

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Baker/Korean Spirituality

is published by University of Hawai'i Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Editor's Preface

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The University of Hawai'i Press has long been noted for its commitment to issuing high-quality scholarly publications in the field of Asian studies. The Press launched the Dimensions of Asian Spirituality series in keeping with that commitment. This is a most appropriate time for such a series. A number of the world's major and minor religions originated in Asia, and they continue to influence the lives of almost half of the world's population. Asian religions should now be seen as global in scope and impact, with rich and varied resources for the people of the twenty-first century.

Religion is at the heart of every culture. To be sure, the members of every culture have also been influenced by climate, geology, and the consequent patterns of economic activity they developed for the production and distribution of goods. Only a minimal knowledge of physical geography is necessary to understand why African sculptors largely employed wood as their medium, while their Italian Renaissance brethren usually worked with marble. Matters of geography and economics are necessary for understanding cultures—including our own—but they are not sufficient: wood and marble are also found in China, yet Chinese sculptors carved Confucian sages, Daoist immortals, and Buddhist bodhisattvas from those materials, not *chivaras* or *pietàs*.

In the same way, a mosque, synagogue, cathedral, stupa, and pagoda may be equally beautiful, but they are beautiful in different ways, and the differences cannot be accounted for merely on the basis of the materials used in their construction. Their beauty, their ability to inspire awe and invite contemplation, rests largely on the religious view of the world—and the place of human beings in that world—that inspired and is expressed in their architecture. Thus the spiritual dimensions of a culture are reflected significantly not only in art and architecture, but also in music, myths, poetry, rituals, customs, and patterns of social behavior. It therefore follows that if we

wish to understand why and how members of other cultures live as they do, we must understand the religious beliefs and practices to which they adhere.

In the first instance, such understanding of the “other” leads to tolerance, which is surely a good thing. Much of the pain and suffering in the world today is attributable to intolerance, a fear and hatred of those who look, think, and act differently. But as technological changes in communication, production, and transportation shrink the world, more and more people must confront the fact of human diversity both between and within nation-states. Hence there is a growing need to go beyond mere tolerance of difference to an appreciation and celebration of it.

The evils attendant upon intolerance are not to be minimized, but tolerance alone cannot contribute substantively to making the world a better and more sustainable place for human beings to live. Mere tolerance is easy because it is passive: I can fully respect your right to believe and worship as you wish, associate with whomever you wish, and say what you will, simply by ignoring you. Yet for most of us who live in economically developed societies or who are among the affluent in developing nations, tolerance is not enough. Ignoring the poverty, disease, and gross inequalities that afflict fully a third of the human race will exacerbate, not alleviate, the conditions responsible for the misery that generates the violence becoming ever more common throughout the world today.

Some would have us believe that religion is—as it supposedly always has been—the root cause of the world's violence and therefore should be done away with. This view is reinforced by invoking distorted accounts of the cosmologies of the world's religions, and pointing out that they are incompatible with much that we know of the world today from science.

But religions are not going to go away, nor should they. Those who see only the negative influences of religion—influences not to be ignored—are taking “a printed bill of fare as the equivalent for a solid meal,” to quote William James. Worse than that, to point the finger at religion as responsible for most of the world's violence today is to obscure a far more important root cause: poverty. On this view, violence will cease only when the more fortunate among the

peoples of the world become active, not passive, take up the plight of the less fortunate, and resolve to create and maintain a more just world, a resolve that requires a full appreciation of the co-humanity of everyone, significant differences in religious beliefs and practices notwithstanding.

Such appreciation should not, of course, oblige people to endorse all of the beliefs and practices followed by adherents of other religions, just as we may object to certain beliefs and practices within our own faiths. A growing number of Catholics, for instance, support a married clergy, the ordination of women, recognition of rights for gays and lesbians, and full reproductive rights for women. Yet they remain Catholics, believing that the tenets of their faith have the conceptual resources to justify and bring about these changes. In the same way, we can also believe, as a number of Muslim women do, that the *Quran* and other Islamic theological writings contain the conceptual resources to overcome the inferior status of women in some Muslim countries. Indeed, we can believe that every spiritual tradition has within it the resources to counter older practices inimical to the full flourishing of all the faithful—and of the faithful of other traditions, as well.

Another reason to go beyond mere tolerance to appreciation and celebration of the many and varied forms of spiritual expression is virtually a truism: the more we look through a window onto another culture's beliefs and practices, the more the window becomes a mirror of our own culture (even for those who follow no religious tradition). We must look very carefully and charitably, however, lest the reflections become distorted. When studying other religions, most people are strongly inclined to focus on cosmological and ontological questions: What do these people believe about how the world came to be, what it is, and where it is heading? Do they believe in ghosts? Immortal souls? A creator god?

Answering these and related metaphysical questions is of course necessary for fully understanding and appreciating the specific forms and content of the art, music, architecture, rituals, and traditions inspired by the specific religion under study. But the sensitive—and sensible—student will bracket the further question of whether the metaphysical pronouncements are literally true. We must attend care-

fully to the metaphysics and theologies of the religions we study, but questions of their literal truth should be set aside to concentrate on a different question: how could a thoughtful, thoroughly decent human being subscribe to and follow these beliefs and attendant practices?

Studied in this light, we may come to see and appreciate how each religious tradition provides a coherent account of a world not fully amenable to human manipulation, nor perhaps even to full human understanding. The metaphysical pronouncements of the world's religions differ from faith to faith, exerting a significant influence on the physical expressions of each faith, their synagogues, stupas, mosques, pagodas, and cathedrals. Despite these differences among the buildings, however, the careful and sensitive observer can see the shared spiritual dimensions of human life that these sacred structures express, and in the same way we can come to see and appreciate the spiritual dimensions shared by each religion's unique metaphysics and theology. While the several religious traditions give different answers to the question of the meaning *of* life, they all provide a multiplicity of guidelines and spiritual disciplines to enable everyone to find meaning *in* life, in this world.

By plumbing the spiritual depths of other religious traditions, then, we may come to more deeply explore the spiritual resources of our own, at the same time diminishing the otherness of the "other" and creating a more peaceable and just world in which everyone can find meaning in their all-too-human lives.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

Against this background we may turn more directly to the third offering in the Dimensions of Asian Spirituality series, *Korean Spirituality* by Don Baker. It is a most appropriate work to appear at this time for a number of reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the spirituality of Korea provides a model of how adherents of very different faith traditions can get on quite peaceably with their neighbors, interacting daily and closely rather than merely tolerating others at a distance. That the Koreans are a fairly homogeneous society is not to be denied, but there is more to the story than that. The perpetrators of sectarian violence in such areas as Iraq, Northern Ireland, and Kashmir, for example, claim different religious allegiances but are

ethnically identical. How do the Koreans interpret their varied faiths so as to preserve harmony with their larger social, political, and cultural order?

A second reason for the timeliness of this volume is that it illustrates how different religions can inspire and modify one another when they are at peace with each other, a significant lesson to learn in the increasingly global community the world is becoming. Professor Baker uses as his central thread a tension between a sense of human frailty he ascribes to the Korean ethos and models of human perfectibility that originated in China but that the Koreans made altogether their own. Baker makes a good case for this dual orientation and illustrates clearly how it has affected Koreans' adoption and alteration of a number of spiritual traditions, from the continuing role of folk religion in contemporary society to the manifold Protestant and Buddhist sects, as well as the enduring influence of Confucianism as a way of life, the status of the Roman Catholic church, and the uniquely Korean interpretations of Buddhism (e.g., Won) and Christianity (e.g., the reverend Sun Myung Moon).

Still another reason why *Korean Spirituality* is an important book today is that Baker devotes a closing section of the volume to North Korean expressions of religiosity through the concept of *juche* (self-sufficiency), which he well demonstrates has spiritual dimensions no less than political and moral ones.

All of these are important reasons for reading this book, but there is another: the intrinsic interest of seeing how others confront a world not of their own making, which can only help us better understand how we confront that world, too.

HENRY ROSEMONT, JR.