

On the Recent Emergence of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Korea with Special Reference to its Critique of Christianity

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1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to look at an inner paradox which has arisen in recent years with respect to how socially engaged Buddhist groups in Korea are trying to respond to challenges which have been recently posed to them by the current situation of Christianity in Korea. Except for early conflicts with Christianity and Confucianism late in the 19th Century, until now, Korean Buddhism has had little cause for any conflicts with Christians. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that Buddhist practices and beliefs have stimulated the life and practice of Christianity within Korea.¹

However, since the coming to power of the current Korean government, the cooperative relation which had existed with Christianity has broken down. Most especially is this true with respect to relations with Protestant Christians. At the present moment, an extremely critical situation exists although, ironically enough, the current critical situation could possibly work to the advantage of Korean Buddhists. Adverse conditions encourage them to work together and to speak with one voice about social problems and issues that are afflicting the quality of life of many Koreans. A new form of active participation is beginning to make its presence felt. In this paper, I will thus speak about how a number of Buddhist groups are responding to the current situation of Christianity in Korea. How does one best speak about Buddhist groups who are socially engaged? I attempt a critical evaluation.

¹From the praxis of Korean Buddhism, Christianity learned many things, whether, for instance, we speak about the use of early morning worship programs or about how one should encourage the building of new churches as the need arises. Witness how church building programs were organized during times of expansion and revival among the Korean Churches, especially among the Protestant churches. Most Korean Churches also host early morning services which begin at about 4:00 a.m. The initiator of this type of approach was a famous Korean pastor named as Kil, Sun Ju who, in his day, noticed that the early morning Buddhist chant services tended to begin at around 3:00 a.m. And so, in response, Kil, Sun Ju developed a form of early morning Christian service that was inspired by the Buddhist example. How new churches were constructed was also, in a way, derived from how Buddhist temples were constructed in a manner which points to a species of religious devotion. For Buddhists, participating in the construction of a temple, in all its aspects, is to be regarded as a form of worship. Hence, for Christians, why not adopt this Buddhist manner of worship in order to build Christian churches? This kind of thinking thus explains why, in building new churches, most Korean Church leaders try to encourage a form of participation that extends to all members of a given congregations. Yu, Chai-Shin, *Korea and Christianity*(Seoul: Korean Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 7-9.

2. Traditional Korean Buddhism and its Cooperative Response to Christianity

As in China, Taiwan, and Japan in East Asia, Buddhism has also had a long history of involvement in Korea. From China, Buddhism entered Korea in the 4th Century AD at the time of the Koryo dynasty. It has flourished ever since. It was a Korean monk, for instance, who took Buddhism to Japan during the 6th Century AD at the time of Baekjae dynasty. In the early centuries of its history, Korean Buddhism played a key role in Korean political life and within the general life of Korean society.² In any study that we would want to make of Korean social forms, then as now, we cannot too easily proceed without referring to Buddhism and the reality of its pervasive presence.

As noted, Buddhism exercised an initial major influence in Korean life. However, when, in the 14th Century, a new political ideology was introduced by the Li dynasty, a new political ideology which existed as a form of Neo-Confucianism, Korean Buddhism began to lose its earlier influence and dominance. In response to severe persecutions, Korean Buddhism withdrew from its prior social presence and social engagement. Most of the clergy and most of the laity were forced to leave their old homes in populated areas and to make new homes in mountainous regions. They were now allowed to return to their earlier habitations. From that time on, Korean Buddhism lived on in mountainous parts of Korea and, with the passage of time, a growing emphasis was placed on the value of religious observance as this can be done using the practices of Zen meditation within a monastic way of life.

Hence, by the end of the Li dynasty in the 19th Century, a divide was created: a separation between Buddhist life and practice and a secular manner of living which had become dominant among many Koreans. Into the 20th Century, this separation endured despite encounters with the new forces of modernization and the influences of a growing Christian presence. Secular activities were not encouraged. One best restricts one's practices to rites and ways of behavior which are strictly religious. Not much attention was given to the emergence of Christianity within Korean society in the 20th Century. In the wake of the silence of Korean Buddhists, Korean society was able to avoid religious conflicts as this could have occurred between Buddhists and Christians. This situation has maintained itself until very recent time, especially in the last ten years.

However, in our day, Korean Buddhism has begun to re-connect itself with a secular dimension which exists in human life. This engagement has been incited in two

² Lewis R. Lancaster, 'Introduction' in *Introduction to Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns* edited by Lewis R. Lancaster and C. S. Yu (Berkley: Asian publishing House, 1989), p. 12.

ways. The first arose in response to the presence of Minjung theology (민중신학, Korean liberation theology) during the 1980s. This theology encouraged Koreans to think about the problems that were being caused by the kind of political oppression which existed during the dictatorship of Park Jung Hee. In these years, compared to the Buddhists, many Christians, especially many Protestants, whether as individuals or groups, sacrificed themselves to encourage the democratization of Korean political life. In these years also, as a second factor, Buddhist intellectuals who were trained in the West began to ask some critical questions about the monastic orientation of Korean Buddhism and how the historical evolution of Korean Buddhism was to be understood and evaluated. They all attempted to speak about Buddhist doctrine as this relates to the value of compassion and the need for a connatural form of social engagement. As a consequence of these efforts, a new form of Buddhism would thus arise: “Minjung Buddhism.” Its Minjung theology could now respond to Christian activities as these existed within Korean society, activities which were not lacking in elements of social engagement.

However, amid the changes that were occurring in the 1980s, Minjung Buddhism would not be welcomed by very many mainstream Korean Buddhists, especially by the Buddhist clergy who held positions of power and influence among Korean Buddhists and also within the Korean social order. Minjung Buddhism would be seriously criticized by many moderates and also by conservative Buddhists, whether as individuals or as groups. The growth of a large Buddhist reformed movement within Korea was thus impeded and, at times, it was successfully stopped.

Yet, in the 1980s, the situation began to change. In these years, Korean Buddhists began to send their own missionaries overseas in order to care for Korean immigrants who had departed for North America and for Korean workers who had gone to Europe to work mainly as miners or as nurses. While working overseas, many of these missionaries began to give serious thought to questions having to do with the social dimension of religion given their encounters with what they were finding in Western culture and society and the activism which they encountered in Christianity. After they returned to Korea, they began to reinterpret traditional Buddhist social concerns as these existed in mainstream Korean Buddhism.

During the years of peak growth for the Korean churches in the 1980s, the programs of these churches served to stimulate young lay Buddhist intellectuals who had been trained in the West, suggesting to them how they could possibly reconstruct programs of their own that would connect a temple centered form of Korean Buddhism with what was now happening in the modern world. Summer “bible school” programs

were introduced, although, for Buddhist children. Today in Korea, summer Dharma schools exist for all Buddhist children and also a number of Buddhist youth groups. On the model of Christian choir programs, Buddhist choir programs were brought into being. Western musical instruments were also introduced and, in addition, Buddhist choir organizations to assist at Buddhist services. These days, at Buddhist temples and Buddhist services, it is not uncommon to encounter a Buddhist choir where the singing is being accompanied by a piano.

Since the 1980s, a Korean word refers to “applied Buddhism (응용불교)” which, in turn, refers to a form of social engagement which now exists within contemporary Korean Buddhism. This social engagement has worked with a latent social dimension which is present in Buddhism in order to adapt it and to transform it in a manner which has led to a number of concrete applications in our global life. Almost all aspects of modern Korean life have been embraced in ways which refer to Buddhist economics, Buddhist education, Buddhist politics, Buddhist ecology, and forms of Buddhist social welfare which transcend earlier concerns that had focused on a secluded form of monastic living that was largely centered on the practice of Zen meditation. In our day now, applied Buddhism is well received by the young Buddhist clergy who have been educated in the West and also by lay Buddhists who respect the value of having an intellectual life. Admittedly, gender issues have yet to be addressed since this is still a taboo subject among many Korean Buddhists.

3. Critical Reactions to Christianity and the “Ashoka Manifesto”

As I have noted, Buddhism was not too concerned about the progress of Christianity in Korea until approximately the 1990s. Buddhism simply and silently ignored the presence of Christianity despite possibilities of conflict which existed in lieu of criticisms that were offered by some Christians about Buddhism. The calmness of typical Buddhist responses despite the presence of these criticisms naturally played an important role in Korean society if religious harmony was to exist within the confines of a common civil order.

However, this situation has shifted radically when, four years ago, the present government of Korea took office. The current President of Korea is a Christian. He had been brought up in a Christian family and he has also served as an elder for a mega Presbyterian church which, in Korea, is referred to as the Somang (소망, Hope) Church. In his cabinet appointments, most ministers come from a Christian background and only

a few, from a Buddhist background. In his policies, evidence abounds of Christian favoritism.

As I have noted, Korean Buddhists have traditionally adopted a policy of silence in matters which have to do with experiences of religious discrimination. However, at this time, their response is changing to one which unanimously opposes the current policy of religious favoritism as this is being practiced by the President of Korea. A strong feeling of unity is emerging among the bulk of the Buddhist clergy and among lay Buddhists, especially among socially engaged Buddhist intellectuals who are opposing the present government policy of showing favoritism towards Christians in Korea. A strong political force is emerging among Buddhists against the present government.

A key issue which galvanizes this criticism or which provides a focus for this criticism is the question of religious instruction in private secondary schools. Socially engaged lay intellectual Buddhist groups with the support of the Buddhist clergy are raising questions about the propriety of government involvement in a manner which is creating conflicts between Buddhists and Christians. Admittedly, the giving of religious instruction in secondary schools in Korea is not easily understood. As with Western schools, religiously funded private schools do not receive any kind of government subsidy, whether they be Christian or Buddhist. They teach their students according to the religious spirit and tradition which they have. These schools are not a problem in Korea.

The real problem relates to public secondary schools that were established by Western missionaries in the early years of Korean Christianity but which have received subsidies from the Korean Ministry of Education. More than 70% of Korean secondary schools were started as Christian schools. However, in contrast with what we find in the West, in Korea, these schools have been categorized as “public schools.” They could maintain their religious education programs and also receive subsidies from the Korean Ministry of Education.

Compared to the missionary founded Christian “public schools,” the Korean Buddhists established few secondary schools. But, in addition and as a source of complications, the number of secular public schools which have been established by Korean government is not sufficient to care for the educational needs of all students, irrespective of the presence of religious differences. In this situation thus, more than 70% of Korean students are destined to attend mission schools according to their place of residence, whether they are Christian or not. If a given student lives near a Christian school and if one is not a Christian, one must attend the local Christian school. Until very recent times, most Korean Buddhists understood the reality of Korean secondary

schools and they did not complain about the existence of religious education programs in schools which are Christian and which also receive government subsidies and grants.

However in recent times, Buddhist students as well as teachers have been voicing their criticisms, complaining against the presence of compulsory religious education programs within Christian secondary schools. Arguments were presented in judicial hearings to the effect that religious education programs should not be applied to all students irrespective of what students might personally wish in their religion even if secondary schools are normally chosen according to the area or place of a student's residence. The Christian schools were accordingly defeated. However, as a consequence, most Korean mission schools were banned from freely giving any kind of formal religious education contrary to what has been the case. If students want to move to another school which accords with their religious identity, they can freely do so although only if vacant seats can be found for them.

Ironically, the existence of religious education programs was criticized not on the basis of having civil rights within a diverse religious context but on a basis which is more closely related to questions that have to do with human rights: in this case, the claim or the right to have a purely secular education. In a point of view which many persons have come to accept, it is said that religious matters belong to a purely private sphere of life and that no legitimate place exists for religion within the public domain. The national constitution speaks about freedom of religion and a separation which should exist between religion and the state.

Unfortunately however, in pushing the logic of a separation between religion and state to an extreme degree, against the intentions of believing Buddhists, an unintended consequence has emerged. It is claimed that all forms of religious education should be abandoned in Korean schools and that religion should have no place in public life in the form of a coexistence which could exist as regards affairs of state and matters having to do with religion. Hence, in response, other Buddhist intellectual groups have attempted to revise this logic (to temper it) although not through any open criticism but in a way that implicitly collaborates with it. Especially is this the case with several Korean Buddhist professors and a well known member of the Buddhist clergy (a Dobub monk who leads a Buddhist ecological movement) who together issued a manifesto in the 24th of August, 2011, "The Twenty First Century Ashoka Manifesto" which argues the case for a healthy coexistence of religions in Korea. The drafters of this manifesto speak about the values of religious pluralism.

After the release of this manifesto at a press conference, many civically minded Koreans were expecting some form of implementation with other groups in Korea. But,

this has not happened for a number of reasons. Criticisms have been voiced by Buddhist clergy belonging to the Chogye denomination of Korean Buddhism. Conservative Buddhist clergy groups in Korea have expressed this discomfort in two ways. First, western Christian notions of religious pluralism which use key phrases such as “ultimate reality” are not compatible with Buddhist understandings of reality. Second, how would it be possible to speak about the legitimacy of a Buddhist mission not only in Korea but also across the world? This last reason or concern is especially fundamental since it is believed that, if the “Ashoka Manifesto” were pushed to its extremity, it would mean that Buddhists would have to forgo the spirit and purpose of their religious mission. Hence, for the time being, the “Ashoka Manifesto” cannot be further promoted within the context of Korean Buddhism.³

4. Conclusion

Until now, I have discussed the recent social movement of Korean Buddhism in Korea. I noted that Korean Buddhism was originally concerned with public and social matters in human life until the 14th Century and advent then of new political ideology. After this new ideology was promulgated and expressed as a new political system, Korean Buddhism withdrew itself from worldly life to emphasize a secluded form of living that was centered on the practice of Zen meditation in temples. This trend of Korean Buddhism has been strongly maintained and was much respected until recent times.

However, the situation began to change through the influence of Buddhist intellectuals who had been trained in the West. They contributed Korean Buddhism to be formed for the purpose of actively participating in social issues as a way of being able to respond to the presence of Christianity. Unlike past tensions which had existed between lay Buddhist intellectuals and conservative Buddhist clergy with respect to any involvement with social issues, today a common voice is being formed among Buddhists: a common voice that can address social issues as these relate to the presence and practice of Christianity in Korea.

However, these developments aside as they have arisen within Buddhism, a twofold problem presents itself. What range or limit exists when we want to speak about the legitimacy of a secular human right which wants to deny that religion has a public role to play in Korean life? Secondly, what range or limit exists for the legitimacy of a

³ Nowadays Korean Buddhism is preparing the different version of the announcement of the “Ashoka Manifesto.” Until now we do not know how they would revise it finally.

Buddhist religious mission work when we also want to think about the possibilities of inter-religious dialogue which can exist with other religious persons or with non-religious persons? I think that these dilemmas are key if we are to move forward in any decisions that we will make in the near future as we think about the re-emergence of a socially engaged form of Korean Buddhism and how this new consciousness will fit into Korean society.