

# An Interpretation of the “Awakening Period” in New Religious Movements of Korea

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently in Korea, public attention was drawn to a small Christian group because of its prediction of an imminent apocalypse. This group, led by Rev. Lee Chang-rim and called “The Mission For the Coming Days,” declared that the end of the world would definitely occur exactly at midnight on the 28th. of October, 1992 (though Rev. Lee did not clarify the time zone to which he referred). Needless to say, members of this group believed that only they would survive after the doomsday. The reason why this small group drew such attention, however, was that it was the source of several well publicized incidents and caused some social problems in Korea. Perhaps the highlight of this group’s activities was a live broadcast from its headquarters at midnight of the day of the predicted apocalypse. The reason for the broadcast was that the members of the group firmly believed that their bodies would be lifted up to heaven at that time. Of course in the end nothing happened that day.

It would be incorrect, however, to regard this Christian-style apocalyptic movement as representing all the millennial movements in recent Korean history. Rather, most apocalyptic movements in recent Korean history can be traced back to the emergence of new religious movements beginning with the *Tonghak* 東學 (Eastern Learning) movement in 1860. After the *Tonghak* movement, which was a reaction to *Sŏhak* 西學 (Western Learning, i.e. Christianity), Korea entered a golden age of religious movements. These movements had many characteristics in common because they were all products of the chaotic social situation in Korea in the second half of the nineteenth century. One characteristic many of these movements had in common was their vigorous assertion of apocalyptic ideas. They typically claimed that the world would meet a calamitous end followed by a new era of

paradise on earth. The interpretation of this new era by Korean new religious movements is unique in that it is typically referred to as the “Awakening Period” 開闢時代 *kaebyoksidae*).

My purpose here, then, is to investigate how this new period was described by these newly emerging religious movements in Korea. It is not possible in the space available for this article to examine the apocalyptic thought of all of the leaders of these movements, which number at least 10 to 15, but it is also not necessary. Of these, I have chosen to focus on the thought of three particular founders, Ch’ oe Suun 崔水雲, 1824–1864) of Tonghak, Kang Chungsan 姜甌山, 1871–1909) of Chungsonian order, and Park Sot’aesan 朴少太山, 1891–1943) of Won Buddhism, because of their charisma and their influence on the Korean people and their religious culture. I have also chosen these three because each of them seems to have derived their thought from one or more of the four major religious traditions of Korea: Suun shows strong Confucian influences, Chungsan basically has Taoist and shamanistic tendencies, and Sot’aesan mainly reflects the Buddhist way of thinking. These four traditions were re-interpreted by these three founders in accordance with the popular religious milieu in Korea at the time when they lived and taught. They represent a new Korean interpretation of the so-called “Greater Traditions” of East Asia. Before examining the apocalyptic thought of these movements, it is important to understand the socio-religious background against which these new religious systems developed.

#### THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY KOREA

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Korea suffered one of the most chaotic times in its history in both its politics and its economy. In the political realm, for much of the nineteenth century, various factions of the noble class “sold” government posts for bribes, fought among themselves and exploited the people. In the economic realm, it is not unfair to say that Korea in the nineteenth century had still not recovered from the damage caused by the Japanese invasion that began in 1592 and lasted for seven years. To make matters worse, the Manchurian invasion of 1636 followed shortly after the Japanese invasions, again devastating the whole country. During these two wars, Korea’s economic system was totally destroyed, and as a result many Korean peasants were forced off their land. Some turned to rebellion under the command of “down-and-out aristocrats,” as in the case of the notorious rebellion of General Hong (1811) and the people’s revolt of Chinju (1862). Such rebellions characterized the chaotic state of Korean society in the later nineteenth century, and this chaos undoubtedly greatly influenced religious beliefs and practices.

Similarly, Korea faced a difficult external political situation at this time as well, seen in what might be called “the Eastern expansion of Western Imperialism.” Korea was an early target of Japanese expansionism, and was also caused difficulties by Western powers such as England, France, Germany, Russia, and the U. S. A. (see below). The reaction of the Korean government to these foreign challenges was utterly ineffective. For example, the government of the Ch’ing dynasty, fearing Japanese expansion, urged the king of Korea to negotiate with Western countries. The king rejected this suggestion, however, saying that “barbarian heterodox ideas could only undermine the harmony of the Confucian world.” As a result, Korea came to be known as the “Hermit Kingdom” at this time.

During this period, the Korean people must have been very intimidated by these grave conflicts between Korea and foreign countries. They experienced periodic battles between the Korean navy and Western naval forces along the coast; the arrival of the “ghostlike” Western Christian Missionaries; an effete royal court influenced by foreign ambassadors; and a war between China and Japan, fought largely on Korean soil, as well as another war between Japan and Russia. In 1866, for example, the *General Sherman*, an American vessel, made an effort to force its way up the Taedong river in order to open trade with Koreans in Pyöngyang (now the capital city of North Korea). The Korean army, however, was able to destroy this foreign ship when it ran aground in the river at low tide. England, Germany, France, and Russia also used their strong navies to press Korea for trade. The Korean people were also greatly shocked by an incident involving Ernst Oppert, a German merchant who, after his formal request for trading privileges was rejected twice, robbed the grave of Taewön-gun’s father in order to blackmail the government into allowing him to trade in Korea. Taewön-gun was the father of the ruling king and the strongest man in the government when he was alive. Oppert’s grave robbery must have been an unthinkable crime to Confucian Koreans, a crime that to them would outrage both heaven and mortals. It would have seemed to them to completely shatter the fabric of Confucianism, which holds filial piety as one of the highest virtues.

On top of all of this, news from China was also bad. As the “Middle Kingdom,” China provided Korea with a sense of security. This relationship is reflected in a letter sent to China by the Korean government which read “Korea is a little child. In this crisis we are fearful and do not know what to do. We beg China ... to protect us as elder brother and feudal lord.” (CHOI 1988: 160) It must have been a great shock for Koreans to hear how the great country of China was so easily conquered by the armies of Western countries,

such as in the case of the Opium Wars with England. It seems very likely, therefore, that at that time Koreans lived in a constant state of anxiety. In the midst of this severe poverty and emotional instability, their future must have seemed very uncertain.

The religious situation in Korea at this time was likewise unstable. Because Confucianism was little more than an impersonal code of morality, it could scarcely satisfy the religious needs of the masses. The various rituals practiced by the people, such as *chesa* (祭祀, ancestor worship) and *purakje* (部落祭, village festivals), which are uniquely associated with Confucianism, were concerned solely with family or village affairs. As such, they provided little solace for the Koreans who found themselves in the chaotic politico-economic situation of the time. In other words, ancestor worship did not meet the spiritual needs of many Korean people at this time.

Buddhism also lost its vitality during the Yi dynasty owing to vigorous repression by Confucian officials. Buddhist monks were seen by these officials as belonging to the lowest level of society. Most Buddhist temples were completely demolished and only a few that were ensconced deep in the mountains survived. These dire conditions prevented Buddhism from being a creative or dynamic religion that could have met the needs of the people of the time. Instead, Buddhism came to take on a shamanistic character. Instead of leading the people by providing a new way of life or a new value system, Buddhism concerned itself only with satisfying the practical needs of the people by selling shamanistic talismans or enshrining the gods of shamanism.

The introduction of Christianity into Korea in the eighteenth century caused further confusion. Catholicism, being foreign and therefore heterodox, was regarded by Koreans as a very grave threat to the Confucian social fabric. It is important to note that Christianity reached Korea not via foreign missionaries but through the Korean members of annual embassies to Beijing who had come into contact with the ideas of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits. It was a rare case in the history of Catholic missionary work that a country admitted Christianity on its own initiative, without the intervention of missionary priests. This interest in Christianity might indicate the extent to which Koreans of that time were disenchanting with the 'fossilized' religions available to them, and suggests that they were searching for a new way of life or a new way of interpreting the world and humanity.

This does not mean that the propagation of Catholicism in Korea went forward in an easy and peaceful manner. The first Korean Catholics organized their church in the form of small underground communities without ordained priests. These secret activities were complicated by several incidents. In one case, two newly baptized Catholics burned their ancestral

tablets and were executed as a result. There was also the so-called “Silk-letter incident” in which Hwang, an avid young Catholic, wrote a letter asking the Pope to attack Korea and use military force to make it a Catholic nation. Several severe persecutions were launched against Catholicism as a result of these events. In fact, burning one’s ancestral tablet, considered the most important symbol in Confucian Korea, must have been shocking enough to seem like a real threat to the traditional value system of the people at that time. The people of Korea were doubtless quite confused by the unprecedented changes occurring in their religious world.

Thus, the arrival of Catholicism from the West only further complicated the religious atmosphere of Korea because of its exclusive nature and its conflicts with the existing traditional religions of Korea. These traditional religions, however, failed to transform themselves into revitalized religions. Unable to find a new value system corresponding to the changing times, the people were at a loss for a spiritual refuge.

#### KOREAN FORMS OF MILLENARIANISM: THE ARRIVAL OF THE “AWAKENING PERIOD”

The explication of the millennial thought by the new religious thinkers of Korea was based on a division of history into two periods: the period of the Former Heaven (先天時代 *sŏnch’ŏnsidae*) and that of the Later Heaven (後天時代 *huch’ŏnsidae*). The latter was understood as an era of paradise, while the former was described as one riddled with contradictions. The Korean expression applied to the new age was “Awakening Period.” In this period all of the conflicts in society were to be completely resolved. This way of dividing history into two Heavens can be traced back to the *I Ching*, but the main impetus for the development of this apocalyptic thought by these new Korean religions can be found in the Korean religious context. It was the *Chŏng-yŏk* 正易, the Korean version of the *I Ching* written by Kim Il-bu around 1860, that provided the philosophical (or even magical) basis for this idea of the arrival of a new world. The *Chŏng-yŏk* criticized traditional interpretations of the basic principles of the *I Ching* as insufficient on the grounds that they belonged to the Former Heaven, and suggested a new *I Ching* theory for the coming of the new era by reformulating the framework of the *I Ching*. The *Chŏng-yŏk’s* explanation for the occurrences of all kinds of conflicts in the Former Heaven is rather strange. According to Kim Il-bu, the universe of the Former Heaven was erroneously formed because a year consisted of 365¼ days. In the Later Heaven this number would be changed into the “even” number of 360 days, and because of this change human beings would never again suffer from natural disasters or social problems. Though it is hard to

imagine how this change might occur, this theory exerted great influence on the millennial thought of the new Korean religions.

Another important book that influenced the development of the messianic thought of religion of the Korean people for hundreds of years is the *Chōnggam-nok* 鄭鑑錄, the Book of Prophecies. Although it seems to date from the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty (fourteenth century), it did not achieve the height of its popularity until five hundred years later, in the nineteenth century. It was written in cryptic language and foretold a great dramatic event, noting the coming of a hero called *Chin-in* (真人 True Man), with the family name Chōng 鄭 who would deliver helpless people from catastrophe. Many founders of new religious sects identified themselves with this anticipated “True Man” of the *Chōnggam-nok*. Another idea central to this book concerned the existence of “ten geomantically auspicious spots” (十勝地 *shipsŭngji*) throughout the country where people would be safe in times of war or epidemics. Initially each sect asserted that the locations of these places were where followers of their sect resided, but eventually this concept of an auspicious spot developed into the idea that Korea, with the Koreans as the chosen people, was destined to become the center of the world, the *axis mundi*.

As has been the case in the Chinese and Korean history of folk religions, Buddhist eschatology, that is, the idea of Maitreya, the future Buddha who will come and restore the Dharma, cannot be ignored in the formation of the apocalyptic thought of the new Korean religions. The advent of an utopian world upon the descent of Maitreya Buddha must have provided some religious thinkers with ample reason for claiming that there would be a paradisiacal Awakening Period brought about by those who identified themselves with Maitreya Buddha himself.

#### THE PERIOD OF THE FORMER HEAVEN: THIS WORLD

How did these thinkers envision the period of the Former Heaven? What was ultimately wrong with this period? It was Chungsan in particular who gave much attention to this ultimate problem of the universe, basing his ideas on the theory of *Chōng-yōk* as described above. According to Chungsan, “the frame of Heaven and Earth” (天地度數 *chōnjidosu*) was not correctly structured at the time of the creation of the universe. As a result, the universe was wrongly formed, and man suffered from all kinds of disasters such as epidemics, floods, droughts, wars, etc. To put it differently, the Former Heaven was not created in the manner of “each producing the other” (相生 *sangsaeng*), but of “each overcoming the other” (being in conflict with each

other) (相剋 *sanggŭk*). The following is Chungsan's own explanation for the chaos found in the Former Heaven:

Since the principle of "each overcoming the other" has prevailed throughout the period of the Former Heaven, every human affair lacks harmony and, as a consequence, resentment (冤 *wŏn*) fills the "three realms of world 三界 *samgye*." The prevalence of such resentment has caused all the miserable disasters in the world. (*Taesun Chŏngyŏng* Vol. 5. 1975: 4)

We can therefore conclude that in Chungsan's teaching, the fundamental cause for all human disasters is resentment. This resentment is seen as the basic evil power that prevents all beings from living together in harmony.

It is interesting to see how Chungsan saw this resentment expressed throughout human history. In particular, Chungsan's theory focused on the resolution of the tremendous resentment felt by women that he believed had steadily grown from the beginning of history. He argued that the relationship between man and woman had been distorted and was especially unfair to women in the period of the Former Heaven:

This is the time for the resolution of resentment. I will resolve the resentment felt by the woman who has been imprisoned at home, as no more than man's plaything and servant for thousands of years, in order to establish the proper relationship between woman and man. Afterwards, man will not be able to do his own work by his own will if he does not listen to the words of women. (*Taesun Chŏngyŏng* Vol. 5. 1975: 134)

With this observation, he then made the prediction that men and women would be treated equally in the Awakening Period to come.

In the same way, Chungsan vehemently attacked the discrimination carried out by the noble class against the common people, including slaves, that had been customary in traditional society, and which had brought about tremendous resentment among the common people. In fact, he even acted on his words. One day, when he used honorific language to the servant of one of his disciples, the disciple responded:

Since this man is merely my servant, please do not use that kind of language ... [Chungsan replied] This man is your servant, not my servant. Therefore I have nothing to do with him ... Respect anyone [whether she/he is a noble man or servant], whomever you meet. There will be no more discrimination by the noble class against the common man ... in the future to come. (*Taesun Chŏngyŏng* Vol. 3. 1975: 5)

Going one step further, he even maintained that the new paradise would come sooner if outcasts were treated in a respectful manner.

According to Chungsan, resentment became deeply rooted in the world, and, as time went by, it would pile up to the point where the world would be filled with it. If we follow Chungsan's logic, our world today is on the brink of explosion because of this immense resentment. In what way, then, is this world going to explode? Here Suun and Chungsan shared the same opinion that a strange and incurable epidemic would sweep the world in the near future. This would be the clear sign of the end of the world, or more precisely, the end of the Former Heaven. When this epidemic occurred, human beings would die without any special reason, while walking, sleeping, or in any state of being. It is reported that Chungsan even noted the name of the place where this unintelligible disease would supposedly originate from. From there it would spread to other parts of Korea and to the rest of the world, and only those who survived would have the privilege of entering the utopian Later Heaven.

In contrast to this somewhat magical view on the end of the world, Sot'aesan's view on this subject is very rational. Although his two precursors stressed the danger of physical illness, Sot'aesan shifted people's attention from physical illness to "societal ills" or the "sick society," maintaining that religionists should only deal with the problem of mental illness. His rational approach to this topic is also found in his explanation of the relationship between the Former and the Later Heaven. He agreed with Suun and Chungsan that the 20th century was to be a turning point for civilization and that we would soon face the paradisiacal era of the Later Heaven. But, in his understanding, the world would not end due to a natural disaster or some kind of epidemic. This does not mean, however, that he viewed the Former Heaven in a positive way. To him, the Former Heaven was irrational or dark, i.e., contaminated by social ills caused by six elements greed for money, ungratefulness, the dependent mind, indifference to learning, inattention to teaching, and a lack of public spirit. However, according to Sot'aesan, the real problem lay with the onset of the scientific civilization which developed very rapidly at the turn of this century. He believed the human spirit could not keep up with the fast-paced development of materialism. This belief in the problems caused by materialism was the impetus for the formation of Sot'aesan's religion, Won Buddhism.

Because of the development of scientific civilization, the human spirit, which should make use of material things, grows weaker, while material things ... increasingly flourish and assert their domination over the enfeebled human spirit. Thus, human beings find themselves chained in servitude to materialism. (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 1)



The main slogan of Won Buddhism, “As material civilization develops, cultivate spiritual civilization accordingly,” came into being in this context. On another occasion, Sot’aesan warned of the unprecedented danger posed by this “crippled” modern civilization and said that if Koreans continued their current prejudices and put emphasis only on material things while ignoring the importance of spiritual cultivation, they would be exposed to danger, like careless children playing with sharp-edged tools (The Scripture of Won Buddhism 1971: 121). Thus, he believed that the world would not end “all of a sudden” due to some natural calamity. Rather, it was up to each individual to open him or herself up to a new world or to be demolished. Sot’aesan admonished his disciples to use their minds righteously in order to make “all civilized circumstances fulfill their roles as assistants in establishing a garden of happiness” (The Scripture of Won Buddhism 1971: 120). He believed that if people failed to do this, civilization itself would become like a sharp weapon in the hand of a thief. Sot’aesan concluded that only when the inward spiritual civilization and the outward material civilization can keep pace with each other would the world be tranquil and at peace. In time, earlier magical explanations of the end of the world gave away completely to the view espoused by Sot’aesan.

#### THE PERIOD OF THE LATTER HEAVEN: THE "AWAKENING PERIOD"

How, then, is the new world, or “Awakening Period,” described by these three thinkers? First, in Suun’s teachings there are few concrete descriptions of the “Awakening Period”; he says only that a utopian world of the “Ultimate Greater Tao” (無極大道 *mugūkdaedo*) will appear after strange epidemics sweep the world. However, descriptions of some of the concrete characteristics of this new world are found in the writings of Suun’s two juniors. They believed, for example, that Korea would be at the center of the world and would lead the “moral civilization” of the new age to come.

Suun received the following revelation when he experienced an enlightenment “Heaven said to me ‘In the 50,000 years since the world began, you are the first person ... to have penetrated the Ultimate Greater Tao. This also was predestined throughout our 50,000-year history.’” (*Chōndogyo Kyōngjon* 1992: 24 ) As a result of this revelation, Suun became a prophet chosen by the Supreme God (上帝 *Shang Ti*). But the important thing to notice here is that Suun was a Korean and that, because of this, Korea was understood to be the chosen land that had the ability to initiate the “Awakening Period.” The new utopian world was supposed to begin in Korea. A similar explication is offered by Chungsan. Chungsan is reported to have confessed that, while he resided in the Ninth (and presumably highest) Heaven, he was asked by Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and

Spirits to save “mankind from an unprecedented turmoil.” Interestingly enough, Chungsan believed himself to be a Supreme Being who was even higher than Buddha, let alone the Bodhisattvas. The important point here is that such a Supreme Being selected Korea as the place to descend from Heaven and as a place to start to teach his doctrines. Of all the countries in the world, Korea was seen by Chungsan as a country where the people worshipped spirits the most sincerely and with all their hearts. This was why Chungsan chose Korea as the *axis mundi*. Korea was to be transformed from a very weak country, subject to Japanese and Western occupation, into the nation at the center of the world.

This same motif is found in our third founder’s description of Korea, which is relatively rational compared with those of his two seniors. In Sot’aesan’s time, which was the time under Japanese colonial rule, Korea experienced one of the darkest and hardest periods of its history. In Sot’aesan’s eyes, however, Korea had a bright future. When asked whether Korea was currently in a period of progress or regress, he answered firmly that Korea was in the former, and that there was still hope for the future.

Since Koreans began to modernize, they have made a lot of improvement ... Nevertheless, they have problems which will need further improvement in the future. This country is now like a lizard which is growing gradually into a dragon. (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 380)

Sot’aesan also came to the conclusion that the Korean language would become an international language in the future, when Korea became a leading country in the world. To one of his disciples, who noted that Chinese was used as the traditional language of the scripture, Sot’aesan replied that the disciple should not value such a difficult language as Chinese because the scriptures of his religion, Won Buddhism, were written in an easier language, Korean. Sot’aesan had a firm conviction that many people from overseas would rush to Korea to learn his religion, the premier religion of the “Awakening Period,” as well as the Korean language, the language of the Won Buddhist scriptures.

As has been mentioned, the second characteristic of the “Awakening Period” is that the world would become a paradise, a utopia richly blessed, both materially and socially. The most concrete description of the “Awakening Period” is found in Chungsan’s descriptions, which are so vivid that most modern followers of Chungsan believe that what was foretold would really come true exactly as he stated it. A general outline of his ideas about this utopia is as follows:

A lantern will be set up atop the houses of all sincere devotees  
and will make the whole village as bright as daylight.  
A steam engine will travel ten thousand miles a second.  
A person's voice will be heard ten thousand miles away.  
Not only will door-rings be made of gold,  
but shoes will also be made of gold.  
Food and clothing will be taken from warehouses  
whenever they are required.  
Rice will be cooked without fire.  
Farming will not mangle the hands.  
The soil will be so fertile that seeds once sown  
will spring up year after year. (*Taesun Chōngyōng* Vol. 5 1975: 18)

The above descriptions are very material and technological, but Chusan also gave social and cosmic revelations such as the following

The cycles of the sun and moon will be corrected  
such that day and night, heat and cold, will be regular and moderate.  
The whole human race will become one family.  
Human beings will be able to ride the clouds at will, will be in constant  
communion with spirits, and will have the ability to ascend to heaven  
because the heavens will be close to the earth.  
Human beings will easily understand past, present, and future.  
Greed, lust, and anger will all disappear and as a result, officials  
will not exceed their authority.  
There will be equality of the sexes  
and no discrimination against the children of concubines.  
Armies and instruments of punishment will disappear,  
as will disease and poverty. (*Taesun Chōngyōng* Vol. 5 1975: 16)

These descriptions of the age to come indicate that Chungsan's vision of it was very much this-worldly. This was the case for most of the other folk religionists of his time.

Sot'aesan's view of the coming age is even more global and grandiose. One chapter in the scripture of his religion, section 14 of "The Discourses of the Great Master," is titled "Prospects for the Future" and presents his vision of the coming age. When asked how the period of the Maitreya Buddha, or the Buddhist utopian age, can be described, Sot'aesan answered,

In this period, the wisdom of human beings will become brighter, no conflicts will be created, truth and falseness will be differentiated, and eventually none will worship Buddha images for their blessedness and

longevity, but will seek all their fortunes by means of accumulating merit in all circumstances and situations. Each of them will try to be a living Buddha, knowing that everyone is empowered as Buddha is. Buddha will be everywhere and so will our temples. (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 378)

In the utopian world of the Dragonflower, or the world of Maitreya Buddha, Sot'aesan expected two teachings to be widely followed that all are incarnations of the Truth-Buddha (處處佛像 *ch'öch'öbulsang*), and that each thing one does should be done as an offering of worship to the Buddha (事事佛供 *sasabulgong*). These two slogans stand for the ideal state of Won Buddhist practice. According to Sot'aesan, such a world was already being realized in Korea at that time. It would be a world in which everyone would be awakened to the above-mentioned truths. As to the actual features of this world and the behavior of people in it, Sot'aesan predicted that

Whereas contemporary people struggle to take from other people and to defeat and hurt them, people in the coming world will be eager to share and will be anxious to make concessions to others and help them ...

Whereas materialism now dominates the contemporary world, a supreme morality will prevail in the coming world, cultivating the human spirit and overcoming materialism. The material civilization will come to be used for elevating morality. (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 379)

Perhaps what is most interesting, however, is his next comment. In contrast to his firm belief that Korea would be the country that would lead the world morally and spiritually, he believed that it would actually be the Western countries that became civilized before the Eastern countries did so. This is so “just as the sunlight rises in East and reflects on the Western sky first” (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 380). However, this difference between East and West disappears when the sun reaches the middle of the sky. It is at this time when Sot'aesan's millennial world, “the world of great morality and true civilization,” is realized.

Sot'aesan believed, however, that such a spiritually awakened world could come about only when basic conditions of social welfare were satisfied. Sot'aesan believed that people in the coming world would live in a society in which public welfare facilities were fully developed. People would not have to worry about their material life because

in the coming world ... ever more employment agencies will serve those looking for jobs ... and nurseries will be established in many places so that mothers can go out to work without any concern for their children. Old people without protectors will live comfortable lives, without anxiety, at

homes for the aged ... Quick cafeterias will provide us with food adequate for our needs, so that we may not have to cook at home all the time. (*The Scripture of Won Buddhism* 1971: 382–383)

These descriptions of this future society are vivid enough to remind us of present-day northern European countries with their modern social welfare systems. It is astonishing that Sot'aesan foretold the advent of a prosperous (Western) society with relative accuracy in the early twentieth century. However, one might doubt whether the people of these countries are sufficiently awakened in terms of spirit and morality to conform to the conditions of Sot'aesan's ideal world.

### CONCLUSION

Although it is difficult to avoid the impression that Sot'aesan's opinion of the coming world is too optimistic, even naive, it is also true that his view of the new world is rather rational compared to those of his two predecessors. In the cases of Suun and Chungsan, the main cause for the disorder of the Former Heaven was described in a magical way. The frame of this universe itself was wrongly formed from the beginning, even though it was not clearly known why this was so. On the other hand, it is even harder to achieve the paradise of the Later Heaven according to these two, because a big catastrophe such as an incurable epidemic lay ahead. In accordance with this apocalyptic tendency, millenarianism figured prominently in the numerous sects that belonged to the Chungsanian order, especially from the early 1920s on. The most famous recent example of this is found in the sect named Taesun Chinri-hŏe (大巡真理會 The Truth Society of Great Peregrination), the biggest sect of the Chungsanian order and the sixth largest contemporary Korean religion.

Though the exact date was not clear, according to the followers of this sect, the world was supposed to end in 1989. Chungsan predicted that by 1989, strange and unintelligible epidemics would be rampant all around the world. To make matters worse, this would not be the biggest catastrophe. On doomsday, malicious *ch'i* 氣 would come down from above with the strange power to "melt" people's bodies. The only way to avoid this disaster was to become a member of this society and to diligently perform magical practices such as the recitation of incantations. Adherents seemed to believe that intense *ch'i* practice could change their bodies so that they would have a protective shell around them, making them immune to disastrous disease and this vicious *ch'i* power. I heard this directly from two followers in 1989; one was a college student and the other served as an official at City Hall in Seoul.

At that time, the former took a temporary leave of absence from school, while the latter quit his job forever. The purpose of their retreat from society was, of course, to join Taesun Chinri-hŏe in order to prepare for the end of the world. The official tried to sell all his property, which would be useless after the “Awakening Period” of the Later Heaven started.

Some time after this incident I tried to find materials written by the order about this event. Amazingly there was hardly any documentation of this event to be found in the publications of the order. When I asked the executive members of the order about this event, I was given only very vague answers, and got the impression that they were trying to avoid talking about it. This kind of avoidance of questions has made it very difficult for scholars of religion to investigate apocalyptic movements in new Korean religions. The only information we could get about this phenomenon was from newspaper articles. Therefore, it is not surprising that almost no scholarly papers have been written on this subject.

While millennial movements have appeared continuously from the early 1920's on in many sects belonging to the Chungsonian order, such movements do not seem to occur in Won Buddhism, Sot'aesan's religion. This may be because Sot'aesan's millennial thought was rather different from that of his seniors. His interpretation of the “Awakening Period” is relatively rational, as we have seen. Though he agreed that the “Awakening Period” was coming soon (or had already come), he apparently did not believe that the new age would come all of a sudden after the occurrence of major catastrophes. There is no place in his teachings for the disasters such as epidemics, flood, fire, etc. that are supposed to destroy this world. Magical practices such as the recitation of incantations were not recommended to his followers. His understanding of social change is rather simple most human problems in this age come from the discrepancy between spiritual and material progress. As material civilization arises due to the development of science, spiritual civilization should strive to catch up with it.

Movements espousing millennial beliefs in present-day Korea, therefore, move in either of two main directions. On the one hand they may fix their attention on a single apocalyptic event or series of events that clearly define the end of the present age and signal the beginning of the next, as in sects such as Taesun Chinri-hŏe, mentioned above, or as in the case of the “Mission for the Coming Days” group mentioned at the beginning of this article. It is also possible, however, that sects espousing millennial ideals of the kind found in Won Buddhism might focus instead on trying to bring about social change on an individual level, with no anticipation of an apocalypse. It will likely be the former, however, that draw the bulk of public attention.

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