Re-creation of Spirit in Response to Western Material Civilization—Sot’aesan’s Perspective

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Though there has been quite a lot of demarcation between the East and the West due to geographical, religious, or cultural boundaries, now we are no longer hesitant to speak of global community based on meeting or understanding between the East and the West. Since the meeting of the East and the West cannot be explained in a mere physical sense such as the travel condition or communication system, it seems important to examine how the East responds to the West when Western civilization challenges it. Each country in the East responds to Western influences differently. Within a single country, e.g. Korea, there have been different responses to the West because there are many dimensions of communication between the East and the West, such as spiritual, ideological, political, economical, or cultural. Even in the spiritual or religious dimension of the communication there are different interpretations of modernity rooted in Western civilization and different solutions in responding to problems of modernity.

As the title of this paper shows, its purpose is to deal with the issue of how Western material civilization was interpreted and responded to by one of the spiritual traditions in Korea, namely Won Buddhism. Won Buddhism as a reformed Buddhism reinterprets the traditional teachings of Buddhism from a modern perspective, integrates other religious teachings in the East, namely Confucian and Taoist teachings based on a reformed Buddhist perspective, and shares the modern perspectives of two recent religious thinkers, Suun (1824-1864) and Chungsan (1871-1909) in responding to Western influences. Unlike Suun and Chungsan’s responses to Western influences, Sot’aesan seemed to pinpoint Western influence,

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defining it as material civilization, and respond to the challenge of material civilization positively with a vision of constructing the truly civilized world in the future.

The founder of Won Buddhism, Sot’aesan (1891-1943) talked about the necessity of re-creation of spirit (Chöngsin’gaebyŏk, 精神開闢) when he encountered the influence of Western material civilization. Though the paper does not intend to compare or contrast Sot’aesan’s perspective with any particular religious thinkers’, Sot’aesan’s positive perspectives on material civilization and his vision of spirituality in the future are discussed in relation to such negative perspectives as total rejection of modern science and technology, a return to the past for recovery of spirituality and morality, or a vision of eschatological decadence. The paper is to develop the thesis that according to Sot’aesan material civilization is an essential element in creating a truly civilized world, though it needs to be integrated with spiritual civilization.

Sot’aesan’s interpretation of problems of modernity in the context of material civilization is as follows:

According to the development of scientific civilization, the human spirit, which should make use of material things, grows weaker, while material things, which should be used by human beings, increasingly flourish and assert their domination over the enfeebled human spirit. Thus, human beings find themselves chained to the servitude of materialism. How, then, can they expect a life free from suffering and trouble?1

Here Sot’aesan examines human problems derived from scientific development. Sot’aesan points out contemporary suffering derived from material civilization, saying “Nowadays, because of the rise of materialism, people are becoming more covetous... the world will never have peace without overcoming covetousness.”2 As Siddharta Gautama declared twenty five hundred years ago, human suffering can be defined as “deriving from covetous or greedy human nature.” Especially human suffering of the modern era is related to materialism. That is, people become more greedy of material things, easily ignore moral or spiritual value in order to pursue more material luxuries, lose spiritual strength, and finally fall into a life of slavery to materialism.

As shown in his interpretation of problems of modernity, Sot’aesan described Western civilization as material civilization. One might wonder whether it is

1 The Scripture of Won Buddhism, (In, Korea Won Buddhism Publishing Co., 1988), p 1
2 Ibid., p 172.
legitimate to divide civilization into material and spiritual civilization as Sot’aesan formulated. How did Sot’aesan define material civilization vs spiritual civilization? Sot’aesan defined material civilization in terms of the physical condition of people, such as housing, food, or clothing. Since the human condition in terms of material convenience and affluence has been radically improved due to scientific and technological development in the West, there seems to be no doubt about the radical improvement of material civilization.

On the other hand, spiritual civilization is defined by Sot’aesan in terms of the spiritual or moral condition of people. This spiritual or moral condition can also be explained in terms of housing, food, or clothing. Human condition in the spiritual as well as the physical sense needs housing, food, and clothing. Housing in the spiritual sense means spiritual shelter for mental stability and for rest just as a house functions as a physical shelter. Food in the spiritual sense means spiritual nutrition for mental health or energy just as food provides the body with nutrition. Clothing in the spiritual sense means spiritual protection just as clothing protects body from heat or cold.

There is no doubt about radical improvement in terms of material civilization. However, it is often said that the human condition in the spiritual or moral sense has deteriorated in spite of material improvement. Here one can distinguish a clear contrast between material civilization and spiritual civilization, as Sot’aesan suggested.

Suppose one realizes the necessity for the improvement of spiritual civilization, is the necessity for spiritual civilization more urgent now than before? Why is that so? In other words, is it the case that the crisis of spiritual civilization is the result of rapid improvement of material civilization? Does Sot’aesan view Western material civilization as the cause of deteriorating spiritual civilization and reject material civilization in order to develop or recover spiritual civilization? What is Sot’aesan’s evaluation of material civilization?

It seems important to elaborate Sot’aesan’s attitude toward material civilization in order to understand his responses to the challenge from the West. Sot’aesan has three different attitudes toward material civilization: positive, negative, and neutral attitudes. His positive attitude is to acknowledge the benefits of material civilization by saying “The material civilization gives convenience to our physical lives.” That is, material civilization is related to the improvement of human life in terms of

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3 Ibid., pp 121-122
4 Ibid., pp 111-112
5 Ibid., p 121
physical condition.

In other places Sot’aesan describes material civilization negatively because the human mind becomes disturbed as a result of material affluence or convenience. His negative description is as follows:

Nowadays, because of the rise of materialism, people are becoming more covetous.⁶

We expect more peaceful and happier life in a so called civilized era. But, people’s mind are getting cold-hearted and the world are becoming rough ... There are increasing cases of killing one’s own father, suing against one’s own brother, killing a wife or a husband to take her or his life insurance, committing murder for money, defrauding a person of his money, and so on. Those people give the judge trouble and destroy peace of the society. Why do these cases occur? They are mainly caused by human greed to pursue (more) material things... ⁷

The higher civilization develops outwardly (materially), the more the world suffers inwardly (spiritually or morally) from diseases which are deeply rooted in the world.⁸

That is, the human mind becomes more greedy for material affluence, which brings forth convenience and satisfaction to human life. Thus, the human mind tends to ignore other values including spiritual or moral values but not material value. The more materialism is emphasized, the less spirituality is stressed. The higher material civilization develops, the more human suffering arises due to the deterioration of spirituality and morality.

Though the two above-mentioned Sot’aesan’s two attitudes, namely positive and negative, are shown to be contradicting each other, these two different attitudes seem to be included or synthesized into Sot’aesan’s neutral attitude toward material civilization. Material civilization can be valued as positive in terms of physical sense, but it can be valued as negative when people ignore spiritual value, emphasizing only materialism. Though Sot’aesan’s description of material civilization represents two contradicting values, namely positive and negative, in a phenomenological sense, Sot’aesan’s intention is neither a blind acceptance of material civilization nor an unconditional rejection of material civilization.

Sot’aesan’s neutral goal toward material civilization is to accept material civilization and to utilize it as positive, based on spiritual civilization. His neutral

⁶ Ibid., p 172
⁸ The Scripture of Won Buddhism, p 123
attitude is as follows:

However fantastic material things may be, if used by a wicked mind they will be used only in a wicked way. Even the most skilled technique and broad knowledge can only do harm to the public when used by a wicked person. Good position sometimes becomes merely a supplementary tool in committing a crime when misused by a wicked person. Therefore, even though the outside of a civilization is glittering, how we control our minds will determine whether we make the world better or worse. When the mind is used rightly, all civilized circumstances fulfill their roles as assistants in establishing a garden of happiness. Otherwise, civilization becomes like a weapon in the hand of a robber.\(^9\)

That is, material civilization can bring forth a positive or negative effect to human life depending on how we use it. Human life can be enriched with the help of material civilization or it can become suffering entrapped by materialism.

Is any material thing considered neutral? Let's take the analogy of a weapon! Is the weapon, similarly to other material things, considered neutral to human life? When one compares a weapon in the hand of a good person with that in the hand of a robber, even a harmful thing like a weapon can be used differently. A weapon in the hand of a good person might be used as protecting one from a robber and produces a positive effect, but a weapon in the hand of a robber might be used as harming others and produce a negative effect. The analogy of a weapon, even a deadly weapon, seems to be consistent with Sot'aesan's evaluation of material civilization as neutral. Sot'aesan seems to mean that all material things, including a deadly weapon, can be good or bad depending on how they are used.

However, to examine the analogy in depth, Sot'aesan seems to consider material civilization as a whole, rather than an individual material thing, to be of neutral value. Material civilization as the source of material things is neutral: thus it produces material things which may be either positive or negative. That is, if material civilization produces beneficial material things, then it is evaluated as good. But if it produces harmful material things, it is evaluated as bad. Thus material civilization is neutral, but material things, the products of material civilization, can be either beneficial or harmful. If a harmful material thing is produced, it is completely harmful regardless of how it is used. Thus there is now a strong need to develop a spiritual civilization, in other words, a “re-creation of spirit,” in order to produce beneficial material things only. Material civilization—which has neutral value—should not be utilized to produce harmful

\(^9\) Ibid, p 120
material things but should only be utilized to produce beneficial material things for human life.

Let’s consider “re-creation of spirit” further. Is re-creation of spirit different from spiritual cultivation of the past? Sot’aesan’s re-creation of spirit cannot be accomplished by reinforcing religious teaching of the past, namely the period of old heaven (Sŏnch’ŏn, 先天). Nor can it be done merely by combining various religious teachings of the past. In the past many religious teachings talked about how to control human desire since humanity struggled with various greed. Religious teaching or morality of the past was more concerned with controlling desire related to people, not material things, namely products of material civilization. According to Sot’aesan’s perspective the contemporary era is a totally new age due to “development of matter (Mujilgaepyŏk, 物質開闢)” in other words, highly developed material civilization. The new age of “development of matter” needs spiritual civilization which can utilize the neutral value of the highly developed material civilization of the present.

Then what does Sot’aesan’s “re-creation of spirit” mean in responding to “development of matter”? Though Sot’aesan uses such terms as “cultivation of spirit (Chŏngsunsuyang, 精神修養)” or “cultivation of mind-field (Simjŏn’gaebal, 心田開發)” in other places, he highlights his essential message of founding a new order with the term “re-creation of spirit.” First, to define the term “spirit,” it means “the mental state in which the mind is of roundedness, clear and calm, such that it entertains neither a sense of discrimination nor attachment.” The reason for using the term “spirit”—instead of using other terms, such as “mind” or “consciousness” or “intention”—is to point out the basis of various mental states or stages. Since people’s mental states can become “disturbed” or “unstable” when attracted by luxurious material things, spirit as the basis of these changing mentalities needs to be emphasized, especially in relation to matter.

Next, to define the term Kaepyŏk (creation or re-creation in translation), it means the “opening” of heaven and earth in Eastern religious tradition. Though Eastern religious tradition may not have had a creator like the Christian God, the term

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Professor Paek Nak-ch’ŏng, though he is a literature critic, clearly explains what Sot’aesan’s message, “creation of spirit” means. His lecture—which was given to Won Buddhist priests, July, 1992—talks about (spiritual or moral) way in the era of creation of matter. His lecture addresses the distinctive characteristic of Sot’aesan message in relation to religious teachings of the past.

11 The Scripture of Won Buddhism, p. 1

12 Ibid., p. 28
Kaepyŏk is used to refer to the beginning of the universe. However, the term Kaepyŏk began to be used differently by two religious thinkers contemporary with Sot’aesan, namely Suun and Chungsan. These two religious teachers used the term Kaepyŏk to refer to a radical change of the world. Thus the term Kaepyŏk is translated in two ways: one as creation and the other as re-creation.

According to Suun and Chungsan, the radical change of the present world is equal to “the beginning of the universe” in terms of its scale and significance. Thus, the period from “the beginning of the universe” to “development of matter” is called the period of the old heaven (Sinch’ôn, 先天). The period from “the development of matter” to “the future”—re-creation of spirit integrating development of matter—is called the period of a new heaven (Huch’ôn, 後天). Sot’aesan agrees with Suun and Chungsan’s perspectives on history. Sot’aesan’s “new heaven” seems to refer to both the new earth and the new heaven in a more precise way because earth is open due to development of matter and heaven is open due to re-creation of spirit. That is, Sot’aesan defines radical change of Western material civilization as development of matter. Then “development of matter,” namely material civilization, is to be followed by “re-creation of spirit,” i.e. spiritual civilization.

One might ask whether the period of Kaepyŏk (creation or re-creation) of spirit ever existed. If previous religious or moral teachings were to function as revival or revitalization of spirit, why does Sot’aesan emphasize “re-creation of spirit” in this era? How is Sot’aesan’s “re-creation of spirit” different from the previous Zen, Taoist, or Neo-Confucian way of cultivation? These three religious traditions have commonly taught cultivation of mind without emphasizing any intrinsic relation between spiritual and material force because materialism was not the major concern in those days. Though Sot’aesan integrates the previous religious practices such as cultivation of mind, his “re-creation of spirit” is radical enough to break through the limit of previous practices. Since cultivation of mind of the past is not strong enough to recover enfeebled spirit due to development of matter, one should respond to development of matter differently.

Sot’aesan’s perspective on “re-creation of spirit” can be explained by analyzing one article chosen from the Collection of Early Publications of Won Buddhism. There arise such questions as “Is re-creation of spirit needed due to the development

of matter?” or “If spirit already existed, why is re-creation of spirit needed again?” Then those questions are answered as follows.

Though human spirit is fundamentally one, it can be divided into two based on how to utilize it, namely technological spirit (Kisuljok Ch’ongshin, 技術的精神) and moral spirit (Todokjok Ch’ongshin, 道德的 精神). To observe human races of the contemporary era they have enormously cultivated technological spirit which invents or produces material things. But the creation of moral spirit—which seeks for or utilizes material things—has not been cultivated yet...\(^\text{15}\)

That is, scientific development or material civilization is also the result of advanced human spirit. However, though development of matter is the result of development of human spirit, that spirit is a technological spirit to invent and produce material things and, that is different from moral spirit. Re-creation of spirit, in other words, creation of moral spirit—which is to seek or utilize material things—is needed in order to make a balance with development of matter, namely technological spirit.

Then how can re-creation of spirit be accomplished? Moral spirit is divided into two realms: spirit to seek for material things and spirit to utilize material things. Here one should understand that the creation of two realms of moral spirit is discussed in the context of responding to development of matter, namely material civilization. In order to accomplish re-creation of moral spirit, the article describes the phenomena of how two realms of moral spirit have not been cultivated. Then it suggests the method by which two realms of moral spirit can be cultivated.

The first realm of moral spirit is creation of moral spirit to seek for material things. It is described as follows:

People of contemporary era, intoxicated with material civilization, are shaken by the trends of the time, indulged in luxurious life, ignore their own limit, seek for a life of luxury—house, food, clothing, etc., and they often fritter away their fortune. In order to back up their lost fortune many people dream of making a fortune at a stroke, and then suddenly ruin themselves and their family ...\(^\text{16}\)

Then the method of cultivating moral spirit to seek for material things is described as follows.

\(...\) (one should) learn natural or unnatural (characteristics of) principle so as to distinguish proper work from improper one, learn right from wrong, beneficial from harmful (characteristics of) fact so as to judge right work from wrong one, keep peace

\(^{15}\) Collection of Early Publications of Won Buddhism, Vol 2, p 338.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p 338
and stability of mind, and cultivate strength of spirit in order not to be shaken by any desired material things. One should not even try to seek for them if those material things are beyond one's reach. One should cultivate spirit in order to take material things not by attraction but by conscientiousness. If one has desire to seek for material things, one should seek for them not by luck but by legitimate ways—engaging an occupation such as scholarly work, agriculture, industry, or business.\textsuperscript{17}

The second realm of moral spirit is the creation of moral spirit to utilize material things.

Suppose that a person bought a good quality-knife—newly invented. If the knife is used for good purpose, then it can be very convenient and beneficial for society. However, if one uses the knife for robbery or murder out of one's own greed, one might lose one's own life. Then the value of a good quality-knife might cease to be and the merit of the inventor—who produced the knife—might vanish. This kind of an example is not limited to a knife only. To observe contemporary society, the more novel material matters are invented, the more criminals—using highly developed technology and weapon—increase. Society is losing peace, and inviting self-destruction.\textsuperscript{18}

Then the way the moral spirit can be cultivated to utilize material things is explained as follows:

Based on proper religious teaching people should be trained to adopt what is righteous and to reject what is unrighteous. Then, they will reform their mode of thought so as not to use material things in harming others for their own interest, and so as to use them in case of mutual benefit.\textsuperscript{19}

As long as creation of spirit, that is, creation of moral spirit to seek for or utilize material things, is followed, material things can bring forth a positive effect to human life because "(they) give convenience to our physical lives," as Sot'aesan described earlier.

So far this paper has developed the thesis that material civilization, which was considered negative on the surface, can function as positive when integrated by spiritual civilization. When creation of spirit responds to development of matter and utilizes material civilization, then a truly civilized world follows, as Sot'aesan visions. Then one might ask when the truly civilized world will come. The question might be rephrased in the following way: "Is present civilization in the process of progress or regress?" According to Sot'aesan's view of history, the period of regress

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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p.338
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, p.339
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p 339.
and the period of progress cannot be separated completely because the new world is coming while the old world is not completely destroyed. Thus, Sot’aesan describes the present in the following way, “Now is only the end of this degraded world, but at the same time, it is the beginning of the new world.”

According to Sot’aesan, material civilization is not the characteristic of regress even though spirituality and morality became declined due to materialism. Thus, Sot’aesan seems to evaluate material civilization as an incentive or challenge to create highly developed spiritual civilization. After spiritual civilization is cultivated in response to material civilization, spiritual civilization will integrate material civilization. Then, there arises the integration of both material and spiritual civilization, namely, the truly developed civilization. The truly civilized world is visioned in The Scripture of Won Buddhism as follows:

... the world which emphasizes only materialism is like a person whose body is healthy, but who has an ailing spirit. And the world where emphasis is placed only on spiritual civilization may be compared to a person whose spiritual condition is perfect but who has an ailing body. How can a one-sided world be called perfect? Therefore, when the development of the inward spiritual civilization can keep pace with the outward material civilization, perfect peace and tranquility will be brought forth in this world.

Whereas materialism dominates the contemporary world, a supreme morality will prevail in the coming world, cultivating the human spirit and overcoming the materialism. The material civilization will become useful for elevating morality.

Since spiritual cultivation in the contemporary era has not progressed beyond previous spirituality or morality—which were not challenged by highly developed material civilization—it is not capable of utilizing material civilization of contemporary era. Thus, the contemporary civilization without sufficient spiritual civilization shows unbalanced characteristics between spiritual and material civilization. Then it can be compared with a person who has a healthy body but an ailing spirit. That is why spiritual civilization is needed more urgently now than before.

As a conclusion, to highlight Sot’aesan’s point, Western material civilization is not causing the crisis of spiritual civilization but stimulating the development of highly spiritual civilization. When spiritual civilization—Eastern religions’ creation of spirit as the response to Western material civilization—is cultivated sufficiently

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20 The Scripture of Won Buddhism, pp. 378-379
21 Ibid., p. 121
22 Ibid., pp. 379-380
enough to utilize and integrate material civilization, then the integrated civilization of these two will be the truly developed civilization which is referred to as the era of new heaven and earth.