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TRACES OF DA'WAH IN SOUTH KOREA: UNDERSTANDING ISLAM'S LIMITED ACCEPTANCE THROUGH HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS LENSES

JEJAK DAKWAH DI KOREA SELATAN: MEMAHAMI PENERIMAAN TERHAD ISLAM MELALUI LENSA SEJARAH DAN KEAGAMAAN

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ABSTRACT

While global trends indicate that Islam is currently the fastest-growing religion, its acceptance on South Korea remains notably limited and slow. This study offers a historical exploration of this phenomenon by analysing the interplay between South Korea's dominant religious perspectives and key social factors that have influenced the public acceptance of Islamic da'wah. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources including academic publications, historical analyses, and sociological literature, this paper adopts a qualitative, and historical-documentary method. It examines how Confucian-rooted religious pluralism, the dominance of Christianity and Buddhism, and post-war nationalism have shaped religious identity and influenced perceptions of Islam. The study further considers the role of media, migration policies, and societal attitudes toward foreigners and minority religions. The findings indicate that beyond theological objections, factors such as social cohesion, cultural homogeneity, and the perception of Islam as a foreign religion remain key obstacles to the spread of da'wah and the acceptance of Islam in South Korea. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Islam's marginal role in South Korea and highlights the broader implications for interfaith engagement and religious minority integration in East Asian societies.

Keywords: Islam, Da'wah, South Korea, Religions, Social

ABSTRAK

Tren global menunjukkan bahawa Islam kini merupakan agama yang paling pesat berkembang, namun penerimaannya di Korea Selatan masih kekal terbatas dan perlahan. Kajian ini menawarkan satu tinjauan sejarah terhadap fenomena ini dengan menganalisis

hubungan antara perspektif keagamaan dominan di Korea Selatan dan faktor-faktor sosial utama yang mempengaruhi penerimaan umum terhadap dakwah Islam. Berdasarkan sumber sekunder sepenuhnya termasuk penerbitan akademik, analisis sejarah dan literatur sosiologi, kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan kaedah dokumentari sejarah. Ia meneliti bagaimana pluralisme agama yang berakar daripada Konfusianisme, dominasi agama Kristian dan Buddha, serta nasionalisme pascaperang telah membentuk identiti keagamaan dan mempengaruhi persepsi terhadap Islam. Kajian ini turut mengambil kira peranan media, dasar migrasi, dan sikap masyarakat terhadap orang asing serta agama minoriti. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa selain daripada bantahan teologi, faktor seperti perpaduan sosial, homogeniti budaya, dan persepsi terhadap Islam sebagai agama asing kekal sebagai halangan utama kepada penyebaran dakwah dan penerimaan Islam di Korea Selatan. Kertas ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang peranan Islam yang terpinggir di Korea Selatan dan mengetengahkan implikasi yang lebih luas terhadap keterlibatan antara agama serta integrasi agama minoriti dalam masyarakat Asia Timur.

Katakunci : Islam, Dakwah, Korea Selatan, Agama, Sosial

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Islam has emerged as the fastest-growing religion worldwide, with significant increases in conversions and demographic shifts observed across diverse global contexts. This trend reflects broader processes of globalization, migration, and interreligious engagement (Pew Research Center, 2025). However, the case of South Korea presents a notable exception to this global pattern. Despite ongoing efforts by Muslim communities and da'wah organizations, the acceptance and spread of Islam in South Korea remain limited and relatively slow (Mohd Ghazi & Fathil, 2017). This paradox raises important questions about the religious and sociocultural dynamics that influence the acceptance of Islam in societies with strong religious traditions and cultural homogeneity.

South Korea is predominantly shaped by a complex religious landscape dominated by Confucian values, along with established traditions of Buddhism and Christianity (Baker, 2008). These belief systems are deeply embedded in the country's historical development, social institutions, and national identity. In this context, Islam is often perceived as a foreign faith, associated more with migrant labour, Middle Eastern geopolitics, or global security discourses than with local religious life (Lee & Joh, 2012). Such perceptions, shaped in part by media representations and limited public exposure, contribute to the marginal position of Islam in South Korean society (Mohd Ghazi, Fathil, & Deliana, 2023).

This study seeks to explore the historical and sociocultural factors that have contributed to the slow acceptance of Islam in South Korea. It adopts a qualitative, historical-

documentary approach, relying solely on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, historical records, and sociological analyses. By examining the interplay between South Korea's dominant religious viewpoints, Confucian-rooted cultural norms, and evolving social conditions, the study identifies both theological and non-theological barriers to conversion. These include post-war nationalism, the privileging of social cohesion, migration and integration policies, and widespread perceptions of Islam as foreign and incompatible with Korean values (Ghazarian, 2018; Rich, Bison & Kozovic, 2021).

By situating the discussion within a broader historical framework, this paper contributes to current scholarly debates on the challenges faced by minority religions in East Asia. It also offers insights into the possibilities for more inclusive interfaith engagement and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in da'wah efforts across diverse social and religious environments

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global growth of Islam has been well-documented by demographic and religious studies, which highlight Islam as the fastest-growing religion worldwide, primarily due to high fertility rates and increasing rates of conversion (Pew Research Center, 2025). However, most of these studies focus on the Western world or Muslim-majority countries, with limited attention to East Asian contexts such as South Korea. While the global spread of Islam is often linked to factors such as migration and interfaith dialogue, these generalizations overlook how regional religious compositions, and historical experiences shape the acceptance of Islam differently. This gap necessitates a region-specific analysis that considers South Korea's unique historical and religious landscape in relation to da'wah efforts.

South Korea's religious makeup has been shaped profoundly by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity, which have long influenced its cultural, ethical, and institutional frameworks (Baker, 2008). Confucian-rooted social cohesion and filial piety norms, for example, often create a collective religious identity that resists external religious influences. Baker's (2008) historical account outlines the embeddedness of these traditions in shaping modern Korean identity, yet it does not adequately address how these entrenched religious worldviews specifically affect the perception and propagation of Islam. Thus, while providing a foundational understanding of Korean religiosity, the existing literature stops short of engaging with Islam's marginal role in the religious discourse of the country.

Grayson (2002) traces the long arc of Korea's religious history, highlighting the entrenched influence of Buddhism and Confucianism in shaping cultural attitudes toward spirituality and religious identity. While Buddhism has had institutional longevity, Confucianism though not a formal religion has deeply shaped ethical norms and hierarchical social structures. These norms foster strong communal bonds and discourage deviation from traditional belief systems, creating an environment resistant to unfamiliar religious expressions. Although Grayson provides a valuable historical foundation, he does not examine how Confucian-rooted values, such as social harmony and filial loyalty, continue to act as barriers to the acceptance of Islam in the present-day Korean religious marketplace. This gap is significant, as it leaves underexplored the cultural logic behind the Korean public's limited receptivity to Islamic da'wah.

Mohd Ghazi, Fathil, and Deliana (2023) provide a historical account of how South Korean mainstream media and Christian organisations have significantly contributed to shaping negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Drawing on the post-9/11 global discourse, the authors demonstrate how Islamophobia was localized through Christian media outlets such as CTS and reinforced by groups like the Korean Christian Council (KCC), portraying Islam as a threat to national and moral values. Their study also highlights how institutional Christianity, rooted in post-war U.S.–Korea relations, has shaped public discourse and religious hierarchy in favour of Christianity, further marginalizing Islam. While the article offers important insight into institutional influences and media bias, it places less emphasis on how deeper cultural values like Confucian collectivism and ethnic homogeneity interact with these narratives to resist Islamic da'wah. Moreover, the role of social media and individual efforts to counter Islamophobia is acknowledged but not deeply examined. This leaves a gap in understanding the broader sociocultural mechanisms that sustain Islam's marginal status in South Korea, a gap this study seeks to address.

Mohd Ghazi and Fathil (2017) provide a foundational overview of the progress and challenges of Islamic da'wah in South Korea since the 1950s, focusing on the religion's reintroduction through Turkish soldiers and the formation of a local Muslim community. While the book offers valuable insights into institutional resistance particularly from Christian organisations such as the Korean Christian Council (KCC) and outlines practical challenges like limited religious infrastructure and public awareness, its treatment of Korea's broader religious landscape is relatively brief. Although it acknowledges the dominance of

Christianity and the presence of Buddhism and Confucian heritage, it does not critically explore how these religious traditions shape national identity or public attitudes toward religious conversion. Additionally, the socio-cultural and philosophical underpinnings of religious exclusivity such as ethnic homogeneity or Confucian collectivism are not fully addressed. This leaves a gap in understanding the deeper cultural and historical reasons for the limited receptivity to Islam in Korea, a gap that this study seeks to fill by situating Islamic da'wah within the wider context of South Korea's religious identity, media narratives, and societal cohesion.

In *The Advent of Islam in Korea*, Hee Soo Lee (1997) provides an early historical outline of Islam's arrival and institutional development in the Korean Peninsula, including the founding of the Korean Islamic Society and limited da'wah activities. While the work is valuable in highlighting that misconceptions about Islam in South Korea are partly rooted in the pro-Western educational framework adopted by the state, his analysis of this claim remains superficial and largely undeveloped. The book briefly notes that financial constraints and public misunderstanding are key challenges for da'wah but does not critically examine how South Korea's Confucian heritage, nationalist ideologies, or the dominance of Christianity interact with these challenges to shape long-term societal resistance to Islam. For a study which seeks to understand the deeper historical and religious barriers to Islam's limited acceptance, this gap is significant. Lee's work, while historically informative, lacks the analytical depth needed to explain how embedded cultural and ideological structures have impeded Islam's growth. Thus, this article builds upon and moves beyond Lee's preliminary insights by adopting a historical-religious lens to explore how cultural memory, state ideology, and inherited religious hierarchies have collectively shaped South Korea's enduring resistance to Islamic outreach.

Another work from Hee Soo Lee's *Korea and the Muslim World A Historical Account* (2020) presents a comprehensive historical narrative, tracing over 1,300 years of Korea–Muslim engagement. From early Silk Road trade and Tang-Silla interactions to the presence of Muslim communities under the Yuan and early Joseon dynasties, culminating in the modern establishment of Islam through Turkish settlement in the 1950s, Lee's work challenges the misconception that Islam is wholly foreign to Korea. While invaluable for mapping these long-term civilizational exchanges, however, Lee does not directly analyze how this deep historical memory interacts with contemporary religious dynamics especially

regarding public perceptions of Islam and the effectiveness of da'wah. Embedded Confucian norms, nationalist ideology, and the hierarchical dominance of Buddhism and Christianity are all cultural–religious factors that likely shaped Korea's modern resistance to Islamic outreach yet remain underexplored in Lee's framework. Thus, although Lee fills a crucial historical gap, his narrative stops short of linking cultural heritage to modern religious marginalization. Addressing this shortfall, the present study applies both historical and religious lenses to uncover how these enduring structures have shaped Islam's limited acceptance in South Korea.

Azyumardi Azra (2005), in his book *Jejak-jejak Jaringan Kaum Muslim: Dari Australia hingga Timur Tengah*, offers a brief but important observation of Islamic da'wah in South Korea, focusing particularly on developments in the 21st century. He highlights the post-9/11 socio-political climate as a turning point for Muslims globally, including those residing in Korea, noting increased public suspicion and prejudice particularly toward visibly Muslim individuals, such as women wearing the hijab. Azra also references the Korea Muslim Federation's role in countering negative perceptions and improving the image of Islam through institutional outreach. While the work is helpful in capturing the general mood and challenges faced by Muslims in contemporary South Korea, its engagement with the topic is surface-level and lacks historical or cultural depth. There is limited exploration of how post-9/11 narratives intersect with South Korea's religious composition, national identity, and cultural homogeneity to restrict da'wah effectiveness. For a study concerned with tracing the historical and religious roots of Islam's marginal acceptance, Azra's work offers an entry point but leaves a gap in understanding the enduring structural and ideological barriers predating the 21st-century global context. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how historical-cultural legacies, rather than global events alone, have contributed to the persistent resistance to Islamic outreach in South Korea.

Scholars such as Koo (2018) have begun to explore public perceptions of Islam in South Korea, emphasizing how media portrayals and limited direct interaction with Muslims have led to widespread stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings. Koo's socio-cultural analysis traces the development of Islamophobia in Korea, highlighting that discussions of Islam have evolved alongside the rise of Korean Protestantism as a major driver of anti-Muslim discourse. He documents how Islam is often conflated with radicalism and foreignness, contributing to social alienation and fear. This phenomenon intensified notably

after terrorist attacks by groups like ISIS and the involvement of a South Korean individual with ISIS in 2015. Koo argues that Islamophobia in Korea reflects a broader backlash against multiculturalism, where Islam acts as an agent of "liquid fear", fuelled by distorted public understanding and sensationalized media coverage. While his work is valuable in highlighting contemporary social resistance and media influence, it focuses predominantly on present-day public opinion and online discourse. It does not fully integrate historical perspectives or the role of da'wah in shaping social attitudes. Therefore, a comprehensive study bridging Korea's historical religious dynamics with current social attitudes toward Islam and da'wah remains lacking.

The existing literature offers valuable insights into the historical presence of Islam in Korea, the challenges faced by Muslim communities, and the broader global context of da'wah activities. Scholars like Hee Soo Lee have illuminated the deep-rooted yet fragmented historical interactions between Korea and the Muslim world, while others have highlighted the sociopolitical and institutional challenges that have impeded da'wah in the post-9/11 era. However, much of this scholarship either focuses on descriptive historical accounts or isolates contemporary issues without fully interrogating how Korea's Confucian heritage, nationalist ideologies, and inherited religious hierarchies shape enduring resistance to Islam. Moreover, comparative works on Muslim minorities often neglect the unique historical and cultural particularities of East Asian societies like South Korea. This review reveals a critical gap in localized, interdisciplinary analyses that link the historical trajectory of Islam in Korea with its limited modern-day acceptance. To address this, the present study adopts a historical and religious lens to examine how deeply embedded cultural structures have influenced public perceptions of Islam and hindered the effectiveness of Islamic da'wah within South Korea's distinct socioreligious context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, historical-documentary research design, relying exclusively on the analysis of secondary sources to investigate the limited acceptance of Islam in South Korea. This approach is suitable for examining socio-religious phenomena over time, particularly when direct empirical access is limited or when the research concerns long-term historical processes (Given, 2008). Historical-documentary analysis is particularly effective in identifying patterns, ideologies, and cultural developments through critical engagement with published texts (Scott, 2006).

The primary method involves content analysis of academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, historical monographs, government reports, and sociological texts related to religion and society in South Korea. Sources were selected using purposive sampling, prioritizing relevance, scholarly credibility, and thematic diversity (Bryman, 2016). Focus was placed on literature addressing: (i) Korea's religious traditions, especially Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity; (ii) societal perceptions of Islam; and (iii) contextual social dynamics such as nationalism, migration, and interfaith discourse.

The analytical procedure followed a thematic coding strategy, in which recurring patterns and discourses were identified and organized under key categories such as "religious exclusivity," "perceived foreignness of Islam," "media portrayal," and "conversion barriers" (Nowell et al., 2017). These categories were then interpreted using a historical-interpretive lens, which allows for deeper insights into the ideological and structural barriers to Islamic da'wah within the Korean context (Bowen, 2009).

By employing this methodology, the study does not aim to measure the quantitative outcomes of da'wah efforts, but rather to critically analyse the structural, religious, and sociocultural narratives that have shaped South Korea's historical and contemporary acceptance of Islam. The approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of minority religious challenges within a dominant cultural and religious framework.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the study, developed through a qualitative historical-documentary analysis of existing secondary sources. The study reveals that the limited acceptance of Islam in South Korea is not attributable to a single cause but rather emerges from the complex interplay of cultural, religious, political, and historical dynamics. Thematic analysis of the data identifies four interrelated factors that collectively hinder the effectiveness of Islamic da'wah in the South Korean context: (1) the enduring influence of Confucian-rooted cultural homogeneity, which resists religious diversification; (2) the dominance of religious exclusivism, reinforced by institutional biases favouring Christianity and Buddhism; (3) the role of historical nationalism and Cold War-era geopolitical alignments, which shaped the ideological landscape of post-war Korea; and (4) widespread societal perceptions of Islam as not only foreign and culturally incompatible but also as a potentially threatening presence to national identity and social cohesion. These findings

underscore the need to situate contemporary religious dynamics within Korea's deeper historical and sociocultural frameworks.

Confucian Cultural Homogeneity and Its Enduring Influence

Confucianism remains a dominant cultural-philosophical force in South Korea, shaping values of harmony, hierarchy, filial piety, collectivism, and ancestral veneration (Baker, 2008). While not a formal religion, it deeply influences education, politics, and family life. These principles often contrast with Islamic teachings, which emphasize individual submission to God (*tawhid*), ritual worship (*ṣalah*), halal practices, and divine law (*shariah*). In a society that prioritizes social conformity and ancestral continuity, such Islamic practices may appear foreign or disruptive, especially in public spaces and non-Muslim households.

Religious conversion in Confucian societies is often viewed not just as a spiritual shift but as a betrayal of family and tradition (Deuchler, 1992; Kim & Park, 2012). Islam's emphasis on religious obligations, such as rejecting ancestral rites or observing gender segregation can intensify familial and social tensions. Christianity faced similar resistance but eventually gained acceptance by aligning with Korea's nationalist and modernist aspirations (Kim & Connolly, 2024). Islam lacks a comparable integration into Korean historical narratives.

Historically, early Islamic contact via the Silk Road during the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) was brief and limited (Lee, 2020). The Joseon dynasty's adoption of Neo-Confucianism institutionalized cultural homogeneity, excluding religions that did not uphold ancestral rites (Baker, 2006). As a result, Islam was largely absent from Korea's religious development and later re-emerged as an unfamiliar and foreign presence. This legacy of Confucian homogeneity has led to persistent cultural resistance to Islam. While Islam promotes universal values, it is often perceived as incompatible with Korean norms. Da'wah efforts must therefore address not just theological concerns, but also deep-seated cultural perceptions that view Islam as socially and historically alien.

Religious Exclusivity and the Christian-Buddhist Dominance

South Korea's religious landscape is dominated by two major traditions: Buddhism and Protestant Christianity. While Buddhism dates to the Three Kingdoms period, Protestantism has most profoundly shaped modern Korean identity, particularly after the Korean War (Kim,

2000). Aligned with U.S. military and developmental aid, Protestantism emerged as a symbol of modernity, democracy, and anti-communism (Baker, 2008). This strategic positioning granted Christianity significant sociopolitical legitimacy, an advantage Islam has never held.

Religious pluralism in Korea often functions within a binary: Christianity and Buddhism are culturally assimilated and institutionally supported, while other faiths, including Islam, are viewed as foreign or intrusive. Conservative Protestant groups have actively resisted Islamic visibility, viewing it as a threat to national and religious identity. Documented cases include protests, pamphlet campaigns, and political lobbying to prevent mosque construction in cities like Daegu and Seoul (Kim, 2015; Choi, 2022). In more extreme cases, missionaries have entered mosques with the intent to proselytize, escalating tensions and disrupting interfaith coexistence (Mohd Ghazi, 2023).

This resistance extends into interfaith dialogue platforms, which, though intended to foster understanding, often marginalize Muslim voices. Muslim speakers discussing topics such as Isa (Jesus) or monotheism have faced verbal attacks, theological hostility, and even death threats, particularly from fundamentalist Christians (Lee, n.d.). These incidents show that interreligious spaces in Korea are not always safe or neutral for Islamic perspectives. The disparity reflects more than numbers; it shows a structural asymmetry in religious legitimacy. Protestant churches have benefitted from integration into Korea's nation-building narrative, while Islam remains external to it. Scholars like Grayson (1994) have explored Christianity's national role, but few have examined how this dominance excludes minority faiths like Islam.

Consequently, Muslim *du'at* (preachers) face not only societal indifference but also institutional hostility, limiting their outreach efforts. Da'wah in Korea is not just marginal, it is contested in a religious context that privileges Christianity, tolerates Buddhism, and alienates Islam. To advance, da'wah strategies must address this exclusivist environment through coalition-building, cultural engagement, and interfaith efforts rooted in ethical literacy and mutual respect.

National Identity, Post-Colonial Memory, and Cold War Politics

The formation of South Korea's national identity in the aftermath of Japanese colonialism (1910–1945) and during the height of the Cold War was shaped by a powerful mix of ethnic nationalism, anti-communism, and developmentalism, all of which had profound implications for the inclusion or exclusion of religious minorities. After liberation in 1945 and especially

following the Korean War (1950–1953), South Korea sought to forge a new national ethos rooted in resistance to communism, cultural purity, and alignment with Western modernity. In this context, Protestant Christianity was not merely tolerated; it was actively embraced as a political and civilizational ally (Baker, 2008). Christian institutions became key actors in education, welfare, and democratic movements, further cementing their integration into the national fabric.

Islam, by contrast, played no significant role in Korea's colonial resistance, independence movement, or post-war recovery. The earliest sustained interaction with Islam occurred during the Korean War, when Turkish Muslim troops from the United Nations Command introduced elements of Islamic practice to local Koreans, including the establishment of a small mosque in Seoul in the 1950s (Mohd Ghazi & Fathil, 2017). However, this contact was not permanent and did not result in sustained religious influence, only later became part of foundation and history of Islam in the country. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, Islam re-entered public discourse through labour migration from countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. This external and transactional entry into Korean society lacked organic connection to the nation's historical struggles or cultural memory, which reinforced Islam's classification as a foreign import rather than a locally embedded tradition (Mohd Ghazi, 2023).

The residual effects of this exclusion are visible in contemporary state policies (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1948). While Korea guarantees freedom of religion in its constitution, public institutions rarely accommodate Islamic practices. There is minimal state investment in halal certification, mosque infrastructure, or Islamic education. Muslims face challenges in accessing burial rights, prayer facilities, and even visa protections for religious workers. This institutional neglect reinforces Islam's marginal status and signals a lack of political will to integrate Islam into the national religious framework, further constraining the scope and impact of da'wah.

Although some scholars have discussed how Korean nationalism tends to exclude religious minorities, there is still a notable gap in historical and political literature on how these exclusionary constructions specifically affect Islam. In this light, da'wah in Korea must contend not only with theological unfamiliarity but with historical and political amnesia a collective forgetting (or exclusion) of Islam's potential place within Korean society. Addressing this challenge requires not only religious outreach but historical reclamation,

interfaith education, and the cultivation of cultural narratives that recognize Islam as a legitimate and potentially enriching part of Korea's pluralistic future.

Islam as the 'Foreign Other': Media, Stereotypes, and Societal Fear

In modern South Korea, media representation plays a pivotal role in shaping public consciousness about religious and cultural difference. In the case of Islam, these representations are overwhelmingly negative, often echoing orientalist tropes and Islamophobic anxieties that originated in Western discourse (Said, 1978). The events of September 11, 2001, the rise of ISIS, and subsequent global terrorism-related incidents have been widely broadcast in South Korea through a lens shaped by Western news agencies, reinforcing the association of Islam with violence, extremism, and sociopolitical instability. This media-induced narrative constructs Muslims as a monolithic "other" culturally alien, politically suspect, and morally incompatible with Korean values (Mohd Ghazi, Fathil & Deliana, 2023).

Unlike Christian or Buddhist narratives, which are often portrayed positively or neutrally, Islam is depicted as an external ideology imported by foreign labourers or war refugees rather than as a faith embraced by Korean citizens (Seo, 2019). These episodic and sensationalized portrayals reproduce fear and misunderstanding, especially in a society where direct interaction with Muslims is minimal and education on religious diversity remains limited. Such a representational landscape contributes to an atmosphere of latent societal hostility, where superficial curiosity about Islam does not translate into openness or interfaith engagement. Muslim converts in South Korea often face profound social ostracization from families who view conversion as a betrayal of national or cultural identity, to peers who associate Islam with violence or extremism. In a tightly knit, collectivist culture rooted in Confucian social norms, conversion to a perceived "foreign religion" is not viewed as a personal spiritual choice, but as a violation of group loyalty and cultural continuity (Mohd Ghazi, 2023).

This societal dynamic is reinforced by the absence of structural accommodations for Islamic practice. While South Korea formally guarantees freedom of religion, the actual religious infrastructure reflects a strong bias toward the dominant faith traditions. Outside of Seoul and a few major cities, access to halal food, prayer spaces, and Islamic burial facilities remains limited or non-existent (Nur & Erna, 2023). Schools do not accommodate Muslim

prayer schedules, and workplace environments often lack awareness or tolerance of religious dietary or clothing requirements. These practical exclusions translate into psychological and social alienation for both foreign Muslims and Korean converts.

Importantly, Islamophobia in South Korea differs in significant ways from its Western counterpart. In multicultural societies such as the United States, United Kingdom, or France, Islamophobia is often contested by strong human rights discourses, civil society activism, and multicultural policy frameworks. In contrast, South Korea's ethnically homogeneous identity and cultural emphasis on unity create a social ecosystem where counter-narratives struggle to gain traction (Nur & Erna, 2023). This creates a vicious cycle of invisibility and suspicion. The reason is because Muslims constitute a very small percentage of the Korean population estimated at less than 0.4% most Koreans have little or no personal experience with Islam. As a result, their perceptions are shaped almost entirely by media, popular culture, and hearsay.

Critically, the perception of Islam as a "foreign religion" is not just an issue of theological misunderstanding it reflects deeper anxieties about cultural integrity, national security, and social cohesion. In a society where cultural identity is closely tied to ethnicity and shared heritage, Islam is viewed not merely as different, but as disruptive. This results in a form of "soft exclusion" where Muslims are not openly persecuted, but neither are they welcomed into the national narrative or afforded equal participation in civic life.

While the literature on Islamophobia in the West is extensive, there remains a significant gap in understanding how such fear and stereotyping function in non-Western, monoethnic, and religiously majoritarian societies like South Korea. Therefore, for Islamic da'wah to succeed in South Korea, it must address not only theological and ritualistic communication but also the symbolic and cultural politics of "foreignness." This requires long-term investment in media literacy, interfaith education, and public outreach that humanizes Muslim identities and disrupts the dominant fear-based narratives. Without such interventions, Islam will likely remain trapped in the public imagination as an outsider ideology visible only in moments of controversy and absent from the broader discourse of Korean religiosity and national life.

Reframing Da'wah: Cultural Constraints and Strategic Implications

The findings of this study suggest that the limited acceptance of Islam in South Korea is not merely a result of theological differences or insufficient proselytization. Rather, it is the

outcome of a historically entrenched and multilayered cultural matrix in which religious identity is closely linked to national consciousness, ethnic homogeneity, and Confucian social values. Each layer be it Confucian collectivism, Christian institutional dominance, postcolonial nationalism, or Islamophobic media narratives contributes to the construction of Islam as an outsider faith, disconnected from Korean identity and society. This complex entanglement of cultural and historical factors produces a unique context in which da'wah is not just difficult but structurally marginalized.

Importantly, the study highlights that religious exclusivity in Korea is not merely theological but deeply cultural and institutional. The longstanding dominance of Christianity and Buddhism has not only filled the religious space but shaped public perceptions of what is considered legitimate or "Korean" in religious expression. Islam, having entered South Korean society through military and labour-related encounters rather than organic cultural development, remains largely excluded from national narratives. Consequently, Islamic discourse struggles to gain recognition or integration into mainstream civil society, leaving da'wah efforts fragmented and lacking institutional support.

This marginalization is further compounded by negative media representation and the lack of public education about Islam. The absence of widespread or accurate knowledge about Islam reinforces fear, suspicion, and stereotyping. In such an environment, Muslim converts face not only religious but also social penalties, including familial rejection and public discrimination. This dynamic undermines the potential for long-term da'wah success, as it disincentivizes exploration of Islam among the public and erodes the confidence of those who might otherwise be receptive to its teachings. As a result, da'wah in Korea must navigate a landscape shaped not only by ignorance but also by active sociopolitical exclusion.

Given these constraints, it is evident that conventional da'wah models particularly those drawn from Western multicultural contexts cannot be directly transposed onto South Korea. Instead, da'wah strategies must be contextualized, both culturally and historically. Emphasis should be placed on ethical embodiment (*akhlāq*), public service, interfaith engagement, and shared moral values that resonate with Korean Confucian ideals such as respect, sincerity, and communal harmony. Rather than doctrinal assertiveness, a relational approach grounded in humility, social contribution, and trust-building may prove more effective. Muslim communities should also prioritize partnerships with academic institutions, NGOs, and civil society groups to foster mutual understanding and reduce social distance.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need to reconceptualize da'wah in South Korea not simply as a religious mission, but as a long-term socio-cultural project. It requires the gradual dismantling of prejudicial narratives, the construction of alternative understandings of Muslim identity, and the strategic cultivation of inclusive spaces for dialogue and presence. Only by addressing the structural and cultural barriers that define Islam as the "foreign other" can Islamic outreach efforts begin to find resonance and acceptance within Korean society. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how religious minorities can negotiate space in socially conservative and religiously exclusive societies in East Asia.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the historically limited acceptance of Islam in South Korea through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, focusing on religious viewpoints and socio-cultural dynamics. Despite Islam's rapid global growth, its presence in South Korea remains marginal, confined primarily to immigrant communities and a small number of local converts. The findings indicate that this limited acceptance is not simply a matter of religious difference, but rather the result of deep-seated historical, cultural, and structural factors.

First, the enduring influence of Confucian cultural homogeneity has fostered a collective identity that resists religious pluralism and favours social conformity. Second, the dominance of Christianity and Buddhism—both institutionally and culturally—has created an environment of religious exclusivity that limits space for alternative belief systems. Third, post-war nationalism and Cold War alignments have shaped a national identity that associates Islam with foreignness and political otherness. Lastly, media narratives and public discourse have further entrenched the perception of Islam as a foreign and potentially threatening religion, reinforcing societal suspicion and resistance.

However, this study also acknowledges several limitations. Most notably, the research is based solely on secondary sources and does not include primary data such as interviews with Korean Muslims, da'wah practitioners, or policymakers. While this approach provides a broad historical and analytical overview, it lacks the grounded insights that ethnographic or field-based research could offer. Additionally, the study does not examine intra-Muslim dynamics, such as differences in outreach strategies between Sunni and Shia communities, or

the role of foreign Muslim organizations in shaping perceptions of Islam in Korea. These areas represent important dimensions for future inquiry.

Given these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, Islamic outreach efforts in South Korea should be more culturally contextualized. Rather than replicating da'wah models from multicultural Western societies, practitioners should develop approaches that resonate with Korea's Confucian-influenced social values, such as community service, ethical conduct, and respect for elders. Second, there is a critical need for media engagement and education to counter misinformation and foster interfaith understanding. Muslim organizations should collaborate with Korean civil society, universities, and religious institutions to promote accurate representations of Islam and build trust. Third, future research should include mixed-method studies that integrate historical analysis with ethnographic or survey-based fieldwork to better understand the lived experiences of Korean Muslims and potential converts.

In sum, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural and historical barriers to Islamic da'wah in South Korea. It highlights the importance of integrating historical consciousness, sociocultural sensitivity, and interfaith dialogue into future strategies. Addressing these barriers not only supports the growth of Muslim communities in Korea but also contributes to broader efforts toward religious inclusion and pluralism in East Asian societies.

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