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Revisiting the Historical Challenges of Islamic Da'wah in South Korea: A Comparative Religious Analysis

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Abstract

This article critically examines the historical trajectory and contemporary challenges of Islamic Da'wah in South Korea, a country characterized by unique religious pluralism and cultural syncretism. Despite early contacts with Muslim traders during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) and later exposure through the Turkish military during the Korean War (1950 - 1953), Islam has remained a minority faith in South Korea. The study aims to investigate the socio-religious factors that have contributed to Islam's limited penetration by conducting a qualitative historical analysis based on secondary data. Drawing upon academic publications, historical records, and sociological studies, this paper systematically analyses South Korea's dominant religious systems such as Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity related to their interaction with Islamic teachings. The findings reveal that the entrenched cultural heritage, historical Confucian governance, syncretic religious attitudes and the proactive expansion of Christianity have collectively shaped a challenging environment for Islamic *da'wah* in South Korea. The paper concludes by arguing that future Islamic outreach must strategically balance cultural engagement with doctrinal authenticity in order to navigate South Korea's complex socio-religious landscape. This study contributes to the growing field of religious studies by offering an underexplored case study of Islam's marginalization in East Asian society.

1. Introduction

The spread of Islam across different regions of the world has demonstrated remarkable adaptability and influence, particularly in Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Africa. Historical records indicate that through trade, intermarriage, and peaceful missionary efforts, Islam flourished in culturally diverse societies such as Indonesia, Malaysia and parts of sub-Saharan Africa (El Hareir & Mbaye, 2011). However, the expansion of Islam in the Far East, notably in South Korea, has remained considerably limited despite early historical contact and periods of Muslim presence.

South Korea presents a unique case where Islam despite being introduce during various historical phases starting with Arab and Persian traders in the 9th and 10th centuries, reinforced by interactions during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, and reintroduced again through Turkish soldiers after the Korean War has not established significant roots among the native population (Baker, 2006: Kyung Sun, 1983). By contrast, other world religions, particularly Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity have developed deep socio-cultural and institutional footholds within Korean society (Savada & Shaw, 1997).

The lacking in acceptance of Islam in South Korea raises critical questions about the socio-religious dynamics of Korean society. Historically, South Korea has been characterized by a layered religious identity, combining indigenous Shamanistic practices with eternal philosophical and religious imports such as Buddhism, Confucianism and later Christianity (Foran, 2013). This syncretic approach to religions stands in stark contrast to the exclusivist monotheism espoused by Islam creating potential cultural and doctrinal tensions (Baker, 2006). Furthermore, South Korean society's historical alignment with Confucian administrative structures and its complex interactions with colonial and post-war Western influences have further marginalized Islam in the region.

Despite increasing globalization and the rising visibility of Muslim expatriates in modern South Korea, academic studies on the historical challenges faced by Islamic *da'wah* in this context remain relatively scarce. While several scholars have explored the Muslim minority experience in South Korea (Sohn, 2015), comprehensive historical analyses focusing on the interplay between South Korea's dominant religious ideologies and the marginalization of Islam are limited. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the historical pathways through which Islam entered Korea, analyze the socio-religious landscape that has hindered its growth and offer comparative insights into the influence of Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity.

1.1 Literature Review

The historical engagement between Korea and Islam has received limited academic attention compared to the extensive scholarship on Christianity and Buddhism in East Asia. Nonetheless, several important studies provide foundational insights into the patterns of religious diffusion, socio-cultural resistance and minority Muslim experience in South Korea. This literature review critically examines these scholarly contributions, situating this study within the broader academic discourse on religion in South Korea.

Yoon Kyung Sun's work on, *Islam in Korea* (1983), provides a foundational historical account of Islam's initial contact with Korea peninsula. Yoon traces the arrival of Muslim traders during the Goryeo Dynasty and examines archival sources documenting Islamic presence in historical ports and cities. His analysis highlights the absence of formal Islamic missionary efforts and underscores the limited religious impact of early Muslim traders. While Yoon's contribution is indispensable for understanding the historical timeline, his study primarily focuses on descriptive historical records and leaves open the need for analytical engagement with cultural and ideological factors influencing Islam's limited reception an aspect this paper aims to address.

While, Don Baker's *Religions of Korea in Practice* (2006) offers a comprehensive overview of the religious landscape in Korea, covering Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and new religious movements. Baker identifies Korea's syncretic religious orientation, where religious identities are fluid and often combined in personal practice. Importantly, Baker contrasts the adaptability of Christianity and Buddhism with the structural rigidity of Confucianism. Although Islam is only briefly mentioned, Baker's work provides a crucial comparative framework, allowing this study to position Islam within Korea's broader religious pluralism and to examine why it remains peripheral in a landscape otherwise open to religious coexistence.

Next, In *The Spread of Islam Throughout the World* (2011), El Hareir and Mbaye detail the mechanisms of Islamic expansion across diverse regions, emphasizing peaceful trade, intermarriage, and social integration as primary catalysts of conversion, especially in Southeast Asia. This comparative perspective is valuable in highlighting the anomalous case of South Korea, where despite early trade contacts, Islam failed to replicate the success it had in Indonesia or Malaysia. The book's global lens enriches the present study by offering a counterpoint South Korea stands out not due to a lack of contact, but due to unique cultural and structural resistances that obstructed *da'wah* effectiveness.

Furthermore, Sohn Joo Young's chapter, *The Muslim Community in Korea: Organization and Activities* (2015), examines contemporary Muslim life in South Korea, with a focus on the Korean Muslim Federation (KMF) and the small community of ethnic Korean converts. Sohn identifies both institutional growth and societal challenges, including Islamophobia and public misunderstanding of Islamic practices. His work is critical in contextualizing the modern state of Islam in South Korea and exposes the limited outreach capacity of existing Muslim organizations. While Sohn focuses on the present-day institutional framework, this study extends the analysis by connecting historical trajectories to contemporary *da'wah* challenges.

Last but not least, Racquel Foran's *South Korea* (2013), though introductory in scope, offers valuable observations on how traditional practices like Shamanism and Confucian ethics persist despite modernization. Foran highlights the centrality of cultural heritage in shaping Korean worldviews, demonstrating how spiritual

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practices are deeply interwoven with national identity. This work reinforces the argument that Islam's limited expansion is not solely a matter of theological rejection, but also of cultural misalignment. Foran's insights support this study's focus on the cultural dimensions of *da'wah* resistance, illustrating that successful religious expansion in South Korea requires engagement beyond theological discourse.

1.2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical-documentary approach to examine the development and challenges of Islamic *da'wah* in South Korea. Given the historical and comparative religious nature of the inquiry, qualitative methods are most appropriate for analyzing textual and archival materials, interpreting cultural patterns and drawing thematic insights from historical narratives (Creswell, 2013). The research is descriptive and interpretive in orientation, focusing on how socio-cultural, political and religious systems in South Korea shaped the reception or rejection of Islamic teachings. The method is non-interventionist and does not involve fieldwork or participant observation but rather synthesizes existing scholarly literatures, primary historical accounts and secondary analytical works.

The data used in this study are entirely based on secondary sources consisting of:

- Academic books and journal articles on Korean religious history (e.g., Baker, 2006; Yoon, 1983; Lee. 1991, 2004).
- Global studies on Islamic expansion and *da'wah* methodologies (e.g., El Hareir & Mbaye, 2011).
- Government reports and censuses cited in published works on South Korean religious demographics.
- Historical accounts from institutional publications (e.g., Korean Muslim Federation) and case studies of modern Muslim communities in South Korea (Sohn, 2015, Mohd Ghazi & Fathil, 2017).

The sources were selected based on relevance, scholarly credibility and availability in English. Some Korean language sources were accessed through translated secondary literature due to language barrier.

The analysis follows a thematic content analysis framework where recurring themes such as religious pluralism, syncretism, institutional support and socio-political resistance were identified and interpreted. Each major section of the paper (e.g. historical contact, religious comparison, discussion, etc.) is organized around these themes to offer a cohesive analysis of Islam's marginal position in South Korea. Comparative religious analysis was used to evaluate the doctrinal and cultural compatibility or incompatibility between Islam and dominant Korean traditions such as Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity.

The methodological process involved:

1. Reviewing historical timelines of Islam's contact with Korea.
2. Mapping the religious demographic and ideological landscape across different time periods.
3. Identifying sociological and theological obstacles to *da'wah*.
4. Interpreting the findings in light of global Islamic expansion models.

While qualitative, non-empirical research allows for interpretive richness, it also presents inherent limitations. The exclusive reliance on secondary data may restrict the depth of cultural nuance that could be achieved through primary fieldwork or ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the triangulation of multiple reputable sources and use of comparative frameworks enhances the credibility and analytical validity of the findings. This methodology is appropriate for the aims of the study: to provide a historically grounded, critically informed, and culturally aware analysis of Islamic *da'wah* in South Korea, without generalizing beyond the scope of textual and historical evidence.

2. Historical Encounters of Islam in Korea Peninsula

The introduction of Islam to the Korean Peninsula, while historically verifiable, followed a significantly different trajectory than in regions where Islam became firmly rooted. Unlike the widespread Islamization of Southeast Asia through trade and intermarriage, Islam in Korea entered intermittently, primarily through non-missionary routes and under conditions that limited its capacity to grow. This section critically reviews the historical phases through which Islam encountered Korea, examining why these early contacts failed to result in sustainable religious influence

The earliest documented contact between Korea and the Islamic world occurred during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), particularly in the 11th century. Historical records indicate that Muslim traders mainly from the Abbasid Caliphate and Persian regions travelled through China and the Silk Road, reaching Korean ports such as Kaesong and Incheon (Yoon, 1983). Arab geographers and historians like Al-Idrisi and Ibn Khordadbeh referenced a distant kingdom in the East that some scholars identify as ancient Korea (Lee, 2018). During the reign of King Moonjong (1046–1083), international trade policies encouraged the establishment of foreign settlements, including those with Muslim traders who introduced Islamic innovations like the lunar calendar and medical knowledge (Lee, 1991). However, no systematic *da'wah* or religious propagation occurred. Unlike Christian missionaries who accompanied colonial or diplomatic expansions, Muslim traders were primarily concerned with commerce, not proselytization (El Hareir & Mbaye, 2011). The lack of religious outreach is

viewed by some scholars as a missed opportunity. As observed by Lapidus (2002), in areas where Islam spread effectively such as West Africa or Indonesia merchants often assumed dual roles as economic agents and cultural transmitters. In Korea, the absence of Islamic institutions, scholars, or sustained community presence meant that Islam remained a transient influence with no generational continuity.

The rise of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) marked a critical shift in Korea's domestic policy and religious orientation. Under the influence of Ming China, Joseon Korea adopted Neo-Confucianism as the state ideology, leading to the systemic suppression of foreign religious and philosophical systems (Mohd Ghazi & Fathil, 2017). Confucian ethics prioritized social harmony, hierarchical loyalty, and ancestor veneration all values institutionalized through state education and civil service examinations. Islam, with its emphasis on *Tawheed* (the Oneness of God), rejection of ancestor worship, and legal universality, posed a subtle yet fundamental contradiction to Confucian ideals. However, the religion was not openly contested because it was largely absent from the social landscape. The Confucian elite's suspicion of merchant classes and non-Chinese cultural imports further marginalized Islamic elements, limiting any potential religious pluralism (Foran, 2013). Additionally, the closure of sea routes and the "Haijin" maritime prohibition policy curtailed Korea's interactions with the outside world, especially with regions outside the Sinocentric cultural order. These geopolitical and ideological dynamics ensured that whatever Muslim presence existed during the Goryeo era did not survive into the Joseon period (Yoon, 1983; Savada & Shaw, 1997).

Following Japan's increased control over the Korean Peninsula in the late 19th century and the harsh conditions under colonial rule (1910–1945), thousands of Koreans migrated to nearby regions like Manchuria. According to Stanley Soltan, the Korean fled their country to Manchuria via two rivers named Yalu and Tuman. He indicated that

> "Two streams of migration have taken place, one from the northeast provinces of Korea into North Kando in Manchuria and on into Siberia, and the other following the railway line across the Yalu river into Moukden and west Kando, and more recently further north to Kirin, Harbin, and to districts between Harbin and Vladivostok on the southeast, and northwest along the Trans-Siberian railway as far as lake Baikal". (Yoon, 1983)

There, they encountered diverse religious environments, including Islamic communities mainly Hui Muslims and Central Asian traders (Yoon, 1983). Some Korean migrants converted to Islam during their stay in these areas. In interviews conducted by Yoon, Korean Muslim converts reported attending mosque services and engaging in community life in Manchuria. This represented the first recorded instance of Korean-born Muslims accepting Islam through direct exposure to a lived Islamic environment. However, these conversions did not lead to the formation of Islamic institutions in Korea proper. Upon returning to the Korean Peninsula, many converts faced sociopolitical instability, economic hardship, and religious indifference, which inhibited the sustainability of their Islamic identity (Sohn, 2015). Furthermore, colonial policies under Japanese rule favoured Shintoism and suppressed both Christianity and emerging minority religions, making it difficult for Islam to find public expression.

The most impactful reintroduction of Islam to Korea occurred during the Korean War. As part of the United Nations Command, Turkey deployed over 5,000 troops to support South Korea. These soldiers, being Muslims, maintained religious practices publicly, such as praying, fasting, and building temporary mosques near battle zones (Sigri, Varoglu, & Ercil, 2010). This unprecedented visibility of Islamic practice left a strong impression on Korean civilians and soldiers. Turkish troops were also involved in humanitarian efforts, offering medical aid, food, and shelter to Korean orphans and war victims. These acts fostered goodwill and prompted the first formal conversions of Koreans to Islam within the peninsula itself (Sohn, 2015). By the late 1950s, with Turkish support, Korean Muslims formed what would become the Korean Muslim Federation (KMF). The KMF was formally registered in 1967 and later facilitated the establishment of Seoul Central Mosque in 1976 marking the institutionalization of Islam in modern South Korea (Sohn, 2015). Despite these developments, the influence of the Turkish military engagement remained mostly symbolic. The Muslim population in Korea remains small, and conversions have been minimal. The South Korean state's increasing alignment with the West during the Cold War further entrenched Christianity and secularism as dominant social forces, limiting Islam's social space.

Across these historical phases from early trade contacts to diasporic experiences and wartime reintroductions Islam's encounter with Korea has been shaped more by external forces than internal demand. Each phase offered limited opportunity for sustained *da'wah* due to the lack of religious institutionalization during early contact. Secondly, Confucian state ideology suppressing external religions. Next, the absence of intergenerational Muslim communities and lastly the foreign reintroductions (e.g. Turkish troops and at the end of 20th and 21st centuries the migration of Muslim workers and asylum seekers) that were not fully indigenized.

These patterns contrast sharply with the success of Christianity, which embedded itself in Korean society through language adaptation, education, welfare institutions, and active Korean participation. The historical

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alienation of Islam, while not due to theological rejection per se, is deeply rooted in Korea's political history, religious culture, and sociocultural structures.

3. Competing Religious Traditions in South Korea

South Korea's religious landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, philosophical systems, and cultural traditions that collectively pose a significant challenge to Islamic *da'wah*. Unlike countries where Islam expanded by integrating into existing cultural frameworks, South Korea presents a unique case where several dominant religious traditions such as Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity have established deep roots in both personal and public life. These belief systems do not merely function as spiritual ideologies but are intimately linked to Korea's national identity, moral norms, and social behavior. This section explores each tradition's relationship to Korean society and how they intersect or conflict with Islamic theological and cultural principles.

3.1 Shamanism: The Indigenous Spiritual Bedrock

Shamanism, locally known as *Muism*, represents Korea's oldest spiritual tradition, predating the arrival of organized religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Deeply rooted in the rhythms of nature and ancestral reverence, Shamanism has historically provided Koreans with a means of negotiating the uncertainties of life whether misfortune, illness, or the search for prosperity. Central to this tradition are the *mudang* (shamans), most often women, who serve as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Through rituals, chants, dances, and offerings, these shamans invoke ancestral spirits and local deities to secure protection, healing, or good fortune for their communities (Foran, 2013).

Despite the profound modernization of Korean society, traces of Shamanistic practice continue to persist. Rituals rooted in *Muism* are still performed during life-cycle events such as weddings and funerals, as well as communal ceremonies marking seasonal changes or the New Year (Savada & Shaw, 1997). Even in urban, technologically advanced South Korea, Shamanistic practices survive in hybridized forms, often coexisting with Buddhism, Christianity, or secular cultural identities. This enduring presence demonstrates the flexibility of Shamanism, which is not always perceived by Koreans as a formal "religion" but rather as a cultural inheritance embedded within everyday practices and social rituals.

From the standpoint of Islam, however, Shamanism presents a direct doctrinal incompatibility. At its core, Islam is built upon *Tawheed* (Oneness of God) and it strictly prohibits *shirk*, or the association of partners with God. Practices central to Shamanism, such as invoking spirits, fortune-telling, and offering sacrifices to supernatural beings, fall into the category of *shirk*. The Qur'an explicitly condemns such acts:

> O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone alters [to other than Allah], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful. (Qur'an, Al-Ma'idah: 90)

The tension here is more than theological and it is also cultural. Shamanistic customs are often woven into the fabric of Korean life in ways that blur the boundaries between religion and tradition. As Baker (2006) notes, many Koreans who identify as Buddhists or Christians nevertheless participate in Shamanistic rites, whether to honor ancestors, seek blessings, or simply uphold familial and social expectations. This normalized syncretism complicates the introduction of Islam, which demands exclusive allegiance to God and a complete break from polytheistic or animistic practices.

For Islamic *da'wah* in South Korea, Shamanism thus represents both a historical obstacle and a cultural challenge. Shamanism embodies spiritual practices that are fundamentally irreconcilable with Islamic belief. Yet, the persistence of Shamanism as a cultural bedrock highlights the need for sensitivity in engaging with Korean society. Islam cannot simply dismiss Shamanistic traditions as "superstition" without risking cultural alienation. Rather, meaningful dialogue would require acknowledging the historical and cultural significance of these practices while carefully presenting Islam's vision of spiritual purity and divine unity.

In this sense, the endurance of Shamanism illustrates how deeply cultural identity can be tied to spiritual heritage, even in a modernized, secular society. For Islam to find meaningful reception in South Korea, it must address not only theological differences but also the emotional and cultural attachments that Koreans maintain to ancestral rituals and indigenous spirituality.

3.2 Buddhism: Cultural Endurance and Ethical Appeal

Buddhism entered the Korean peninsula from China during the Three Kingdoms period (c. 4th century CE) and steadily grew in influence, eventually attaining the status of state religion during the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392). Its integration into political and cultural life was profound, shaping Korean art, philosophy, and social institutions. Even when Buddhism lost its privileged status under the Confucian-dominated Joseon dynasty

(1392–1897), its spiritual and cultural imprint remained deeply embedded in Korean society. Despite centuries of suppression, Buddhist traditions endured, and in contemporary South Korea, approximately 15–20 percent of the population continues to identify as Buddhist (Savada & Shaw, 1997). This resilience demonstrates not only the adaptability of Buddhism but also its ability to align itself with shifting cultural and political contexts.

The ethical and spiritual framework of Buddhism in Korea emphasizes liberation from suffering through moral discipline, meditation and the cultivation of inner detachment (Lindahl, 2022). These principles resonate in certain respects with Islamic virtues such as patience (*sabr*), humility (*tawadu'*), and moral conduct (*akhlaq*). Both traditions seek to foster ethical self-restraint and spiritual refinement. However, beneath these surface similarities lie significant theological differences. Buddhism is fundamentally nontheistic: it does not recognize a Creator God, divine revelation, or prophecy as authoritative sources of guidance (Awang, 2021). By contrast, Islam is centered on *Tawheed* (the oneness of God), the institution of prophethood, and the framework of the *Shari'ah* as divinely revealed law. The absence of a personal God and revealed scripture in Buddhism sets it apart from the Qur'anic worldview, which views divine guidance as essential for structuring both individual ethics and social order (Ramli, 2023).

In addition to its religious dimensions, Buddhism in Korea has also functioned as a repository of cultural memory and national identity. Buddhist temples, many of which date back centuries, are not only places of worship but also historical landmarks that embody architectural innovation and cultural continuity. For many modern Koreans, especially those who do not adhere strictly to religious practice, visits to temples are less about doctrinal commitment and more about seeking psychological peace, cultural rootedness, or participation in national festivals (Foran, 2013). This phenomenon of "cultural Buddhism" illustrates the way religious traditions can evolve into cultural resources, accessible to believers and non-believers alike.

This contrasts markedly with Islam, which maintains a holistic religious system that requires adherence to specific rituals (e.g., daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan) and lifestyle regulations grounded in divine commandments. Whereas Buddhism in Korea can be approached selectively and valued for its aesthetics, meditation practices, or moral teachings without full doctrinal acceptance while Islam places greater emphasis on submission to God's will in both belief and practice. Consequently, while there are spaces of moral and ethical convergence, such as shared calls for compassion and justice, the structural and theological foundations of Buddhism and Islam remain distinct.

In the Korean context, this distinction has significant implications for interreligious engagement and the reception of Islam. Buddhism's endurance, despite centuries of suppression, highlights the strong cultural integration of its values and symbols into Korean life. For many Koreans, religious identity is intertwined with cultural tradition rather than doctrinal exclusivity. Islam, by contrast, presents itself as a comprehensive faith rooted in divine authority, which may be perceived as demanding a stronger departure from Korea's inherited Buddhist-Confucian cultural frameworks. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for analysing both the challenges and opportunities of Islamic presence in Korea, as Buddhism continues to serve not only as a religious tradition but also as a cultural lens through which many Koreans interpret spirituality, morality, and identity.

3.3 Confucianism: The Ethical and Social Framework

Confucianism, introduced to Korea from China around the 14th century, became deeply embedded in Korean society after its institutionalization as the state ideology during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). Unlike Buddhism, which shaped Korea primarily through religious devotion, Confucianism penetrated the administrative, educational, and social spheres of Korean life, providing a comprehensive framework for governance, family relations, and cultural norms (Baker, 2006). Although Confucianism does not fit neatly into the category of religion because it is lacking a deity, revealed scripture, or organized clergy, it still functions as a worldview grounded in moral obligations, ritual practices, and social ethics. Central to this framework are practices such as ancestor worship (*jesa*) and the cultivation of filial piety (*hyo*), which collectively structured Korea's moral imagination for centuries. (Cawley, 2021)

From an Islamic standpoint, Confucianism presents both points of convergence and areas of tension. The Confucian emphasis on respect for parents, sincerity in personal conduct, and the prioritization of communal harmony strongly echoes Qur'anic teachings as mentioned in Surah Al-Isra, verse 23:

> "For your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And honour your parents. If one or both of them reach old age in your care, never say to them ˹even˺ 'ugh,' nor yell at them. Rather, address them respectfully." (Qur'an, Al-Isra: 23)

The Qur'an repeatedly enjoins kindness to parents, and the Prophet Muhammad emphasized justice, sincerity, and discipline values also central to Confucian moral philosophy. These shared ethical concerns reveal potential avenues for dialogue and mutual recognition between the two traditions.

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However, fundamental differences remain. The ritual dimension of Confucianism, particularly ancestor veneration, directly conflicts with Islamic monotheism. In Confucian practice, filial piety is often expressed through ritual offerings and memorial ceremonies for deceased ancestors, a tradition that has been sustained as a marker of cultural continuity (Bakar, 2019). Islam, in contrast, strictly prohibits ritual acts directed toward the dead, except those grounded in the remembrance of God and performed within a monotheistic framework:

> "We have commanded man [to show kindness] to his parents: his mother carried him, with increasing hardship upon hardship, and his weaning was in two years. So be grateful to Me and to your parents. To Me is the final return. But if they strive to make you associate with Me what you have no knowledge of, then do not obey them. Still keep their company in this world courteously and follow the way of those who turn to Me [in devotion]. Then to Me you will all return, and then I will inform you of what you used to do." (Qur'an, Luqman: 14–15)

This divergence highlights the limits of ethical overlap while Islam and Confucianism may agree on the importance of honoring one's parents, their theological and ritual expressions of this duty diverge sharply.

Another layer of complexity lies in Confucianism's deeply hierarchical social vision. Confucian ethics emphasize order, hierarchy, and deference to authority within both family and society. Gender roles, in particular, have historically been circumscribed by Confucian ideals, with women often relegated to domestic spheres and subordinate roles in both ritual and social life (Li, 2025). This cultural inheritance has shaped Korean perceptions of gender and authority, influencing the reception of alternative ethical systems. Islam, which affirms spiritual equality before God while also maintaining gendered social roles, may therefore be interpreted within Korea as reinforcing patriarchal authority rather than presenting a distinct framework of justice and dignity. Such perceptions can complicate efforts at cross-cultural or interreligious understanding, as Confucian legacies predispose Koreans to evaluate Islam through pre-existing notions of hierarchy and gender relations.

The historical dominance of Confucianism in Korea has also left little room for alternative ethical systems to claim authority, particularly those demanding exclusive spiritual allegiance such as Islam. Confucianism has shaped not only social etiquette and moral norms but also the very categories through which many Koreans interpret religion and morality. Its enduring influence means that Islam is often received not as a parallel ethical framework but as a competing system that challenges established cultural expectations. Consequently, while Confucian ethics create certain bridges of shared moral concern, the entrenched authority of Confucian social and ritual structures continues to limit the cultural receptivity to Islam in Korea.

3.4 Christianity: Institutional Strength and Cultural Adaptation

Christianity, particularly Protestantism, experienced dramatic growth in Korea beginning in the late 19th century and today constitutes one of the largest religious communities in the country, with approximately 28% of the population identifying as either Protestant or Catholic (Becker, 2024). Its expansion was facilitated by a convergence of historical, social, and cultural factors. Christianity entered Korea during a time of national upheaval during the decline of the Joseon dynasty and the pressures of colonial modernity when traditional systems of authority were in crisis. Missionaries introduced not only a new faith but also modern education, healthcare, and social services, which positioned Christianity as both a spiritual and practical resource for national resilience. The establishment of mission schools and hospitals elevated the profile of Christian institutions, while simultaneously creating avenues for upward social mobility among Koreans (Clark, 2022).

One of the most significant reasons for Christianity's success was its capacity for cultural adaptation. Unlike Islam, which has largely remained confined to immigrant and foreign Muslim communities, Christianity was able to indigenize rapidly. Protestant missionaries translated the Bible into vernacular Korean, utilized local forms of music and cultural expression in worship, and empowered Korean leaders to assume positions of authority within churches early on. This allowed Christianity to be perceived not as a foreign import but as a faith that could be authentically Korean (Oak, 2014). Furthermore, Christian institutions played an active role in shaping South Korea's modern national identity by linking spiritual renewal with movements for social reform, charity, and even political independence. The result was the growth of robust church networks that provided both spiritual guidance and social solidarity (Matheson, 2022).

Despite the shared monotheistic foundation of Christianity and Islam, their theological frameworks remain profoundly different. Islam regards Jesus (*'Isa*) as a revered prophet but explicitly denies his divinity and rejects the doctrine of the Trinity. Instead, Islam affirms the Qur'an as the final and unaltered revelation, superseding previous scriptures. These differences are not only doctrinal but also institutional, as Christianity in Korea has established a strong political and cultural presence, often using its influence to resist the growth of Islam. In recent decades, some Christian organizations have mobilized against the construction of mosques and Islamic cultural centers, citing fears of religious radicalization and the disruption of South Korea's cultural cohesion

(Sohn, 2015). Such resistance underscores the competitive religious environment in which Islam finds itself in the country.

Christianity's rise must also be understood within the broader religious landscape of South Korea. Alongside Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, Christianity has become a central pillar of national identity and moral order. Its institutions have penetrated education, politics, and civil society, making it deeply embedded in both private and public life. Islam, by contrast, remains on the margins, not because of a lack of universal ethical overlap as values such as compassion, justice, and care for the poor resonate across both traditions but because of Islam's non-syncretic nature. Korean religious culture has historically favored fluidity and coexistence, where individuals may draw simultaneously from Shamanistic rituals, Confucian ethics, or Buddhist meditation without exclusive allegiance. Islam's insistence on exclusive submission to God and adherence to a divinely revealed legal and ritual framework creates a sharper boundary with Korea's religious environment.

The cumulative effect of these historical, theological, and cultural dynamics has rendered Islam a minority faith in South Korea with limited influence beyond expatriate and immigrant populations. Yet, Christianity's trajectory also highlights potential lessons for Islamic *da'wah*. The success of Christian missions lay not merely in theology but in their ability to contextualize faith within South Korean cultural identity, meet social needs, and establish resilient institutions. For Islam to gain greater recognition in South *da'wah*
Korea, future *da'wah* strategies must account for these dynamics, building bridges of ethical commonality while also addressing the deep-rooted perception of Islam as an external or foreign system.

4. Discussion

The marginal presence of Islam in South Korea is not simply the product of historical coincidence but the outcome of layered structural, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics that continue to shape Korean religious life. The findings suggest that the issue cannot be reduced to "lack of awareness" but rather lies in how Islam is positioned vis-à-vis Korea's dominant traditions, its social expectations, and global narratives. This discussion moves beyond descriptive accounts to critically interrogate why Islam has struggled to establish itself in Korea, despite the country's exposure to diverse religious influences.

First, Islam's early historical absence from Korea's cultural formation created a long-term deficit that later religious competitors were able to fill. Whereas Christianity successfully embedded itself in Korea during a time of national upheaval by offering education, social services, and a sense of national renewal, Islam never assumed a comparable role in moments of Korean transformation. Its late and primarily commercial entry meant it was never linked with Korea's modernization, intellectual development, or nationalist aspirations. In a society where religion has historically thrived when tied to collective progress, Islam's marginalization became structurally reinforced.

Second, Korea's ethical orientation dominated by Confucianism and shaped by Shamanistic and Buddhist practices has fostered a religious pluralism that thrives on syncretism rather than exclusivity. Korean spiritual life often blends ancestor rites, Buddhist meditation, Christian worship, and Shamanistic rituals without tension. Within such a fluid landscape, Islam's demand for exclusive monotheism appears inflexible. This inflexibility is not merely theological but social: to embrace Islam often requires rejecting culturally embedded practices such as ancestral rites, communal celebrations, or even dietary norms, creating a sharper rupture with Korean identity than conversion to Christianity or Buddhism would entail. Thus, Islam is not only perceived as "foreign" but also as culturally non-negotiable.

Third, the role of perception and global discourse cannot be understated. In the post-9/11 era, Islam's image has been filtered through international narratives of extremism, conflict, and cultural incompatibility. Korean media and public discourse, heavily influenced by Western frameworks, often replicate these portrayals, reinforcing the notion of Islam as a political threat rather than a spiritual tradition. This geopolitical framing exacerbates domestic challenges: Christian institutions, with their established political clout, have at times leveraged such fears to resist mosque construction or Islamic visibility. The cumulative result is a double marginalization social suspicion from below and institutional resistance from above.

Fourth, institutional weakness compounds these external challenges. Unlike Christianity, which built strong networks of schools, hospitals, and community organizations, Islam in Korea remains largely oriented toward expatriates and migrant workers. Organizations such as the Korean Muslim Federation have yet to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap with native Koreans, and without localized outreach, Islam remains a religion perceived as "for outsiders." In a society where religious legitimacy often depends on public service and cultural embeddedness, this lack of institutional integration perpetuates Islam's peripheral status.

Yet, while the barriers are substantial, they are not insurmountable. The findings also point to areas of potential convergence. Korea's value system emphasizing filial responsibility, ethical living, and communal harmony resonates with core Islamic principles. These shared values suggest that Islam's most effective entry point may lie not in theological debate but in ethical engagement. An emphasis on compassion, justice, environmental stewardship, and social welfare could align Islam with Korean aspirations without demanding

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immediate doctrinal confrontation. Furthermore, generational shifts are altering the religious landscape. Younger Koreans, increasingly disillusioned with rigid Confucian hierarchies and institutional Christianity, are more open to exploring alternative spiritualities. For Islam, this creates a window of opportunity provided it adapts its message to address contemporary Korean concerns rather than merely replicating foreign models of *da'wah*.

Ultimately, Islam's future in Korea will depend less on historical rectification than on strategic cultural negotiation. The challenge is not simply to "introduce" Islam but to reposition it within a society that privileges syncretism, institutional embeddedness, and national utility. If Islam can demonstrate its relevance to Korean ethical life and social well-being while maintaining theological integrity, it may carve out a more meaningful space in Korea's pluralist landscape. However, without localized adaptation and proactive interfaith engagement, Islam risks remaining confined to the margins, perpetually overshadowed by traditions that are seen as more compatible with the Korean ethos.

5. Recommendations, Limitations and Future Prospects

This study has traced the historical, sociocultural, and institutional dimensions of Islamic *da'wah* in South Korea. It highlights that Islam's marginal position is not the result of active suppression alone, but of a broader ecosystem shaped by Confucian traditions, religious syncretism, geopolitical narratives, and early historical oversight. While Christianity and Buddhism have localized successfully within Korea, Islam remains perceived as foreign, rigid, and culturally incompatible. Yet, the challenge is not insurmountable. As Korean society continues to evolve particularly among its youth there is space for alternative spiritual frameworks grounded in universal ethics. Islam's values of justice, compassion, and integrity can serve as points of connection if presented with cultural sensitivity and social engagement.

5.1 Recommendations

Several recommendations can be deployed to alienate the barriers. Firstly, the ethical-based *da'wah* should be prioritized in the South Korean context, where religious identity is often shaped more by ethical and cultural values than strict doctrinal adherence. Islam shares many moral principles with Korean traditions such as compassion, filial piety, honesty, and social justice which resonate with Confucian ethics and Buddhist compassion. Therefore, rather than focusing on theological differences or polemical discourse, *da'wah* efforts should highlight these shared values to create a space of mutual understanding. Framing Islam as a faith that enhances existing moral commitments, rather than replacing them, could lead to greater receptivity among Koreans, especially those who identify as non-religious but still value cultural ethics.

Next, cultural localization is critical in overcoming the perception of Islam as a foreign religion. Translating core Islamic texts and *da'wah* materials into Korean while embedding them in culturally familiar narratives, metaphors, and social contexts can improve both understanding and acceptance. For example, introducing the concept of *tawheed* (the Oneness of God) through analogies rooted in Korean philosophy or daily life may make Islamic teachings more relatable. Historical examples, such as Christianity's success in Korea through the use of Korean-language Bibles, suggest that language and cultural context are key variables in effective religious communication. Without localization, *da'wah* efforts risk alienation and further marginalization.

Thirdly, community engagement represents another vital strategy to improve the perception and impact of Islam in Korean society. Establishing Islamic community centers that offer social services such as food banks, health clinics, language classes, or educational support can bridge the gap between Muslim minorities and the wider public. These services should be designed to benefit both Muslims and non-Muslims, reflecting Islam's emphasis on social responsibility (*maslahah*). When Muslim communities are seen as contributors to social welfare rather than as isolated groups, it helps challenge negative stereotypes and fosters organic interpersonal connections.

Furthermore, interfaith collaboration is essential in a religiously pluralistic society like South Korea, where various traditions co-exist and influence public discourse. Strategic partnerships with leaders and institutions from Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucian heritage movements can create platforms for dialogue, shared rituals (e.g., peace prayers or humanitarian campaigns), and cultural exchange. These efforts not only dispel misconceptions but also humanize Islam in the eyes of non-Muslims. Interfaith programs also provide space for discussing shared challenges such as secularism, youth alienation, and materialism making Islam part of Korea's broader moral and spiritual landscape rather than an outsider religion.

Lastly, countering Islamophobia is another crucial step toward improving Islam's public image. Misconceptions about Islam in South Korea are often reinforced by media portrayals that associate the religion with violence, extremism, or patriarchal oppression. To address this, Muslim communities and allies must invest in producing culturally sensitive and human-centered narratives about Islam through Korean language platforms, documentaries, social media, and even collaborations with local influencers or artists. These efforts

should focus on everyday Muslim life in Korea, positive contributions to society, and personal stories of faith challenging stereotypes with facts, empathy, and engagement.

5.2 Limitations

A key limitation of this study is its dependence on secondary sources. As a historical and conceptual analysis, the study relied on existing literature, archival records, and published works to construct its narrative. While this method allows for broad thematic synthesis and historical depth, it lacks the empirical immediacy that fieldwork could provide particularly in capturing the voices of Korean Muslim converts or the lived experience of *da'wah* in practice. As such, some of the cultural nuances or evolving dynamics of religious identity may not be fully captured.

Another limitation is the language barrier encountered during the research process. While efforts were made to consult translated Korean-language materials, the majority of primary sources used were in English. This constraint may have excluded valuable local perspectives, including Korean academic writings, media reports, and community reflections that are not yet accessible to non-Korean speakers. Consequently, the analysis may reflect a partially external viewpoint, and future research involving Korean-language expertise would be beneficial.

Lastly, the scope of this study focused primarily on historical, cultural, and religious dimensions of Islamic *da'wah* in Korea, without engaging deeply with legal, political, or institutional frameworks. Issues such as immigration policy, freedom of religion, mosque zoning laws, and educational regulations are vital in shaping the lived experience of Muslims in South Korea. However, they were beyond the scope of this paper and warrant dedicated inquiry in future research efforts.

5.3 Future Research

Future studies should prioritize empirical investigations into Korean Muslim converts, whose voices are often underrepresented in academic literature. Fieldwork such as interviews, life histories, or ethnographic immersion can offer nuanced insight into why and how Koreans embrace Islam, the challenges they face, and how they navigate dual cultural identities. Such firsthand accounts could significantly enrich the current body of research and provide practical guidance for more culturally sensitive *da'wah* efforts.

Another important avenue is a media analysis of Islamophobia in Korea, examining how Islam is portrayed across mainstream television, news platforms, and online discourse. Content analysis could help identify recurring themes, stereotypes, and ideological biases that shape public opinion. Understanding these narratives is key to developing counterstrategies that educate, inform, and reframe Islam in a more accurate and constructive light. Next, comparative studies of Islamic *da'wah* across East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and China could also reveal useful patterns, common challenges, and innovative approaches. For instance, examining how Islam is practiced and accepted in similarly non-Muslim majority, but Confucian-influenced societies can offer comparative benchmarks and regional lessons that apply to the Korean case.

Lastly, youth perception and globalization represent a critical research frontier. As South Korean youth increasingly engage with global cultures, human rights discourses, and digital platforms, their openness to new spiritualities including Islam may differ from previous generations. Surveys, focus groups, or digital ethnography among youth populations could shed light on their religious attitudes, values, and openness to Islamic teachings when framed in contemporary, ethical, and globally relevant terms.

6. Conclusion

The historical journey and contemporary status of Islam in South Korea reveal a complex interplay of religious, cultural, and sociopolitical factors that have collectively limited its reception and institutionalization. While Islam first made contact with Korea as early as the 11th century through trade, the absence of structured *da'wah*, combined with Korea's later Confucianization and isolationist policies, prevented its early growth. Subsequent historical reintroductions most notably during the Korean War resulted in some institutional footholds but failed to embed Islam deeply into the cultural or religious consciousness of the Korean people.

The dominance of indigenous and imported belief systems like Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity has created a religious environment that is both diverse and resistant to exclusivist theological systems. These traditions have shaped Korean moral values, social rituals, and public institutions, leaving little space for Islam to assert itself without cultural friction. In addition, the modern sociopolitical narrative surrounding Islam, often informed by global Islamophobic discourses, further complicates public perceptions and limits the social mobility of Muslim communities in South Korea.

Despite these formidable challenges, this study identifies areas of opportunity. Ethical and culturally sensitive *da'wah*, rooted in shared moral values rather than doctrinal confrontation, may offer a more fruitful path forward. The changing dynamics of Korean society especially among the youth present openings for alternative spiritual narratives that align with global justice, compassion, and ethical living. However, for these

efforts to succeed, they must be paired with strategic community engagement, cultural localization, and interfaith collaboration.

This study contributes to the underexplored academic field of Islam in East Asia by offering a historical and comparative religious analysis grounded in Korea's unique cultural and institutional contexts. It also provides a foundation for future empirical, media-based, and sociological studies that can further explore the evolving relationship between Islam and Korean society. Ultimately, a nuanced understanding of Korea's religious landscape is essential for any *da'wah* effort to move beyond symbolic presence toward meaningful integration and coexistence.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

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