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WONHYO'S BUDDHIST THOUGHT AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Wonhyo (617-686) is generally considered the greatest Buddhist thinker in the history of Korean Buddhism.¹⁾ Who, one might ask, is his Buddhist thought relevant to the basic problems of contemporary society? The purpose of this paper is to answer this question. In approaching this question, I will relate the two major problems of contemporary society: ideological conflicts and class struggle with his two most famous theories: 1) "harmonization of disputes" (hwajaeng) and 2) "tathagatagarbha" (yoraejang), respectively.

I

It is true that the world is gradually moving toward "one world." More and more people are becoming aware of the need for a peaceful world. But it is equally true that we are still witnessing the clashing of ideologies and the feuding of conflicting individuals and groups everywhere in the world. World peace is still a dream, and not yet a reality.

What is the cause of the present fractured world order? It seems to me that one of the factors, if not the most fundamental factor, for this condition is "religious exclusivism," i.e., the attitude which claims a monopoly on religious truth.

Aldous Huxley, the English writer, points out that religious

exclusivism or what he calls theological imperialism is “not only absurd and discreditable ; it is also socially dangerous. Like any other form of imperialism, theological imperialism is a menace to permanent world peace.”²⁾

Religious exclusivism is not only a menace to permanent world peace, it is also an obstacle to interpersonal relationships between individuals. Paul F. Knitter, the leading Catholic theologian of world religions, states this clearly when he says that religious exclusivism, or what he labels “religious nationalism,” eventually leads to a type of “fanaticism” :

In a world of so many differing opinions and so many “gray areas,” religion is becoming the one refuge of absolute certainty, of black and white, unchangeable truth. Such religious nationalism does provide a warm security blanket, but it does so, frequently, at the cost of a fanaticism ……³⁾

According to Knitter, this fanaticism “impedes any kind of personally appropriate faith and appears as an insult to human intelligence and integrity.” We might also say that this kind of fanaticism impedes any kind of peaceful relationships with others as well.

What, then, is the key to peaceful interpersonal human relationships and world order in this culturally and religiously pluralistic world? The answer is clear: “the key” is freedom from such religious exclusivism. This idea is forcefully expressed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith when he writes :

Men have yet to learn our new task of living together as partners in a world of religious and cultural plurality. The technological and economic aspects of ‘one world’, of a humanity in process of global integration, are proceeding apace, and at the least are receiving the attention of many of our best minds and most influential groups. The political aspects also are under active and constant consideration, even though success here is not so evident, except in the supremely important day-to-day staving off of disaster. The ideological and cultural question of human cohesion, on the other hand, has received little attention, and relatively little progress can be reported ; even though in the long

run it may prove utterly crucial, and is already basic to much else. Unless men can learn to understand and to be loyal to each other across religious frontiers, unless we can build a world in which people profoundly of different faiths can live together and work together, then the prospect for our planet's future is not bright.⁴

Freeing ourselves from religious exclusivism, "living together as partners," "learn[ing] to understand and to be loyal to each other across religious frontiers," "build[ing] a world in which people profoundly of different faiths can live together and work together," etc. means cherishing what I call a "pluralistic perspective." This pluralistic perspective is an imperative if our pluralistic society is to have a future.

What is the pluralistic perspective? In more general terms I suggest that it is the attempt to see things from as many perspectives as possible. With the pluralistic perspective, one humbly admits that all human views of reality, including one's own, are inevitably limited and conditioned, and thus partial. One accepts that what seems right from one perspective may appear as completely wrong when seen from a different point of view. One refuses, therefore, to dogmatize any one view of reality as absolute. It not only allows other views but also acknowledges the need for them for the attainment of a fuller picture of reality. One accepts, therefore, even seemingly contradictory, contrasting, and incompatible views, not in terms of a dichotomous "either/or" logic but in terms of a complementary "both/and" logic.⁵

What does Wonhyo have to do with the pluralistic perspective? It is my view that his famous theory of hwajaeng (harmonization of disputes) basically does not differ from what contemporary terminology would call the pluralistic perspective.

Wonhyo, in his book, *Yolban Jong'yo* (The Compendium of Nirvana Teaching), asks the question of whether the dharmakaya is material or non-material. His own answer to this question is "if we cling to either one of these two views" as exclusively true, we fail to do justice to reality.⁶ He gives the same answer to the question of whether *dharmakaya* is emptiness or essence. He concludes:

If taken literally, both views failed to do justice to the reality. The

two varying views bring about disputes by failing to grasp the original meaning of the Buddha. If freed [on the other hand] from any dogmatic position, both views are helpful. In the ultimate sense, they are not contradictory to each other.⁷⁾

With regard to other opposing pairs of categories such as being and non-being Wonhyo always tells us not to absolutize any one side of the pair but to accept both sides as complementary to each other. Hwajaeng is, likewise, “being free from both views of being and non-being and also from the middle path at the same time.” This is freedom not only from the so-called eternalist and non-eternalist views but also from the view of non-view. With this kind of perspective, he says, we can have a reconciling relationship “among the hundred different views.”⁸⁾

In today’s pluralistic society, what could be more important than the kind of pluralistic perspective which was so powerfully advocated by Wonhyo?

II

What would Wonhyo say about the class struggle which we are still encountering in contemporary society? With regard to this question, it seems interesting to observe Wonhyo’s thoughts from the viewpoint of the so-called minjung sociology.

According to Professor Wan Sang Han of Seoul National University, the most ardent theorist of minjung sociology,⁹⁾ minjung means “people who have long been politically oppressed, economically exploited and socio-culturally marginalized by the ruling group.”¹⁰⁾ Professor Han claims that there are two types of minjung: 1) minjung-in-self and 2) minjung-for-self. The minjung-in-self are the minjung who are in a state of “sleep.” They are not fully aware of the fact that they are oppressed, exploited and marginalized. Even though they are dimly aware of their situation, they tend to accept it as part of their fate. The best example of this type of minjung is the “Uncle Tom” who represents the slave who was well programmed to accept the American slavery system without challenging its inhumanity.

The minjung-for-self, on the other hand, are the minjung who have

been “awakened.” They are keenly “aware of their own plight, and, through the mirror of history and prevailing social structure, and able to reflect on their deeply afflicted wounds.”¹¹⁾

According to Professor Han, there are three stages through which the minjung-in-self are transformed into full-fledged minjung-for-self: 1) the stage of becoming conscious of structural absurdity, 2) the stage of becoming systematically critical so as to debunk the ideologies of the ruling group, and 3) the stage of becoming “goal-oriented activists.”

Transforming the minjung-in-self into the minjung-for-self is called “conscientization”(uishikhwa) and those who are engaged in this process of transformation are called “intellectuals” (chishik-in). Professor Han argues that intellectuals are different from “technocrats” (chishikgisa) in the following ways:

1) Technocrats work as “ideologists,” who legitimize the ruling group, provide the ruling group with practical knowledge and techniques for effective manipulation of the people, and assist the ruling group in keeping the minjung in a state of sleep.

2) Technocrats, in their attempt to comprehend reality, favour “a micro-analytic approach” in the name of “value-neutrality and scientific objectivity.”

3) Technocrats identify themselves as “solid middle class or upwards,” and show a contempt for the minjung.¹²⁾

Intellectuals, on the other hand, “are strongly motivated not only to identify themselves with, but also to be the minjung.” Intellectuals try to see the issues always from an historico-social and holistic perspective, and “use their stock of knowledge for the benefit of the minjung.”

In short, Han says, “intellectuals... are the ones who can play a role of changing minjung-in-self to minjung-for-self. The intellectuals’ compassion for the suffering minjung is in sharp contrast to the technocrats’ callous indifference to them. Intellectuals are compelled to engage in endeavor to enhance the consciousness of the minjung. Therefore, the conscientization task falls into the hands of the intellectuals, even though theoretically speaking this task should be carried out by the minjung themselves.”¹³⁾

Professor Han adds that conscientization is an “educational process ;” but he emphasizes that “education” in this case is not “education” in the normal sense of the word. Generally speaking, education involves a process in which the educators tend to be “condescending to the educatees.” This attitude is fostered by the basic presupposition that the educatees are “inherently immature, impure, and inferior.” Education in this sense is an indoctrination or socialization which aims at filling in the *tabula rasa*.¹⁴⁾

Education as conscientization is, according to Han, totally different from the conventional sense of education. In the process of conscientization, intellectuals, the educators, treat the minjung-in-self, the educatees, as “equal human beings.” They recognize the minjung as “total beings” or “indivisible totalities,” who have the same human potentialities as anybody else in society. Intellectuals, as educators, show neither arrogance nor superiority toward minjung ; rather, they “share the minjung’s suffering and pain.”¹⁵⁾ When intellectuals work for the awakening of minjung they work as “co-workers, or Socratic midwives.”¹⁶⁾

Wan Sang Han calls his minjung sociology “humanization sociology” or “humanistic sociology.”¹⁷⁾ This is not the place to criticize his sociology in detail. Our present interest is only to see how his minjung sociology resonates with Wonhyo’s Buddhist thought, especially Wonhyo’s idea of yoraejang (tathagatagarbha).

Of course, the tathagatagarbha theory is not Wonhyo’s invention. It is a common doctrine shared by many Mahayana Buddhist schools.¹⁸⁾ The most basic idea of this theory is the idea that the garbha of Tathagatahood is innate to all living beings. The word garbha (jang) has a twofold meaning : first, it means the matrix ; second, it also implies the matrix’s contents, that is, the embryo. Everybody has both the seed of enlightenment and an inner room to conceive and nourish it. This matrix/embryo of Tathagatahood is an inner potential intrinsic to everybody for the actualization for their full humanity.

The doctrine of tathagatagarbha is discussed in many of Wonhyo’s writings. Although he used similar terms to describe reality such as dharmata (popsong), tathata (jinyo), dharmakaya (popshin)], bhutata-tathata (silsang), and nirvana (yolban)], he laid special emphasis on the idea of tathagatagarbha.¹⁹⁾ Moreover, he tried to explain these rather

abstract and philosophical concepts in terms of the comparatively concrete and tangible idea of the tathagatagarbha.²⁰⁾ It can safely be said that Wonhyo's emphasis on the tathagatagarbha idea was a clear reflection of his sincere concern for "sentient beings" (jungsaeŋ) who, in their ignorance, were not aware of the fact that they had the embryo and womb of Tathagatahood in themselves. Through the abundant use of this term he expressed his firm belief that sentient beings could and should be awakened to their innate "original enlightenment" (pon'gak)). By laying greater emphasis on this term than on the other terms, Wonhyo expressed his strong intent to help sentient beings become aware of this fundamental truth concerning human possibilities.

When we examine his life itself, Wonhyo's concern for the "sentient beings" or ordinary people becomes even clearer. Wonhyo was not an ascetic who denounced the world and indulged in lofty philosophical ideas while hidden away deep in the mountains. He was, so to speak, a man "in the world," if not "of the world."

[Wonhyo] took 'a completely liberated man, liberated from the distinction of life and death' as a motto for his spiritual training. He was wandering through villages and towns singing the songs of liberation (non-obstruction), and dancing the dances of liberation. Sometimes he appeared as mad. He slept with Princess Yosok and fathered Solch'ong. He called himself 'a lay devotee with no title.' He even visited bars and whore houses. Sometimes he played the *gomungo* in the shrines and lodged in common people's houses; sometimes he sat in meditation in the mountains or by the rivers. He was absolutely flexible to any circumstances and there was no fixed norms for his actions.²¹⁾

In light of the above discussion, one might say that Wonhyo could be called a great advocate of minjung sociology. Or one might rather say that minjung sociology can find an advocate in Wonhyo. Both Wonhyo and minjung sociology are concerned with people, their innate potentialities, and their capacity to actualize these potentialities.

Of course, it should be noted that minjung sociology and Wonhyo's tathagatagarbha theory are different in a number of ways. For our present purpose, I want to point out just two major differences. First, Wonhyo's concept of "sentient beings" has a much wider sense than

the concept of “minjung.” While “minjung” means a social class who have been oppressed and exploited by the ruling class, “sentient beings” or *sattva* (*jungsaeng*), implies all living conscious beings. While minjung sociology primarily focuses its attention upon the suffering of oppressed people, Wonhyo was concerned with all human beings. According to Wonhyo, not only the oppressed class but the ruling class too are suffering. Thus both classes need to be awakened from ignorance so as to realize their innate potentialities. Wonhyo would say that the ruling class needs to be humanized just as much as the oppressed class does. The ruling class should not be understood as those who should always be fought *against* but rather as those who should be worked for as well.

Second, minjung sociology and Wonhyo’s *tathagatagarbha* theory are different in terms of their objectives. While minjung sociology basically aims at socio-political justice in society by helping the minjung become aware of their socio-political realities, Wonhyo endeavored to bring about spiritual freedom and peace in humanity by leading people to awaken their innermost spiritual realities.

Professor Han envisioned “the ideal society of human community” in which “there are no categories such as minjung and ruler: everybody becomes sister and brother to one another.” Everybody can live as a decent human being in this “freer and more just” community of “full participation and compassionate empathy.” Han said this is a dream “dreamt by the critical intellectuals called prophets.”²²⁾

But Wonhyo would say that even if such a “prophetic dream” is to a certain extent good, it is not good enough. Wonhyo would insist that a truly ideal society is one in which not only the categories of minjung and ruler but the categories of “you” and “I” should be abolished. He would say that a completely free and just society can be realized not when everybody becomes just sister and brother to one another but rather when everyone becomes one in the One or what he calls One Mind (*ilsim*). The prophetic dream should be a “mystic dream,” so to speak.

It seems to me that these two points of difference should be brought to the more serious attention of minjung sociology. I believe that if minjung sociology were to adopt Wonhyo’s *tathagatagarbha* theory, at least in terms of these two points, it would gain much greater

breadth and depth in its² vision of human society. This is one of the contributions Wonhyo can make to contemporary society.

It is clear now that Wonhyo's theories of "harmonization of disputes" (hwajaeng) and "tathagatagarbha" (yoraejang), "perspectivism" and "humanism," respectively. While the first theory was meant to help people develop a pluralistic perspective, the second theory was meant to help people, especially suffering people, "conscientize" themselves concerning their true potential for a full humanity. In this sense, Wonhyo of the seventh century has a lot to say to our contemporary society which is still suffering from such problems as ideological conflict and class struggle.

Notes

- 1) For the classical sources for Wonhyo's life and works, see Tsang-ning, *Sung kao-seng chuan*, T.50, p.730 a-c; and Iryon, *Samguk yusa*, T.49, pp.953-1019.
- 2) Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970, first published in 1944), p.200.
- 3) Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p.12.
- 4) Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p.127.
- 5) See Kang-nam Oh, "Concord and Discord in the History of Korean Thought : A Pluralistic Appraisal," in the proceedings of Division IV of The 5th International Conference on Korean Studies, The Academy of Korean Studies (Seoul, Korea, 1988).
- 6) T.38, p.245b.
- 7) T.38, p.242c.
- 8) See T.38, p.238a.
- 9) For Han's discussion of the sociology of minjung, see his "Toward a Sociology of Minjung," in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *Essays on Korean Heritage and Christianity* (Princeton: 1984), pp. 87-121; and *Mingjung Sahoehak* (Seoul: 1984).
- 10) "Toward a Sociology of Minjung," op.cit., p.100.
- 11) Ibid., p.101.
- 12) See Ibid., pp.107-110.
- 13) Ibid., pp.110,111.
- 14) Ibid., pp.111f.
- 15) Ibid., p.113.
- 16) *Minjung Sahoehak*, op.cit., pp.43f.
- 17) Ibid., p.53.
- 18) For more detail on this topic, see, for example, Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhanga* (Uttaratantra) Being a Treatise on the Tathagatagarbha Theory of Mahayana Buddhism (Serie Orientale Roma, XXIII) (Rome: Institute Italiano per Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966).
- 19) See Yi, Yang-hui, *Wonhyo ui Yoraejang Sasang Yon'gu* (A Study of Wonhyo's Yoraejang Thought), M.A. Thesis of the Graduate School, the Academy of Korean Studies, 1982, pp.23-28.
- 20) One might say that while the terms like tathata, dharmata, etc. are more or less metaphysical, the term tathagatagarbha is rather "metanoetic" in that the latter refers more to personal realization of one's own potential

enlightenment.

- 21) Jongik Yi, *Wonhyo ui Gunbon Sasang* (Wonhyo's Basic Thought), (Seoul : Tongbang Yon'guwon, 1977), pp.10f.
- 22) Han, "Toward a Sociology of Minjung," *op.cit.*, p.118.