



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Hanŏguk yŏsŏng chonggyoinŭi hyŏnsil kwa chendŏ munje ed. by Sogangdae  
Chonggyo Yŏn'guso (review)

Kyung-Mi Park

Journal of Korean Religions, Volume 5, Number 2, October 2014, pp. 175-179  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: 10.1353/jkr.2014.0017



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/564171>

## Book Reviews

한국 여성종교인의 현실과 젠더문제 (서강대종교연구소 종교학총서 11). *Han'guk yösöng chonggyoin ūi hyönsil kwa chendö munje* [The situation of female clergy and nuns and gender issues in Korean religions]. Religious Studies Series 11. Edited by Sogangdae Chonggyo Yön'guso [Institute for the Study of Religion at Sogang University], Seoul: Dongyeon, 2014, 384 pp.

Analyzing both Korean traditional religions and those implanted from the West, this book addresses gender-related issues in Korea's multi-religious society and includes significant discussions concerning the problems facing female clerics within their diverse religious traditions.

An essential element shared by female clergy in Korea is their devotedness even amidst their marginalization. This work makes an important contribution by illuminating the poor state of affairs faced by Korean female clerics/priests regardless of their religion. Previous research on the state of women and gender in the context of religions mainly focused on how religious ideologies that originally sought gender equality became distorted through history by a patriarchy that inserted discriminatory beliefs into gender definitions. Such research takes an apologetic approach, justifying these bias-based distortions. This work, however, takes a more rational course by referencing studies which approach religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Rather than emphasizing the peculiarity of each religion's ideology, it identifies itself as a "review of situations and experiences shared by Korean female clerics/priests, and allows a perspective of their condition as not isolated cases of a single religion but as a common problem of all female clerics/priests" (p. 7).

This work consists of two parts; the first is entitled "The Situation of the Female Clergy and Nuns in Korea," and the second, "The Gender Issue in Modern Korean Religion." Notable in Part One is the noted steady decrease in the number of female clergy applicants, resulting in an unreplenished population of aging female clerics. This trend, more intense among Buddhists and

Catholics, demonstrates the deteriorating situation Korean women of religion face. Studies referenced here implicate social modernization and secularization as the causes of gender discriminative structures in each religion. First, the modernization and secularization of Korean society are cited as primary causes of the decrease in female clergy. The distinctive codes for hairstyles, dress, and an ascetic life that are found in Buddhism, Wŏn Buddhism, and especially Catholicism, are perceived as burdensome by modern young women. More importantly, however, is that democratic awareness has intensified as secularization and modernization have progressed, whereas training programs for life as a female cleric and/or clergy member fail to account for standards of modernism. Cho Sŭngmi illustrates this in the chapter, “The progress, crisis, and task of the modern Bhikkhuni-Sangha of Korea,” through vivid and detailed interviews with many young Buddhist nuns. This is a problem of Korean traditional religions in general, and relates to gender issues as well as to the strict and undemocratic characteristics of religious communities.

Second, gender-discriminative structures are another cause of the decrease in female clergy. Highlighted in this work are studies indicating that gender equality in terms of clergy training program, ordination, clerical practices, and pay is nonexistent across all religions. In terms of approving women clergy (priests), according to Pak Mihyŏn in her chapter, “Her-story: the history of women in the Anglican Church of Korea and the story of a female pastor,” Buddhism, Wŏn Buddhism, and Shamanism have been accepting of female clergy from the beginning, whereas Christian religions accepted them comparatively late. The process of approving women priests has been very difficult; nevertheless, even when women priests are approved, they still face considerable disadvantages in terms of ordination or treatment within their ministries.

Wŏn Buddhism is an exceptional case; it emerged approximately a century ago and from its inception advocated gender equality, notably through female priests' roles in missionary work. However, Pak Hye-hun, in her chapter, “Female priests of Wŏn Buddhism in global times,” raises these gender issues: first, women who desire priesthood are required to take the vow of a *chŏngnyŏ* (nun), imposing upon them an ideology of chastity. Second, they are required to adhere to a peculiar century-old hairstyle and dress code, which is a barrier for them today.

In the case of Protestant churches, the participation rate of female pastors and representatives in major orders was below ten percent in 2012 (see Im Hūsuk's chapter, "The actual state of female clergy in the Korean Church and its problem"). This confirms that gender role stereotypes continue to dominate and that gender justice is not protected for female pastors. Im suggests that fundamental theology, formed around male-centered religion, defends the dogma of gender discrimination, patriarchy, and ecclesiastical authority.

The impoverishment of female clergy is but one consequence of this gender-discriminative hierarchy. Many researchers assert that a welfare system with guaranteed minimum standards as well as a pension system must be established for female pastors. Im suggests that gender equality should be implemented from the budget establishment stage, and emphasizes that a gender mainstreaming strategy is required. Rather than detaching issues related to women, they are to be integrated into the main argument. To remove the poverty that women of religion face, a traditional feminist issue is to be proposed, but this situation must be seen as broader than feminism and should arise as an issue within the entire modern world. It is expected that women will speak out on, and join ranks over, such issues as the environment and peace.

Ch'oe Hyeyōng writes that in the twenty-first century, convents could act as an alternative community for a change in women's religious roles: "As nations have become responsible for issues such as education, medicine, and welfare, convents have become less responsible for those social needs" (p. 117). As in periods when convent residents were involved in various apostolate roles, many convent residents now cherish the meaning of community life itself. This is influenced by the fact that traditional family life has disintegrated and distrust of others has become prevalent; thus, convents now offer more opportunity for working in an alternative community (see the chapter, "The issues of Korean Catholic nuns and gender," p. 117). Such a suggestion could be made not only to Catholics, but to the entire body of religious women. Today, families and villages are disorganized and individuals are isolated like islands. In this situation, could a community of religious women become "a village on a mountain," presenting hope for communal life and overcoming the limitations proposed by a capitalistic and materialistic civilization? In order to achieve

this, women of religion will have to strive to achieve the democratization and opening of the community. Rather than being tied to the closed structures and rigid practices of the past, the community must meet the various demands of contemporary society, and develop a democratic political structure. Hence, they must accept the open values of modern society in terms of respecting each religion's tradition, and resist being isolated within their own tradition (p. 62).

Dealing with diverse issues, the second part of this volume provides concrete cases of the ups and downs of women in each religion within the context of Korea's tumultuous modern history—especially the Colonial Period and Korean War; how women in religion defended their religions but were later excluded from them. It also presents the religious particularity of Shamanism that favored and sustained women who for so many years suffered under a patriarchal system, as well as a gender analysis of the shamanic myth-telling stories about women who were victimized by the patriarchal system but who had the courage to challenge it (see Ch'a Oksung's chapter, "Korean shamanism from the perspective of gender"). Cho Eun-su, in the chapter, "Study on the Bhikkhuni order in Korea from the feminist perspective," illuminates the positive and independent traits of the Korean order of Bhikkhuni by exploring the changes in that order caused by internal and external influences, both ideological and environmental, from the introduction of Buddhism until modern times. In her chapter, "A critical study of the father-discourse in Korean Christianity," Yi Sukchin discusses patterns of reconstruction of the myth of the father, which was decoded after the deconstruction of authoritarianism. She recalls the image of the father and its discourse as she analyzes its similarity pattern with authority as it was applied in terms of the re-education program in the Korean Church. In the chapter, "Study of the charismatic women leaders in the religions of Korea," U Hyeran, informed by Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership, analyses women leaders who possess charismatic authority and followers, despite such barriers as the deep-rooted patriarchal system of Korean society.

Kang Hyegyōng interviews several daughters-in-law of head families (*chongga*) and reinterprets Confucian relational ethics through their lives. From the feminist perspective, they have been perceived as victims sacrificed to maintain the Confucian order; but through the concept of ethics of care as articulated by Carol

Gilligan, their lives are interpreted as having practiced an independent relational ethics. Such attempts suggest a lesson about the attitude required when analyzing and evaluating women's lives historically from a feminist perspective. Although women are subordinate in Korean society, where patriarchal ideology is dominant, their lives must be understood and interpreted in relation to their own independence and autonomy. Kang Hyegyŏng concludes that the "spirit of the *chongbu*" (daughter-in-law of a head family), in terms of Confucian relationship ethics, is a relational and caring spirit.

Nowadays, neo-liberal society commercializes everything, thus causing severe destruction to humanity. From a neo-liberal perspective, expanding one's individual self is understood to be the same as realizing one's social self. Under such circumstances, relationship ethics could be proposed as part of feminist values. Hence, it suggests a feminist vision that overcomes feminism as a modern ideology as well as modernity itself. A quote by Ch'oe Hyeyŏng may be generalized for all women of religion:

Women of religion in today's world, where hedonism, materialism, and individualism are prevalent, must devote themselves to universal love as nuns, voluntarily choosing poverty, and letting go of one's self-centeredness in order to follow God's will and fight off the values of the world. Life as a nun should be about suggesting the real meaning and value of life, and being able to provide critical reflections as well as reading the signs of the age and providing future visions. (p. 116)

This book contains several studies on Korean women of religion with the shared theme of the present state of the woman of religion and the gender issue. Many difficulties and dilemmas caused by each religion's peculiarity, as well as by the patriarchy of Korean society, are presented. It is hoped that these studies may serve as steppingstones for further studies promoting a healthy engagement of women in the religions of Korea.

Kyung-Mi Park

*Director, Ewha Institute for Women's Theological Studies*

*Ewha Womans University, Korea*