Korean social welfare’s approach to spiritual diversity

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Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of ways that the profession of social work in the Republic of Korea1 engages with spirituality in its diverse religious and philosophical forms. This includes three sections: explanation of key concepts and Korean context; main religions and spiritually oriented philosophies that shape social welfare (i.e. traditionally rooted Buddhism, Confucianism, shamanism and recently introduced Christianity); and a concluding summary with suggestions for innovation.

Key concepts and Korean context

Korean culture sets a distinctive context for understanding spirituality; therefore, some key concepts and features of diversity related to spirituality and social work are explained in this section. For the purpose of this chapter, we adopt the concise conceptualisation of spirituality provided by Canda and Furman (1999), because it has been widely used both in North America and in South Korea, where their book was translated and published in 2003 (Canda and Furman 1999/2003; see also Yoo 2003). In this conceptualisation, spirituality refers to the human search for a sense of meaning, purpose and morally fulfilling relationships with oneself, other people, the universe and ultimate reality (however understood). In this sense, spirituality is expressed in diverse religious and nonreligious forms.

As Park (2003) pointed out in his translation of Canda and Furman’s book, the word ‘spirituality’ is difficult to translate exactly into Korean. The most common translation in social work publications is yeongseong, derived from Chinese characters that have the literal connotation of spirit or ghost plus nature or characteristic. In typical Korean usage, the word often implies something to do with spirits or ghosts or with ideas in Christian theology, such as ‘the Holy Spirit’. This is much more limited than the professional social work usage advocated in the Canda and Furman definition. Korean social work scholars therefore sometimes offer explanations for use of this term to make it more broad and inclusive in meaning, or simply borrow the English word (Chun 2013; Park 2003; Yoon et al. 2015).

Park addressed this dilemma by creating a new Korean word for spirituality, eol al,
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pounded from two Korean native words, meaning ‘spirit’ and ‘essence’. He explained the nuances of the Canda and Furman definition, emphasising the importance of addressing in social work all the religious and nonreligious forms of spirituality in a respectful manner, without imposing particular personal or religious beliefs upon clients.

In general, it is common in Korean social work literature to address spirituality by referring to particular religions, rather than considering nonreligious spiritual perspectives (Kim and Canda 2009); therefore, the term for religion (jonggyo) and specific religious terms are found more commonly than ‘spirituality.’ Further, the pervasive traditional spiritual worldviews and helping practices of Confucianism and shamanism, which are considered religions by some scholars, are often not considered formal religions in Korea, so they are often left out of discussions of religion and spirituality in social welfare. The word ‘gyo’ is now typically included in the name for all the spiritual perspectives described here.

According to 2005 government statistics, 53 per cent of Koreans align themselves with a religion. Of those who claim a religious affiliation, about 43 per cent are Buddhist, 55.1 per cent are Christian (including 34.5 per cent Protestant and 20.6 percent Catholic) and 1.9 per cent adhere to other religions such as Confucianism, Won Buddhism, Islam and other indigenous religions (Korea.net 2015). It should be noted that survey statistics on religious affiliation are likely to be imprecise due to culturally incongruent ways of eliciting religious affiliation. For example, most people, especially adults, are strongly influenced by Confucian worldviews and ethics, but do not belong to a Confucian religious organisation. Many utilise shamanistic practices, especially at times of crisis or distress, such as healing rituals, divination and prayers for blessings. However, few Koreans would identify this as a formal religious affiliation. Furthermore, many people (especially those who are not Protestant) actually blend involvement with multiple religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives. Over the past 15 years, there has also been a rapid influx of migrants with various spiritual perspectives and worldviews from North Korea, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Philippines (Yoon 2008). Such complexity is not reflected in surveys. Given this complexity, in agreement with Baker’s (2008) recommendation, we use the term ‘spirituality’ to include the full variety of religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives in Korea.

The Korean understanding of the English term ‘social work’ also varies from what is understood in some other countries. Professional social work is typically translated in Korean as sahoebokji, which more literally means ‘social welfare’, which emphasises social welfare policy (such as social insurance, public assistance and NGO provided social service). This is because the English term ‘social work’ (literally translated as sahoeaesop) usually refers to direct helping, often connoting volunteer or unprofessional service activity. Yet when native Korean speakers refer to the Western context in English, they will usually follow the convention of referring to professional ‘social work’ and social workers. We therefore often use the terms ‘social welfare’ or ‘social work’ interchangeably in an encompassing sense.

Korean social workers must be prepared to work with people who are nonreligious, with religiously affiliated people from religions that are long established, and with people affiliated with Islam and other religions not previously widespread in South Korea (Yoon 2008). Nevertheless, in this chapter we will focus on the spiritual perspectives that are most prevalent: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism and shamanism. Given that other spiritual perspectives influencing Koreans who do not identify as religious have not been addressed yet in the Korean social work literature, we will not consider them here, but recognise that they deserve greater attention in future research.
Spiritual perspectives and social welfare

Buddhism

Buddhism moved from India to China and then into Korea about 2,000 years ago (Lew 1988). The predominant branch of Buddhism in Korea is Mahayana (described in detail by Caroline Humphrey in Chapter 9), which is also common in China, Japan and Vietnam.

Buddhism became highly influential in Korea during the Three Kingdoms Period (especially from about 372 to 660 CE). It was the state sponsored religion during the Unified Silla Dynasty (661–918) and the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392). Therefore, Buddhism had a pervasive influence on Korean society and human services for about 1,000 years (Lee 1993). It continued to have an influence, though somewhat marginalised, during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). The largest denomination is named the Jogye Order, but there are several other denominations and many small nondenominational temples that may blend in elements of shamanism (Tedesco 2003). This section will focus on the Jogye Order as the largest denomination involved with social welfare.

Buddhism’s emphasis on relief of human suffering naturally leads to a concern for social welfare (Canda et al. 1993). As of 2003, among 2,162 religiously affiliated social welfare agencies recognised by law (which is 53 per cent of all agencies), 21 per cent (n=402) were Buddhist (Koh 2006). A 2011 government report (Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism), using different criteria, identified about 500 religiously operated agencies, of which 125 are Buddhist. Further, many temples provide informal social supports to their members, volunteer help such as day care for children, and ‘temple visit’ programmes of short retreats to encourage stress relief and spiritual cultivation for the general public.

A major way to help overcome suffering is by teaching people how to practice meditation and to live in a compassionate way that leads to clarity and eventually enlightenment. Traditionally, there was an emphasis on monastics living in temple communities to practice meditation, chanting and rituals extensively. When Buddhism was sponsored by the state, temples provided relief services for the public such as distributing grains and water, providing medical treatment, constructing bridges and roads, and giving shelter and support to orphans and isolated elders. In contemporary society, the monastic practices continue. For the general public, meditation and chanting techniques are taught for mental cultivation and rituals are provided for solace. Many contemporary lay Buddhists are concerned mainly to seek blessings and practical benefits for themselves and loved ones (Tedesco 2003).

Regarding professional social work, the Jogye Order’s Korean Buddhist Welfare Foundation was established in 1995 to contribute to social welfare development in Korea through research, education and welfare activities (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhist Welfare Foundation 2015). Currently, there are 180 welfare agencies and projects operated by the foundation, including 24 general welfare agencies and numerous agencies for specific populations such as people with disabilities, families and youths, the elderly and the homeless. The foundation holds national conferences, various workshops and forums. Lately, the foundation is operating international aid projects in various countries. The Jogye Order also provides social work education at two universities. These include courses on professional social work as well as Buddhist philosophy in addition to supporting scholarship on Buddhist social work in Korea. There is a Journal of Buddhist Social Welfare, and Kim and Canda (2009) identified 11 articles and five books on Buddhist social work in the Korean context.

In addition to traditional mainline Buddhist denominations, there is an indigenous denomination named Won Buddhism (wonbulgyo or One Circle Buddhism), founded in Korea in
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1916. Won Buddhist teachings draw on Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and shamanism, but Buddhism was taken as the primary guiding perspective. Won Buddhism emphasises an egalitarian and socially engaged approach (Bongkil 1988). Although membership is less than 1 per cent of the Korean population, it is disproportionately strongly involved in social welfare and human services. It has been providing social relief and educational services, especially for low income or vulnerable people in rural and suburban areas and education of social workers, since 1927 (Gupta 2014). The Won Buddhist Social Welfare Association was founded in November 1998, to facilitate collaboration among welfare agencies affiliated with Won Buddhism for research, curriculum development, professional and volunteer training, policy development, publication and resource development in collaboration with affiliated domestic and international agencies (Won-Buddhist Social Welfare Association 2015). Their social welfare practice is based on the ideal to repay the grace of Buddha by relating to every person and creature as Buddha. Their programmes in social welfare, education and health include insights from Eastern and Western traditions and spiritual practices. Government statistics variously report 75 (Koh 2006) or 16 (Korean Ministry 2011) Won Bulgyo-operated agencies, but there are known to be many more not included in these numbers. Wonkwang University Department of Social Welfare offers Bachelor of Social Welfare, MSW and PhD degrees that are promoting the ongoing involvement of Won Buddhism in welfare provision and social work scholarship. In their 2009 review, Kim and Canda identified 11 scholarly social work articles related to Won Buddhism.

Christianity

Korean language typically distinguishes between Christianity (gidokgyo, meaning Protestant Christian congregations) and Catholicism (katollikgyo), but in this chapter we use the term Christian to refer to both and distinguish where necessary.

Catholicism was introduced from China in the late Joseon Dynasty but it was marginalised and persecuted (Lee 1983). Protestantism was introduced in the latter 1880s. After the Joseon Dynasty, the influence of Christianity grew, including in nationalist movements against Japanese occupation. This influence grew further after the Korean War when Christian missionaries, educators and relief agencies made a major impact on the development of modern style health, educational and social welfare services (Canda and Canda 1996). By the 1980s, the increase of Christian adherents in Korea was growing at one of the fastest paces in the world.

The Christian commitment to charitable works has made a dramatic impact on Korean social welfare. This reflects the Christian virtue of caritas, a Latin word referring to love expressed in service, as a reflection of God’s love for humanity (Dal Toso et al. 2015). According to the Korean Ministry of Culture (2011), there are at least 251 Protestant and 105 Catholic registered social welfare organisations, which is about 72 per cent of all religiously affiliated agencies. Koh’s (2006) figures also indicate about 70 per cent of all religiously affiliated agencies are Christian based.

The Korean Christian Social Services Association is a joint body comprised of the members of eight Protestant denominations and the National Council of Churches. Since its inception in 1963, the association has been providing charity works, mainly focusing on providing monetary and material aids to the poor both domestically and internationally (Korean Christian Social Services Association 2015). Caritas Korea was established in 1975 as the official social work and international development committee of the Korean Catholic churches. Caritas Korea seeks to contribute to the development of a better society by carrying out relief projects and social services in Korea and internationally (Caritas Korea 2015). These various Christian affiliated agencies address many kinds of social welfare services, including disaster and poverty relief,
international development, healthcare, migrant support programmes, child and family services, and gerontology.

Many social work education degree programmes are affiliated with Christian universities and these often imbue Christian perspective in a broad way within general education. Soongsil University (Protestant) has a course on spirituality and social work in an inclusive sense, established in 2015. It uses the Canda and Furman (1999/2003) book as a main text. Kkotdongnae University (Catholic) focuses on social welfare education and sometimes sponsors special lectures on theology and spirituality in relation to social work.

The academic journal *Church Social Work* has been published by the Korean Academy of Church Social Work since 2003 (Kim and Canda 2009). Initiatives such as this undoubtedly contribute to Kim and Canda’s (2009) finding that Korean social work scholarship about spirituality is dominated by literature from a Christian perspective. They identified 63 social work articles with a Christian perspective, almost six times more than Buddhist and Won Buddhist. Given this emphasis in the literature and that many social welfare departments are located in Christian affiliated universities, it seems likely that Christian ideas about social welfare have the widest influence among spiritual perspectives. This view was shared by participants in Canda and Canda’s (1996) field study.

Confucianism

Like Buddhism, Confucianism was introduced to the Korean region from China about 2,000 years ago (Lee 1993; Lew 1988). It influenced the formation of Korean culture during the Three Kingdoms period and afterward, especially as Confucianism was connected with the transmission of Chinese literature, art, educational materials and written characters. During the Silla and Goryeo dynasties, Confucianism also influenced social mores and governmental social welfare services (Canda et al. 1993; Lew 1988). The Joseon Dynasty adopted the Zhu Xi (*juhui*) school of Neo-Confucianism as the state ideology. Therefore, for about 500 years, Neo-Confucianism provided a comprehensive metaphysical, ethical and social organisation system. Korean Neo-Confucianism is known as ‘the Learning of the Way’ (*dohak*) and ‘the Learning of the Sage’ (*songhak*). It largely supplanted Buddhism in provision of formal social welfare services.

Confucius lived in China 551–470 BCE. He taught a small cadre of students and consulted with nobles, seeking to promote governance and interpersonal conduct based on virtues, the most central being ‘benevolence’ (*in*, Korean; *ren*, Chinese), which refers to humane interrelatedness and connotes unconditional love (Canda 2013; Lew 2003). Another virtue that became very influential in family-based care of elders and social ethics is filial piety, which refers to children honouring their parents, and by extension, younger honouring elder, and humans honouring Heaven and Earth as cosmic parents. Confucian social ethics are strongly concerned with promoting harmonious family and societal relationships.

Neo-Confucian approaches to social welfare included promoting individual mindfulness, sincerity and social concern through practices of quiet sitting; scholarly study to acquire wisdom and skill for social administration; teaching about insights from sages from Chinese classics in state and private schools; scholars’ remonstrance with the king and nobles for just governance; collective protest; administration of formal social welfare programmes for relief of the poor; help for people considered vulnerable (such as widows, isolated elders, orphans, homeless and people with disabilities); and promotion of the village-based mutual support system of *hyangyak* (Canda et al. 1993; Canda and Canda 1996).

The periods of the Japanese imperialistic occupation of Korea (about 1910–1945), separation between North and South, and the Korean War (1950–1953) caused drastic disruptions of
Korean culture, including marginalisation of Confucianism as a basis for governance and social welfare. Further, many contemporary Koreans have come to identify Confucianism with abuses of feudalism and patriarchy, although there is a small movement of Confucian philosophers who advocate for the democratic and justice promoting features of the Way of the Sages, as opposed to the corrupted practices of former political rulers (Lew 1988, 2003).

Only about 0.4 per cent of Koreans identify as Confucian (Kim and Canda 2009). Nevertheless, there remains a pervasive indirect influence on social welfare policy and informal patterns of mutual support based on Confucian social ethics. However, there is very little utilisation of Confucian thought in professional social welfare education or institutions. Kim and Canda (2009) identified only four social work articles on Confucianism and of these, two mentioned that its communitarian approach might be more suitable to guide social welfare than Western individualistic views. For about the past 10 years, Sungkyunkwan University, which has Confucian roots, has been offering a course on spirituality and social work in an inclusive sense, drawing on many religious and philosophical perspectives. The instructor, Professor Park Seung-Hee, includes discussion of ways that Confucianism can promote respect for cultural and spiritual diversity (personal communications and Park 2006). Like the Soongsil University course, it uses the Canda and Furman book as a main text.

Shamanism

Shamanism (musok or mugyo) is the most ancient indigenous tradition of Korea (Canda et al. 1993; Kendall 2011). It is rooted in an animistic worldview that promotes harmony between humans, the spirit beings of the natural world (such as mountain spirits, sansin) and other spirit powers, such as the culture-founding hero Dangun, ancestors and spirits that affect health and fortune. Shamans (commonly referred to as mudang), most often women, are mediators between the human and spirit realms who are skilled in trance performance and rituals for divination and healing of personal, family and community maladies, misfortunes and disruptions of harmony (Canda and Canda 1996). Shamans often help people to release deeply ingrained emotional distress through cathartic rituals involving intense music and dance, evocative symbols and psychodrama-like enactments of communication with spirits and deceased relatives.

Korean shamanism is not organised according to formal bureaucratic organisations and membership, so it does not show up much in formal surveys of religious affiliation. Shamans tend to have an informal network of regular and occasional clients who request their services at times of crisis or life cycle transition. Although shamanism has had a pervasive influence on Korean traditional worldview and continues to be influential, it has rarely been addressed in social welfare education or research (Canda and Canda 1996; Chun 2013; Kim and Canda 2009).

Conclusion

The contemporary stance of the profession of Korean social work on spiritual diversity has several features. In scholarly publications, education and human service organisations, spirituality is mainly addressed in terms of religiously-based social welfare perspectives and religiously sponsored agencies, mostly Buddhist and Christian (i.e. Protestant and Catholic). Most often this includes religion-specific contexts and types of practice or policy (Kim and Canda 2009). Although Confucianism and shamanism have very long histories of social welfare and human service involvement, they are little addressed.

However, efforts toward an inclusive approach to spirituality are emerging. Some authors identify broad themes that are said to be common across Korean religions. For example, Yoo
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(2004) made connections between Christianity and shamanism to reveal ideals for church social work characterised by freedom, unity and elegance. Ro (2010) suggests that the spiritual principle of love for human beings is universal across religions and that this principle should be central to social welfare practice. Ro also cautions against detrimental impacts of self-centredness and closed-mindedness that may contribute to conflict and competition between different religions. In this context, Ro promotes ‘spiritual social work’ and refers to the work of Canda and Furman (1999/2003). Yoo (2003) also advocated for spiritually-sensitive social work in both micro and macro practice, influenced by the work of Canda and Furman. Likewise, Chun (2013) promotes a client-centred approach to spiritual needs in social welfare, rather than inappropriate imposition of religious agendas.

These authors’ positions are in accord with the Korean constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion and the Korean National Social Work Code of Ethics’ requirement of respect for human diversity, including prohibition of discrimination based on religious affiliation (Korea Association of Social Workers n.d.). However, there is no consensus about the importance of spirituality, including religious and non-religious forms, in professional standards for education or practice, and the topic is rarely addressed in the professional preparation of social workers.

An inclusive approach is also offered in at least two universities that have recently offered social work courses on spirituality: Sungkyunkwan and Soongsil. Professor Park Seung-Hee of Sungkyunkwan University has recently been offering a popular seminar on insights from Confucianism and Daoism for the Association for Social Work Practice. Furthermore, in 2011, the Korean Association of Spirituality and Social Welfare was established in order to promote clarification of spiritual principles found in various religions for application to social work practice and to develop educational curricula for producing spiritually sensitive social workers (Korean Association of Spirituality and Social Welfare 2015). This organisation provides workshops, annual conferences and a journal.

These religious, inter-religious and spiritually-inclusive initiatives offer opportunity for further innovations. First, national professional standards for ethics and education could build on the prohibition of religious discrimination to develop proactive approaches to respecting and engaging spiritual diversity in religious and non-religious forms. Second, prominent spiritual perspectives that have been most neglected, including Confucianism and shamanism, can be further examined for their potential to contribute to culturally appropriate social welfare. Third, currently growing religions with social welfare traditions, such as Islam, need to be examined, especially for relevance to work with clients among immigrant communities. Fourth, some Western paradigms for holistic social work that have drawn strongly on Indigenous and Eastern perspectives might be valuable to consider, such as deep ecological social work (Coates 2003) and transpersonal social work (Canda and Smith 2001). Fifth, since Korean religions and philosophies include many kinds of meditation, contemplative arts, prayer and ritual, these could be linked with evidence-based mindfulness practices and expressive arts therapies in social work (Canda and Warren 2013; Land 2015; Park 2013). As Yoo (2004) pointed out, Korean and Western social work scholars could learn from each other and foster innovations cross-culturally. A very pertinent example of this type of innovation is body-mind-spirit integrative social work as developed by Chinese and Chinese American social work scholars (Lee et al. 2009).

Korean society has been characterised by a plurality of spiritual perspectives for at least 2,000 years, and this diversity has grown in scale and complexity in the past 50 years. Further, Korean culture is noted for its relatively homogenous ethnic composition combined with mainly peaceful co-existence of multiple spiritual perspectives (Baker 2008). It may be fertile ground for further growth of both religion-specific and inclusive approaches to spiritual diversity in social welfare.
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Note

1 The official English name of the country is Republic of Korea but is commonly referred to as South Korea. We will use these terms interchangeably. If we use the term Korea when discussing history prior to partition after the Korean War, we will specify the relevant time period and kingdoms.

References


