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The Transformation of Buddhist Thought and Religious Modernity in Early 20th-Century Korea: *The Case of Won Buddhism*

Minjung BAEK

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Buddhism and the problem of religious modernity in Won Buddhism, one of the indigenous new religions that arose in colonial Korea in the early 20th-century. Amid an era of colonial domination and social upheaval, Sotaesan Bak Jung-bin (1891–1943)—honored as Daejongsa—founded a new religious movement grounded in the Buddhadharma while seeking to reform contemporary Korean Buddhism. His thought synthesized elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism with cosmological insights drawn from late 19th-century movements such as Donghak (Eastern Learning), particularly the doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening (hucheon gaebyeok). *While affirming the Buddhadharma as the central truth of Won Buddhism, Sotaesan did not merely accommodate the spirit of modernity but sought to address and transcend the spiritual crisis of his age. Observing the rapid expansion of material civilization, he advocated a "Great Opening of Spirit"* (jeongsin gaebyeok) *as a religious response to the profound transformations of the modern world. This study first delineates three major ways in which Sotaesan reinterpreted Buddhist ideals in dialogue with modern change and then considers how the doctrines of Won Buddhism illuminate a distinctive trajectory of religious modernity in early 20th-century Korea.*

Keywords: Won Buddhism, Sotaesan Bak Jung-bin, religious modernity, Later Heaven Great Awakening (後天開闢), Great Opening of Matter, Great Opening of Spirit

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Minjung BAEK is a professor in the Department of Philosophy, The Catholic University of Korea. E-mail: mjbaek@catholic.ac.kr.

Introduction

This paper seeks to analyze the transformation of Buddhism and the issue of religious modernity in Won Buddhism (圓佛教), one of the indigenous new religions that emerged during the colonial period in early 20th-century Korea. Under the Regulations for Religious Propagation (Fukyō kisoku 布教規則) promulgated by Japan in 1915, only Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity were officially recognized as legitimate religions. Korean new religions, many of which exhibited nationalist tendencies, were categorized as quasi-religions and subjected to surveillance and control by the Japanese Government-General of Korea. Following the March First Independence Movement in 1919, Japanese colonial authorities intensified their censorship of these quasi-religions.[1] In 1929, the Government-General published the *Compendium of Folk Belief Materials* (*Minkan shinkō shiryō sōsho* 民間信仰資料叢書), and in 1935, Japanese scholar Murayama Chijun 村山智順 released his monograph *Quasi-Religions of Korea* (*Chōsen no ruiji shūkyō* 朝鮮の類似宗教). It was within this precarious environment of religious suppression that Sotaesan Bak Jung-bin 少太山 朴重彬 (1891–1943), also known as Daejongsa 大宗師, undertook his religious activities. In order to avoid persecution, he clearly asserted that the religious community he envisioned was grounded in "Buddhism." In 1924, he founded the Buddhadharma Research Society (Bulbeop yeonguhoe 佛法硏究會), and in 1935 he published an early doctrinal text titled *Doctrine of Buddhist Reform in Korea* (*Joseon bulgyo hyeoksillon* 朝鮮佛教革新論).[2] Through these efforts, he outlined a new model of Buddhist community and way of life

1. For focused studies of the early 20th-century religious policies of the Government-General of Korea and Japan's censorship and control over new and quasi-religious movements, see S. Kim (2004) and K. Park, et al. (2015).
2. The core of *Doctrine of Buddhist Reform in Korea* (1935) was later incorporated into *The Principal Book of Buddhism* (1943) and, after liberation, into *Jeongjeon* (The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism) as part of *The Scriptures of Won-Buddhism*. This study examines Sotaesan's Buddhist reform as presented in *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism, Daejonggyeong* (Scripture of the Founding Master), and *Wonbulgyo gyosa* (History of Won-Buddhism). English translations are available at The Scripture of Won-Buddhism site (http://wonscripture.org) and in *Won bulgyo gyoseo* (Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism) (2016). See also, Won (2014a) for references and a glossary of key terms.

suitable for the modern era. In this work, Sotaesan articulated the ideals and tasks of Buddhist reform not only as a strategy to cope with colonial religious censorship, but also as a way to reveal to the world the nature and significance of the new modern form of Buddhism that he sought to establish through the Buddhadharma Research Society.[3]

Sotaesan is known to have attained great enlightenment (*daegak* 大覺) in 1916, after which he consulted various religious texts. He read the *Great Canon of Buddhism* (*Bulgyo daejeon* 佛敎大典, 1914), a major work by Manhae Han Yong-un 萬海 韓龍雲 (1879–1943), and although no official record confirms it, it is presumed that he also carefully studied Han's earlier treatise, *Doctrine of the Renewal of Korean Buddhism* (*Joseon bulgyo yusillon* 朝鮮佛敎維新論, 1913).[4] As is well known, Han Yong-un was one of the leading Buddhist thinkers and reformers of early 20th-century Korea. More than any of his contemporaries, Manhae keenly perceived the formidable influence of Western civilization and deeply reflected on the nature of Western religion and philosophy. His discussion of competition, evolution, selfhood, and freedom in *Doctrine of the Renewal of Korean Buddhism* clearly reflects his engagement with Western philosophical thought.[5] In addition to Han Yong-un, two other Buddhist reformers—Baek Hang-myeong 白鶴鳴 (1867–1929) and Baek Yong-seong 白龍城 (1863–1940)—are commonly noted as having exerted significant influence on Sotaesan. Through Baek Hang-myeong, who advocated a "half-farming, half-Seon" (*bannong banseon* 半農半禪) lifestyle, Sotaesan appears to have gained insights into contemporary developments in

3. Ryu Sungtae's *Buddhism and Won Buddhism* (2018) offers a comprehensive study of the formation of the Won-Buddhist scriptures, their Buddhist foundations, and the tradition's doctrines, practices, and social ideals. See also D. Kim (2010) on the same topic.
4. This article cites the original text of the Won-Buddhist Scriptures only when necessary, but otherwise refers to relevant chapters and verses. For the cited passage, see *The History of Won-Buddhism*, Part 1, "The Dawn of Great Opening," Chapter 3, "Sotaesan's Statecraft of Saving All Living Beings and Curing the World," section 1, available at http://wonscripture.org. Further details are discussed in S. Jung (2014b, 2015a) and Heo (2018).
5. For research demonstrating how Manhae Han Yong-un's theory of Buddhist reform was developed through a process of active dialogue and engagement with Western modern thought, see J. Park (2015) and H. Jung (2017).

Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.[6] Furthermore, by observing the symbolic framework of the "One Circle Image" (Il-Won-Sang 一圓相) and the organizational reforms initiated by Baek Yong-seong in the Daegak Buddhist Order (大覺教), Sotaesan likely acquired practical ideas for operating a new kind of Buddhist community.[7]

In this article, I do not focus on institutional reforms or organizational structures within Buddhism, but rather on Sotaesan's thought as a Buddhist thinker who intellectually engaged with the challenges of Western modernity.[8] I further aim to illuminate the distinctively indigenous character and significance of his Buddhist theory.[9] Rooted in the Buddhadharma as a foundational truth and oriented toward reforming contemporary Korean Buddhism through Buddhist ideals, his ideas resonate with those of his predecessor, the reformer Manhae. However, whereas Manhae's thought reflects a strong engagement with Western philosophy in responding to modernity, Sotaesan's theory more deeply embodies a uniquely Korean worldview and civilizational vision. His thought draws not only from the traditional teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but also from the doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening (*hucheon gaebyeok* 後天開闢), which arose from late 19th-century movements such as Donghak 東學 (Eastern Learning) and Jeungsangyo 甑山教.[10] This article argues that the

6. For a comprehensive comparison of Sotaesan's thought with that of earlier Buddhist reformers such as Manhae Han Yong-un, Baek Hang-myeong, and Baek Yong-seong, refer to S. Jung (2014; 2015a; 2015b).
7. Kim Kwangsik, who has conducted in-depth research on Baek Yong-seong, also offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between Baek and Sotaesan. See K. Kim (2015; 2017).
8. For studies on Sotaesan's critical engagement with Western modernity and his response to material civilization and the age of science, see Paik (2015; 2016), M. Park (2018), and Heo (2024b). For the contemporary significance of Sotaesan's theory of civilization, see Kwon (2019).
9. For discussions of Won Buddhism's call for a spiritual transformation in response to material civilization, see Baker and Heo (2018), who interpret *gaebyeok* as a "Great Transformation," while I use "Great Awakening" following common usage.
10. For a comprehensive study of Korea's new religious movements and the cultural phenomenon of *gaebyeok* from the late 19th to early 20th-centuries, see K. Park (2013, 268–300). Park analyzes the ideological features of Donghak, Jeungsangyo, Daejonggyo, and Won Buddhism, focusing on their relation to *gaebyeok* thought and social engagement. See

ideals of Won Buddhism, as articulated by Sotaesan, provide critical insight into the distinctive form of Korea's religious modernity. The following sections first examine three key ways in which Sotaesan reformulated Buddhist ideals to meet the needs of the modern era, and then explore how the doctrines of Won Buddhism illuminate the specific path of religious modernity in early 20th-century Korea.[11]

The Content and Significance of Sotaesan's Buddhadharma

Succession of the Doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening

As demonstrated in *The Proclamation of Buddha-Dharma* (1919), Sotaesan made it clear that the foundational teaching of the religion he founded was rooted in Buddhism. However, rather than confining himself within the existing Buddhist sects or adhering to traditional institutions, Sotaesan founded a new religious community, thereby expressing that while Won Buddhism was based on Buddhism, it was distinct from the established Buddhism.[12] In this paper, I focus not on institutional differences, but on the ideological aspects that set Won Buddhism apart from preexisting Buddhist schools. Sotaesan, while grounded in the causal ontology of Buddhism and

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also K. Park, et al. (2015).

11. In this paper, the term modern religion or religious modernity denotes the distinctive ways in which Korean religions emerging during the colonial period—such as Won Buddhism—departed from earlier traditions. The founding motto of Won Buddhism, "With this Great Opening of Matter, Let There Be a Great Opening of Spirit," reflects Sotaesan's response to the profound material transformation brought about by Western science and technology. He proposed the "Great Opening of Spirit" as a means of cultivating spiritual wisdom to guide the proper use of material civilization. Together with his early disciples, he initiated the Levee Project and established a savings cooperative to build an autonomous economic community, thereby resisting the capitalist pressures of colonial Korea. In this respect, Won Buddhism represents a form of modern religion that critically engaged with material civilization and capitalism, while offering a spiritual and communal alternative distinct from traditional Buddhism.
12. For comparative analyses of the relationship between Buddhism and Won Buddhism, see Jung, et al. (2015). For further discussion, see Won (2014a).

the doctrine of Buddhahood, sought values and ideals that diverged from traditional Buddhism. As previously mentioned, he inherited the doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening, as it was passed down through figures such as Master Suun Choe Je-u 水雲 崔濟愚 (1824–1864) and Master Jeungsan Kang Il-sun 甑山 姜一淳 (1871–1909). He embraced a cosmology of universal transformation, which posited that the dark and painful end times—referred to as the Age of the Former Heaven (先天)—would be followed by the opening of a new, future-oriented Age of the Later Heaven (後天). This cosmological framework of Former Heaven and Later Heaven has roots in the cosmology of Shao Yung 邵雍 (1012–1077), a Neo-Confucian scholar of the Northern Song. However, the integration of this cosmological structure with the *gaebyeok* (Great Awakening) doctrine—which anticipates the imminent arrival of a utopian era and emphasizes active human participation in bringing it about—represents a uniquely Korean religious belief developed on the Korean Peninsula from the late 19th century.[13]

Master Suun, the founder of Donghak, diagnosed his time as an age of degeneration, in which the fortunes (運數) of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were already coming to an end. He prophesied that after this degenerate age, a new world of Great Peace and Prosperity (太平盛世), akin to the age of Yao and Shun, would emerge. He named the arrival of this cosmic fate as the event of the "Great Awakening Again" (*taesi gaebyeok*). Kang Jeungsan emerged around 1894, in the midst of the profound suffering caused by the Donghak Peasant Revolution. He confronted the horrors of the peasant uprisings that occurred in the late Joeon period and claimed that he initiated the "divine act of resolving resentments" (解冤公事) to relieve the grievances and pains of the people. This religious act, widely known as the "divine work of Heaven and Earth" (天地公事), was a cosmic undertaking through which he proclaimed that he himself would take on the task of altering the fortune of Heaven and Earth, something beyond the knowledge of ordinary people. He believed that only when the heavenly realm was first transformed through

13. For studies on Korea's new religions and the discourse of the Great Awakening, see Yoon (2017). Building on his discussion of Donghak, Jeungsangyo, Cheondogyo, Daejonggyo, and Won Buddhism, see also Jeong (2015) on Won Buddhism and *gaebyeok* thought.

a Great Awakening would a bright new age of *gaebyeok* arrive in the human world, in which suffering would be eliminated.

The cosmology and the doctrine of Great Awakening found in Suun and Jeungsan were carried forward in a similar manner by Sotaesan. While he acknowledged that the present world was indeed a degenerate age (末世), he did not believe it would end in destruction. Instead, he was convinced that a more civilized and moral world would soon emerge. Thus, he proclaimed, "now is the end of an old era, but is also the beginning of a new one," and stated that for those who foresee the coming civilization of the world, bright and joyful developments would unfold.[14] Despite the grim reality of Korea under colonial rule, he described the nation as being in an "age of progression" (*jingeupgi* 進級期), poised for remarkable advancement.[15] Upon returning from a journey to Mount Geumgang, Sotaesan emphasized its majestic presence and declared that Korea, like Mount Geumgang, would be reborn and become a leading nation in the world.[16] He taught his disciples not to despair over the present condition of Korea, but rather to prepare in advance for the day when the nation would lead the world through exemplary spiritual guidance. While never turning a blind eye to reality, he held firm in his belief that in the future Korea would become the spiritual leader of the world.[17] Sotaesan and his disciples maintained an ontological optimism, believing that with the arrival of the Age of the Later Heaven Great Awakening, a more civilized world would dawn. They possessed a fundamental optimism grounded in a thorough affirmation and acceptance of the structure and operation of the universe into which we are born.

Sotaesan acknowledged Suun and Jeungsan as divine personages (神人) and did not deny that he was carrying forward the doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening. Even when his disciples offered metaphorical interpretations of the relationship between Suun, Jeungsan, and Sotaesan — suggesting a profound connection among these religious leaders— Sotaesan

14. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 14: Prospects, 19.
15. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 6.
16. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 14: Prospects, 5–6.
17. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 14: Prospects, 23.

affirmed their statements.[18] He recognized that different persons of the Way (道人) were born into this world, each initiating their own order of moral renewal, and admitted that he was following in their footsteps. On one occasion, when a disciple disparaged Master Jeungsan as a madman, Sotaesan rebuked him, saying: "You can't criticize past personages so recklessly. Master Jeungsan was a rare seer and divine personage."[19] He prophesied that the time would come when both Suun and Jeungsan would be honored and respected.

At the same time, Sotaesan was highly critical of those who focused solely on superpowers or extraordinary talents. He condemned the practice of relying on supernatural powers or magical rituals without a foundation in the Way, likening such acts to magic tricks devoid of genuine spiritual merit.[20] Regarding the popular folk belief in Jeong Doryeong—the traditional esoteric legend of Korea—Sotaesan rejected the idea that a messianic figure bearing the surname Jeong would suddenly appear and save the world.[21] Instead, he offered a rational interpretation, stating that Jeong Doryeong symbolized an enlightened and upright leader. Even to his disciples who revered and relied upon him, Sotaesan emphasized that their faith should not be placed in him personally, but rather in *my Way and its power*, the moral principles he had established.[22] When his disciples asked him about Maitreya Buddha (彌勒佛) and the nature of the Dragon-Flower Order (龍華會上), a concept central to the Buddhist utopia he envisioned, Sotaesan replied that they represented a world in which the truth of Buddhism is fully revealed, morality shines brightly, and social distinctions have disappeared.[23] "Maitreya Buddha refers to the wide manifestation of the truth of the Dharmakāya Buddha. The Dragon-Flower Order means that this world becomes greatly radiant. That is, the gist of 'Everywhere a buddha image, every act a buddha offering' will be widely practiced." Sotaesan further proclaimed, "Whoever awakens to the

18. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 32.
19. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 31.
20. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 3: Practice, 42.
21. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 33.
22. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 30.
23. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 14: Prospects, 17–18.

truth bit by bit will become one of the masters."[24] As mentioned previously, Sotaesan maintained an ontological optimism, but he also believed that such a world would not come about on its own. He therefore emphasized to his disciples that each individual who awakens to Buddhist truth must become the master of this world, cultivating their own spirit—what Sotaesan called the Great Opening of Spirit—and, furthermore, based on this cultivated spirit, they must make wholesome use of scientific technology and material civilization.

By establishing Buddhism as the foundational truth of the world, Sotaesan sought a form of religious universality. At the same time, in inheriting the distinctively Korean doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening, he envisioned that Korea would become the spiritual leader of the many nations of this world and the moral-parent nation, playing a vital role in the future of human civilization. This vision reflects a unique feature of Korea's modern religious imagination.[25] Sotaesan's Won Buddhism can thus be seen as advancing a distinctive path of religious modernity by mediating between the universality of Buddhism and the particularity of the *gaebyeok* worldview.

Ethics for Humanity in the Age of Science

Sotaesan warned that although a new age of expanding intellect and flourishing civilization had dawned, humanity risked falling into a perilous condition in which the roots of spiritual illness deepened amid the temptations of dazzling material progress. He identified the causes of this moral and spiritual malaise as greed for money, resentment, dependency, indolence in learning and teaching, and the absence of public spirit.[26] While he believed that the cosmic order of the Later Heaven would inevitably lead to

24. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 14: Prospects, 16.
25. In his essay, "Won-Buddhism and a Great Turning in Civilization: The Role of Religion," Paik Nakchung draws attention to the dual character of Won Buddhism, which embodies both the universal character of Buddhism as a world religion and the distinctive Korean idea of Later Heaven Great Awakening (後天開闢), which Paik terms alternately, "Later Day Great Opening" (Paik 2017).
26. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 34.

a brighter civilization, he also emphasized that such transformation required human participation through moral practice and the cultivation of mind corresponding to universal order.

In Sotaesan's thought, human beings stand as the lords of all things and the masters of Heaven and Earth. He asserted that although Heaven and Earth possess infinite principles and powers, if people do not recognize the Way and apply it, then Heaven and Earth will be nothing more than an empty shell, declaring, "In the future, human beings' authority will be respected more than that of heaven and earth."[27] Thus, he underscored the awakened capacity of human beings to master and rightly use material civilization, rather than relying on a transcendent deity or an external truth (K. Kim 2019). For Sotaesan, human beings realize and harmonize the principles of the world; to establish the great Way of benevolence and righteousness in society is, therefore, the very path to founding a true religious order.[28]

One day, when a disciple returned after speaking with a Catholic and told Sotaesan that the Catholic had explained Cheonju 天主 as "the Creator," Sotaesan replied that there is no invisible and mysterious Creator separate from ourselves, but that all living creatures are each their own Creators. "When I thought about it again, I realized that 'the Creator does not exist elsewhere, but rather, your Creator is in fact yourself, my Creator is in fact myself, and all living creatures are in fact each their own Creators.' This is the most appropriate remark. If he awakens to the meaning of this, it will become a great gospel for him."[29] His statement—that all living creatures are each their own Creators—can be understood in various ways. In this essay, I will examine its meaning within the context of the ontological perspective of Won Buddhism, in which human beings are seen as both the subjects and objects of retributions and responses of cause and effect (因果 報應).

Won Buddhism expresses the fundamental truth of the universe through Il-Won-Sang, and interprets the specific meaning of Il-Won-Sang through the Fourfold Grace (四恩)—the Fourfold Grace of Heaven and Earth, parents,

27. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 8: Buddhahood, 13.
28. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 1: Prologue, 5.
29. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 6: Doubts Clarified, 9.

fellow beings, and laws.[30] Sotaesan restructured the value-neutral ontology of dependent origination (緣起, pratītyasamutpāda) in Buddhism into an ethical world of grace. He explained that all beings exist in essential and inevitable relationships of grace, wherein they cannot live without one another. Sotaesan reinterpreted the Buddhist universal ontology of dependent origination as a world of inevitable ethical relations grounded in the Fourfold Grace of Heaven and Earth, parents, fellow beings, and law; it is precisely in this latter respect that the distinctiveness of Won Buddhism as a new religion can be discerned. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism* presents in detail the teachings of the Fourfold Grace, the Principle of Indebtedness, and related doctrines on gratitude and indebtedness. According to these teachings, human beings inevitably participate in the retribution and response of cause and effect, a cosmic process, by performing various good and evil actions in specific circumstances.[31]

Sotaesan taught that just as the circulation of the four seasons and the alternation of yin and yang govern the natural world, so too the principle of wholesome and unwholesome retributions operates in human life. "In the same way, in human affairs, strength and weakness are interrelated, and as one produces what is wholesome or unwholesome, there occur the karmic retributions of progression and regression and mutual life-giving and mutual harm. This is the fundamental principle of the retribution and response of cause and effect."[32] He explained that gratitude and ingratitude arise from the good and evil actions exchanged among human beings within this cosmic process of karmic response. While the subject-object relationship in the exchange of grace remains fixed, the extent of transgressions and merits varies according to each person's circumstances.[33] Sotaesan held that although no one can escape the universal law of cause and effect, human beings actively participate in it through their moral conduct, thereby shaping their own karmic outcomes.

30. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 1: General Introduction, Chapter 2: An Outline of the Teaching.
31. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 2: Doctrine, Chapter 2: The Fourfold Grace.
32. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 5: Cause and Effect, 2.
33. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 5: Cause and Effect, 7.

"The Founding Motive of the Teach" of Won Buddhism clearly identifies the critical task for human beings in the coming age of new material civilization: to cultivate and refine the spirit. Here, "expanding spiritual power and conquering material power, and to lead all sentient beings, who are drowning in the turbulent sea of suffering, to a vast and immeasurable paradise," are presented as essential and autonomous responsibilities of each human being.[34] The founding motto of Won Buddhism is, "With this Great Opening of Matter, let there be a Great Opening of Spirit." Sotaesan's emphasis on the Great Opening of Spirit has its roots in earlier movements such as Donghak.[35] Haewol Choe Si-hyeong 海月 崔時亨 (1827–1898), who inherited the teachings of Suun, distinguished between the age of Great Opening of Matter (*seoncheon*, or Former Heaven) and the coming age of Great Opening of Human Mind (*hucheon*, or Later Heaven), thus emphasizing spiritual cultivation. Even in Cheondogyo 天道敎, the modernized successor of Donghak in the early 20th-century, the distinction between The Great Opening of Humanity (*ingaebyeok* 人開闢) and Great Opening of Matter (*mulgaebyeok* 物開闢) was clearly emphasized. In pursuit of the Great Opening of Humanity, Son Byeong-hui 孫秉熙 (1861–1922) deepened the concept of spirituality.

Sotaesan's call for the Great Opening of Spirit holds a distinctive significance in relation to earlier traditions. Attentive to the rise of material civilization shaped by science and capitalism, he did not reject science or treat matter as inferior to spirit. Instead, he emphasized the necessity of a Great Opening of Spirit capable of guiding the proper use of science and material progress. This perspective marked a departure from traditional Buddhism, largely indifferent to scientific advancement, and from Han Yong-un's critique of Western and Japanese material civilization. Sotaesan argued that spiritual renewal must advance in parallel with scientific development, stressing

34. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 1: General Introduction, Chapter One: The Founding Motive of the Teach.

35. In quoting passages from the scriptures of Won Buddhism, I follow the existing official English translations. Thus, here *gaebyeok* is rendered "great opening." In my own sentences, however, I translate *gaebyeok* as great awakening, as in *hucheon gaebyeok* (Later Heaven Great Awakening) for consistency with the terminology used by the other contributors to this special issue.

the "Wholeness of both spirit and flesh."[36] He envisioned a living religion responsive to practical needs—food, clothing, and shelter—while grounded in spiritual cultivation. Since daily life rests upon material conditions, he maintained that nurturing the body through a sound material foundation was essential, underscoring the harmonious advancement of matter and spirit, science and the Way.[37]

Even before the Nine Members Prayer Assembly with his earliest disciples, Sotaesan had already highlighted the cultivation of the human spirit for the wholesome use of material things in his early teachings, such as the "First Dharma Words" and the "Levee Project."[38] He warned them that while material civilization was rapidly advancing, technology was progressing, and tools for daily life were becoming more splendid, the human spirit was, in contrast, growing weaker. Sotaesan's emphasis on the Great Opening of Spirit suitable for the new age was not for the sake of spirit alone, but rather for the purpose of utilizing this rapidly changing material era to build a paradise in the present world and to manage a new civilization grounded in both material and spiritual foundations. It is precisely at this point that Sotaesan stresses "the dharma of using the mind" (用心法).[39]

Because Sotaesan recognized the importance of the scientific age grounded in material progress, he taught his disciples not to cling to the Buddhadharma itself but to apply it to improve actual human life.[40] The Buddhadharma, he emphasized, was not confined to recitation or meditation in seclusion but intended to save and transform everyday existence. True mastery of the Dharma, therefore, lay in engaging with the concrete realities of the world. The form of Buddhism Sotaesan envisioned departed from

36. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part Three: Practice, Chapter 16: The Dharma of the Wholeness of Both Spirit and Flesh.
37. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 31.
38. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 1: Prologue, 8, 13. Kwon (2013) introduced the Seon Buddhist practices that Sotaesan valued, from the time of the Nine Members Prayer Assembly (*guin gidohoe*) to the formulation of *The Doctrine of the Renewal of Korean Buddhism*.
39. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 30.
40. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 3: Practice, 51.

institutional traditions: it dissolved the distinction between monastics and laypersons, encouraged the union of work and practice, and integrated the callings of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants.[41] Rejecting exclusive reverence for temples or Buddha images, he proposed a life of cultivating the spirit within one's vocation and living as a master of the scientific age. In this sense, Sotaesan's Buddhist vision constituted a Great Opening of Spirit in response to the Great Opening of Matter, articulating a new human ethic suited to modern civilization.

The Relationship Between Truth and Faith

Won Buddhism presents the Buddhist truth—accessible through the enlightenment of practitioners—as the fundamental principle of the universe. In his *Doctrine of Buddhist Reform in Korea*, Sotaesan proposed not the buddha image, which represents a personalized figure, but buddhahood Il-Won-Sang (One Circle Image) as the symbol of Buddhist truth.[42] This concept later gained prominence in *The Principal Book of Buddhism*, where it was described as Il-Won-Sang, the Dharmakāya (law-body) Buddha—a symbol of ultimate truth. In *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, under the section "An Outline of the Teaching," Il-Won-Sang—"the Dharmakāya Buddha, which is the original source of all things in the universe and the mind-seal of all the buddhas and sages"—is presented as the object of faith and the model of practice.[43] This demonstrates that the basis of faith and practice in Won Buddhism is not belief in some mysterious, transcendent being, but rather something that can be fully understood through the rational knowledge and learning of human beings in the modern age of advanced cognition.

Then, as we contemplate Il-Won-Sang, which symbolizes the fundamental truth of the universe, how can we truly develop religious faith and engage in spiritual practice? As is well known, it was in *The Principal Book*

41. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 1: Prologue, 15.
42. *The History of Won-Buddhism*, Part 2, Founding of the Order, Chapter 3: Forming the System of the Order, 2.
43. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 1: General Introduction, Chapter 2: An Outline of the Teaching.

of Buddhism that the structure of "The Gateway of Faith" and "The Gateway of Practice" was clearly articulated. These two paths—faith and practice—are also well represented in the doctrinal diagram of Won Buddhism. At the time, Sotaesan's disciples still harbored doubts about how the truth of Buddhism could be religiously believed in and practically cultivated. In response to such doubts, there is a statement by Sotaesan. In the Doctrine, he explains that faith in Il-Won-Sang is established through a proper understanding of the content embodied in Il-Won-Sang itself—that is, through a correct grasp of the Fourfold Grace: the grace of Heaven and Earth, the grace of parents, the grace of fellow beings, and the grace of laws:

> Take Il-Won-Sang as the object of faith and, believing in its truth, pursue merit and happiness. If we were to specify the content of Il-Won-Sang, it is in fact the Fourfold Grace; if we were to specify the content of the Fourfold Grace, it is in fact all things in the universe; and there is nothing among the myriad things in heaven and earth or the dharma realm of empty space that is not the buddha. Thus, regardless of time or place, we must never neglect to maintain a respectful state of mind and should treat the myriad things with the same pure mind and pious attitude we have for the venerable Buddha. We should also exert ourselves to make buddha offerings directly to the myriad things themselves and thereby create merit and happiness in a practical manner. In sum, we are prompting people to transform a partial faith into a well-rounded faith and a superstitious faith into a realistic faith.[44]

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination is, at its core, a value-neutral ontology. In contrast, the cosmic vision conceived by Sotaesan is an ethical ontology structured around the Fourfold Grace. He explained that the universe, the myriad things in Heaven and on Earth, and the dharma realm of empty space are all embodiments of the Buddha, and that the form of this Buddha consists of the four kinds of grace and their causal relationships. Accordingly, he taught that we should always treat all things with reverence and solemnity,

44. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 4.

just as we would venerate the Buddha, and that we should offer our buddha offerings directly to those concrete beings and objects causally connected to our own actions, thereby generating realistic merit and happiness. Sotaesan believed that through clearly understanding and accepting the causal structure of the Fourfold Grace, one could cultivate a genuine sense of gratitude and reverent faith. When a disciple once asked whether the diagram of Il-Won-Sang truly contained truth and awesome power, Sotaesan replied that just as the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself, the circular form of Il-Won is not the same as Il-Won's true nature.[45] What matters, he emphasized, is cultivating Il-Won's true nature. As a method for embodying this true nature, Sotaesan presented the Threefold Study (三學) and the Ways of Practice based on the Eight Articles (八條). In particular, *The Scripture of the Founding Master* offers the following explanation regarding the practice appropriate to Il-Won-Sang:

> Our aim is to take Il-Won-Sang as the model of practice, and to develop our character by modeling ourselves wholeheartedly on its truth; and, by awakening to the truth of Il-Won-Sang, to understand without any obstructions the beginning and end and the roots and branches of the myriad things in heaven and earth, the human cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death, and the principle of the retribution and response of cause and effect. As is also the case with Il-Won, our minds should have no selfishness, nor be swayed and taken in by cravings and attachments, but instead should nourish the nature that is clear and round. [...] Therefore, awakening to the principle of Il-Won means to see one's nature (*gyeonseong* 見性); to guard the essential nature of Il-Won means to nourish one's nature (*yangseong* 養性); and to engage in conduct that is well-rounded like Il-Won means to command one's nature (*solseong* 率性). These are the essential Ways of our practice, namely Cultivating the Spirit, Inquiry into Human Affairs and Universal Principles, and Choice in Action, and they are the equivalent of the three trainings in precepts [戒] (śīla), absorption [定]

45. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 6.

(*samādhi*), and wisdom [慧] (*prajñā*) taught by the Buddha of the past.[46]

Sotaesan emphasized that when we venerate Il-Won-Sang as the ultimate truth, we must first understand the causal relationship of the transgressions and merits through an understanding of the Fourfold Grace. He stressed the importance of comprehending this causal relationship and practicing a realistic faith by offering buddha offerings to concrete beings in accordance with the principle of causality. Following this practice of faith, Sotaesan presented methods corresponding to the three trainings in Buddhism—the three trainings in precepts, absorption, and wisdom—by introducing *gyeonseong* (seeing one's nature), *solseong* (commanding one's nature), and *yangseong* (nourishing one's nature). These methods were integrated as essential components of the Threefold Study: cultivating the spirit, inquiry into human affairs and universal principles, and choice in action, which is the practice of Won Buddhism. While the Threefold Study serves as the gateway to enlightenment through self-powered practice, the Fourfold Grace, as cited earlier, is the core of other-powered belief, which we must inevitably accept and acknowledge—through this, we express gratitude for the grace of existence and come to fear committing transgressions against it (K. Park 2010).

After his great awakening, Sotaesan recalled it as an experience given by the great help of the Fourfold Grace. The Buddhadharma fundamentally emphasizes self-power and the realization of the buddhahood in one's self-nature. However, according to Won Buddhism, which illuminates the relationship of all things as an ethical relationship of grace, one is inevitably bound to live within the causal relationship with all existence except for oneself, in other words, in the dimension of other-powered belief. Therefore, Won Buddhism values both self-powered enlightenment based on truth and the other-powered belief and reverence for the Fourfold Grace.[47] In *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Won Buddhism presents the ethical theory of causality of the Fourfold Grace, and in *The Scripture of the Founding*

46. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 5.
47. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter Ten: Belief and Dedication, 8.

Master, chapter five, "Cause and Effect," it introduces the eternal principles of the operation of the universe and the corresponding principles of human action as truth. Through this, it guides people to humbly accept the inevitable structure of the universe and to develop a faith that reveres the structure of this truth. While I recognize that the formation of such faith is possible, I have lingering doubts that there may still be a gap between truth and faith within Won Buddhism.

On the other hand, when it was asked whether Won Buddhism, which is based on Buddhism, venerates Śākyamuni Buddha, Sotaesan judged that while it is possible to worship Śākyamuni Buddha, it is more difficult to practically convey to people that this Buddha imparts the transgressions and merits to us.[48] Instead of Śākyamuni Buddha, he seemed to believe that one could more realistically observe how the transgressions and merits are created through the reciprocal relationships of Heaven and Earth, parents, and our fellow beings, and laws, which are the Fourfold Grace. He thought that the Fourfold Grace to be a concrete manifestation of the Dharmakāya Buddha (化神), and through this, one could cultivate a practical and realistic faith. Furthermore, Sotaesan argued that true veneration of the Buddha lies not in worshiping the image of the Buddha from morning to evening, but in respecting and practicing the Buddha's spirit. In this intellectually advanced age, he seemed to believe that showing the inevitable and inescapable interrelationships of the Fourfold Grace would be a much more persuasive teaching for people.[49] He believed that those who have experienced the realities of suffering and joy in life could understand the principles of the transgressions and merits, and further, based on the rise and fall of events, could identify the appropriate objects for buddha offerings themselves. This reflects his advice to his disciples and followers to make direct buddha offerings to concrete objects related to their actions in order to avoid transgressions and receive merits. On one hand, this could be seen as the faith in all things in the universe as the Buddhas of all things (萬有佛), revering and venerating every being through their connection to causality, and on the other hand, as a personal practice of the Dharma of

48. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 9.
49. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 10.

Making Buddha Offerings (佛供法) aimed at understanding the principles of the transgressions and merits to avoid transgressions and succeed in receiving merits.[50] In order for the latter not to devolve into a self-centered, wish-fulfilling faith, an ethical attitude of reverence and care for all beings in the universe, as in the former case, must be established first.

The Characteristics of Religious Modernity

Won Buddhism, which appeared in the early 20th-century based on the Buddhadharma, not only reinterpreted traditional Buddhist ideas but also actively engaged in the process of Buddhist modernization, which was required by the historical and social conditions of the time. Korea's indigenous new religions, which were labeled as *quasi-religions* by the Japanese Government-General, had to reorganize their teachings and institutions in order to maintain their religious identity and grow their communities under the pressure of modernity. This section examines the ideological aspects of this modern transformation. As mentioned earlier, Sotaesan inherited and reinterpreted the thought of the Later Heaven Great Awakening. Many new religions during the colonial period viewed the world as entering a time of decline and crisis—a dark and hopeless age. In contrast, followers of the Great Awakening envisioned the advent of a new era of light and illumination in the Later Heaven (後天). Sotaesan also strongly believed that Korea's moral civilization could be renewed, and that Korea could become a spiritually advanced nation in the world. Based on this optimistic worldview, he developed a theory of religious integration (會通說), which aimed to bring together the core insights of Confucianism, Daoism, and Great Awakening (*gaebyeok*) thought under the principles of Buddhism. He maintained that the subjects of enlightenment vary according to historical era and regional context.

50. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 3: Practice, Chapter Ten: The Dharma of Making Buddha Offerings.

> The Founding Master said, "In the past all the founders of religions have appeared according to their own proper time in order to instruct all sentient beings in how to conduct their lives. However, their core principles in disseminating their teachings differed according to their era and region, just as there are different specialties within the field of medicine. Buddhism took the formlessness of all things in the universe as its core principle and taught the truth that is free from arising and ceasing and the principle of retribution and response of cause and effect, elucidating principally the path whereby ignorance is transformed into awakening. Confucianism took the forms of all things in the universe as its core principle and taught the three duties, the five relationships, and the four constants of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge, elucidating principally the path whereby one cultivates oneself, regulates one's family, governs one's country, and realizes peace in the world. Daoism took the Way of the natural universe as its core principle and taught techniques for nourishing the nature, elucidating principally the path of tranquility and nonaction. Although these three paths have core principles that differ from one another, they all have the common goal of rectifying the world and benefiting living beings. In the past, however, these three traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism have mainly disseminated their own doctrines, but in the future it will not be enough to deliver the whole world through limited subjects alone. Hence, we have synthesized all these doctrines and established all courses on the basis of combining Cultivation, Inquiry, and Choice into the Il-Won (One Circle), and on the basis of the wholeness of both spirit and flesh and the simultaneous practice of universal principles and human affairs."[51]

Observing the rapid transformations of the early 20th century, Sotaesan diagnosed that the content of religious edification in the modern era could no longer be based solely on any single religious tradition or discipline. He therefore emphasized the necessity of integrating not only the three teachings—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—but also insights from

51. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 2: Doctrine, 1.

world religions. He argued that the present age demanded both spiritual cultivation and inquiry into the attributes of things. His articulation of a perspective of integration (會通) was grounded in a recognition of the changing cognitive capacities and living conditions of contemporary people. To the Korean people suffering under colonial oppression, Sotaesan presented an optimistic vision of a future utopia, drawing on the philosophy of the Great Awakening. To those consumed by mutual resentment and hatred, he offered an ontological perspective rooted in the Buddhist view of karmic relations and the ethical framework of grace and retribution. Moreover, concerning the interpersonal and ethical relationships required for cooperative living, he proposed a Confucian model of everyday moral discipline. In his earliest teachings, he presented a path of practice closely aligned with the ideals of the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*), particularly the sequential goals of cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the nation, and bringing peace to the world (修身, 齊家, 治國, 平天下).[52] As methods for nurturing one's innate nature, he taught not only Buddhist practices such as reciting the Buddha's name and seated meditation, but also spiritual cultivation techniques drawn from the Daoist tradition.[53]

Especially notable is how Sotaesan reintroduced the Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom under the framework of grace. This reinterpretation not only diverged from the Buddhist theory of causality but also marked a significant departure from traditional Confucian moral virtues. Instead of focusing on filial piety toward one's parents, Sotaesan emphasized the mutual grace shared between parents and children.[54] He believed that only when a relationship that fosters mutual grace between people is established, can it truly be called virtue (德). The Confucian virtues emphasized by Mencius referred to the innate goodness of humans, but Sotaesan reinterpreted these as empirical virtues that could be achieved by practicing the Way (道) between parents and children, couples, and friends.

52. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 3: Practice, Chapter 13: The First Dharma Words.
53. One of the early Won-Buddhist scriptures, compiled in 1927, *The Essential Doctrine of Spiritual Cultivation and Inquiry* (*Suyang yeongu yoron* 修養研究要論), presents methods of spiritual discipline that exhibit Daoist influence.
54. *The Scripture of the Founding Master*, Chapter 4: The Way of Humanity, 2.

Sotaesan, who believed that the greed for money amplified by capitalism and the resentment arising from competition with others were serious spiritual diseases of his time, presented a theory of grace that underscored the inescapable interdependence among human beings. He further proposed a practical method by which ethical virtues could be cultivated through the generation of grace within closely interrelated human relationships.

By synthesizing diverse traditional intellectual resources, Won Buddhism developed an ideology and set of values attuned to its era, sharing a distinctly modern character with other indigenous new religions through its strong emphasis on human agency. Sotaesan emphasized the causal theory of the Fourfold Grace as the object of faith and upheld the doctrine of reincarnation, asserting that the void and calm numinous awareness (空寂靈知) transforms the body and exists eternally, both before and after life. While he posited the inevitable principles governing the universe, he also believed that humans, as masters of all things, comprehend and utilize everything in the world. Within the causal process of the Fourfold Grace, humans are highlighted as ethical agents who create and transmit the causes and effects of transgressions and merits. The emphasis on human agency as a world-transforming force constitutes an aspect of Won Buddhism that markedly departs from traditional Buddhism.

Won Buddhism places greater emphasis than any other religion on the public spirit and its significance in life, a point further reflected in chapter three, "The Four Essentials," of *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, which stresses both "The Principle of Developing Self-Power" and "Venerating the Public-Spirited."[55] This teaching reflects the urgency of cultivating one's own abilities to navigate a new era and the importance of using those abilities for public good. As mentioned earlier, Sotaesan, having witnessed the progress of science and technology in the early 20th century, highlighted the transformation of the human spirit that could lead to a change in the era. On one hand, he proposed a human-centered ethics; however, this was not

55. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 2: Doctrine, Chapter 3: The Four Essentials, Section 1: Developing Self-Power; Chapter 3: The Four Essentials, Section 4: Venerating the Public-Spirited.

intended to portray humans as masters over all things, but rather to emphasize the cultivation of a human spirit wise enough to utilize science and material goods without being dominated by them in the age of science.

Another notable element in the development of new religious thought—from Donghak (Eastern Learning) to Cheondogyo (天道敎) and Won Buddhism—is the conception of the divine being that was believed in and worshipped. As is well known, when Suun Choe Je-u spoke of Cheonju 天主 (Lord of Heaven) and emphasized the practice of "revering the Lord of Heaven within one's heart" (*sicheonju* 侍天主), he portrayed Cheonju as possessing a certain personhood.[56] At the same time, however, Cheonju was also understood as the vital energy of the universe, manifesting itself through nonaction and spontaneous transformation (*muwi ihwa* 無爲而化). Suun placed his faith both in the miraculous energy (*sillyeong* 神靈, or divine spirit) present in the human mind and in the divine force operating throughout the cosmos. The Cheonju he described was neither a lifeless, impersonal force nor a singular, personal deity with clearly defined traits. The universe as envisioned in Donghak was not a mechanical or material system but a living organism composed of innumerable sentient beings.[57]

When Sotaesan instructed his followers to have faith in the Dharmakāya Buddha (法身佛) and venerate the structure of the Fourfold Grace, he reflected elements of the devotional orientation found in Donghak. The Il-Won-Sang symbolized ultimate truth while also serving as an object of reverence to cultivate devotion. In the "Silent Declaration" (心告) and "Formal Prayer" (祈禱), Sotaesan emphasized the interdependence of self-power and other-power, likening the latter to a tree's roots drawing nourishment from the soil—the soil signifying the sustaining grace of the Fourfold Grace.[58] Through faith and

56. This term *sicheonju* is rendered elsewhere in this special issue as "serving the Lord of Heaven," but here I wish to convey the strong sense of revering the Lord of Heaven within one's own mind and so have opted for slightly different translation.
57. For discussions of *gaebyeok* thought in Donghak and its relation to later Korean new religions, see M. Park (2007) and Jo (2020). For comparative perspectives on variations of gaebyeok thought among new religions, see Shin (2018).
58. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Part 3: Practice, Chapter 9: Silent Declaration (Simgo) and Formal Prayer (Kido).

gratitude directed toward this grace, believers were to seek guidance and moral renewal in both joy and adversity. Sotaesan taught that sincere devotion could move Heaven, and that, supported by the awe-inspiring power of the Fourfold Grace, one could realize true fulfillment. Although the Fourfold Grace is not a personal deity, it functions as a tangible moral and spiritual force governing human transgressions and merits. Much like Suun's conception of the Lord of Heaven, it may be seen as a cosmic life-force—dynamic and relational—existing between personhood and impersonal essence.

The new religious movements that emerged on the Korean Peninsula in the early 20th century—especially Won Buddhism, which inherited the spirit of Donghak, a precursor to *gaebyeok* 開闢 thought—sought to establish a buddha land (*bulgukto* 佛國土) as both a new nation and a foundation for daily life in this world. This vision reflects a modern rearticulation of the doctrine of the Great Awakening of the Later Heaven, shifting paradise from a transcendent realm to a terrestrial reality achievable through human moral agency. In response to the rapid advance of material civilization, Sotaesan regarded the building of a new spiritual civilization as the most direct way to create a new world and nation. For him, reforming the world required first transforming the mind, through proper understanding and disciplined cultivation.

At this juncture, Sotaesan underscored the interrelation between religion and politics.[59] Won Buddhism's principle of *jeonggyo dongsim* 政教同心—"government and religion of one mind"—did not imply their fusion, but rather their cooperation in realizing shared moral ideals. As an indigenous religion rooted in truth and faith, Won Buddhism placed at its core the realization of a new nation and a spiritual civilization within lived reality. This aspiration continued after liberation in the *Geongungnon* 建國論 (Treatise on Nation-Building) by Jeongsan Song Gyu, the second Head Cardinal Master. In this respect, the modern distinctiveness of Won Buddhism is manifest in its endeavor to envision and actualize new communal and national forms of life attuned to the historical conditions of the Korean Peninsula. A fuller understanding of religious modernity in early 20th-century Korea may be

59. *The Scripture of the Founding Master.* Chapter 2: Doctrine 39.

attained by taking into account these political and social undertakings of the new religious movements.

Conclusion

Sotaesan, the founder of Won Buddhism, affirmed that his religion was rooted in the truth of the Buddhadharma. Yet Won Buddhism inevitably departed from traditional Buddhism as it arose within the transformed intellectual and social landscape of the early 20th century. Like other indigenous new religions that emerged on the Korean Peninsula, it inherited the current of *gaebyeok* thought—the doctrine of the Later Heaven Great Awakening—which envisioned the advent of a new Buddhist paradise on Korean soil amid the perceived decline of the age. Within this framework, Won Buddhism advanced an ethical vision that extended beyond the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, emphasizing an active moral relationship of mutual beneficence among all beings. The Fourfold Grace was elevated as both an ethical principle and an object of faith, symbolizing the dynamic interplay of transgressions and merits within human life. In this sense, Won Buddhism deepened the religious dimension of Buddhism while reinterpreting it in light of modern conditions shaped by science and materialism.

Sharing a common heritage with other Korean new religions, Won Buddhism also developed distinctive characteristics of its own. Cheondogyo, as a successor to Donghak, pursued a path of civilizational enlightenment aligned with Western and Japanese forms of modernity,[60] while Jeungsangyo 甑山教, rooted in the miraculous life of Kang Jeungsan, developed a strong inclination toward mystical ritual and charismatic devotion. Daejonggyo 大宗教, by contrast, reinterpreted the myth of Dangun 檀君 in nationalist terms, channeling its energies into resistance and the struggle for independence.

60. This remark notes that Son Byeong-hui, leader of Cheondogyo, deeply engaged with Japanese civilization, while Yi Don-hwa, a major theorist, studied Western philosophy in comparison with traditional thought. As this lies beyond the scope of my main argument, it will not be discussed further here.

Won Buddhism, however, sought to popularize and everydayize Buddhism, encapsulated in the maxim "Buddhadharma is Daily Life, Daily Life is Buddhadharma."[61] It emphasized lay participation, gender equality, and universal education, thereby achieving a wider and more enduring social influence.[62]

Won Buddhism thus exemplifies the essential characteristics of Korea's religious modernity. Its teachings embody an integrative synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions while assimilating elements of Korea's indigenous spirituality. In doing so, it successfully balanced the universal ideals of Buddhism as a world religion with the particular sensibilities of Korean thought. Of particular significance is its critical engagement with modern material civilization: rather than rejecting or capitulating to it, Won Buddhism sought a middle path through spiritual cultivation and ethical reform—a "double project" of adapting to and overcoming modernity.[63] Moreover, Sotaesan's vision extended beyond national liberation to a universal ideal for human civilization. He emphasized an intelligent faith that venerates truth itself rather than a transcendent deity, and he proposed a model of moral ontology grounded in public virtue and mutual coexistence. These principles reveal the distinctive contribution of Won Buddhism as a modern religion articulating a spiritual response to the challenges of modernity.

61. *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, Mottos.
62. For an overview of Won Buddhism's religious, ideological, and social influence on modern Korean society, see B. Ryu (1983). For a recent study on how Won Buddhism mobilized ordinary rural people to form new communal movements, see Yun (2021).
63. For a discussion of the concept of "the double project of adapting to and overcoming modernity," see Paik (2015).

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Appendix: Key Terms in Revised Romanization with McCune-Reischauer Romanization Equivalents

Revised Romanization	MR Romanization
Baek Hang-myeong	Paek Hang-myŏng
Baek Yong-seong	Paek Yong-sŏng
Cheondogyo	Chŏndogyo
Cheonju	Chŏnju
Daejongsa	Taejongsa
Donghak	Tonghak
Gaebyeok	Kaebyŏk
gyeonseong	kyŏnsŏng
Haewol Choe Si-hyeong	Haewŏl Ch'oe Si-hyŏng
Hucheon	Huchŏn
hucheon gaebyeok	huchŏn kaebyŏk
ingaebyeok	ingaebyŏk
Jeong Do-ryeong	Chŏng To-ryŏng
jeonggyo tongsim	chŏnggyo t'ongsim
jeongsin gaebyeok	chŏngsin kaebyŏk
Jeungsan Kang Il-sun	Chŭngsan Kang Il-sun
Jeungsangyo	Chŭngsan'gyo
jingeupgi	chin'gŭpki
Manhae Han Yong-un	Manhae Han Yong-un
mulgaebyeok	mulgaebyŏk
muwi eohwa	muwi ŏhwa
Seoncheon	Sŏnchŏn
Sicheonju	Sichŏnju
sillyeong	sillyŏng
solseong	solsŏng
Son Byeong-hui	Son Pyŏng-hŭi
Song Gyu	Song Kyu
Sotaesan Bak Jung-bin	Sot'aesan Pak Chung-bin
Suun Choe Je-u	Suun Ch'oe Che-u
yangseong	yangsŏng

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