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A Study on the Reception of Science-Technology in Ch'eondoism: In the Case of Yi Don-hwa

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I. Introduction

Ch'eondoism (天道教) literally means “The Teaching of the Way of Heaven” and was a religious movement in early 20th century Korea. In the legacy of Donghak (東學), a school of thought founded by Suwun Choi Je-u (水雲 崔濟愚, 1842-1864), Ch'eondoism endeavored to transform itself into a modern religion in 1905. This study explores Ch'oendoist attitudes towards concrete applications of modern science and technology, such as electricity, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and steam trains. The investigation shows that the religion not only used modern conveniences but incorporated science and technology to transform its religious imagination and self-understanding. In accordance with the basic tenet the “man is heaven” (人乃天), modernity was the opening of a new era by humanity, using science and technology to create a modern civilization in Ch'eondoism. In this understanding, religion and science were not conceived of as separate realms but as developing together linked by the human being on which both were centered.

The integrated perspective of Cheondoism that differs from the common view of an incompatibility of religion and science, has been regarded as irrational mysticism. For example, Lee Chul-ho writes in his recent work on Yi Don-hwa (李敦化, 1884-1950), one of the leaders of Ch'eondoism: "Yi's thought is not free from fundamentalism, because he sought to find the basis of his belief and religious dogma in scientific hypotheses, concepts and proofs".¹ Moreover, Lee finds that "the obsession for western universality" is inherent in Yi's integration religion and science. Lee's criticism is no unproblematic because he applies a rationalistic perspective that itself has been constructed in the course of the modern period. The perspective that regards religion and science an irreconcilable is not well suited for understanding philosophic, religious or intellectual developments in Korea in a period in which discourses on religion and science were diverse and in flux.

Research on Ch'eondoism has mostly focused on its political role. It is positively assessed for its function in the independence movement and as a religious or philosophical contribution towards Korean national identity. This paper departs from the perspective of political history. It investigates Ch'eondoism as a new religious movement that actively integrated science and technology in order to elevate its status as the most modern, most highly evolved religion in the world. The investigation is a first step to assess Cheondoism not as an exclusively national religion, but on its own terms as a modern, potentially global religion of the period of modernization. The reason for the focus on Ch'eondoist attitudes towards science and technology is the fact that the leaders of the movement were committed

¹ Lee refers to the following sentences from Slavoj Žižek's *In Defence of Lost Causes*: "No wonder then that religious fundamentalists are among the most passionate digital hackers, and always prone to combine their religion with the latest findings of science: "for them, religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge. (In this sense, the status of "universal human rights" is also that of a pure belief: they cannot be grounded in our knowledge of human nature, they are an axiom posited by our decision.) The occurrence of the term "science" in the very name of some of the fundamentalist sects (Christian Science, Scientology) is not just an obscene joke, but signals the reduction of belief to positive knowledge.": Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London & NY: Verso, 2008), 31-32; 이철호, "우주종교로서의 개벽사상: 이돈화와 김지하의 진화론 수용 및 그 정신사적 계보" 『한국학 연구』, (2015/ 38), 502, 507.

to educate and enlighten the nation through the introduction of the latest knowledge from abroad. Compared to the other religions of Korea in the period, Ch'eondoism held the most positive and activist stance in applying scientific knowledge to its religious understanding and world view.

In my talk today, I attempt to show how the Ch'eondoist attitude to scientific knowledge and to technical applications influenced its religious experience. To this aim, rather than attempting an exhaustive analysis of relevant discourses, I provide an overview of Ch'eondoist approaches and reinterpretations and narrate the Ch'eondoist interaction with science and technology. The investigation presented today is the first to step of a study that considers Ch'eondoism's place among new religious movements in the global religious history of the period of modernization from the late 19th to the 20th century. My presentation today focuses on Yi Don-hwa(李敦化, 1884–1950), and mainly uses *Gaebyeok* (開闢, lit. *Opening of New World*, 1920.6–1926.6, 1934.11–1935.3), the representative magazine of Ch'eondoism, and *Byeolgeongon* (別乾坤, lit. *Another Heaven and Earth*, 1926.11–1934.6).

II. From Electric Force to Spiritual Force

An article entitled “General knowledge of electricity for domestic uses” (家庭應用 電氣常識(一)) appeared in 1930 in *Byeolgeongon*. The author was Yoon Ju-bok (尹柱福, ?–?), who professionally worked in technology. Yoon portrays electricity as a dramatic event, a thunderbolt that used to be heaven's punishment now placed into man's own hand to serve humanity. Telephone and telegraph reduce the space on our globe, electric light dented the preeminence of the Sun, the radio, the electric phonograph and television establish an electric authority over modern humanity. Yoon's view reflects a common attitude towards electricity among educated people of the period.

In the same magazine, Cho Gang-san, a Ch'eondoist lay person's contribution offers us a different perspective on advanced technical devices:

Morse's invention of the telegraph was a great blessing to humankind. However, the shortcoming was that one still could not communicate in unequipped places ... Would it be possible to communicate without lines? Indeed all that a mind can think can be realized. There is nothing that could come out of thought. Every mystery of the universe will be eventually disclosed in (human) knowledge. Time and space of the universe which have not been comprehend yet, will come into (human) knowledge. Shortly after thinking about communicating without lines, radiotelegraphy was indeed invented. 2

Cho employs the perspective of Ch'eondoism that regards technical development as a fruit of the human power of mind. Scientific development as a fruit of the power of the human mind is found a decade earlier in an article by Yeonpo (然飽) in *Cheondo Monthly Bulletin* (天道教會月報): "Our human life is indeed all-powerful. Because we desire to reach beyond the ocean, we invented the steamer. Because we desire to fly in the sky, we invented the plane." 3

Kim Myeong-ho (金明昊, 1901—?), who was a Ch'eondoist leader and a member of the New Party, wrote that the with progress, bodily material needs increase. Yet man's aspirations being far greater than his bodily needs, the needs of soul and mind will always be far more intense than those of the body. For this reason, Kim defined mind and soul as the root all of matter, because man's needs of the mind and the soul bring forth material civilization. Referring to Benjamin Franklin (1706—1790) and the invention of electricity, he again stresses human "mental power" and "the need of mind and soul".

Today's civilization is called a material civilization and widely regarded as nothing but soul- and mind-less objects. This is seeing only material objects while being unable to see what came before them. Let us have a look at Franklin's invention of electricity. As we see machines driven by electricity we see are mere materials, but let us consider Franklin on the day he invented electricity. A flash in the sky, like a demon fire, which we fear because we cannot understand it. Let us try to understand. His heart, without any material desire, his very

2 速記者 曹山江, "닭의 제 歷史講演", (1932/59), 9.

3 然飽 "人萬能으로부터 天萬能에" 「천도교회월보」(1922/ 139), 25.

soul demanded to know. This is what all is about. Before an invention or a discovery comes the utmost earnestness of a striving soul and mind. Let us consider the great men whom we know well. The needs of their mind and soul correspond to the level of the great men.⁴

Kim Myeong-ho reached a religious interpretation of the human spiritual and intellectual effort as the driving force of scientific and technological progress.

Yi Don-hwa went further than Kim. He imagined an elaborate cosmology based on the development of science and technology. The invention of telegraph, telephone, steam locomotive and steamer to him was evidence of progress achieved by the power of the human mind that would transform the universe:

Originally, what made mankind mankind was in man's self-emancipation from nature. On the one hand man uses his human talent, on the other, restructures the chaos of the natural world, so that the development of human life can begin to progress. The Stone Age changed to the Bronze Age, the Bronze Age changed to the Iron Age, the Iron Age changed to the Steam Age, the Steam Age changed to the Electricity Age again. The speed of the ascent of human power accelerates. Therefore the modern sciences possess the great supremacy of the human world as well as an outstanding influence on material renovation ... T[t]ruly, the power of the human mind and soul has overreached nature and will change heaven and earth and all things!⁵

According to Yi, scientific truths were not separated from religious truths. He believes that "a kind of mysterious force rules all things in the universe". As in electric force in electricity, steam force in steam engines, human force was in the human being. As growth in animals and plants is mysterious, he deduced that the force of the earth, the force of the fire, electric and steam force in the last analysis were all the same. He identified universal gravitation as the principle of all forces and assumed that as this force permeated the entire universe, including all matter and humankind.⁶ With man creating the new era, Ch'endoism understood change

4 金明昊, "侍日說教에 對하야", 「천도교회월보」, (1922/ 5), 31.

5 李敦化, "新時代와 新人物", 「개벽」(1920/ 3), 15-16.

6 李敦化, "眞理의 體驗", 「개벽」(1922/ 27), 35.

universe caused by human action as positive, regarding humanity as the agent of a scientific transformation of the world.

At the same time Ch'eondoist thinkers did not simplify into a one way avenue towards process and perfection. In the article of 1921 titled "Can man indeed be omniscient and omnipotent?" Yi portrayed the universe as huge vital force. The model of this idea was the telegraph, which he lyrically described as strings that as in a stringed musical instrument bridged time and space (琴線: original meaning is Geomungo strings) which resonate and conveyed sound. The resulting image of a "phenomenon of the world of the mind and soul as a great universal vital force (宇宙大活精인 心靈界의 현상)".⁷

III. Science Myth

Byeolgeongon of 1929 published a short story by Yi Don-hwa: "New myth – Before the world began"(新神話- 開闢以前). The narrator tells an ignorant old man (*Muhaong*, 無何翁) about the birth of the universe based on the evolution theory and history. The story may appear abstruse, but Yi predicted new universal dimension achieved by progress in the spiritual and material world, in which all people lived in harmony, without borders of races or states. Yi's thought appears to reproduce traditional images of harmony, yet it reminds us that the human being is connected with the heaven. The title "new myth" indicates that he intended to present a myth based on scientific progress.⁸ Concrete aspects in the "new myth" include a "the radio car" as a means of transportation powered by electric force, and inter-racial and even inter-planetary marriages as a common and accepted phenomenon.

In addition to showing an awareness of global trends, his myth can also be read as the opposite of reality in Korea under Japanese rule: Evolved people using the radio car which

7 夜雷, "人은 果然 全知全能이 될가", 「개벽」, (1921/ 9), 50.

8 夜雷 "新神話 '開闢以前'", 별건곤 제19호 (1929.02.01.), 168-172.

combined communicating and transportation, while the boundaries of power and national tradition had been overcome.

According to Yi, 'human life' was the center for understanding religion and society. Experiencing the changes on daily life brought by science and technology, one might feel the need for a religious explanation. But this explanation should not stop in the religious sphere, but reform the human condition itself. Moreover, this religious explanation would become a driving force to reform society.

IV. Conclusion

Different from preceding religious thinkers, Yi Don-hwa and Ch'eondoism approached the material universe by the way of technological application of modern science. His experience of modern technology brought him to a new anthropocentric cosmological view. He regarded scientific technological innovation as evidence of the existence of a force that joined the human being with the universe. He was not unaware of problems in the real world around him (both in the application of science and in human society), but nonetheless maintained that these were results of the as yet limited scientific progress of his time. This allowed him to believe in a continuous evolution that would proceed from insights into the organic relationship between the universe and human being, eventually leading to the perfection of man and society.

It seems important to me to consider Ch'eondoism and its attitude towards science and technology in terms of defining its own religious and reformist identity. Yi Don-hwa and other thinkers of Ch'eondoism sought to overcome the distance of existing religions and science by actively integrating scientific knowledge into a rationalized religious identity. We can read Ch'eondoism in the historical context of Japanese colonial rule as an attempt at creating an outlook of hope for the future. At the same time, we can recognize the Ch'eondoist theory of the world as an effort of presenting itself as the most advanced religion in an evolutionary sense that would ultimately become the global creed.

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