If we are to understand Unificationism, we must understand the religious background against which it developed. There are many different strands of religious tradition, which have waxed and waned at various stages of Korea’s history. The picture is by no means straightforward, for two reasons. First, there have been various attempts to unify different strands within broad traditions, as well as attempts to unify Korean religion more generally. Confrontation has been tempered with much cross-fertilisation and syncretism. For example, Yulgok, often reckoned to be Korea’s greatest scholar, was brought up as a Confucian, but converted to Buddhism, which he later formally abandoned but yet allowed to influence his neo-Confucian philosophy.

Second, westerners often find it difficult to cope with the typically eastern practice of pursuing several religious traditions simultaneously. Judaeo-Christianity’s essentially uncompromising character which permits no rivals stands in sharp contrast to most other religious climates, not least Korea, where the religious seeker uses whichever of the available religions will best fulfil his or her current purposes. As early as 1902, the Christian missionary, the Rev George Heber Jones noted:

[The Korean husband] personally takes his own education from Confucius; he sends his wife to Buddha to pray for offspring; and in the ills of life he willingly pays toll to Shamanite Mu-dang and Pansu. The average Korean is thus a follower of all three systems, in the hope that by their united help he may reach a happy destiny.¹

In this chapter I hope to disentangle some of the complexities of Korean religion and philosophy and show how some of their ideas and debates find their way into Unification thought.

Two popular religious myths are known to most, if not all, Koreans. The Korean people regard themselves as the descendants of the great ancestor Tangun. According to Korean legend, Tangun was the grandson of the supreme God Hwan-in and son of the divine spirit Hwan-Ung. Hwan-Ung obtained permission to descend from heaven to live on earth and establish the Kingdom of Heaven there. He came to Korea, and discovered a tiger
and a she-bear who wanted to learn how they might become human. Hwan-Ung gave each of them sacred food, which they had to eat in a prescribed manner. The bear obeyed and was transformed into a woman; she then wedded Hwan-Ung. The tiger did not obey and remained a beast. Tangun was born as the offspring of the she-bear and Hwan-Ung. In the year 2333 BCE he came to Pyongyang, established his royal residence and gave the name ‘Choson’ to his new kingdom.²

The notion that a divine emissary should descend to establish a family and thence the Kingdom of Heaven on earth has some resemblance to Unification theology. The parallels are not exact, of course, but it is significant that the components of the myth include the divine aim of establishing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, the sending of a divine emissary, the themes of obedience and disobedience to the supreme God with the resultant contrast between quasi-messianic and quasi-satanic figures.

A further Korean religious myth illustrates the theme of sexual misconduct by celestial beings and its possible influence on humankind. The theme of the serpent is highly significant.

A legend of the Namwon area says that a man convicted of adultery in heaven became a serpent as he fell onto the earth. The serpent became a maiden and as she tried to seduce a young scholar she suddenly realized her sin and ascended to heaven again.³

FOLK SHAMANISM

At a popular level, the prevalent religion in Korea is a kind of shamanism. Although this folk religion has encountered fierce opposition from the authorities, who wished to impose a neo-Confucian culture, folk shamanism is still prevalent, and shows no signs of decline in a technological era. Estimates of the number of shamans vary: a conservative estimate suggests that there is one shaman for every 1500 members of the South Korean population, while other authorities indicate that the statistic could even be as high as one in every 316.⁴

A shaman (or mudang, to use the appropriate Korean expression) is one who is believed to be able to make contact with the spirit world on behalf of the laity. In Korea, shamans are usually, although not exclusively, female. She is an oracle who can summon the spirits of the dead to provide information or guidance, for example about a coming harvest,