

Freedom of Religion, *Sangsaeng*, and Symbiosis in the Post-COVID Study of (New) Religions

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of freedom of religion, *sangsaeng*, and symbiosis when considering the post-COVID study of religions, especially new religions. When it comes to the study of new and alternative religious groups, where there is more potential for misunderstanding and misinformation, it becomes all the more important—and indeed mutually beneficial, in the areas of religious liberty, religious freedom, and cross-cultural dialogue—to learn about a tradition by taking into account the spiritual life and practices of members themselves and their own sacred writings and practices. Daesoon Jinrihoe offers a case study of the importance of this principle and the notion of *sangsaeng* in particular is a fruitful utilitarian lens for thinking about how scholars, journalists, and others might approach the study of religion in our complex and global digital age of (mis)information. Daesoon Jinrihoe is also considered in light of Roy Wallis’s typology of world-rejecting, world-affirming, and world-accommodating new religious movements. Open areas for sociological research are proposed and the nascent field of Daesoon studies is compared to some similar scholarly endeavors within NRM studies.

Keywords: Daesoon Jinrihoe; *sangsaeng*; COVID-19; religious freedom; sociology of religion

Introduction

This article represents a first academic step on my part into the richly complex world of Daesoon Jinrihoe and Daesoon Thought. It was written on the basis of the emerging scholarship on Daesoon studies, to be sure, particularly what is available in English, but even more than that is highly dependent on reading through the Scriptures of Daesoon Jinrihoe that were kindly mailed to me. I refer to three works—*The Canonical Scripture*, *The Guiding Compass of Daesoon*, and *Essentials of Daesoon Jinrihoe*—all of which I read in detail, marked with notes, and enjoyed thinking about on their own terms and in comparative religious perspective, while acknowledging my own limitations as a newcomer and the regrettable fact that I am unable to read them in their original Korean. However, on another level, I found that these liabilities were somewhat refreshing, since they allowed me a “fresh view,” one might say, into a new religion and its scriptures, similar to someone first encountering the Bible, in English, without any familiarity with Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic or the underlying historical, theological, and sociological contexts of Judaism and nascent Christianity. There is still much to be gained and analyzed with this approach and even potential future scholarly pathways emerge, slowly but surely, as more pieces of a scriptural and worldview puzzle fall into place. As time goes on, I look forward to deepening my understanding of the scriptures, rituals, and community outreach of Daesoon Jinrihoe as a growing new religion on its own terms above and beyond the treatment found in this article. My own professional background is in the interdisciplinary field of religious studies, mostly the study of new religions in America, so I have been delighted to expand out and study Daesoon Thought in preparation for this article. It is vitally important, I think, for scholars of new religious movements (NRMs) around the globe to connect with one another and expand our geographical and scholarly footprints. Fortunately, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of networking opportunities have been made possible through video calls and remote engagement, hybrid conferences, virtual tours, and so on.

With these disclaimers in mind, it seems to me that Daesoon Jinrihoe and the notion of *sangsaeng*, as presented and understood through these scriptures, offer scholars of religion, and scholars of new religions in particular, a wonderful window into a central feature of Daesoon Thought. Moreover, *sangsaeng*, it seems to me, is a concept that has broader relevance in the post-COVID study of new religions. Indeed, it appears to be a fruitful utilitarian lens for thinking about how scholars, journalists, and others might approach the study of religion in our complex and global digital age of (mis)information in respectful and responsible ways. Finally, at the end of this article, I consider Daesoon Jinrihoe in light of sociologist Roy Wallis's typology of world-rejecting, world-affirming, and world-accommodating new religious movements, and make the preliminary case

that the group appears to be both world-affirming and world-accommodating. This dual classification makes sense in light of how the scriptures present *sangsaeng* and attests to the complexity of Daeseon Jinrihoe as a new religion as well as the sophistication of Daeseon Thought more broadly that defies simple classification. Finally, some possible areas for sociological research are proposed that would serve to deepen and refine our understanding of Daeseon Jinrihoe as a lived religion.

***Sangsaeng*, the Academic Study of Religion, and a Scriptural Approach**

The concept of *sangsaeng*, as far as I understand it in its more general sense—that is, the importance of cultivating symbiotic relationships, win-wins, mutual beneficence, cooperation, etc.—also appears to be an excellent theme for thinking about religious freedom and interreligious understanding, especially when it comes to new and alternative groups such as Daeseon Jinrihoe that may be subject to misunderstanding and misinformation, whether in or outside Korea. Our increased reliance on digital based forms of communication during the pandemic has made it all the more important to think about *sangsaeng* and symbiosis in active rather than passive terms, I would argue, especially given the potential for misinformation to proliferate more quickly and insidiously than in previous generations with advent of the Internet and social media. In reading through *The Guiding Compass of Daeseon*, for instance, I could not help but notice the following line in the English translation: “Truthful expression in words protects against criticism as a cult, therefore, you should maintain caution at all times” (DIRC 2020b 1.2, 1.2. v, B).

In addition to my background, teaching, and research in religious studies, I teach in the area of library and information science, where the subject of *information literacy*, as it is often called, is more relevant than ever, and not just in the United States. *Religious literacy*, too, is important on an international level, and it has been a pleasure to see some of the ways in which this new religion from Korea has expanded, engaged with scholars, and continues to produce an impressive body of scholarship of its own, both within the group and outside of itself, in both Korean and English. Indeed, the willingness and ability of a new religious tradition to so consciously and productively cultivate scholarly work in this way is arguably one sign of its maturation and openness, I would argue, and researchers of new religious movements over the years have seen similar developments in other groups, such as the Unification Church, Church of Scientology, the Baha’i faith, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the last of which is another good example of an “old new religion” (Kim 2020, 353), to quote David Kim on Daeseon Jinrihoe. Similarly, Liselotte Frisk, in an article in JDTREA (2021), aptly compared Daeseon Jinrihoe with other NRMs, such as Scientology, The Family International, ISKCON, the Family Federation, and the Osho Movement; and

George Chryssides, in another *JDTREA* article (2022), made excellent comparisons to the Jehovah's Witnesses and Unification Church.

As we continue to (hopefully) move out of this pandemic, or at least into its later stages, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the nature of *sangsaeng* and consider its relevance for study of new religions on their own terms and in comparative context. It brings to mind Max Müller's well known saying that "he who knows one [religion], knows none" (1870 [2016], 113) and highlights the importance of comparative work as a feature of the academic study of religion. Toward that end, I would like to call attention to a number of passages from the scriptures of Daesoon Jinrihoe that stood out to me in this regard. I do not intend this to be a proper or full exegetical or rhetorical analysis (cf. Fehler, 2022), which would require, no doubt, much greater attention to culture, beliefs, and practices of Daesoon Jinrihoe, other Jeungsanist movements, and Korean history that others would be more qualified to undertake—especially by others who can read and research in Korean, and there is certainly space for collaboration between outsiders, insiders, and Korean interpreters. Even so, a number of scriptural passages stood out to me in the English translations as instructive, revealing, and relevant as I remain cognizant of methodological and logistical challenges—many of which have been very helpfully delineated in a 2018 article by Yoon Yongbok and Massimo Introvigne in *The Journal of CESNUR*.

Starting with *The Guiding Compass of Daesoon*, we find an emphasis on mutual beneficence that has its origins in personal responsibility and ethical living, extending out to the family, society, and beyond:

Inwardly realize that, 'I am the one who provokes grudges, and I am the one who must unweave them. If I act first to resolve grudges, then the grudges of others shall be resolved on their own.' When the grudges of both sides gain absolution, the resolution of grievances is thereby achieved. By doing so, mutual beneficence shall be accomplished. Profoundly realize this truth! (DIRC 2020b 1.3, 1.3. iii, A)

This passage brings to mind concepts and passages in many other religious traditions. One is the Zoroastrian motto to cultivate a harmony of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds."

Indeed, later in *The Guiding Compass of Daesoon*, we find this corollary:

There is an old saying that 'If your mind is not sincere, your intention is not sincere. If your intention is not sincere, your acts are not sincere. If your acts are not sincere, you shall not reach the perfected state of unification with the Dao.' Keep this in mind. (DIRC 2020b, 4.1, 4.1.i v, D)

These two examples, with their emphasis on the individual and the resolution of grievances, remind me of this well-known Biblical passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (*Matthew 7:2-5*, NRSV)

The Golden Rule is often viewed in Christian terms, tracing to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount to "do to others as you would have them do to you" (*Matthew 7:12*, also see *Luke 6:31*, NRSV). However, most religious traditions, in one way or another, echo this sentiment and promote similar principles about behavior and reciprocity that are arguably grounded not so much in religion or dogma as much as common sense within a well-functioning, well ordered, and just society. *Sangsaeng* seems to have much in common, at a fundamental level, with Golden Rule thinking, but it should be noted that the scriptures of Daeseon Jinrihoe paint a far more complex theological, psychological, and social picture in the context of Korean unification, the self, filial piety, social obligations, spirits, mental cultivation, humility, yin and yang, and the "heavenly Dao" (DIRC 2020b, 2.1, 2.1. iii) that requires one to practice what one preaches for any appreciable effect. In putting faith in action, in attaining mental and bodily peace and well-being, the individual is better positioned to become a model for the edification of others on a path of spiritual growth, progression, and propagation.

I was intrigued to find this Golden Rule language used explicitly in the *Essentials of Daeseon Jinrihoe*. The third in a series of five ethical rules reads as follows:

Do not deceive yourself—this is the golden rule for disciples. Therefore do not deceive your conscience, or delude the world or deceive the citizenry through your speech, nor do anything unethical or unreasonable. (DIRC 2020c, 11. 3)

In *The Canonical Scripture* too, not surprisingly, mutual beneficence (*sangsaeng*) and its opposite, mutual contention (*sanggeuk*), are discussed in many places, explicitly and implicitly.¹ I was also intrigued to learn about the ways in which grievances and grudges are depicted in spiritual-psychological ways, including the presence of "grudge harboring spirits" (*Acts 3:16*, *Acts 4:47*, *Reordering Works 2:19*, *Progress of the Order 1:2*, *Dharma 2:14*) that can afflict one's body and mind. Along these lines, one helpful source is Pochi Huang's 2021 article in *JDTREA*, "*Haewon-sangsaeng* as a Religio-Ethical Metaphor,"

especially the language of “correlative cosmology” (Huang 2021,106; cf. Schwartz 1985) as a framework for apprehending the dynamic between spiritual and earthly realms.

It goes without saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of life and activity, including in the sphere of religion. However, when it comes to the study of new and alternative religious groups, where there is more potential for deception, misunderstanding, and misinformation, it becomes all the more important—and indeed mutually beneficial, in the areas of religious liberty, religious freedom, and cross-cultural dialogue—to learn about a (new) religion such as Daesoon Jinrihoe by taking into account the spiritual life and practices of members themselves and according to their own sacred writings and practices. Too often, especially among journalists and the general public, we find attention given to sensational narratives, gossip, and innuendo about so-called “cults” and “sects,” making it all the more important that scholars, especially NRM researchers who work with newer and marginalized groups, do their best to understand groups on their own terms and analyze them rigorously and fairly. Researchers thus play a supportive role in combating misinformation, prejudice, and bias, perhaps even in a way that could help resolve grievances or grudges that exist in society—all the more important when political and cultural climates contribute to polarization and where monologue is far too often the norm instead of dialogue and cross-cultural understanding.

Roy Wallis’ Typology and Daesoon Jinrihoe

With this scriptural introduction of *sangsaeng* in place, I would like to shift attention to the sociological work of Roy Wallis. In his *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (1984), Wallis put forward a typology well known in NRM studies in which he distinguished between 1) world-rejecting, 2) world-affirming, and 3) world-accommodating new religious movements, a model that seems worth revisiting as one way to better understand Daesoon Jinrihoe from religious studies and sociological perspectives. It seems to me that we can reject straight away thinking of Daesoon Thought as world rejecting given the nature of *sangsaeng*, the openness of the group to engage with the outside world, its social programs and charitable work, and well as the manner in which, according to Don Baker’s essay after the main body of *The Canonical Scripture*, Sangje “brought together the teachings of many different religious traditions, including some not rooted in Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, shamanism, or Christianity, and added ideas of His own to create something that is totally new yet resonates with Korean traditional beliefs and practices” (Baker 2020, 319; cf. Rigal-Cellard, 2022). As Baker put it, Daesoon Jinrihoe is a “quintessential Korean religion” (Baker 2016, 15) and, to repeat from David Kim, it can be considered an “old new religion” (Baker 2020, 353).

According to Wallis, world-affirming new religious movements “claim to possess the means to enable people to unlock their physical, mental, and spiritual potential without the need to withdraw from the world, means which are readily available to virtually everyone who learns the technique or principle involved” (1984, 22). Here, there would seem to be parallels to the emphasis in Daeseon Thought and practice on the four cardinal mottos: quieting the mind, quieting the body, reverence for heaven, and lastly cultivation (DIRC 2020c, 7. 1)—which can take place at central headquarters, temples, or in one’s home, as I understand it. By contrast, Wallis argues, the “innovatory religious movement with a “world-accommodating” orientation will be seen not so much as a protest against the world or society, but as a protest against prevailing religious institutions, or their loss of vitality. They are seen to have abandoned a living spirituality, to have eschewed experience for an empty formalism” (Wallis 1984, 36-37; emphasis mine). Perhaps, then, if Wallis’ typology is to be of use in assessing and describing Daeseon Jinrihoe, it can be proposed that the movement has aspects that are *both* world-affirming and world-accommodating, especially if one places the movement in the larger context of Korean new religions, as the largest among the traditions of Jeungsanism, and best poised to establish its relevance and vitality of Daeseon Thought both in and outside of Korea.

This dual classification of Daeseon Jinrihoe as world-affirming and world-accommodating appears to be supported by existing sociological research as well. Susan J. Palmer and Jason Greenberger, for instance, have conducted extensive research on children in Daeseon Jinrihoe based on interviews and archival research (2021). They conclude that, while there are schools and programs for younger members, such as youth camps and the magazine *Donggeurami*, the group “appears to be a religion that is designed for adults” (Palmer and Greenberger 2021, 98) in contrast to other NRMs that place greater emphasis on including, recruiting, and retaining children and younger members into their core membership activities. In Daeseon Jinrihoe, Palmer and Greenberger found that “children are awarded the power of choice. There appears to be no such thing as ‘forced indoctrination’ or ‘shunning’” (Palmer and Greenberger 2021, 99). These findings are consistent with a group labelled as world-affirming, especially in the Korean context, where respect for parents and elders would overlap with the central role of adult members who likewise freely choose to participate in activities that would, directly or indirectly, benefit the mental and spiritual lives of themselves, family members. And society on the path to unification, peace, balance, and harmony.

Palmer and Greenberger also acknowledge previous work on Daeseon Jinrihoe with respect to its “millenarian” character (e.g., Kim 2015; Baker 2016; Introvigne 2017a). But in Daeseon Jinrihoe, this millenarian theology seems to require the rituals and participation of human actors to help bring about the full passage, as Massimo Introvigne puts it, “from the old to the new world” (*Gaebyeok*, “Great Transformation”)

(Introvigne 2017a). Moreover, as Introvigne writes, “By equilibrating Yin and Yang, divine beings and human beings shall be unified and a 50,000-year earthly paradise shall be established, where humans will enjoy good health, long life, and eternal happiness and wealth” (Introvigne 2017a). That is to say, the theology and mission of Daesoon Jinrihoe is primarily dependent on the retention and engagement of adult members, whose cultivation and edification efforts *actively and inclusively* foster the soteriological aims of the group in a way that mutually benefits the self, the group, Korean society, and the world consistent with the principle of *sangsaeng*. In this way, the group would again appear to be world accommodating as well, especially as the largest of the Jeungsanist groups and in light of its work to expand beyond South Korea and transform the organization into a global religious movement.

Some Possible Sociological Projects Moving Forward

Moving forward, there seems to be no shortage of potential sociological projects that would only serve to deepen our understanding of the group. David Kim’s recent book, *Daesoon Jinrihoe in Modern Korea* (2020), serves as an excellent English language introduction but also helps lay a foundation for future work. Certainly, there is much more research that could, and should, be carried on the group’s scriptures and its philosophy and theology. Kim includes detailed chapters on the group’s “canonical literature” (Chapter 4) and “Daesoon philosophical thought” (Chapter 5)—the last of which includes an illuminating section on *Haewon-sangsaeng* (199-204) that is well worth reading.

It is Kim’s chapters on “religious rituals and practices” (Chapter 6), “sacred sites and their functional roles” (Chapter 7), and “social outreach in reductive enterprise” (Chapter 8), however, that in my estimation most powerfully point the way for prospective sociological research. In the (post) COVID study of religion, there are surely many opportunities to engage and conduct interviews on platforms such as Zoom and WebEx. So many of us have become accustomed to video calls and these types of virtual platforms can easily bring together translators and members who might not otherwise be able to connect. However, I suspect in the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe that more substantial fieldwork and interviews will require travel to South Korea to observe communities of practice on the ground. This might include trips to temple complexes and other sacred sites, schools, hospitals, and volunteer organizations, as well as observation of male and female training activities, prayer meetings, devotional offerings, rituals, and festivals, among other expressions of identity, culture, and outreach. Attention should also be given to material culture such as clothing, art, architecture, and iconography.

It will be intriguing to see to what extent participant-observation fieldwork may be

possible in relation to rituals and temple practices—a possibility that will likely require travel as well, not to mention a longer stay in order to build trust and immerse oneself in the group’s culture, customs, and lifestyle. In terms of initial or “foot-in-the-door” access, though, the good news is that Daeseon Jinrihoe has already begun to open its own doors to academic researchers with conferences and visits in a manner that suggests a positive, proactive, and productive future. This too can be viewed through the lens of *sangsaeng* as a win-win scenario: on the one hand, it offers the world a chance to better understand this new religion and its own members and, on the other hand, scholars have the opportunity to propose and conduct research and fieldwork that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to carry out.

The academic study of Daeseon Jinrihoe is also significant because it helps lay bare open areas in NRM studies with respect to Asian religious traditions. There have been encouraging scholarly signs in this area, such as CESNUR conferences in Korea (2016) and Taiwan (2018), the publication of Brill’s *Handbook of East Asian New Religious Movements* (2018), an edited volume from David W. Kim on *New Religious Movements in Modern Asian History* (2020), and monographs, such as Massimo Introvigne’s *Inside the Church of God Almighty: The Most Persecuted Religious Movement in China* (2020). In addition, there has been attention specifically on Korean NRMs, such as Shincheonji (Introvigne 2021a) and Kaengjŏngyudo (Kaplan 2021). There is value in case studies as well as comparative works, such as Introvigne’s article in *Nova Religio* entitled “The Flourishing of New Religions in Korea” (2021b), that situates groups such as Daeseon Jinrihoe in the larger context of Korean (new) religion and trends. David Kim’s monograph on Daeseon Jinrihoe also gives attention to the group in comparative context, an approach that strengthens his analysis as he analyzes the unique theological, ritualistic, and sociological dimensions of the organization.

Daeseon Jinrihoe and the Church of Scientology Compared

In the spirit of comparative analysis, and drawing on my own previous studies, it may be useful to consider the Korean-born Daeseon Jinrihoe alongside the American-born religion of Scientology, which I believe also defies simple categorization in light of Roy Wallis’ tripartite typology. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Church of Scientology qualifies, as Wallis rightly observed, as a “world-affirming” religious movement, especially in light of its programs to improve individual and in turn societal well-being (Westbrook 2019, 263; Wallis 1984, 6, 28). At the same time, there are aspects of Scientology’s theology that I have analyzed as “counter-apocalyptic” in light of the Cold War milieu in which the church was born, and its beliefs, practices, and communal life were conditioned (Westbrook 2019, 264). In particular, this includes the mission of Scientology ministers as well as parishioners but especially members of the full-time

clergy known as the Sea Organization, whose members devote their lives to Hubbard's goals to spread Scientology and "clear the planet" (i.e., either produce Clear individuals, per Hubbard's Dianetics and Scientology techniques, or otherwise increase sanity and stability, on a global level, through humanitarianism or advanced auditing [counseling] techniques).

Thus, it seems to me that Scientology, as with Daesoon Jinrihoe, ought to be considered *both* world-affirming and world-accommodating, as it seeks to empower individuals to, in effect, save themselves and society around them in a way that in the end benefits both members and outsiders alike. In other words, the goal is not necessarily to convert the entire world to Scientology, even if church members might desire such an outcome in a grand eschatological worldview, just as Daesoon Jinrihoe, as far as I can tell, does not have the goal to persuade the world to join its cause in the immediate or realistic future.

Scientology has been described as a "quintessentially American" new religious movement (Kaplan 2006, 96-98), in much the same way that Daesoon Jinrihoe has been labelled a "quintessential Korean religion" (Baker 2016, 15). Both have global aspirations and, in the case of Scientology, has been relatively successful at transplanting itself outside of its American origin points, and now claims "Churches, Missions, and affiliated groups...across 167 nations" (Church of Scientology International 2022a). Even allowing for inflated or exaggerated statistics (see, e.g., Introvigne 2017b), Scientology has certainly expanded its institutional footprint by opening or renovating churches outside the United States, and no doubt owes at least some of its missiological success to large scale efforts to translate Hubbard's enormous canon or writings and lectures (counted as scripture) into dozens of languages (Bridge Publications 2022). In the last decade alone, churches have opened or been renovated outside the United States in Johannesburg, Stuttgart, Perth, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Budapest, Tokyo, Bogota, and Kaohsiung (Church of Scientology International 2022b).

Daesoon Studies, Scientology Studies, and Beyond

Aside from historical or theological points of similarity, Daesoon Thought and Scientology have both benefited from an increase in academic attention in recent years. Although the Church of Scientology has commissioned scholars over the years to publish studies on the group (see, e.g., the appendix essays in Church of Scientology 1999; and Church of Scientology 2022c), most of the academic work on Scientology to emerge in the last fifty years, and especially in the last two decades, has come from sociologists, historians, religious studies scholars, and even journalists working on their own, often with limited or no access to the church and its own members. There have been a number of book-length exceptions, however, such as the works of Chagnon

(1985), Whitehead (1987), Reitman (2011), Westbrook (2019), and Thomas (2021), the last of which relied on “Free Zone” or schismatic Scientologists and showcased the ways in which the Church of Scientology has evolved and splintered since its founding in the 1950s. Thomas has argued that scholars should focus attention on “Scientologies” in light of the diversity of interpretations of Hubbard’s work and legacy (2020), and here one might draw a parallel to the numerous schools of thought under the umbrella of Daesoon Thought.

Indeed, it seems me that Daesoon studies has experienced a recent surge in attention and scholarly output, just as we have seen similar developments in the field of NRM studies in the subfields of Scientology studies, Mormon studies, Baha’i studies, Unification studies, and others. It also seems that a fair number of Daesoon studies scholars are themselves adherents of its philosophy and worldview, whether that means membership in Daesoon Jinrihoe or other groups, and certainly a similar phenomenon has occurred in say the development of intellectual work on Mormonism, with many scholars coming to the subject as current or former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) or perhaps the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or RLDS). Interestingly, to continue the comparison with Scientology, the same cannot be said to be true. With very few exceptions (see, e.g., Roux 2020; Simmons 1976), academic researchers of Scientology have come to the movement from outside the group, arguably due to an anti-intellectual culture within the Church of Scientology—based, I think, on a reliance on Hubbard’s canon to speak for itself as a tactic to eliminate the possibility for interpretation and thus alteration—that has not yet led to a culture in which church-based historians, theologians, apologists, and the like are needed or frankly wanted. Instead, on occasion, the expertise of outside academics, especially those open to studying the group and its practices on its own terms, have been enlisted in public relations and legal settings. Despite institutional aversions, Scientology studies has gained steam, especially over the last decade, and more work is on the horizon, as a variety of stakeholders—outside scholars, current members, and former members—are beginning to contribute their voices in rich and diverse ways (Westbrook 2022).

Daesoon studies, too, has gained momentum, in no small measure thanks to the periodical in which this piece appears, the *Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia (JDTREA)*, and recent issues attest to the work done on this new religion from both inside and outside the movement—and in fact, the lion’s share of recent scholarship comes from NRM scholars who, like myself, have no personal affiliation with the group. Unlike other subfields such as Scientology studies, *JDTREA* has consciously positioned itself in relation to Daesoon studies *and* East Asian religion more broadly, in much the same way that say Mormon studies has often situated itself in relation to American history, North American religion, and (as the LDS church has expanded) international historical contexts.

JDTREA's vision for itself as an academic periodical rooted in, but not reducible to, Daesoon studies presents a number of practical and methodological advantages for the journal, and the field, moving forward. For one, it allows the journal to cast a wider net for submissions to the journal, which is useful as its gains more recognition and prestige in its formative years. But even more than that, it is arguably part of a commitment to interdisciplinarity and cutting-edge scholarship that transcends provincialism and an understanding of Daesoon Thought without appreciation of the larger religious, social, political, economic, and other contexts in which this and other systems of thought develop. For this reason, at least on the face of it, it would appear that the project of Daesoon studies is perhaps most similar to Unification studies, especially given that both grew out of Korean-born NRMs. The Unification Theological Seminary (UTS), to this point, has published a *Journal of Unification Studies* since 1997 (UTS 2021). This periodical, true to its name, seeks out work from "a Unificationist perspective... [and] papers from diverse viewpoints that engage Unification theology and practice" (Wilson, n.d.). *JDTREA*, by contrast, "is the only peer-reviewed, English language journal exclusively dedicated to research on Daesoon Thought and the contemporary relevance of East Asia Religions" (*JDTREA* 2022).

This vision for a broader scope is also, returning to an earlier theme in this article, itself arguably an extension of the concept of *sangsaeng*. It represents an intention, I would argue, to put into scholarly practice the notion of cross-cultural understanding that emerges from healthy and respectful but rigorous academic dialogue, debate, and peer review. As more English language researchers take seriously Daesoon Jinrihoe and East Asian (new) religions, research on this NRM will surely grow in sophistication and deepen our appreciation for the nuances best known to those familiar with its Korean centers and populations. And if someday, Daesoon Jinrihoe expands beyond Korea in the same that the Unification Church did—and in ways that perhaps someday parallel the success that the Church of Scientology and so many other NRMs have had from the United States—the scholars publishing in this space will have been part of cultivating early academic awareness about a group in its relatively early history of reaching beyond itself and to the rest of the world.

Post-Truth and the Post-COVID Study of Religion

Earlier I mentioned the importance of information literacy and more specifically religious literacy. The need for both has grown all the more urgent in our age of "post-truth," misinformation, and disinformation; realities that seem to have only grown in seriousness in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In my other area of professional life, library and information science, there is no shortage of works on the need for information literacy and specifically on the practical forms that training along these lines can, and should, take, whether for children, adolescents, adults, in the classroom,

in the library, or in everyday life (see, e.g., Levitin 2017; McIntyre 2018; O'Connor and Weatherall 2018; and on the intersection between technology, social media, society, and literacy see Noble 2018; Vaidhyathan 2018; Weinberger 2019). Religious literacy is one important sub-dimension. On a practical level within NRM studies, religious literacy has often expressed itself in the form of scholars correcting claims or perceptions about so-called “cults” or “sects” and in relation to practices such as “brainwashing” and “deprogramming” (Introvigne 2022). W. Michael Ashcraft has produced a wonderful history of NRM studies (and cultic studies) (Ashcraft 2018) that situates major players, methodologies, and controversies, especially in the past fifty years.

Today, rhetoric surrounding so-called “cults” continues unabated in the media—certainly in the United States with which I am most familiar—and in recent years has been applied in political, social, technological, and other contexts in addition to the more familiar religious uses. Steven Hassan’s book *The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control* (2019) is one example. Another that has enjoyed mass popular success is Amanda Montell’s *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (2021), which led to a podcast, “Sounds Like a Cult,” with episodes that explore “the modern-day cults we all follow” (2022). Subjects of some recent episodes include: multi-level marketing, sororities and fraternities, the royal family (UK), and flat earthers (2022). The 2022 annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) in Los Angeles included a session on “‘Cults’: The International Return of a Dubious Category” (I was one of the speakers, as were Massimo Introvigne, Holly Folk, and Rosita Soryte) (2022). I think it is important that scholars continue to research this phenomenon, as a matter of academic interest, but also push back on the excesses of the word “cult” in popular culture, especially when used to denigrate, marginalize, and oppress religious minorities. From an academic point of view, the term is pejorative, imprecise, and subjective to the point of meaninglessness—but these are arguably the same characteristics that have allowed such a contested and divisive word such as “cult” to proliferate in our post-truth world in the first place, a world that is too often driven by social media, anonymous communication, trolling, monologue over dialogue, artificial intelligence, and a lack of empathy. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that a loaded word like “cult” is sometimes used by individuals coming to terms with their experiences in groups in ways that are therapeutic as well as academic or polemical in nature (see, e.g., Young 2022).

How, then, should the post-truth and post-COVID study of religion proceed? It seems to me once again that the concepts of *sangsaeng* and symbiosis, taken proactively rather than passively, are useful methodological starting points. Misinformation can spread and become viral in ways similar to the COVID-19 pandemic that we have all experienced over the past two years. It can lead to misunderstandings, grudges, discrimination, persecution, and even violence. It is all the more important that those

of who study minority religions such as Daesoon Jinrihoe do so responsibly and with careful attention to our methods, sources, and the diversity of people and perspectives at play. It is also important to build trust and foster relationships, something that can be difficult, though by no means impossible, to accomplish in light of language barriers and geographical distance. These challenges can be overcome and, as restrictions continue to lift as the pandemic (hopefully) reaches its final stages, the opportunities for fieldwork on the ground in Korea will be plentiful, assuming access can be granted, and researchers come to projects with the proper cultural and linguistic training (or else the assistance of translators). And until then, there are numerous fruitful paths forward on a remote basis in terms of historical analysis, theological interpretation, and comparative religious studies.

Last but not least: transparency and open access to information will be essential in the post-COVID study of (new) religions, especially when the general public, and scholars too for that matter, expect easy and quick access to their sources. For this reason, it is highly commendable that *JDTREA* is making itself available on an open access (OA) basis. Too often journal articles are hidden behind paywalls, unavailable at one's particular university library, or, in the cases of older works, quite often unavailable in digital form and thus, for all practical purposes, lost to researchers without access to academic libraries and archives. Of course, this is not a problem unique to NRM studies or the humanities and social sciences. It should be taken into account that while open access initiatives do result in free access to the end user (i.e., the researcher), this does not mean that the backend process of publishing works on an OA basis come without expense, whether on the publisher's side or, as quite often happens (though not at *JDTREA*), via article processing charges (APCs) passed on to authors. As more periodicals continue to embrace the OA model that makes the most sense for them, *JDTREA*—and by extension Daesoon studies—is helping to model a new path forward that will perhaps encourage other journals in the NRM world to make a similar move. *The Journal of CESNUR* is an example of another relatively new OA periodical that publishes NRM research (2022). For more on the history of open access and its practical implementations, Peter Suber's *Open Access* (2012) is an excellent introduction for scholars and publishers alike.

Conclusion

Daesoon Jinrihoe offers scholars of religion a unique entry point into learning more about Korean religion. As this group continues to make itself available for outside and scholarly investigation, scholars of religion, and in particular researchers of new religious movements, should take advantage of opportunities as they come along to learn more about this group and its members. My own introduction came via the scriptural texts and engagement with the notion of *sangsaeng*—but it soon became clear that this new religious organization has developed a sophisticated intellectual self-consciousness

through conferences, books, journals, and other activities in promotion of Daeseon Thought and studies, both for itself and the broader world. Analyzed against Roy Wallis' 1984 typology, it appears that the group has characteristics that make it both world-affirming and world-accommodating, a preliminary conclusion that I invite others to further investigate, refined, or challenge. But it seems to me that the group's theology and practices, and its extensive social engagement, defy simplistic sociological classification, especially as this Korean-born NRM seeks to internationalize and engage in scholarly conversations about itself. In the wake of post-truth and COVID-19, scholars of religion and defenders of religious freedom stand to benefit from the theology of *sangsaeng* and its potential to build bridges in world too often divided by misinformation and disinformation, especially in online forums where monologue reigns over dialogue.

I would like to close with a passage from *The Canonical Scripture* that I think is methodologically relevant and instructive for academic researchers as more of us continue to learn about Daeseon Jinrihoe. Sangje told his disciples:

You always want to learn the arts of the Dao, but even if I were to teach them to you now, it would be like pouring water on a rock; it would not permeate inside but would just flow over the outside. When the arts are needed, I will open them to you. Until then, keep cultivating your minds diligently. (*Dharma* 2:12)

Scholarship on Daseoon thought, at least in English, is in its relatively early and promising stages of development, increasing in sophistication and depth at a rapid pace, evidenced, for instance, in the peer reviewed work found in periodicals such as *JDTREA* and the *Journal of CESNUR*, with much more presumably to come. One way for researchers to continue cultivating our minds, if I may use that phrase, is to maintain our diligent academic study of Daeseon Jinrihoe. Some of us, myself included, come to the movement as non-members and outsiders, eager to learn more and even, someday, to perhaps conduct fieldwork at sites in Korea. Others may come to this academic study as insiders, bringing with them the richness of a perspective informed by daily practices, upbringing, and other benefits of membership in the group. This diversity of positions, backgrounds, and perspectives will serve Daeseon studies well. As time goes on, scholars from around the world will have the opportunity to contribute to the scholarly record, introduce our students and other scholars to the richness of this Korean-born tradition in comparative ways, promote religious literacy, and even combat misinformation in the spirit of *sangsaeng* in our globalized, interconnected world.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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Note

- ¹ I recommend reading through *The Canonical Scripture* with the assistance of Don Baker's essay "Reading *The Canonical Scripture*" (DIRC 2020a, 318-23) as well as regular use of *The Literary Companion Dictionary*, conveniently found in the back of the same volume.

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