

## **Believers in the Divine: The Religions of South Korea**

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### **Abstract:**

Religion has been present throughout all societies and civilizations within history. However, how have different religions been incorporated in present day South Korea, where western influenced religions such as Christianity and traditional East Asian religions like Buddhism coexist? Exploring various factors such as gender, age, geographic region, and changes over time, the various divisions and similarities between the followers of these two types of religious faith were found. Utilizing data from the Pew Research Center's: The Global Religious Landscape, a demographic study based on the analysis of 2,500 censuses, surveys, and population registers from nations all over the world, and the KOSIS KOréan Statistical Information Service's 2015, 2005, 1995, and 1985 Gender/Age/Religion Surveys, several reasons for the rise of Christianity could be found. The rising urbanization and Christian followers mobilizing around densely populated areas as well as Christianity's appeal to younger generations compared to other religions seem to act as the main factors in supporting Christianity's rise and Buddhism's decline.

## Background and significance

Religion has been a critical component of maintaining the societal structures developed through human evolution. Following the rise and fall of major civilizations within history, its influence is still widespread in the present day with numerous sectors that can both bring communities together or create distinct classifications between varying major religious groups. Within the South Korean peninsula, a diverse range of religions are seen to coexist in harmony: Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, as well as several subsets which combine various levels of local folk and shamanistic practices.

As a first generation immigrant from South Korea, with a mother who follows Protestant Christianity and father who practices Buddhist principles, I was curious in exploring the relationship between religion from western influences, specifically Protestant and Catholic Christianity, and more traditional religions in South Korea, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Exploring various factors such as gender, age, geographic region, and changes over time, I hope to provide some insight into the various divisions and similarities between the followers of these two types of religious faith.

## Methods

The data utilized within this project were collected from the Pew Research Center's: The Global Religious Landscape, a demographic study based on the analysis of 2,500 censuses, surveys, and population registers from nations all over the world. These census results reported numbers down to every individual within each nation as well as the religion they practiced, providing an incredibly thorough set of data. There were 246 nations/territories listed within the data, with 8 different religious groups identified: Christian, Muslim, Unaffiliated, Hindu, Buddhist, Folk, Other, and Jewish. This data was then transferred into a percentage format, representing the percentage of individuals that practiced a specific religion in a nation. Utilizing percentages rather than the real number population data allowed the world maps to effectively communicate information about which religions had a strong prominence in each nation, instead of having large nations with major hubs of religious groups skewing this representation. This map is shown in Figure 1 below:

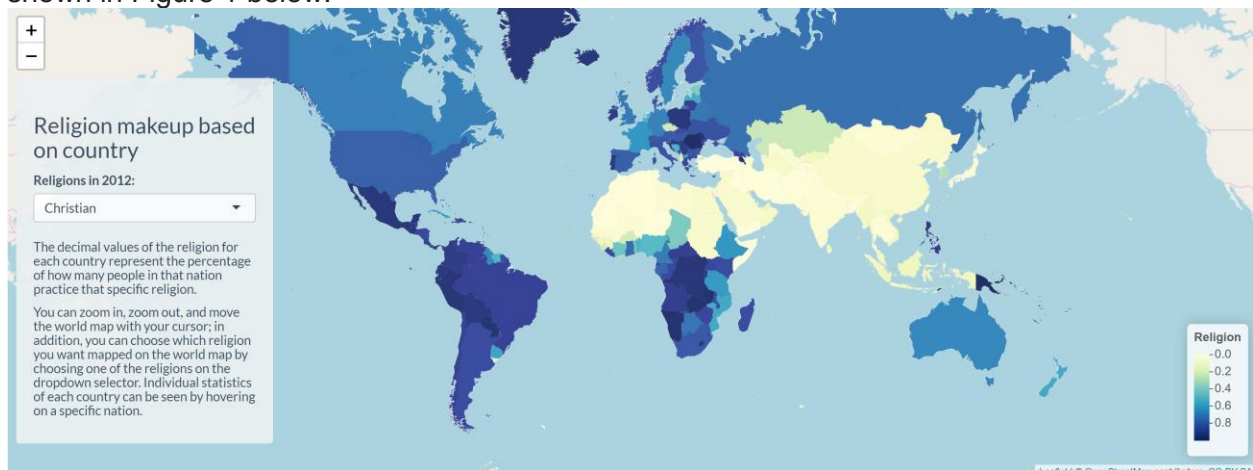


Figure 1: Leaflet world map of the distributions of various religions within the world

This data was then utilized specifically to compare the percentages of how many individuals practiced specific religions in South Korea in a grouped bar plot (Figure 2), and the world's overall percentages of each practiced religion. The world percentages were calculated based on the percentage makeup of each nation and territory listed in the dataset. Thus, each nation was treated at an equal level, which is not representative of the number of religious followers by population. However, this percentage representation lets us compare South Korea

to the other religious make-ups for each nation, normalizing the scale on which we can compare the various regions.

The KOSIS KOREAN Statistical Information Service's 2015, 2005, 1995, and 1985 Gender/Age/Religion Surveys were also utilized, a component of the Korean Census Data where more specific information about religion was found during certain years. Every single individual's religious identification was listed, with data given about age, gender, and province they were from. Although this project was limited with only 4 separate time periods of data spanning from 1985 to 2015 of religions in South Korea, the exploration of the changes seen over time for two specific religions, Christianity and Buddhism, was of interest (shown in Figure 3). It was understood that the number of followers of the Christian faith had increased with the increasing influence and power that western nations in South Korea, but the relationship of how this affected Buddhism's followings, one of the largest religious populations in South Korea, was not known. Bar plots were used for evaluating gender and age, with a quadratic regression model fitted onto the age variable to follow the trends of religious activity with increasing age.

## Results

When comparing South Korea's religious groups with the overall average world data, (depicted in the grouped bar plot in Figure 2) an unusually large number of religiously unaffiliated individuals, 46.4% of the South Korean population, was seen in contrast to the rest of the nations in the world, 7.4%. A large Buddhist population of 22.9% was also noted, which the result is understandable seeing as South Korea is an East Asian country. Although the population of Christian individuals in South Korea trailed behind with 56.4% overall in the world with 29.4% only in Korea, Christianity was still the second largest group in the number of religious followers in South Korea.

In Figure 3's time-based line plot, Protestant Christianity and populations not affiliated with a religion seem to be on the rise, in the post millennial time period; non-religious individuals by approximately 7 million individuals, and Protestant Christianity by 1 million. The levels of Buddhism and Catholic Christianity on the other hand are seen to decrease in relation to these numbers; Buddhism lost 3 million followers while Catholic Christianity by 1 million. These sudden changes are mainly seen in the beginning of the 2000s, moving into the 2015s breaking the steady trends starting from 1985 to 2000s. Many more conclusions could have been deducted with access to more thorough data in previous years, but the Korean Census did not seem to run these surveys until the late 20th century.

Interesting developments in gender differences were also found within South Korean religious groups; in figure 4, within the grouped bar percentage plot, almost all religions had more females than male followers. The only sections that South Korean males passed the 50% mark were non-religiously affiliated groups, and Confucianism.

Confucianism is mainly viewed as a practice of principles to develop moral systems, social relationships between young and old, and guide the ways of life; it is not necessarily viewed as a spiritual religion like Christianity or Islam. Within the various principles practiced

The Religions of the World vs. South Korea in 2012

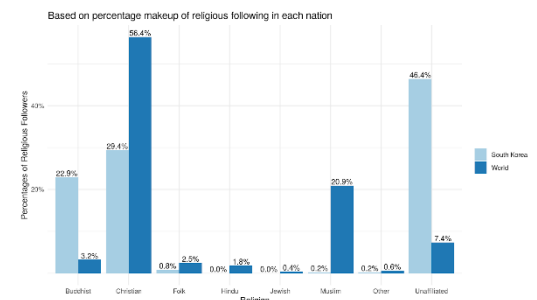


Figure 2: Grouped bar plot of South Korean religious percentages V.S the world

Religions in South Korea Over Time

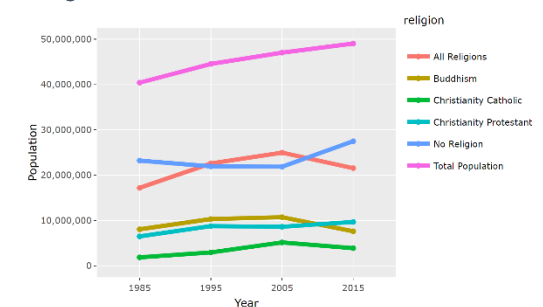


Figure 3: Line graph of religious populations of South Korean Christian, Buddhist, No religion, total populations, and all religions over the time period 1985 - 2015

Male and Female Religious Data

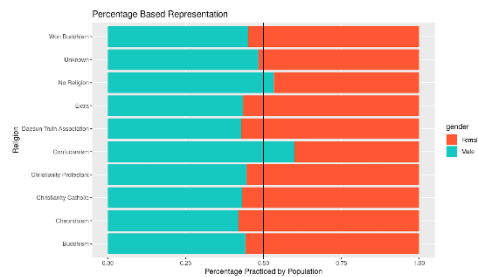


Figure 4: Grouped barplot of each South Korean religious group against gender

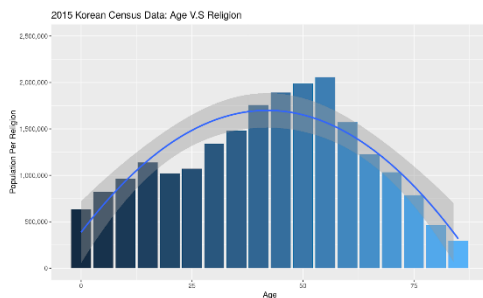


Figure 5: Age v.s. religious following in South Korea, with a quadratic regression

within Confucianism, it is important to note that patriarchal values are also encouraged such as having the respect for the first male of the family - upholding the hierarchy of fathers and sons being on higher on the scale compared to the female members of the family.

In figure 5, the ages of the data spanned between 0 to 85 years with a vertical bar plot plotting the number of religious individuals overall in South Korea. The quadratic regression plotted against this graph shows a trend of individuals practicing more religion during their 30s to 60s, an age when they would have become more established with their beliefs and moral principles to seek out a religion they would identify with. For youth and adolescents younger than 18, as well as older generations past 70, the numbers of individuals that are religiously affiliated significantly decrease causing the creation of a bell-shaped curve. This is slightly different in the Christianity Protestant tab however, where there is a large following starting from the younger generations continuing into the middle years; there is the same drop in the older generation however in this religious population as well.

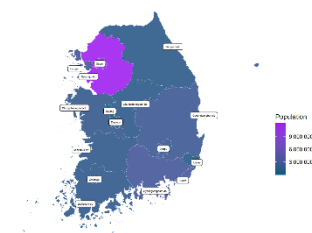
Differences in geographic region also showed several interesting results. The first map in figure 6

represents the general population density of South Korea, with the pink areas representing higher density regions (the capital Seoul). In the second and third maps, the density of religious followers of Buddhist and Christian groups are represented; Buddhist followers can be seen to be much more diversely spread out towards more rural areas as well, while Protestant Christian followers seem to be concentrated mainly around dense urban populations.

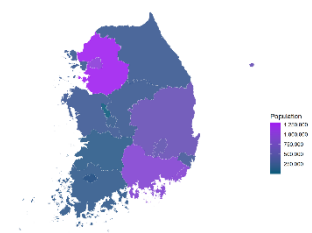
## Discussion/Conclusions

After exploring the numerous differences and similarities between Buddhism, a more traditional religion in the region, and Christianity, more recently incorporated religion from western influences, we can clearly find some reasons in the rise of Christianity within South Korea in the recent decade. In comparison to the world religion percentages, South Korea seems to be following the trends of more affluent nations with a majority of Christian religious followers, with Christianity rising up as the most practiced religion in South Korea. Seeing South Korea's rapid growth and urbanization over recent years also helps confirm the rise of Christianity, as it seems that Christianity seems to be mainly practiced in urban areas around the nation's capital. Age seems to be an important factor as well, as Christianity seems to have large followings starting from the younger generations, while Buddhism has more followers starting from the adult generation. Does this imply that Buddhism is growing out of style and Christianity is starting to build more of it's following in South Korea? Or does the trends of these religious groups matter seeing how fast the number of non-religiously affiliated individuals are growing in this past decade? These are definitely questions I would like to further pursue, and research, as we explore the various religious influences of South Korea.

South Korea population density based on geographic region



Population of Buddhists based on geographic region



Population of Protestant Christians based on geographic region

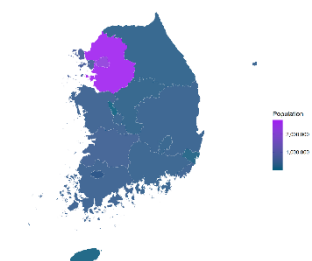


Figure 6: Density map of various religions in South Korea, order: Population, Buddhism, Christianity

## References

Table: Religious Composition by Country, in Percentages. (2017, November 16). Retrieved from <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/>.

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