

The Role of Popular Religions and the Formation of Korean Values:

Tonghak and the Clash of Civilizations

By Noh, Jong Sun

Professor, Christian Social Ethics, Yonsei University

NOHJONG@chol.net

1. Tonghak as a Popular Religion for an Egalitarian World

The Tonghak Religion was organized in 1860-64 by Choi, Jae Woo. The spiritual teaching was “Treat every person as you treat Heaven(事人如天)” - a purely egalitarian principle that is against gender, race, ethnic, national, and social discrimination, as well as discrimination based on economic status, and it has been the movement of tenants and of serf-liberation.

Tonghak declared that:

Members should not discriminate against others on the basis of age, sex, occupation, or of race, nor should they show partiality between the powerful and the weak; the poor and the rich; and the government officers, the people, and those with better opportunities.

They burned the slave registrations and even joined in the war in 1894 against the oppressive government of Chosun, and against the invading forces of Japan into the land of Korea.

Laotze's Taoism, Maentze's popular revolutionary teachings, Maitreya Buddhist teachings and some Shamanistic experiences are inclusively accepted in the religious teachings and the strategies of Tonghak. It was not a simple syncretism, but more than a syncretism. It has been a part of creative and indigenous strategies and ways of life. The spirit of Tonghak's "Treat every person as you treat Heaven" was very much alive in the spirit of the struggle for people's democracy under the totalitarian military rules in the 1960s-1980s. Some people had flags, "Tonghaks", in the middle of crowds marching for democracy and human rights at that time.

Some opened a small noodle restaurant with a white board in front. Every morning there were lists of people who were not permitted to get in the restaurant. The names were the notorious oppressors, or politically and economically corrupt people who were hated by the common people. The owner of the restaurant said that he was Tonghak, but these kinds of people, most of the time, have never officially joined any of the Tonghak organizations. They are invisible Tonghaks.

Jeungsandoga(繪山道家) is very popular on the campuses of more than at least some 60 universities in Korea. Jeungsan is the spiritual disciple of Tonghak, but it is the non-violent wing and did not join the militant armed struggles throughout history. Both Tonghaks and Jeungsandoga people work for the peace and reunification of Korea, but their methods are different. Commonality is to transform the oppressive and destructive structures of the world toward the more egalitarian and ecological and sustainable society of liberation and salvation. Young college students and people are joining the Jeungsandoga nowadays more than ever and are organizing study groups on campus. Almost every major campus nowadays has a Jeungsandoga circle, which is an indication that the indigenous religious teachings are getting more and

more popularity recently. In fact they are the core of the Korean people's values against western influences.

2. 10 Teachings for the Family: Hanul Family(한올가정)

There are 10 teachings for the family in the world in Tonghak nowadays. These teachings were developed from the original teachings to the contemporary family.

Ten promises for the healthy family are:

One, you should express your love to the members of the family.

Two, you should have enough time for dialogue with the members of the family.

Three, you should have some leisure time hobby activities together with the members of the family.

Four, you should share household chores.

Five, you should make important decisions together with the members of the family.

Six, you should make the important rules that everyone should keep in mind through discussions together.

Seven, you should encourage each other's self actualizations and development.

Eight, you should work together for social service activities and volunteer activities.

Nine, you should try to understand the family traditions and make new traditions.

Ten, you should set a Family Day.

These 10 promises are for peace and for the conflict resolutions in the family. These promises are very simple but essential and critically important teachings nowadays. Chundokyo Temple has posted it on the wall for everyone to practice(2002). The intention seems to be for the common people's practice, rather than the elite's provincial and exclusive debates. Tonghak is in a sense the religion of *minjung*(民衆), the people, and the teachings are in very plain language and with easy-to-understand concepts, but to the point of the praxis of liberation in heart and in the social structures and the global oppressions by the powerful.

3. Inaechun (人乃天) Reunification.

The core of the Tonghak's struggle for the reunification of Korea, divided by the superpowers, is human-centered and people-centered reunification on the spirit of Inaechun, which means People are Heaven, or Hanul. Tonghaks have been attempting to have Korea reunited since 1945, with various organized plans, strategies and operations. When the country was divided into two, 90% of Chundokyo believers lived in North Korea. There were 102 local parishes and about 500,000 families in the North.

In April 1946, Tonghaks made a statement on reunification, with the ideal democratic government based on Korean people's independence and self-reliance.

In 1948, Tonghaks started the movement for reunification of the nation, against the South Korean Government. The leader was KIM, Kwangho in Seoul, and they sent secret organizers to Pyongyang, North Korea.

3.1.1 Three Women for Reunification: PARK, Hyunwha, YU, Eunduk and RYU, Miyoung

In order to be more effective under the Communist Party in North Korea, the committee chose two women, PARK, Hyunwha(박현화), wife of KIM, Jisoo, and YU, Eunduk(유은덕), the wife of O, Geuneuy to go to Pyongyang as secret envoys to organize people to have a mass demonstration on the First of March, 1948, with the same spirit and method of the 1919 March First movement. Women are also Hanul, Heaven in The Tonghak feminism which teaches that women should not be discriminated by men. It is significant to see that Tonghak supported women's leadership for reunification.

The intention of this movement was to fight against the efforts to divide the country into two permanently by the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north. The significance of the Second March First Movement was to save the nation as one nation-state, not two nation-states. KIM, Dalhyun was the leader of Chungwoodang Party(靑友黨) in the North. Chungwoodang was the political party of Tonghaks with the structure of religion and political party as one. But KIM, Dalhyun and others were against the plan, considering the possible suppressions from the Communist Party. But the plan to have the mass demonstration went on secretly through all the parts of North Korea, with the Praying to Heaven Ceremonies(誓天式). But the plan failed and many leaders were arrested by the Political Bureau and interrogated for about 10 days, except in Youngbyun, North Pyongan Province, where they held the demonstration for one nation-state successfully, asking for the withdrawal of all the foreign forces - i.e., U.S. and U.S.S.R. forces at that time. At least some 170,000 people were arrested and put into prison, and some 80 leaders were sentenced to death, or 5 years to 15 years in prison. Many people lost their lives after the breakout of the War in Korea in 1950.

After the failure, they organized Youngwoohoe(靈友會), or, "The Society for Spiritual Friends", for another secret planning of mass demonstrations. Their position was against Communism which considers religion as opium. For the development of the Tonghak religion(Chundokyo), freedom for religion had to be the basis of the establishing of the new nation. The organization had some 800,000 members with 204,000 families in North Korea in 1948. In 1950(March), the secret members under Youngwoohoe numbered 325,002, where the total number of the Chundokyo members in North Korea were some 2,866,342.

In 1950, from April to May, 165 leaders were arrested, and 75% were from North Pyongan Province. The charge was that they endeavored to topple the government with the secret plans of the U.S. and RHEE, Seungman Government with armed struggles.

In 1975, CHOI, Byungje(최병제) and others made the Declaration for Unification.

We declare the fact that North and South and the world are one, not divided in two, with the concept of 'Treat everyone as you treat heaven ethics, and people are heaven ideology. We should make the divided Korea and the spirit into one and all the nations in the world should declare the fact that all the sovereign nations have equal rights, and the provincial prejudices of the human-centered ideologies should be eliminated, with the spirit of People are Heaven(天). Super Powers should stop oppressing the weak nations with arms. We should respect the Hanulnim(한울님),(養天), and practice the will of Heaven. We do not want to criticize the UN for their status quo of the nations. All the nations should go beyond militarism with power and live on the spirit of Innaechun. *Treat everyone as you treat Heaven* should be the principle for the reunification of Korea for security. We should organize the All Korean People Assembly(汎國民會議), and we should have an alternative New United Nations in the land of Korea.

January 27, 1983, another declaration for reunification was proposed in the Donga Daily News.

Japan should repent her original sin for the division of Korea, and stop planning to expand their hegemonic power in Asia. Nowadays, capitalism and Communism are merging into mixed economy. Chundokyo is the unified concept for unification of Korea, transcending extreme divisions. We ask for the support of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. and the President, CHUN, Duwhan.

In 1984, Tonghaks organized the Research Institute for the Reunification of Korea, and in 1991, Tonghaks organized The Tonghak Reunification Assembly(동학민족통일회의) with the declaration and action guidelines.

The statement says,

We support the efficiency of the free market economy and justice of the egalitarian new economic order on the bases of equality and social welfare. Now is the time to transform the world. We do not accept the scapegoating process of cold war under the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Tonghak Revolution will be achieved by the reunified Korea on the bases of peace, self-reliance, and democracy.

3.2 Tonghaks in North Korea

CHOI, Dukshin and Ms. RYU, Miyoung in North Korea

Four leaders of Tonghak went to North Korea from South Korea, and lived there permanently, becoming leaders of the North Korean Tonghaks(Chundokyo). CHOI, Dukshin's father was General CHOI, Dong O, the Principal of the Whasungeuisuk(華城義塾) Military Academy in Manchuria during the time of Japanese Colonial Rule in Korea. KIM, Il Sung was a one-time student under him. CHOI, Dong O was the faithful member of Chundokyo. General CHOI, Dong O's strategy for peace and security in Korea was military power against the Japanese massacres, exploitations, military sex slavery of some 130,000 to 200,000 women, and conquering Korea for slavery. During the time of the war in Korea, both General CHOI and General RYU, Dongyul moved to North Korea, and they were treated in an excellent manner in North Korea by the government.

In South Korea, it was reported that both of them were kidnapped by North Korea during the time of war, but others say that they actually chose to go to North Korea voluntarily. There have been hermeneutical differences and biases, based on personal experiences, ideological differences and other factors since the division of Korea by the super powers. A hermeneutical key for peace is necessary to solve the problems and sufferings.

Both General CHOI and General RYU, Dongyul were buried in the Shinmiree Patriots National Cemetery in North Korea.

Ms. RYU, Miyoung's father, RYU, Dongyul was Minister of the Defence Department of the Interim Korea Government and the General of the Calvery, of Chosun Kingdom(大韓帝國). RYU, Dongyul and CHOI, Dong O became the brothers in faith, and they became the fathers-in-law to their son and daughter.

CHOI, Dukshin, Great Leader of Chundokyo and his wife Ms. RYU, Miyoung moved to North Korea and CHOI lived there until his death, and RYU, Miyoung has been the Chairperson of the Central Committee in Chundokyo, North Korea. They lived in the USA for about 10 years, before they moved to North Korea. Ms. RYU, Miyoung, the Chairperson of the Central Committee in The Chungwoodang(靑友黨) Party under Chundokyo in North Korea visited South Korea in 2001, as the Head of the Separated Families Visit to South Korea. They have been working for the reunification of the divided Korea in South Korea and now in North Korea at the same time.

3.3 O, Ikjae in North Korea

O, Ikjae, the Head of Chundokyo (Kyoryung)(April, 1987.- June,1994) went to North Korea as a person who loves Korea, and his family members were separated into two. The reason that he went to North Korea and has been living there since that time is because he wanted to be with the family.

It is significant to see the Two Heads of Chundokyo, and Woman Leader moved to North Korea for their efforts for reunification of Korea. None other religious heads in Korea have the same historical operations and experiences, comparing to Chundokyo's.

One of the similar cases is Rev. HONG, Dong Keun of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. He was born in North Korea and moved to South Korea and lived there until he went to U.S.A. He began teaching at KIM, Il Sung University for about 10 years, and then passed away in North Korea in 2001. But he did not lived permanently in North Korea. He had stayed for a few months each time to teach at Kim, Il Sung University.

4. Clash of Civilizations and Tonghaks

The Values of Tonghaks on reunification is unique, but invisible and yet still alive in many ways in the society of North Korea and also in South Korea.

The clash of civilizations in Korea has been the clash between western Christian civilizations, which was pretty much secularized by the hegemonic interests of the powerful colonial countries in Europe and North America, versus the indigenous civilizations in Korea. Confucianism is originally Chinese, not Korean, and Buddhism is also from India and China, which are not the original Korean religious civilizations. Tonghak is one of the unique religious civilizations in Korea. Tonghak literally fought Japanese invasions with arms and with the people's army, and also fought the invasions of western hegemonic powers via religions and civilizations for the national people's security, self-reliance and sovereignty as a nation-state of Korea. Tonghak did not want to see victimization and the scapegoating of Korea by the two Super Powers and one colonial power, i.e., Japan. Tonghak fought with revolutionary armed struggles and also with non-violent means, i.e. education, conscientizations through religious activities, and with a political party for the security of the oppressed people. Tonghak goes beyond the military demarcation line of the Demilitarized Zone, or the 38th parallel after 1945. In Tonghak, North and South Korea are not two, but one. This value is very much alive in the people's heart of every Korean nowadays.

5. When the Super Powers Return to their Places.

After the Revolution failed in 1894-5, The Tonghak Revolutionary War, the disciple of Haewol(海月), Choi,Sihyung, asked him when would the country be peaceful and well-off for the oppressed, suffering and alienated people in Korean peninsula. He answered, "The time is when all the soldiers and the war horses of the all the countries come (to Korea) and then return back to their own countries and places."

This saying is alive in the posters and leaflets for Tonghak in June, 2002. Tonghak believers seems to think and believe that Haewol's prophecy is still effective in the year 2002, when George W. Bush says that North Korea is one of the axis of evil, and the U.S. has the strategy of the pre-emptive strikes on the evil powers even with nuclear weapons. Since the revolutionary war of Tonghak, Chinese Forces, Japanese Forces, Russian Forces and U.S. Forces and Forces of the Socialist Countries, and Capitalist Countries have come and fought the war in Korea, until today. Tonghak's schedule for peace is clear to the point and Tonghak has her own strategies and diverse operations, visible and invisible, in the South and in the North Korea.

Tonghaks are saying that:

“If one wants the reunification of Korea, then one should have one ideology.

If one wants to have one ideology, then materialism(唯物論) and psychologism(唯心論) should be one through monism. Reunification should be based on material-mind monism(物心一元論).

The extreme left and the extreme right can return to the eternal great way of oneness. The theory for reunification should be based on the philosophy of reunification. One should know the history of the last 140 years. Many do not.”

6. Reconstruction for the Alternative World(後天開闢)

The last 500 years has been the era of massacres and victimizations in Russia, Germany, the Americas, Australia, Hawaii, China, Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Kosovo, Namibia, etc., etc. More than 6-16 million people killed in Russia, 6 million Jews and 6 million Europeans killed by Germans, 20 million Chinese were killed by Japanese and 16 million wounded, more than 14 million native Americans has been disappeared since the arrivals of European settlers, some 3 million people were sacrificed in the Vietnam War, more than 200,000 soldiers were killed in the Gulf War, and some 3 million people were either killed or wounded in the war in Korea. Some 80% of the natives in Namibia were killed by Germans, countless natives in Latin America were sacrificed since the arrivals of Europeans. Many Pacific Islanders have been victimized by the nuclear tests of the U.S.A., France, and the United Kingdom, etc.

Tonghak has been fighting for the suffering and alienated people. And the ones who should listen to the voices of Tonghak are the people with power, military and weapons.

Robert McNamara, then the secretary to the Department of Defense, U.S.A., during the time of the Vietnam War, began reflecting on what went wrong in the massacres of people in Indochina. He said in his book, *In Retrospect: Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, New York, Random House, 1995 :

“We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why”.(p.xvi.)

“One reason the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed to take an orderly, rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam was the staggering variety and complexity of other issues we faced. Simply put, we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and we often did not have time to think straight. This predicament is not unique to the administrations in which I served or to the United States. It has existed at all times and in most countries. I have never seen a thoughtful examination of the problem. It existed then, it exists today, it ought to be recognized and planned for when organizing a government.”(p.xvii).

His reflection is not enough, but Tonghak may regard him to be the starter for the new enlightenment for peace. Tonghak regards the present United Nations as not enough for peace and is suggesting an alternative United Nations based in Korea.

The National Council of Churches in Korea, The National Council of Churches in Christ, USA, and the Korea Christian Federation, DPR Korea gathered together at the Church Center for U.N., on March 17-21, 1997 and made the Statement, saying that:

The United States and the DPR Korea should make a peace system.

The United States should lift the economic sanctions against North Korea.

The United States should stop calling North Korea a terrorist country.

And the churches should promote the peace education for reunification and peace in Korea.

Tonghak may want to have inclusive strategies while she reads the Christian response on peace and reunification. People in Korea do not want to have any kind of war by any countries. Those who have power and agendas for preemptive strikes and war should stop the agenda and listen to the teachings of the common people and the teachings of Tonghaks.