Three Approaches to
Justice and Peace in Korea

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Before discussing the relationship between justice and peace, and the role which Buddhism and Christianity can play for promoting them in Korea, a brief definition of the meaning of peace is called for. Whatever it may mean in a positive sense, peace is a state free of conflict. The removal of conflict is a necessary condition for peace. What lies behind human conflicts? What makes a conflict truly a conflict? According to the common witness of Buddhism and Christianity, it is our selfish desires and interests, deeply rooted in our natures, that constitute the root-causes of conflict and give it its destructive power. Mere confrontation of ideas or differences in views do not lead to conflict. It is only when they are driven and distorted by selfish desires, conscious or unconscious, that they turn into ideological conflicts.

Conflicting desires within us destroy individual peace of mind. When one person's will runs up against the opposing will of another person, interpersonal conflict arises to disrupt the peace between them. But the conflict of desires does not take place only on the individual level. On the collective level it poses an even greater threat to peace. Conflicts between the collective will (or collective egoism) of different groups —races, states, classes, sexes, tribes, parties, religious communities – have been the major source of the social unrest and tension across the world. Problems of social justice necessarily arise in the attempt to resolve those collective conflicts.

Given the above understanding of peace and its enemies, what can we expect from religion in dealing with the conflicts? Can Buddhism and Christianity play the role of peacemakers for individuals and social groups torn apart by conflicting interests?

From the beginning, Buddhism has taken the problem of human desire very seriously. It does not seek merely to suppress human desire but, in accord with the teachings of the Buddha, sees desire (*tanhā*) as based

on a mistaken and distorted view of reality, a deep-seated ignorance (*avidyā*) of the truths of suffering, impermanence, and selflessness. Hence we need meditation and mental discipline in order to surmount this ignorance and free ourselves from bondage to habitual forces of desires.

Christianity has also taken the problem of selfish human will (sin) very seriously. Unless we are completely transformed by the gospel from the selfish mode of being to a new being which is open to God and to fellow human beings, we cannot find peace within or without.

What is it in us that makes us seek a new mode of being, beyond the fulfillment of selfish desires and interests? Religious anthropology does not agree with the modern biological view of the human, according to which we are essentially a mass of instincts endowed with the faculty of reason and intelligence. On such a view, peace can be achieved when we use our reason to curb excessive selfish desires by fostering rational agreements among individuals and social groups regarding the amount of desires each is entitled to satisfy. It is primarily in this context that secular anthropology and ethics raise the question of justice. Religious anthropology and ethics, however, have traditionally approached the problem of peace through love and self-sacrifice. They appeal to our higher, inner spiritual aspirations. Justice, the equal or fair distribution of the right to satisfy basic human desires, has been regarded more a problem of love and compassion than a problem of reason.

This traditional religious approach has been radically questioned in modern times, primarily as a result of an increased social awareness, particularly of a Marxist stamp. According to this sociological view, social problems cannot be solved by mere extension of individual ethics. Society follows its own logic, and there is a fundamental limitation to the capacity of the moral individual to live morally in an immoral society (to borrow Reinhold Niebuhr's term). It is simply not true that the more religious people there are in a society, the better that society will become. The socio-ethical approach, as distinct from individualistic ethics, clearly recognizes that there cannot be peace in society without social justice and that the latter cannot be established by mere appeal to the good wills of individuals. Love has to be translated into social justice, and justice is the way to practice love on a social level. The crucial question, then, is how to bring about social justice. By force? By revolution?

By some sort of ethical appeal? By rational appeal? By "piece-meal social engineering" (Karl Popper)? The socio-ethical approach has not yet provided clear answers to these questions.

Meanwhile, another approach to the problem of justice and peace – this time a radical theological approach, not an ethical approach – has developed in Korean religious communities. But it has to be pointed out at the same time that even the socio-ethical approach has not yet found a home among the majority of Korean religious leaders, not to mention the faithful in general.

The third approach is best represented by the Latin American liberation theology. In Korea, its two equivalents are Minjung theology and Minjung Buddhism. The most significant aspect of this approach vis-à-vis the ethical approaches is that it repudiates the traditional theology which understands the religious message in terms of individual spirituality and moral life. It no longer raises questions of faith *and* ethics. By a new interpretation of the original religious messages, Minjung Buddhism and Minjung theology understand faith (spirituality) itself as inextricably bound up with the social commitment to the oppressed and the dispossessed. Liberation through justice and peace is the very heart of the religious message. Currently, Minjung Buddhism and Minjung theology constitute a clear minority 'within their respective religious communities. But their activities and influence far outweigh their small numerical representations.