

Religion in Public and Private: A Perspective of a Seon (Zen) Practitioner

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I. Introduction

It is very important that practitioners of religion and law get together to discuss the topic of “Religion in Public and Private” to find an effective way to promote a culture of peace, justice and healing for all people in the multi-religious civil society throughout the world. This can be fostered through sharing ideas and experiences in the global context. As a Buddhist monk and a Seon (Zen) professor, I am pleased to take part in the symposium on “Religion, Democracy and Civil Society” focusing on the “Religion in Public and Private” session. I was invited to share my personal thoughts and experience about this topic. I will try to show an East Asian point of view based on Korean culture that will be useful for comparison by Western scholars who are more familiar with Euro-American traditions. I appreciate the thoughtful and significant efforts of the organizer of this symposium to make meaningful contributions to people of various societies, not only in religious but in political fields as well. In this paper, I will focus on some key words of the topic by reviewing the meanings of these words from my perspective and then suggest some points of view from Seon, a way of Buddhist meditation, as a practical way to enrich humanity and society in terms of the private and public context.

II. Basic Understanding of the Topic

1. Religion

'Religion,' in Korean is 'Jonggyo', a compound word that originally consisted of 'Jong' (top or ridge) and 'Gyo' (teaching), which literally means 'supreme teaching.' In fact, 'Jong' refers to a supreme state of being or reality which is attained by Enlightenment and 'Gyo' refers to expression and teaching about Jong. However, Jonggyo also refers to a religious and spiritual community or organization, as well as to the supreme teachings of sages, such as Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus, who were the founders of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity respectively. Nevertheless, Jonggyo indicates the teachings of spiritual beings in general and of the so-called world religions in particular. Of course, this depends on the people and situations involved. Therefore, Jonggyoin in Korean, 'religious person', refers to a person who belongs to a certain religious community, such as a Jeol or Sachal (Buddhist temple and monastery), a Seongdang (Catholic Christian church), a Gyohoe (Protestant Christian church), a Seongwon (Islam Mosque) or a Gyodang (some indigenous denominational place of Cheondogyo and Wonbulgyo , etc.) It is noticeable that Jesa in Korean, a ritual service or a memorial ceremony for a deceased ancestor, and Gut in Korean, a Shamanistic performance for a sick person or the departed, are included in Jonggyo-euirye, a religious ritual service. However, I would like to bring your attention to the epistemological and practical meanings of Jonggyo, a Korean

word for religion, which has been recognized more as a spiritual and educational term rather than a social and institutional one.

Many languages have different words that can be translated as religion, but they may use them in various ways, and some have no word for religion at all. For instance, 'Dharma,' a Sanskrit word, could be translated as religion and law, or simply truth for Buddhists and Hindus. Therefore, we should be careful to understand the term properly in certain cultural and religious contexts. History shows that the development of religion has taken different forms in different cultures. However, religion helps people to deal with problems of human life that are persistent and unbearable such as terrible sickness and death. Religious beliefs provide a set of ideas about why and how the world is put together that allows people to deal with suffering and to accommodate misfortune and anxieties. Some religions place an emphasis on belief, basically seen in the god-centered religions, while others emphasize practice in the human-centered religions. For instance, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are examples of the former and Buddhism for the latter. Some religions value and focus on the subjective experience of the individual or the private, while others consider the activities of the religious community or the public to be more important. Some religions claim to be universal, believing their principles and worldview to be binding for everyone, while others are intended to be practiced only by a closely defined or localized group. However, religion has also been associated with public institutions

such as schools, hospitals, communities, the government and non-governmental organizations for managing the common concerns of people in society.

In general, it could be said that religion is a collection of belief systems, cultural systems, practical ways and worldviews that leads to practices and established rituals with symbols that relate humanity to spirituality and moral values. Many religions have their own histories, traditions, symbols and narratives that are intended to give meaning to life and the universe. They tend to derive religious rules, morality, and a preferred lifestyle from their ideas about the cosmos and human nature. The word 'religion' is often used interchangeably with 'faith,' 'belief system,' and 'spiritual practice.' However, religion can differ from individual private belief or practice in its communal and public features. Most religions have practical regulations, including professional hierarchies and precepts, a definition of what constitutes adherence or congregations of laity. They have regular congregational assemblies or public services for the purposes of veneration to deities through prayer, as well as remembrance of their founders and practice of their teachings. They also preach their scriptures or doctrinal thoughts, as well as practice morality and relationship with other people of the community. The practice of a religion includes meditation and other spiritual aspects of human culture. While a ritual performance is to show one's devotion in an outward manner to supreme beings, in contrast, meditation practice is a spiritual inner path to seek the

ultimate reality in one's inner world. Ritual services are active and expressive, but meditation practices are non-active and intuitive in silence.

It seems that religion focuses more on institutionalized and communal factors in contrast to spirituality, which orients more to a liberal and personal dimension of religious reality. Although there have been various religions and spiritual traditions, we can classify religions into three broad categories: 1. world religions, which refer to international or trans-cultural and traditional practices; 2. indigenous religions, which refer to smaller, culture-specific or nation-specific religious groups; and 3. new religions, which refer to newly developed religious groups. In many ways, we should understand and appreciate all religions without prejudice if they have not made human rights violations, but contribute to humanity and world peace, no matter how different they look or sound. We need interreligious dialogue and cooperation for peace and harmony among people in the world for the common good.

2. Public and Private

"Public" in Korean is "Gong[gong]" or "Gong[jung]" , which refers to the people, community, and the world. "Private" in Korean is "Sa[sa]" or "Gae[in]" and refers to the personal and individual. In general, 'Gong' specifies the official and is open to people; 'Sa' indicates it is unofficial and secluded. Therefore, Gong and Sa stand against and is contrary to each other. However, history

shows that in Korea and East Asia the Gong (public) has come first and is treated more important than Sa (private), showing a tradition for common sense. For instance, the idiom “Myeolsa-bonggong in Korean,” which literally means “eliminate the private and support the public,” has been popular and refers to selfless devotion of the people and official duty to one’s country. It seems that such a public oriented tendency has been derived from an ancient background where ordinary and individual people were powerless and were ignored by the political-economic system and the socio-cultural settings of the day.

However, in the enlightened and democratized society of modern times, situations have changed and people have laid claim to human rights which promote personality and individualism. Therefore, matters of the individual have been reevaluated positively and are now balanced against public interest. In fact, it is clear that a community, as a group of people consists of the basic element of individual persons, and that a community could not exist without individual persons as a part of the whole. It is obvious that a community should not one-sidedly demand a sacrifice of a person without his consent, as well as a person should not damage and cause disorder to the community. Everyone ought to consider others as themselves. Everyone has to think about the wellbeing of their community and take responsibility for the care of everyone in it. Therefore, it can be said that both the extremists of Jeonchejui (totalitarianism) and

Gaeinjui (individualism) or Jayujui (liberalism) do not serve the well-being of the people in terms of private or public.

In Buddhism, one of the most important and treasured concepts is Dharma which is translated into Korean as "Beop." Beop literally means law, justice, and the ideal. But Beop also refers to truth and the way which was taught by the Buddha (Enlightened One) to lead one in attaining insightful wisdom and Nirvana, perfect peace and happiness. Beop is for all sentient beings including every individuals and communities of humankind. Beop originally signifies natural reality like the flowing of water. Water is soft and adjustable to certain situations, flowing down and waiting in peace but will eventually overcome the obstacles and barriers on its way. It is said that we should live our lives through the way of truth that nature shows us without prejudice and discrimination. In a similar way, rivers and seas have the same character of water and show the diversity and unity in harmony according to time and space. The Nature of Dharma is harmonious and non-dual, as well as being adaptable and peaceful. Beop covers everything in the universe, from a single part to the whole. Beop is the way or path on which all people should go, whether it is individual or communal, public or private for common good and ultimate goal of righteousness and happiness of all.

In general, people or their representatives in democratic societies and countries of the world make laws through the legislative proceedings according their socio-political situation. Some laws

are made for executive public offices or governmental services to assure fair administration and to provide for the official's duty and responsibility to the people. Public officials ought to do their work concerning religious affairs with neutrality, remaining indifferent to the denominational matters beyond one's private faith or religion. There have been some social tension and conflicts among different religious groups around the world because some public officials ignore neutrality and use their position and power for their personal religious interests. Such cases brought disturbance and bad influence to other religious groups in the society. It requires sensitivity in the public officer's attitude when executing religious affairs in the public domain. He ought to be indifferent and fair, without personal religious orientation and interest.

III. Seon and Its Relevance to the Matter of Religion in Public and Private

1. Seon Practice

1) Background

'Seon' is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese word 'Chan,' which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word Dhyana and shortened, which can be translated as meditation or concentration. In fact, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese letter of Chan is Zen, which has been popular for English speakers since some Japanese first introduced it to the West. Seon (Chan/Zen) also refers to a school of Mahayana Buddhism which developed in China during the 6th century CE as a meditation practice-oriented

tradition. Seon is known as a typical Buddhist spiritual practice of concentration or contemplation on a certain point to produce a state of mind known as Samadhi, a complete absorption. Through this practice, one can make one's mind calm, clear, and bright. From that state of mind one can see one's nature or the Buddha Nature and reality of the world, which means an attainment of Enlightenment or completion of wisdom and freedom of transmigration. In the Seon tradition, its origin has been known as the meditation of Siddhartha just before he attained Enlightenment and became the Sakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, Seon is recognized as the best way of practice to attain Buddhahood. It is noticeable that the Dharma lineage of Chinese and Korea was started from Sakyamuni Buddha. Traditionally, Seon emphasizes practice to attain Enlightenment which generates Wisdom and Compassion for all sentient beings. As such, it de-emphasizes theoretical knowledge in favor of direct self-realization through meditation practice. Seon stresses meditation and asceticism in daily life.

2) Seon Practice

Seon practice has been recognized in Korea as the best among all Buddhist practices to attain Enlightenment. Seon training emphasizes daily life practice, along with some intensive periods of meditation. However, focusing on the Awakening or Enlightenment has always been the ultimate goal no matter where or when one is situated, but one should always be aware of being in a certain situation, in every moment of "here and now."

According to tradition, Seon originated as a transcendental non-verbal Dharma which was communicated and transmitted directly by the Buddha to his principal disciples. Though the traditions have spawned numerous lineages, they all share two elements: a metaphysical system postulating that reality is essentially empty and an emphasis on the practice of meditation. Emptiness is based on no-self and interdependent origination or coexistence of reality in humanity and the world. Seon meditation practice is not a logical approach but is intuitive.

The characteristics of the Seon tradition have been known by the following four phrases: "1. The way is not established on academics, 2. The Mind is transmitted beyond the Scriptures (the Doctrinal Tradition). 3. Correctly orient the human mind. 4. Seeing one's true nature to attain Buddhahood." Those words teach practitioners that they should not attach to scripture and words, but use them as Upaya, or Skillful Means. In distinction to many other Buddhist traditions, Seon de-emphasizes reliance on religious texts and verbal discourse on spiritual questions. It is important to notice that a well known Seon proverb says that when a finger is pointing to the moon, "one should not see merely the finger, but the moon." This clarifies the terms of ultimate purpose for meaningful communication. Seon practitioners consider the letters and scriptures as a finger which points to the true reality. Seon holds that these things lead the practitioner to seek the direct intuitive apperception of the Buddha-nature. Seon can be practiced anywhere and anytime

because it is dependent on one's single mind or intention regardless of any particular conditions.

Attaining Enlightenment means to attain Buddhahood or become a Buddha (Enlightened One). Enlightenment, or Awakening, refers to knowing the reality or nature of oneself and the world. It also includes the completion of wisdom and freedom from transmigration. Seon is characterized by mental and spiritual discipline, calmness, austerities and effort. Seon asserts, as do other schools in Mahayana Buddhism that all sentient beings have the Buddha Nature, the universal nature of inherent Wisdom and virtuous Compassion; and emphasizes that the Buddha-nature is nothing other than the nature of one's mind itself. The aim of Seon practice is to discover this Buddha-nature within each person through meditation and mindfulness of daily experiences. Seon practitioners believe that this provides new perspectives and insights on existence, which ultimately lead to Enlightenment. It is notable that among various ways of Seon practice, Ganhwaseon (Observing Hwadu Meditation) is popular in Korea.

2. Seon's Relevance to Religion in Public and Private

As said above, Seon is a way of spiritual practice which is open to anyone who is interested in one's own nature and the reality of the world. Seon is a practice of mind which is the source of one's thinking, speaking and acting to manage one's life. It can be imagined that one's mind is clear and calm, bright, and peaceful,

then, one's speech and action are gentle, peaceful and compassionate. Therefore, it has been said that "Simcheongjeong-guktocheongjeong" in Korean, which means when the mind is clean and pure the country is clean and pure. It shows the relationship and interdependence that an individual or the private is not separated with people or the public but is integrated as a non-dual being. It is said that there is no difference among people in ultimate reality according to the enlightened one. It is known that most conflicts and disputes have arisen from egoism and selfish attachment for one's interests. If people realize that all sentient beings are the same as themselves in reality, they should be compassionate and naturally take good care of others. Therefore, it can be said that Seon practice is relevant to overcome the self-centric and violent mentality and achieve the non-dual and peaceful mind for good both in public and private.

It is also a well-known teaching of the Buddha that one who seeks truth and peace should take the Middle Path; the righteous and noble path, through which one could attain Enlightenment and achieve happiness. As the words literally indicate, the Middle Path refers to a good and peaceful way which transcends the extremes of both the one-sided and opposing views of a selfish and narrow minded person or group no matter what kinds of fields and subjects. One should consider others with a compassionate mind and seek a middle way for the common good in balance. The real compassion is called Dongchedaebi in

Korean, which means the great compassion of one body. If one thinks about the matter of religion in public and private from the perspective of one body compassion, there would be no conflicts and damages to others, private or public. We should have a sense of compassion and take the middle path for peace and happiness in terms of the common good at all times. We could achieve such a compassionate mind and go on the middle path through Seon practice which leads one to make a peaceful mind and insightful view in reality. Therefore, it can be said that Seon is a Buddhist meditation practice which is an essential part of the religion, and its way is relevant and adaptable to other religions for cultivating their spirituality in public and private.

3. Response to Some Presented Questions

Here are my personal responses to the given questions that are to be discussed with our colleagues in this session which was suggested by the organizer.

Q1). What sorts of pressures do religious actors face in the public sphere? To what extent should religion be privileged in the public sphere or limited to a private sphere?

A: Religious actors should take the role of the ideal which is expected by the public to be proper and relevant for a religious person. Religious actors should not act as a political person or secular actor. Therefore, I believe that they should act in public as religious and spiritual practitioners in terms of their moral

obligation. Religious persons should consider it a privilege to act in the public as a spiritual leader or serviceman who should not take profits and advantage for oneself, but take care of people in society. A religious person should not demand a change to anyone's personal faith and should respect human rights and religious freedom, while promoting spirituality in the private sphere.

Q2). Can meaningful involvement of religion in the public sphere contribute to or detract from religious freedom overall? To what extent can the public involvement of a dominant religious tradition affect the religious freedom of minorities in a community?

A: Depending upon situations, a normal religion can contribute to the public in religious freedom by proper practice and education in which liberty and humanity is cultivated through academic or objective way. If a religion intends to propagate or take its mission to the public, people who do not belong to the same religion could be detracted from their religious freedom. If a dominant religious tradition tries to go its own way without considering the other minorities in a community, there would be tension and conflicts among people in the community. Therefore, a person of the dominant religion should be humble and moderate to the other minorities, and prepare dialogues with others to communicate for the common good.

Q3). To what extent should religious symbols be allowed in public settings? When do symbols in public space constitute legitimate acknowledgment of religion's societal role, and when do they constitute impermissible imposition of religion on others?

A: Religious symbols are naturally allowed in public settings when all participants in the place belong to same religion. And if religious leaders and practitioners are respected by people in society, symbols of all religions in the society could be set together in public space and it could constitute legitimate acknowledgement of religion's role. But, if religious symbols were set up in public places without permission or agreement from the public, it could constitute an imposition of religion.

IV. Conclusion

At the beginning I reviewed the key words of the topic, "Religion, Public, and Private," from the perspective of a Korean practitioner to share some differences and similarities with Western participants. Then, I introduced Seon, a Buddhist meditation practice that could be useful for any religious people to develop their spirituality in attaining enlightenment and a compassionate mind, in which one could realize the oneness or non-duality with others by overcoming egoism and discrimination. Then I responded to some questions for discussion with the participants of this session. In short, "religion in public and private" is an important issue which is a very sensitive and influential matter around the world not only for the religious cultural sectors but for

the sociopolitical situations in society. We should consider that this issue ought to be managed by the 'middle way' in balance for the common good in terms of peace and harmony in the world.