasty repressed Buddhism with its 'Honor Confucianism and Suppress Buddhism' policy, but rather than obliterating the traditions of Buddhism which had taken root in people's heart in thousand years, its policy was that of tolerance and co-existence.

That is why even at the birth of a new dynasty, there was no bloodshed caused by religious conflict, which is an incredibly singular fact in itself.

And a testament to the fact that the spirit of tolerance in regard to religion was already apparent in the hearts of the Korean people.

Even when Christianity was first introduced into Korea in the 18th century, the intellectuals who had been yearning for modernizing changes at the time first learned about the Catholic doctrine, together with the Western civilization and culture, from China, and voluntarily introduced it into Korea.

For example, in 1784, a Korean man named Seung-hoon Lee(이승훈) went to China himself and studied under a French priest and became the first Korean Catholic priest. And through this process Catholicism was introduced into Korea as a religion, which is quite a singular and unprecedented event in the history of the propagation of Christianity in the world.

However unfortunately, when Catholicism was introduced into Korea, it clashed with the political leading ideology of Korea and the traditions of Confucianism. Therefore much blood was shed by innumerable martyrs as a result.

This was due to the fact that Catholicism clashed with the most fundamental living customs and norms of Confucianism, namely the worshipping of ancestors (offering ancestral rites), which provided a cause for Koreans to persecute the new religion.

To compare these events with the time of the introduction of Buddhism into Korea dating back some 1,400 years ago, Buddhism accepted the tradition of shamanism prevalent in Korea at the time. For example they built a separate building called Samsingak (literally meaning 'three god building') within its temple providing a place for folk religion and Buddhism coexist.

In contrast with this wisdom shown by Buddhism, Christianity absolutely adhered to the tradition of worshipping the only God and thus clashed and conflicted with the traditional customs and norms of ancestor-worship then practiced in Chosun dynasty, which brought about the bloodshed mentioned above.

Around the same time, Protestantism was also introduced into Korea through the United States, and Protestantism was recognized as a new culture of modernization, for it brought with it educational service and medical assistance, and thus made rapid progress.

In particular, when the Korean War broke out in 1950 and the Korean people were plunged into misery and anguish, the United States representing Christian culture extended a helping hand like a savior and offered assistance, which opened up the hearts of the Korean people.

Moreover, the impassioned Holy Spirit movement, which swept across Korea when it was suffering in the wretched agony of war, served as the fertile soil whereon Protestantism was rapidly propagated.

Together with such developments, the extreme disintegration of denominations within Christianity itself gave rise to many conflicts.

However, all such conflicts were caused by the some actions of a very small minority of extreme believers. And I believe that, on the fundamental level, the spirit of tolerance is still observed in our multi-religious society, Korea.

While suffering amidst the agony of war and poverty, new autogenic denominations rooted in national spirit and traditions also came into active being within the Christian faith. And these new religions had conflicts and were sometimes even persecuted by mainstream Christianity.

A principle example of this is the persecution against the Unification Church Movement centered on Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

But Rev. Sun Myung Moon, however, was a religious leader who was more passionate than anyone else in carrying out an interdenominational and interreligious peace movement.

The central ideology coherent in all his teachings is 'One family under God'.

Rev. Moon founded the 'Inter-denominational Association of Christianity' in 1966 and invested large funds and made much effort to resolve conflicts between Christian denominations within Korea. In addition, he organized the 'Korea Religions Association' to build channels of communication between the mainstream religions of Korea in his efforts to bring about interfaith harmony. And he also helped the different denominations to find a way towards harmony and cooperation through cultural exchanges.

Rev. Moon believed that, once the ideological antagonism in the Cold War between the East and the West was brought to an end, the conflict between races and religions would become one of the most serious risk factors threatening world

peace.

And so he emphasized that reforming the UN by establishing as its annex, an organization that can deal with religious conflicts on a global scale befitting the UN would be the only way to build a more solid foundation for world peace.

Therefore, he advocated the 'UN Reform Proposal' and founded the 'Interreligious and International Peace Council' as an NGO to further the efforts to make an interreligious culture of peace.

Rev. Moon thought that the fundamental reason lying behind religious conflicts was that believers were unable to overcome the differences between the doctrines of their different religions.

And so he mobilized world-renowned theologians to come together and research the scriptures of the different religions collectively, and he ultimately made them publish an interreligious scripture under the name of 'World Scripture'.

The results of the research carried out by those renowned theologians revealed that 70 percent of the doctrines of the different religions were identical, and that the remaining 30 percent differed because they held different religious rituals and followed different religious procedures.

As a conclusion, all religions can be compared to the different paths on a mountain leading to the summit or the One Absolute Being, and that their destination is one and the same.

And tolerance can be said to be the most important factor in systematizing this peaceful mentality.

Religious discord and conflict arise when a religion follows a self-righteous and dogmatic path and assumes an attitude of exclusionism and intolerance towards other religions and denominations, and this is a problem mainly caused by religious fractionalists and fanatics who follow their own ways even though we are all living in a society founded on diversity.

In the case of Korea, one of the most political factors that brings about religious conflict is the prejudiced attitude of leaders or government officials in regard to a certain religion. Therefore, the freedom of religion as is guaranteed by the constitution should actually be guaranteed on the fundamental level, and the principle of separating politics and religion should be absolutely observed, so that such acts causing religious conflicts or social conflicts can be strictly prohibited.

Second, what is the most important is to educate religious believers to establish a mature view on religion.

This signifies educating believers who may have a

strong confidence in their own religions not to show an intolerant and exclusive attitude towards other religions. They should be educated to clearly understand that freedom of faith means the freedom to choose one's own religion.

And that choosing a religion is not the demonstration of an exclusionist attitude but rather an inclusive act of co-existing with the religions one has not chosen.

In conclusion, I think it fortunate that Korea is a multi-religious society, even though incidents giving rise to religious conflict have been committed now and then by a small number of extreme believers. But on the fundamental level, a spirit of tolerance in regard to religion is deeply enrooted in Korea. This is the reason why peace between religions can be maintained without extreme clashes or conflicts.

And I cannot help but be proud of what I believe, that the foreign religions that have been introduced into Korea have been developed to the next level through the deeper religious reflection and practice of tolerance by the Korean people.

Thank you for your kind attention.