

Article

A Critical Evaluation of Religious Education in Korea

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Received: 29 September 2018; Accepted: 15 November 2018; Published: 18 November 2018



Abstract: This essay will discuss the general orientation of Korean religious education and some of the problematic issues that are related to its position within the current Korean educational systems. It will focus especially on four critical aspects pertaining to religious education as found today in the Republic of Korea (we will not consider the situation of religious education in North Korea because it is so difficult to get accurate information). The first section will begin to identify the contemporary ‘communicational dilemma’ of religious education in Korea and its roots in the lack of a proper understanding of religious education from a non-confessional academic perspective. The second section will place the problem in the context of Korean religious demography as it pertains to the necessity of religious education and the conventional image of religious education within schools. The third section will enumerate a number of critical issues and analyze their impact on the direction of religious education policy since the establishment of the government’s equalization educational policy in 1969. The fourth section will critically examine a number of constitutional issues as they bear on the question of where compulsion exists in current religious education.

Keywords: religious education; equalization policy; confessional perspective; non-confessional perspective; religion and state; religion and constitution; religion and human rights; teaching rights of religion

1. The Communicational Dilemma of Korean Religious Education

In Korea, full-fledged modern religious education (RE) programs, as we find these in Europe and North America, have yet to be fully developed, despite the fact that Koreans have been teaching about religions in schools for quite a long time. The problem is rooted in a misunderstanding of the concept of religious education in Korean society, which can be seen in how institutional changes have been mandated by the Korean government since 1969, with the implementation of a policy that has been known as the equalization education policy of 1969.

Initially, the concept and application of RE began in mission schools as well as other schools that have a religious foundation. Because of the misunderstanding of the term ‘religious education’ and its popular understanding that is linked with mission or religiously oriented schools, Korean public schools have not willingly initiated RE curriculum. Many stakeholders in schools and also many scholars in the pedagogical field have confused the present orientation of current RE with a “membership” kind of education that belongs to the mission or the beliefs of a particular religion. This confessional model of RE continues to be apparent not only in Buddhist and Christian mission schools but also in some schools that belong to New Religious Movements. In each case, the format or mode of implementation has been framed to strengthen and to communicate the beliefs and practices of a particular religious identity. This interpretation of RE is problematic and it betrays the fundamental value of religious freedom in the Korean constitution. For people in general, it suggests a biased image with respect to RE. Moreover, this image has served to simplify and to reduce the complex dynamic meaning that is found in the Korean constitution as it touches on the separation of religion

and state. The situation of a flight from a proper, non-confessional understanding of RE has been misused by various political interest groups to propagate themselves or criticize rival groups with different religious/non-religious backgrounds.

Currently, most Korean RE can be categorized as fitting into either of these two situations—“to teach to understand and to teach to be religious in a particular way” (Hazra 2009, p. 143; Jackson 1997; Kim 2016, pp. 1–15; Park 2002, pp. 57–58). The more that RE is turned into an issue in public schools, the more that most of the religiously founded schools try to defend the merits of their own “religious” framework, seeking to strengthen it. On the other hand, public schools try to avoid an exploration of the concept. Today, this unwillingness of investigation, and, especially, of communication is to be regarded as the chief obstacle that works against the development of RE in all schools. If there is to be a breakthrough in a way that does not ignore the Korean government’s educational policy on RE, it would seem that the best, perhaps only viable alternative would be to seek a policy based on a proper understanding of the term, “religious education” in which the diversity and value of religion as a global phenomenon can be explored and promoted.

In particular, this essay embraces the vision of Ninian Smart (1927–2001) that was developed through his work and his engagement with the practice of RE in the UK (Smart 1968, pp. 1–12), a development that can be traced back to the psychology of religion movement (Jordan 1986, pp. 287–88) that was initiated earlier by William James (1842–1910) and his former student, Granville Stanley Hall (1844–1924). According to Smart, a proper RE in general should fulfill both functions: to provide students with understanding about their own traditions and/or the dominant religions that play an important role in the construction and identification of their culture and community; and also to equip them with the knowledge of religion and other religions; both should be carried out free from assumption and in a comparative manner (Smart 1968, p. 106; Smart and Horder 1975, pp. 7–10; Smart and Wiebe 1986, pp. 227–29). This model is very meaningful for the development of Korean RE and it needs to be implemented creatively within the pluralistic context of religions in Korea. It requires the Korean educational system and educators to move beyond a confessional practice of RE to communicate and collaborate with one another.

With that in mind, this essay will then attempt to contextualize this goal in relation to the specific problematic issues regarding RE in the contemporary Korean educational system. The next section will deal with the situation of Korean religious demography as it pertains to the necessity of RE and the conventional image of RE within the schools. The third section will try to list and speak about a number of critical issues and the kind of impact that they have on the direction of RE policy since the establishment of the government’s equalization educational policy in 1969. The fourth section will critically examine a number of constitutional issues as they relate to the question of where compulsion exists in current RE. My discussion does not cover the situation of RE in North Korea because it is beyond my expertise and outside the boundaries of verifiable data.

2. Religious Demography and Religious Education Image in Korea

Officially in 2005, the Korean National Statistical Office issued the most recent population census (Korea Gallop Research Institute 2015; Choi 2011), which was the most reliable source for determining the dimensions of the Korean religious population. Unfortunately, the census does not capture the diversity of religious understandings operational within Korea. The language of the census, like the understanding of RE, is based on ‘membership’ within a particular religious community—not religious understanding itself. According to this census, the South Korean population stands at about forty seven millions and about twenty five million (53%) of the population practice their own religious tradition. More specifically, in the population, the biggest groups consisted of (1) the Buddhists comprising 22.8% (10,726,463 members), (2) the Protestants, 18.3% (8,616,438), (3) the Catholics 10.9% (5,146,147), and finally (4) the Confucians 0.2% (104,575). The population numbers for various New Religious Movements were not identified as clearly active members in this census. The followers of Shamanism and Confucianism were also not actively identified.

Generally we could claim, on the basis of the census, half of the Korean religious population is Buddhist and the other half, Christian (the Protestants and the Catholics being lumped together). In addition, we can see that, in the total Korean population, half of the population can be regarded as officially religious, the other half, non-religious. This point, once recognized, can easily lead one to conclude that the Korean religious situation is such that it is balanced with respect to the rate of religious and non-religious and that, within the religious population, the Buddhist and Christian population rate is also well balanced.

As a consequence of these conditions, religious voices from Buddhism and Christianity are always attentively concerned and dominate conversations with respect to what could be happening in politics, media, education, and in other public life domains. Especially during general elections, despite what could exist as personal religious preferences among politicians, most candidates try explicitly to distance themselves from an unbalanced view of religious matters. It is very rare that any of them would try to attend to the role or the place of religious minorities and listen to their voices. Public media evinces no serious concern for them either. However, when problematic situations emerge with respect to the being of religious minorities, the media engage in extensive coverage that often assumes a prosecutorial tone, as shown by their treatment of the ferry boat disaster of 2014. The disaster was related to a new religious movement: the Salvation Sect (구원파), which is a Christian sectarian group (Tak 2009, pp. 88–91; Tak 2011, pp. 52–57).

A “middling” point of view that is conditioned by the specifics of Buddhist/Christian demography is continuously maintained in order to emphasize the current balance argument, as it exists in the current Korean demographic religious situation. Certainly, externally, this seems to be quite proper with respect to how we should understand the current Korean religious demographic situation. Hence, most scholars in religious studies assume that the Korean religious demographic situation is quite unique and exceptional as a consequence of the demographic balance (Kim 2017, pp. 277–79). In addition, they argue that this highly unusual balance has played a key role in helping to avoid religious conflicts or wars within the Korean peninsula. This presumed balance is generally accepted not only within public spheres (as for instance, in political policy and the daily media), but it is also accepted within these two religious circles. This religious rivalry is found in many aspects of Korean society. It is an unfortunate consequence of the official “external” religious census that inaccurately captured the distribution and diversity of actual “internal” religious membership of the different religions that exist within Korea (Jung 2001, pp. 3–42).

However, apart from this type of external focus which has emerged as a kind of habitual response over time, another interpretation or another sense of reality can be alluded to. By shifting our focus and attention to the “being” that exists as an internal form of religious consciousness among Korean people, the meaning and the value of the religious census can then begin to appear in a different light. By moving in an inward direction and by attending to the question of religious consciousness, a space can be cleared or room can be created for another point of view that can include the ancient traditions of Shamanism and Confucianism and, from there, determine how they can function within the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity and, at the same time, also live and function in a way that can be appreciated by persons who claim to have no religious affiliation. We can perhaps move from the concept of religion as belonging to a particular faith community to a concept of religion as a particular sensibility and consciousness that transcends current language and unfortunately eludes census counters.

This issue has been discussed and argued by two creative scholars of religion. According to Yu Dong-Sik, the undercurrent within Korean religions, including Korean Christianity, is rooted in Shamanism (Ryu 1985, pp. 321–50; Ryu 1987, pp. 399–413). In contrast, but along a similar argument, Kil Hee-Sung speaks about an undercurrent that comes not from Shamanism, but from Confucianism. His claim is that the different religions, now expressed in Korea, are all formed within a Confucian framework (Kil 2015, pp. 1–24). He thinks and believes that contemporary Korean Buddhism, contemporary Korean Christianity, contemporary Shamanism, and the diverse New

Religious Movements all function within the imprint of Confucianism. For him, Confucianism is key if we are to move toward a deeper understanding of contemporary Korean religions. Although both men stress different points of departure, both agree that the population census does not reflect the true reality of Korean religions—as they really and truly exist and as they are lived today. In other words, their arguments imply that the census is not able to identify the complexity of different variables that function as hidden operators or movers within the life of Korean Buddhism and Christianity.

If we follow Yu's and Kil's perspectives, then the Korean religious demographic situation can be understood differently. To confirm their arguments in a telling fashion, a further exploration and analysis of religious consciousness, not just religious affiliation, based on empirical data, should be conducted. This is something that has not been fully tried. Most especially, a different kind of measurement process is needed in order to more accurately assess the demographic situation of Shamanism and Confucianism (unlike what we have for Buddhism and Christianity). Very few Koreans identify themselves as adherents and participants of Shamanism and Confucianism. Hence, the registered numbers in the population census are far fewer than the actual population practicing shamanism and various New Religious Movements.

Unfortunately, the Korean government's census-generated blind spot helps to cause a situation in which political calculations and decisions are made by an incomplete understanding of the Koreans' religious consciousness based primarily on the dynamic of only two traditions, Christianity and Buddhism. A broader perspective is absent: a perspective beyond what the data of the Korean religious census can offer. Perhaps, within the current academic community, questions can be raised about how informative and valuable it is to assume that half of the population is religious while the other half is non-religious.

Have we missed something qualitative? Are these assumptions the basis for a policy of avoiding issues that pertain to the question of RE in Korea's schools, private and public? In failing to rethink how RE can be conceived to exist in a new manner within the public schools, do we not perpetuate a more challenging problem than any issue which deals with the question of RE in private schools with their historical religious affiliations?

In this sense, then, it is necessary to take a look at what has been the general image of RE in Korean history. Irrespective of different population percentages in the census and any emphasis that can be given to the role of Shamanism and Confucianism for an in-depth understanding of the Korean demographic religious situation, it cannot be denied that Korean religions, within their context, have independently created means and institutions for the purpose of effecting and implementing each their own brand of RE (Seymour 2005, pp. 337–39). They have been distinctively concentrating on forming a religious clergy, and they have also engaged in the work of evangelization within their schools. As Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), and also the New Religious Movements have spread throughout the Korean peninsula, they have created diverse educational institutions for these two purposes.

When compared with Christianity and New Religious Movements, the practice of RE in Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism has had a long history in Korea. Especially within Buddhism, diverse educational institutions for the training of clergy and schools connected to temples have existed since the fourth century. Confucianism has also intensively focused on traditional RE in the context of *seowon* (서원) and *seodang* (서당) during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) (Choi 2011), covering over 500 years since 14th century, prior to the colonization of Korea under Japanese Imperial rule that lasted for 36 years (from 1909 through to 1945). Prior to the current modernization, most of the educational framework that existed in Korea was largely based on the dominance of Confucianism within Korea. Yet, the Confucian based traditional schools were not transformed into modernized Confucian schools. Instead, they were replaced by modern public government schools. Instantly, they ceased to survive within the new ethos of the modern educational system.

Compared with the Buddhist and Confucian religious traditions and respectively their schools, the Shamans did not bequeath much in terms of educational literature for the training of clergy nor

for the works of their mission, since their types of thinking and training were transmitted orally through the relations that existed between shamans and their disciples (Yoon 1999, pp. 81–96). As with Shamanism in other parts of the world, the RE of clergy candidates who were to become shamans would not be done on the basis of written documents but by means of oral instruction and training under the personal guidance of individual shamans. A few years ago, as a counter to this past tradition, the existing Shamanist association in Korea attempted to establish a modernized official department of RE for the training of their clergy and a process of accreditation for RE teachers in the context of university life, but this attempt did not succeed, leaving the Shamanists without any schools.

Although Christianity and the New Religious Movements in Korea have not had a long history in Korea as compared to what has existed for Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism, they have also established their own institutions of RE. Relatively speaking, the Catholics have had a small number of official seminaries; the Protestants, many denominational seminaries (Seymour 2005, pp. 337–39). They have also many elementary-secondary schools that have been founded according to their varying mission statements and have introduced RE course within their curriculum. In the case of the New Religious Movements, some NRMs have had their own RE institutions while others have not. Some NRMs offer instruction in other places. Some Buddhist related NRMs (as, for instance, Won Buddhism) offer further training within the context of Buddhist studies, as these exist within Buddhist founded universities. Without being identified, many clergy who had belonged to the Unification Church, in the early years, were trained within liberal protestant theological seminaries. Korean NRMs have also established a few elementary-secondary schools in order to teach their form of RE within the context of the school curriculum (Kim 2017, p. 289).

Currently, the modern elementary-secondary schools that have been founded through the mission statements of various religious bodies comprise one-fifth of all schools in Korea. Among them, the percentage of the Protestant schools exists as more than 50% (Kim 2016, pp. 1–15). They number more than 250 schools. Next come the Catholic schools with almost 65 schools. The third largest belongs to the Buddhist schools with more than 22 schools. Among the schools belonging to various New Religious Movements, the Won Buddhists have 22 schools and the Eastern Learning (천도교) one school. Others, such as the Unification Church and Daesoon Thought, have also a few schools. The distinctively dominant numbers belong to the Christian elementary-secondary schools, especially here, the Protestant schools. This distinctive feature is also to be found among the numbers of kindergartens and higher educational institutes as these exist among universities, colleges, and seminaries. The highest percentage belongs to the Protestant churches and their institutes.

Even though the numbers of private schools that have been founded by religious foundations as compared to the total number of schools in Korea appears to be very high, the orientation of RE still remains within a traditional and confessional framework: it is concerned with transmitting a specific religious world view. The style of RE is to teach to be religious in a particular way according to the mission statement. At best, it only fulfills one out of the two fundamental functions of RE mentioned at the end of the previous section. No attempt is made to try and go beyond the “religious” education of a particular religious world view although, if we look at this pattern, we find that it does not seem to differ too much from a common pattern that exists across religious differences in terms of demography and the number of religious schools. However, given the large number of Christian schools, whenever problematic questions about RE emerge, criticisms appear to be more frequently directed toward these schools although the other religious schools are not exceptional in their status. They too are confronted by the same challenges.

In this sense, a non-confessional model of RE, emerged from a foundation that is based on religious studies, has yet to be solidly established. Unlike the kind of general tendency that we find among the public schools, private schools neither question nor reject fundamental assumptions about the necessity of RE. A consensus prevails across private religious schools that secularism constitutes the principal threat to religious consciousness within Korea. However, their definitions of religion remain so tightly enshrouded within the precepts of their confession that they have not been successful in

inculcating a sense of what a religious consciousness might actually consist of and what it might aspire to do.

3. The Emerging New Ethos of Religious Education after the Implementation of the Equalization Educational Policy

As can be seen, in their individual histories, Korean religions have all established RE institutes for the training of their clergy and related religious schools for the education of children and youth. However, a different situation exists if we attend to the modern schools that, later, were established by newly arriving Christian missionaries. Given the influence of these new Christian mission schools, almost all modern schools that were later founded by Korean religious foundations have offered their own form of RE in an independent way within the context of offering a general curriculum. Most teachers are not officially trained as RE teachers, although they have functioned as clergy within the context of their religious institutions. Almost all teachers have been clergy despite the religious differences that have existed among the different schools as one finds these in Korea.

In the confessional type of RE which is currently provided, little thought or concern has been given to the meaning of RE within a context of religious and cultural pluralism. Students are not encouraged to reflect in a critical way on diverse religious questions and concerns in a global context. The sole focus appears to be given to a form of upbringing and nurturing that is determined by one's religious worldview. In the Christian schools and in the Buddhist dharma schools, most classes in RE are centered on the study of, respectively, the Christian and Buddhist scriptures and so do the New Religious Movement schools. The situation of the public schools is not as different as one might have expected. Although the RE classes that are offered in Korean public schools are given a special independent status within the regular curriculum, the format of this education does not differ from the traditional RE that has been given to students in Buddhist and Confucian schools, prior to the establishment of modern schools by the later Christian missionaries (Jung 2001, pp. 3–42). Both traditional and modern forms of RE do not go beyond an education within one's own religious worldview and the kind of confessional transmission that is then given and passed on to students. In other words, the format of modern RE has not changed over the years. It continues to exist as an extension of traditional RE as this has been given within Korea.

This image of RE is deeply embedded within the consciousness of contemporary Koreans. It is a parochial understanding about the nature of RE. Nourishing this parochial sense of things constitutes a major challenge to the organization of education within Korean schools today. The challenge that presents itself around the understanding of RE is the most serious of all problems that are currently facing Korean educators. A fundamental transformation of traditional RE is now urgently needed within a religiously diverse educational environment.

Policy makers and stakeholders from different backgrounds in Korean schools have been aware of the changing educational context. Increasingly aware of Korea's participation in a global world, many are willingly seeking new ways of operating within schools today. In this sense, the curriculum of RE is not to be regarded as an exception. In fact, exemptions have usually been granted (no change or interference in current practices) because of a respectful ethos that exists for the foundational principles of many schools. When compared to the kind of innovation that exists with regard to the curriculum of other subjects, RE continues to focus on the teaching of one's own particular religious worldview. This fact and focus of RE has been accepted. It is understood and practiced broadly within the organization and structure of schools in Korea.

However, this understanding and practice of RE cannot be maintained. It inhibits transdisciplinary academic inquiry concerning the understanding of religion, and it retards the growth of Korean students into global citizens. Along with this criticism of current practices of RE affecting school curriculum and style of pedagogy in the classroom, another seemingly unrelated development in government policy demands an urgent response from Korean educators and scholars of religion.

The Korean government since 1969 in Korean middle schools, and similarly since 1974 in Korean high schools initiated some major educational reforms in order to reduce the intense pressure that is experienced by students as they prepared for the competitive administration of school entrance examinations (Yoon 1999, pp. 81–96). Despite some critical problems, these educational reforms has served to reduce the fever of competition that has plagued the taking of entrance examinations for admission to schools and colleges in Korea. At the moment, things have settled down to some extent—students feel less pressure and competition. However, another set of problems and conflicts have unexpectedly arisen and they are surprisingly linked with the questions of RE. Not only are these new problems linked with the insufficient understandings and current practices of RE, they also show that the communicational dilemma concerning the term ‘religious education’ can only be resolved if we embrace another understanding and practice of RE in Korean schools.

When these policies were being implemented in the early stages, most religion education teachers managed their classes according to the ways that they have always known. The new situation that was emerging was not fully understood. Now, most students do not come to a school because they have chosen it, but because they are being sent to it according to their place of residence and the location of nearby schools. However, in most cases, teachers and other persons who have had a vested interest in the well-being of their schools were not equipped to effect changes in the offering of RE classes within this newly changing context.

In the pre-policy era, students lived and worked freely within a relatively homogeneous religious background as their context for maintaining a distinct religious culture at a given school. However, after the activation of new government policy, most schools have been faced with difficulties. This new situation is because students come now from diverse religious backgrounds. The Christian mission schools are being especially challenged, since Buddhist and other non-Christian religious students tend to be uncomfortable in RE classes where the goal and style of teaching is not inter-religious understanding but understanding within a particular religious framework/membership. Buddhist mission schools have been challenged in a similar way. Christian students and other non-Buddhist religious students tend to be uncomfortable participating in RE classes that are conducted by Buddhists. In the old days, most students and parents had not been troubled by such things. To some extent, they seemed to accept the spirit of foundation which had existed with respect to the being of the school of their choice. They were part of a seemingly homogeneous community grounded in a particular religious framework and common language.

Hence, today, most schools have found that they cannot implement a policy that stipulates that RE should not be taught in a regular class, but only as an extracurricular activity. In addition, they cannot abide by a policy that would forbid the use of long established resources as these are especially found in the use of sacred scriptures that belong to a given religious tradition. Forcefully, many schools began to challenge the unilateral imposition of government policy, and, eventually, their criticisms were accepted through the enactment of the 4th national curriculum standard (in 1981–1987) (Cha 2006, pp. 443–59). Two critical issues with respect to the curriculum could only be resolved at an institutional level: (1) RE is seen to exist as one of the elective regular subjects that belong to the school curricular; (2) resource materials belonging to a given religious tradition are recognized as qualified educational material, similar to the being of books that belong to other subjects that are taught within the school curriculum.

Within this situation, for the first time, the Korean Association for the History of Religions (KAHR, known as the Korean Association for Religious Studies (KARS) since 2014) became involved. The association began to address issues and themes that pertained to RE, persuasively suggesting a conceptual reorientation to schools and the Korean Ministry of Education. Especially, during the 1985 spring annual conference of the KAHR, two key scholars, Yoon Yi-hum and Jung Jin-hong, tackled a number of issues from the perspective of a religious studies viewpoint (Yoon 1986; Jung 1986). Both emphasized that RE should not be limited to the focus on religious conversion and evangelization. Instead, they suggested that the field of religious studies/education ought to seek to move toward

a deeper understanding of history, humanity, culture, and cosmos. Each scholar attempted to speak about the direction and the future of RE within the context of the 4th national curriculum standard.

In the 5th national curriculum standard (1987–1992), the conceptual RE-orientation of religious education in terms of the academic study of religion was further embodied and put into effect. An institutional strategy was provided to schools in terms of (1) officially recognizing a RE text book that was to be published for each religious body and (2) requiring a licensing for RE teachers. Each school, if it wished, could use a textbook that was published by its sponsoring religious body if reviewed and approved by the Minister of Education.

At the time that this new policy began to be implemented, most of the RE teachers had only received their training (mostly clerical) from their own religious seminaries (Cusack 2017, pp. 530–31). They had not been originally trained as RE teachers by a department of religious studies nor by any department of education in university or college. They were actually clergy functioning as RE teachers within schools designed for young people. Neither had their training included exposure and learning about other religions. Hence, they were not properly trained how to teach other religions to their students and they were not in accordance with the revised guidelines outlined in the new RE curriculum. In addition, they lacked experience in using textbooks of academic study of religion. Up until that time, they had only used materials that worked with specific scriptural texts or catechisms that were designed for use in the mission field.

To address this, for the first time in 1990, an intensive course for the training and licensing of unlicensed teachers in RE was provided during the school vacation periods. Participants took subjects in religious studies and pedagogy in a program that was created by the School of Teachers College, which, in turn, belonged to Seoul National University. Through this program, 90 unlicensed teachers successfully obtained their teaching certificates in RE (Korean Ministry of Education 2001, p. 128). Every five years, since then, the Ministry of Education continues to provide the same course of studies for new participants.

Beginning in 1995, this training and licensing course of studies has been run through a collaboration between the aforementioned Teachers College and the University's Department of Religious Studies. Subjects of Religious Studies have received a greater emphasis than subjects associated with educational pedagogy and teaching. At the same time also, a number of scholars within Religious Studies have strongly urged that more support should be given to the value of RE in a manner that transcends any particular confessional concerns. The advocates of religious studies have sought to clearly distinguish between the confessional teaching for membership in a particular religious community and the value of a non-confessional perspective. This distinction is crucial in order to emphasize the latter perspective as the fitting and proper orientation of RE to be applied within Korean schools. This emphasis was then strengthened by the promulgation and implementation of the 6th national curriculum standard (1992–1997) (Kim 2016, pp. 1–15).

However, in the 7th national curriculum standard (2000–2004), the curriculum guide for RE began to come under some critical scrutiny (Jung 2001, pp. 3–42). It was questioned not only by students and their parents but also by teachers. Both groups were not satisfied with how classes in RE were being conducted. Except for those students that belonged to the same religion as that which was professed by their respective schools, many students and their parents were not happy with the style of teaching the compulsory RE. Rather than aligning with the non-confessional approach emphasized by the 6th national curriculum standard, this style of teaching RE was still concentrating only on the beliefs of a particular religion, and depending on the religious foundation of the particular school attended. Teachers and schools were also not satisfied with the new government policy. They thought that it was too intrusive. They complained about not being allowed to freely teach their own religions. They began to ask questions, in a critical way, about the foundational purposes of their schools.

Both sides could not find any solution for the proper understanding and administration of RE within the new situation of schools in the wake of the government's curriculum policy. RE teachers defended themselves on the basis of the charters of foundation that had been drawn up in the

establishment of their respective schools. Publicly, some students and their parents began to complain about how RE was being conducted. They also began to protest against having RE with the help and support of their respective religious and political interest groups. This protest, from students and parents, revealed a new ethos that was emerging further demanding and encouraging revisions in how RE was to be understood, conceived, and implemented. However, these concerns and complains were not discussed in a fully public manner. Nothing was said outside of school boundaries. Eventually, after some discomfort, students and parents would withdraw their complaints out of respect for their teachers and schools, which is an inherent cultural norm in Korea.

However, in 2004, this restraint proved untenable after a student, Kang Eui-Suk, engaged in a public form of demonstration that opposed the kind of RE that was being given at his school (Kim 2008, pp. 305–22). Mr. Kang was then serving as president of the student body at his school, the Daekwang High School. The school had a Christian foundation. He rejected the RE that was given to him and because of his publicly voiced criticism, he was expelled from his school. In the train of events which followed, he launched a civil suit against his school, seeking damages. He received strong support from the Korean Institute of Religious Freedom, an NGO with a Buddhist orientation. Eventually a favorable ruling was issued in his favor from the Korean Supreme Court in 2010 (Kim 2008, pp. 305–22). This was a stunning event in the history of modern Korean education. It was a first for a student to successfully rebel against the educational authority of his school. The impact rattled against traditional assumptions and values both with regard to the nature of school RE instruction and the kind of respect that should be ascribed to the operation of schools and other possible centers of learning.

Prior to the 2010 Supreme Court ruling of Mr. Kang's case, several more civil lawsuits had been launched (Kim 2008, pp. 305–22). In 2005, Mr. Oh Byeung-Heun and in 2007, Mr. Lee Dong-Gyu launched civil lawsuits against their schools. Simultaneously, in 2007, a research professor who was based in a Christian university was dismissed because, allegedly, he had bowed to an image during his visit to a Buddhist temple. In addition, the administration of President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) was criticized for its alleged Christian favoritism and for the exclusion of many Buddhists from high office in the government administration. Buddhist oriented NGO groups and other groups began to denounce the Lee government policy on religious matters. They also actively supported Mr. Kang's civil suit and also the civil suit that was launched by the aforementioned professor in 2007.

Since then, thus, whenever religious issues have emerged in the public sphere, the proportional rate of balance as this pertains to Christians and Buddhists is regarded as a more important variable in the employing of officials than the alleged ability of a potential public servant in government. In addition, the Lee government was immediately forced to inaugurate and administer a new program within the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, whose object was to prevent any discrimination on religious grounds among all Korean public servants, teachers in public schools included. The program continues to function up to the present.

In this situation, the 7th national curriculum standard revision committee of the Department of Education could not resist rethinking how RE was to be done in Korean public schools. When compared to other things, formerly, questions about the RE curriculum had not been a major concern. Much freedom had been given to individual schools. However, this was no longer possible. RE was emerging as a key question in regards to curriculum revisions (Ryu 2013, pp. 1–34). Accordingly, this committee began to invite scholars in the field of religious studies in order to involve them in the revision of guidelines governing the conduct of RE.

In 2007, the revision committee of the 7th national curriculum standard issued new revised guidelines for RE, focusing on its fundamental orientation and content (Ryu 2013, pp. 1–34). In drawing up this new policy, it can be concluded with some certainty that not all suggestions were accepted as these could have come from scholars in religious studies who belonged to this committee. At the same time, also, the concerns that came from school teachers and administrators could not be ignored or disregarded. The result thus was a decision to give more discretion to Korean public schools in

conducting RE. Alternative subjects and courses were to be provided to students who did not want to receive any formal religious instruction. Students could also freely move to other schools within their residential district if they wanted to attend schools that belonged to their religion of preference. In this context, several scholars from the field of religious studies and RE spoke about the direction of RE in a manner that ranged from the “extreme” perspective of religious studies toward a more moral character type of education that might prove viable within the context of Korean public schools.

4. Unresolved Constitutional Issues in the Revised Curriculum of Religious Education

After the issue and proclamation of the 7th national curriculum standard revision in 2007, itself being shaped by the activation of a mandatory equalization educational policy, the guidelines of the curriculum revision had to be immediately applied not only to all public schools but also to almost all private schools that existed in Korea. As with the previous national curriculum standards that had been issued in earlier years, the most recent curriculum revision guidelines could not avoid two core problems for legal and constitutional reasons. In seeking for some form of educational consensus that all could possibly agree on, in the end, no such agreements could be reached. This impasse was because of the influence of a number of political considerations: issues and concerns that surfaced when questions about educational matters arose.

A first problem that plagues this educational policy is that the new policy takes away from the autonomy of private schools. Private schools can no longer apply their own criteria in selecting students for acceptance into their schools. Now, without having to pass any entrance examination, students are to be accepted if they reside within the local school district. Academic aptitudes and performances were no longer to be the governing criteria. As a result, legal problems have been created because most private schools do not dare to challenge the government policy, particularly if they need to receive large government subsidies in order to remain in operation. The government is in a stronger position to dictate policy with them. Most private schools find that they are required unwillingly to follow the direction of current government policy. So, as a further result of this, almost all Korean private schools have begun to look like public schools, avoiding a mission style of RE. They can no longer insist on their proper autonomy or on any increases in autonomy that they believe that they should have.

A second problem is the issue of students’ and parents’ rights to choose their respective schools. According to the Constitutional Court of Korea, parents have educational rights with respect to their children as a consequence of natural law ([Constitutional Court of Korea 1995](#), 91 Hun-Ma 204). The rights of parents prevail over the rights of teachers. Yet, the government’s equalization policy refrains from seriously considering this aspect. In the early period of policy implementation, many parents were not worried about their rights given the traditional respect that existed for the work and status of teachers. They accepted the teaching rights of teachers before thinking about other things with respect to the good administration of the schools that were being attended by their children. However, at the present time, this right of parents has become a dominant consideration, even if it functions in a more or less almost invisible way when there is no severe conflict between parents and government officials.

These two problems also affect the question of RE, more explicitly and directly so, than with any other curriculum subject. Three issues can be indicated. Above all, in this revision of the curriculum, the freedom of RE rights in schools is being ignored largely as a consequence of the government’s mandated equalization educational policy where, legally and constitutionally, RE rights are being annulled as these touch on the founding spirits of many Korean schools. If RE classes cannot be administered in a manner that meets the requirements of a school’s foundation, it would seem to be the case that about a fifth of existing schools should not continue to remain in existence. On the other hand, if this problem is approached in a manner that is a bit more realistic or more pragmatic, possibly an accommodation can be reached. As we have noted, where extreme views prevail about the need

to give RE, many private schools are faced with the problem of survival if they must receive large government subsidies and also pay for the salaries of RE teachers.

Secondly, students and parents should have the right of religious freedom. But, this freedom is clashing with the current practice of RE in schools. The fundamental reason for this clash is the abolishment of the right to choose which school should be the object of one's educational choice. Fortunately, in recent times, when RE in schools becomes problematic, then one could evade this problem simply by changing schools or by taking alternative course as a substitute for RE classes.

In relation to RE, other issues have also flared up. Compulsory participation in chapel services has become an issue. How can students deal with the issue of eligibility if certain offices of the student body demands the participation? How can one cope with religious tests that require a subscription to specific doctrines? Especially, since the case of Mr. Kang, these issues have come together in a way which has created a complex legal and constitutional situation for how religion is to be handled within the context of Korean schools. Some groups who champion the freedom of students with respect to choice of religion have rejected any type of obligatory RE and religious activities. In opposition and contrast, the other group defends traditional custom and practice, emphasizing the legitimacy of religious instruction as this is drawn from the mission statements of religiously founded schools. Both groups have engaged in extensive legal and constitutional arguments. The first group tends to be supported mainly by Buddhist and other religious groups; the second group, by Christian groups.

In addition, after Mr. Kang's successful lawsuit of 2007 that had won strong support from a Buddhist oriented NGO, the newly emerging critical perspective on religious matters has been strengthening and growing in schools and beyond. No longer can the Christian schools operate freely in the conduct of their RE classes and in other religious activities. This reduces their rights to freedom in religious matters. As was mentioned above, the pro-Christian government of President Myung-baek Lee had come under criticism. The subsequent administration of President Geun-hye Park showed a marked improvement with regard to its general policy on religious matters, although there was no change with regard to the treatment of RE in Christian schools. The policy of the current Jae-in Moon administration does not noticeably differ. The current political situation is continuously pushing the Christian schools toward a kind of truncation, as this affects religious matters.

In these years, amid these controversies, Mr. Kang's case—a public lawsuit for human rights and religious freedom that was vindicated by decisions that came from the Korean Supreme Court—has been mistakenly viewed as a civil lawsuit that had been launched by him, personally seeking revenge for his expulsion from his school. In general, traditionally, it had been believed that RE and other religious activities were "taboo" subjects and this attitude cast a wide shadow, influencing public sectors, as these could be found in universities, social welfare organizations, and kindergartens—anything founded by religious organizations. However, unlike the kind of case which has existed with respect to the administration of Korean secondary schools, parental and student choice was not an issue with respect to these other organizations. Yet, during the time of the Lee administration, related issues, including the Christian use of public spaces, has given rise to lawsuits that have been supported by the same NGO that had supported Mr. Kang's successful lawsuit. This group in conjunction with other likeminded groups had been accusing the Lee government of Christian favoritism. So, in the wake of these criticisms, in order to defuse criticism and confrontation, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has been establishing prevention programs that are directed against religious discrimination among public servants, including teachers in government funded public schools (see the Website of Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism for the prevention of religious discrimination). These programs continue to be in effect under the present government administration.

Currently, under the present government, the level and harshness of criticism from NGO groups that had been critical of the former government's Christian favoritism has lessened as a consequence of what appears to be a more just policy about the place of religious matters in the public sector. However, at this time, Christian groups are beginning to raise their voices against a form of Buddhist favoritism

that is being shown through the granting of subsidies that are devoted to Buddhist projects of one kind or another: the renovation of historic Buddhist temples, the sponsorship of temple stay programs, and aid offered to Buddhist studies and research. At the same time, they have begun to criticize how RE is being dealt with in the 7th national curriculum standard revision. In their criticisms, their focus is not with RE *per se*, but with the illegality of the equalization educational policy. To publicize their concerns, in 2014, they organized a powerful new organization: the National Association for Christian Education (see their homepage at www.nace.or.kr).

Thirdly, the issue of school choice rights is related to the practice of assigning students to public schools. Public schools are failing to open new RE classes although they employ professional teachers who are trained in a teachers college or by a religious studies department. According to currently available statistics, no single public school is organizing new RE classes. In this situation, thus, some students would prefer to take a RE class of their own choosing within their schools, but they cannot because of the equalization educational policy that is currently in effect. Strictly speaking, in their defense, public school authorities emphasize the constitutional separation of religion and state as the key reason to explain why they should not create new RE classes.

This defense is not without a measure of merit if students go to schools according to their personal choice. But, if this is not the case, public schools should open new classes that could offer RE to all comers. However, this omission continues to exist as a kind of blind spot in current RE. The omission grows in urgency to the degree that public educators tend to ignore any form of RE that is centered on a specific religion. This attitude expresses a kind of parochial secularism that has been emerging in public schools. So, we have an issue that is especially problematic for the implementation of RE in Korea, a problem that cannot be easily resolved by referring to a constitutional article that comes to us under the present ruling of the equalization educational policy.

5. Conclusions

As is to be seen, the present situation of RE is such that it is caught between two perspectives: a confessional perspective that only focuses on teaching a particular religious world view and passing on their judgments (despite subtle differences between different traditions/schools); and, a non-confessional perspective that tries to provide a comparative understanding of religion and religions. Amid that situation also arose a type of barren and dangerous secularist response that tends to ignore RE and a school's foundational spirit all together.

With the challenges that have been emerging against the first perspective, without plan or premonition, the second has been invited to participate in the theoretical and practical development of RE in Korean schools, especially since the issue of the 4th national curriculum standard (1981–1987). More currently, the non-confessional perspective is emerging as a curriculum that transcends the parochial religious perspective (belief in one's own religion). With its foundation in religious studies, this perspective also transcends a parochial secular perspective that rejects any place for RE in the public sector. However, in the process of implementation, the non-confessional perspective does not sufficiently meet the requirements that belong to the understanding and style of RE in private religious schools. Unfortunately, the Christian schools reject the strict application of a non-confessional perspective, preferring to ignore a flexible possibility that can exist to some extent for the confessional perspective within some schools. As a consequence of Mr. Kang's successful lawsuit, the Christian schools (which comprise more than 50% of schools with a religious foundation) tend to fight for the validity and the acceptance of their perspective, and, more so than before, they voice their criticisms. They explicitly argue that the non-confessional perspective is incompatible with their perspective, because it leaves no space for the possible involvement of a confessional perspective (an unfortunate regrettable consequence that has arisen from all the legal and political criticism that has been levied against the operation of Korean schools).

Hence, to reverse this tendency in the Christian schools, the non-confessional perspective needs to be openly discussed with the Christian schools and also with other schools. Relatively

speaking, the non-Christian schools seem to think that the non-confessional perspective supports their perspective against that which exists as the (Christian) confessional perspective. However, this also points to a major misunderstanding of the non-confessional perspective. In fact, the perspectives that are found in the non-Christian founded schools are not free from the same kind of problems that exist in the Christian schools. Each works with a particular religious perspective and, at the same time, each school needs to transcend their confessional perspectives in order to facilitate an understanding of other religions. A non-confessional, as in the suggestion of Ninian Smart, encourages both types of understanding with an emphasis on a neutralist and assumption-free position. Of course, a neutral and balance approach like that is difficult to be achieved, since it requires a really secular or pluralist social context (Barnes 2000, p. 320).

Indeed, it is impossible to apply the strict non-confessional perspective to all religious schools in the current Korean context. As mentioned above, among all schools, more than 20% are religiously founded and their roles are essential in the structure and order of Korean education. They contribute to the quality of education in Korean society as if they exist also as public schools. Yet, they cannot administer any kind of free RE in a manner that ignores the different students that attend their schools and the different parent groups that exist. In this situation, thus, the religiously founded schools and the policy makers for RE should ask for mutual concessions, so that both sides can think about the form of a proper RE within a religiously diverse school context. If schools would like to teach and to communicate their religious identity for their students, they should be allowed to do so with the proviso that other students could take alternative classes. This type of policy should be extended to the students of public schools who would also want to have a RE class of their own.

In relation to other religious activities as these exist in terms of religious ceremonies and chapel services, schools should obtain the assent of students and parents and ask them if they would be willing to respect of the spirit of a school's foundation before they would begin to attend a given school. However, if schools do not want to compromise on these matters and if they want to adhere to the compulsory nature of their RE and other religious matters, they should not receive any governmental subsidies. In order to fund the salaries of RE teachers with the governmental subsidy, they should not insist of the demands and needs of their confessional perspective. With respect, however, to the existence of independent schools, the Ministry of Education should not interfere with their policies and this includes not interfering with their RE policies. Their full autonomy should be respected.

Funding: "This research received no external funding."

Conflicts of Interest: "The author declares no conflicts of interest."

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