

Theories of Suffering in East Asian Religions: The Case of Daesoon Jinrihoe

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ABSTRACT: All religions try to explain the origins of human suffering. East Asian religions, old and new, are no exception. Daesoon Jinrihoe is unique for its identification of “mutual overcoming” as the root cause of suffering, and “mutual beneficence” as the main tool to overcome unnecessary afflictions. The paper discusses the typology of different categories of sufferings in the theology of Daesoon Jinrihoe, and the main differences between its theology of suffering and the theories of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. It also emphasizes that, while traditional East Asian religions focus on the subjective dimension of suffering and propose remedies centered on the situation of individuals, Daesoon Jinrihoe, through its notions of “mutual overcoming” and “mutual beneficence,” regards suffering as a social problem in need of social solutions.

KEYWORDS: Suffering, Suffering and Religion, Daesoon Jinrihoe, Korean New Religions, Mutual Overcoming, Mutual Beneficence.

Introduction

Among the most discussed problems in contemporary religious studies is how the different religions help their devotees cope with the practical problems of life. Religions do more than interpreting theory and theology. They negotiate, reconcile, and put into practice theological meanings in their devotees’ everyday lives (Lee 2013, 12). The theology is thus applied to life and, within the structure of religious meanings, a practical scope emerges as crucially important. Accordingly, religions should be studied beyond the theologies that have been fixed in their scriptures (Ha 2010, 1–2).

Within the larger field of the studies of religions “in practice,” an important subfield is the study of suffering, i.e. of the process where, with the help of religion, devotees acquire a new understanding of the harshness of life and adequate spiritual tools to overcome their hardships. Suffering is a universal experience: it is hard to avoid, and endless efforts are required to cope with it. All religions have offered their diverse solutions to the problem of suffering (Sohn 1995, 107–13). They continue to do so today (Hwang 1980, 42–4; Yu 2004, 303–19). The crucial role of suffering also warns scholar against studying religion from a purely secular perspective.

The religious traditions of East Asia have suggested their own solutions to the problem of suffering. However, each religion of East Asia, old or new, has adopted its own approach, which makes their plurality worth studying. This paper focuses on Daesoon Jinrihoe, one of the largest East Asian new religions, and discusses its approach to the question of suffering within the East Asian religious context.

The Causes of Suffering in the Theology of Daesoon Jinrihoe

According to Daesoon Jinrihoe, at one stage in the history of the world, the divine beings who rule each part of the universe became unable to control it. The universe was about to be annihilated. Thus, the divine beings petitioned Sangje, the Lord of the Ninth Heaven and the highest God in Daesoon Jinrihoe’s pantheon, to intervene. Sangje started an “itineration” through the Three Realms of Heaven, Earth, and Humankind (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Progress of the Order* 1:9 and *Prophetic Elucidations* 1: the *Jeong-yeong* is the major scripture of Daesoon Jinrihoe). Sangje’s Great Itineration is regarded as the starting point of Daesoon Jinrihoe. Two key words in this narrative are “annihilation” and “petition,” and both are related to suffering.

It would not be wrong to classify Daesoon Jinrihoe among the religions that find their starting point in the problem of suffering. There is, however, a peculiarity. The range of sufferings goes far beyond the afflictions of the humans and expands to the whole universe. When asked to indicate a theology whose starting point is the problem of suffering, many would mention Buddhism. It is a matter of common knowledge that Buddha tried to resolve the basic human forms of suffering, including birth, aging, sickness, and death (the four phases of life),

by performing appropriate penance. This is, in fact, the starting point of Buddhism.

While Buddhism is prone to focusing on individual sufferings, Daesoon Jinrihoe includes the social (national) dimensions, beyond individual life. In addition, the divine beings of the universe are also considered in Daesoon Jinrihoe. They suffer too, and so does the Supreme God himself. This cosmic suffering is the context of human suffering, which is the focus of the present article.

The worldview of Daesoon Jinrihoe insists that the relationships among all created beings proceed according to the two principles of “mutual beneficence” and “mutual overcoming.” The former indicates a relationship of mutual life-giving and help, while the latter refers to mutual suppression and restraint. When these relationships are well-balanced, harmony reigns. Their imbalance, however, creates multiple problems. Daesoon Jinrihoe argues that, so far, the created world has been dominated by mutual overcoming, which resulted in the accumulation of grievances and caused many sufferings. From a remote past and until now, the principle of mutual overcoming has ruled the world. Our present world, with all its problems accumulated so far, is called the Former World. Happily, Daesoon Jinrihoe announces that the world in which conflicts will disappear, and only the principle of mutual beneficence will rule, will be opened before long. It is called the Later World, in which grievances and sufferings will disappear, and is the direct opposite of the Former World (Jang 1989, 278; Cha 2011b, 97–9).

As this scheme shows, the cause of sufferings in Daesoon Jinrihoe is mutual overcoming. This statement, however, does not express completely Daesoon Jinrihoe’s theory of suffering. The complexity of suffering cannot be explained by a single cause, and more elaborate frames are needed. In fact, the *Jeong-yeong*, the supreme scripture of Daesoon Jinrihoe, explains human suffering by insisting on mutual overcoming but it also introduces other elements. I would propose to classify them in four classes and nine models.

The MOC Model

MOC stands here for “Mutual Overcoming of the Cosmos.” It refers to causes of sufferings created by mutual overcoming in its cosmic dimension. Daesoon Jinrihoe explains that, in the background of all afflictions, there is always some form of mutual overcoming. Thus, MOC appears as the ultimate cause of all sufferings in the worldview of Daesoon Jinrihoe. But human beings are not always responsible of MOC. Many cases of MOC that are outside the sphere of human responsibility are depicted in the *Jeong-yeong*. They include wicked spirits harming human beings without any reason, the impure energies of nature, natural disasters, or the natural death of a person with the resulting grief of her bereaved family (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Authority and Foreknowledge* 1:8 and 2:18; *Saving Lives* 40).

In this model of suffering, the MOC is so powerful that it is almost impossible for human beings to avoid or prevent it. Humans do not receive any rewards through this experience of suffering, as they are not responsible for it. This kind of suffering gives humans serious resentment and creates grievances towards Heaven and the world. Daesoon Jinrihoe states that the root cause of this situation is the “Old Heaven,” which killed human beings (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Reordering Works* 1:11). To end these painful circumstances, Sangje himself descended to Earth. He reordered the cosmic program in a way of mutual beneficence by transforming the Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humankind). According to Daesoon Jinrihoe, mutual overcoming will not exist in the Later World (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Progress of the Order* 1:66). This view suggests that sufferings caused by MOC should gradually disappear as we advance towards the Later World. However, humans themselves should contribute to this process by participating in Sangje’s Reordering of the Universe (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Prophetic Elucidations* 17).

The VMOH, VMOO, and VUD Models

On the other hand, there are cases in which humans are responsible of the mutual overcoming. In these cases, offenders and victims are indeed present. It is thus necessary to define a second model of suffering, which considers the victims. This model is in turn classified into three categories.

The first category is VMOH, “Victims of Mutual Overcoming Caused by Humans.” It refers to the damages caused by mutual overcoming created by human groups such as nations or societies. VMOH includes sufferings from wars, disasters, struggles among human groups, and discrimination or polarization caused by distorted structures and customs in politics, economy, or society. Typical cases would be the Nanking Massacre of 1937–38, the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, ethnic cleansings, and so on. The *Jeong-yeong* provides a representative case of this kind of sufferings during the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894 in Korea (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Acts* 1:26; *Reordering Works* 2:19).

The second category is VMOO, “Victims of Mutual Overcoming Caused by Others.” It refers to intentional hostile acts by single individuals or unorganized small groups of individuals. The scheme is the same of VMOH, except that in the VMOO the offenders are not organized as a group. Among the examples mentioned in the *Jeong-yeong* are the incident of a servant wrongly killed by a king and the murder of Buddhist monk Jin-Muk (1562–1633) (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Acts* 1:1 and 4:28; *Reordering Works* 3:15).

The third category is VUD, “Victims of Unintended Deeds.” In this case, mutual overcoming is produced in an unintentional way. Others suffer, but clarifying the responsibility asks for an analysis whether the deed was intentional or not. The death of Emperor Shun (ca. 2294–2184 BCE according to tradition) and the sufferings of his two empresses are mentioned in the *Jeong-yeong* (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Reordering Works* 3:4) and are a good example of the VUD sub-model at work.

These different V-derivative models appear through human history. The sufferings depicted in these models do not create any positive values for human beings. Humans struggle to get rid of them. Yet, the only way to eliminate the V categories of suffering is to scrupulously avoid any kind of mutual overcoming, regardless of its origins and intentions. From the point of view of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the earthly paradise of the Later World is a place completely purified of all traces of mutual overcoming. The sufferings of the V lineage, just like these of the MOC model, can be removed only by participating in Sangje’s Reordering Works of the Universe and opening of the Later World, where only mutual beneficence will reign.

The PPT and PUW Models

The *Jeong-yeong* also presents cases of sufferings caused by the victim's own actions. Generally, these forms of suffering can be regarded as punishments for different categories of wrongdoings. We can thus introduce a P lineage model. The principle of mutual overcoming remains the basis of suffering. However, the mutual overcoming in this case is created by the victim herself, rather than by others, which is a very relevant difference with respect to the other models.

The P lineage models can be in turn classified into two categories. In the first one, PPT stands for "Punishment of the Perpetrator or Transgressor." This means that the punishment for certain wrongdoings, or a price to pay, becomes the cause of suffering. The second category is PUW, "Punishment of the Perpetrator or Transgressor for Unintended Wrongdoing." Here, a human deed becomes a sin unintentionally, but still creates grievances in others and is punished with suffering. The *Jeong-yeong* offers example of both PPT (a drunken man entrapped in a stone mortar) and PUW (a man's unwise behavior derived from his worries about his debts) (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Acts* 1:17–18 and 3:36; *Reordering Works* 1:16; *Saving Lives* 24).

From a humanistic point of view, it may appear reasonable that suffering should be endured as a punishment for personal sins (Cha 2011a, 163–64). The *Jeong-yeong* suggests a representative case where a man suffering from injuries on his chest bone overcomes the pain by repenting of his sins (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Dharma* 3:12). Models of suffering that are possibly explained by PPT and PUW become valuable when human life is well-balanced between merits and demerits, and between good and evil.

The Desire Models

Desire and humans are not separated. Desire is a basic instinct. Most religious movements of East Asia assume a position that advocates a taboo on desire, because they perceive desire as the cause of all sufferings and a source of trouble. On the contrary, Daesoon Jinrihoe does not consider desire a taboo. For this Korean religion, desire also implies an appropriate ambition, which may promote progress and betterment. Problems, however, emerge when inappropriate desires arise to satisfy one's own selfishness (Yun 2012, 179). Daesoon Jinrihoe

encourages appropriate ambition but warns that inappropriate desire should be avoided.

Daesoon Jinrihoe also notes that, whether positive or not, if the desire is not granted, despair and suffering are created. Negative wishes such as vain desires, obsessions, or grudges cause sufferings. Here, an SPD model applies, “Self-Perpetrators Who Conceives Vain Desires, Obsessions, and Grievances.” Vain desires often result in excessive expectations about us or others. As the vain desire leads to obsession and creates grievances, in the end, it causes a suffering that eats itself. It may not be easy to see that the principle of mutual overcoming is also at work in this case. This kind of suffering does not have a meaning or value for human beings. Therefore, it is necessary to get rid of vain desires. Daesoon Jinrihoe summarizes its methods for achieving this result as follows: regaining a pure conscience of our nature, observing our behavior by law and manner, throwing away any vanity, getting rid of selfish motives that trigger earthly desires, and looking back, and reflecting, on ourselves (Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture 2014, 17–8).

In addition, Daesoon Jinrihoe’s recipe includes self-reflection and practice of mutual beneficence in a specific way. The principle of mutual beneficence includes two notions: resolving grievances for mutual beneficence (解冤相生), and creating harmony through the grateful reciprocation of favors (報恩相生). The former notion implies that we should be fair and righteous in every affair, as well as honest and trustworthy. We should also not give others new reasons for grudges, and this may only be achieved by getting rid of vanity and living within limits. If some hold grudges against each other, they should try to love each other as a way of resolving the grievances.

The second notion indicates that we should help each other, by repaying all the blessings we have received from Heaven and Earth, the nation and society, neighbors and teachers. Such attitude and practice of mutual beneficence constantly remind us of our limits and positions. It also enables us to consider the betterment of others rather than our own benefits only, which allows to dismiss excessive and vain desires, obsessions, and grudges (*Daesoonhoebo 2* 1984, 2). Therefore, in the theology and ethics of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the practice of resolving grievances for mutual beneficence, and creating harmony through the grateful reciprocation of favors, becomes a method to remove sufferings caused by SPD.

At the same time, the *Jeong-yeong* also discusses the situations in which sufferings occur because of positive desire. One such case is the ELJ model, “Enforcement of Law or Practice of Justice.” Often, suffering is created in the process of enforcing the laws and the public order or justice. This ELJ model, where suffering is created in the process of realizing justice, overlaps with the VMOH model we previously discussed, “Victims of Mutual Overcoming Caused by Humans.”

The *Jeong-yeong* presents historical cases such as Jeon Bong-Jun (1854–1895), the leader of the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894, who tried to work for the betterment of others but ended up being executed, and the Jesuit Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who tried to establish an earthly paradise in China but failed due to the social circumstances of the times (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Reordering Works* 3:2; *Progress of the Order* 1:9, 1:50 and 2:57). It is generally assumed that the sufferings occurred in the process of enforcing the laws or realizing justice have positive values. As it implies a definite purpose to realize the ideal of good, this kind of suffering is worthy enough to endure. In the process of realizing justice or enforcing the laws fairly, it would be ideal that sufferings would not occur. However, Daesoon Jinrihoe teaches that we still live in the Former World ruled by mutual overcoming, and this is unlikely to happen. Even just acts may be distorted by abuse because of the prevalence of mutual overcoming in the Former World. These sufferings will only disappear, together with mutual overcoming, in the Later World.

In addition to the ELJ model, the *Jeong-yeong* presents other examples of sufferings created by positive desire. They can be classified as part of the CERT model, “Cultivation, Enacting the Reordering of the Universe, Ritual Practices, Promotion of Fortune, Tests.” There are sufferings we experience when cultivating or disciplining ourselves, making efforts for promoting our fortune and happiness, or preparing for tests. Some of these are vain cases, when the sufferings do not bring forth good fruit but end up in complaints only. But the results, and the human attitude when confronted with misfortune, do not change the root causes why the sufferings occur.

These cases fall under the CERT model. Daesoon Jinrihoe defines the present condition of the world as the age when Heaven gives birth to humankind and works with humans. They are called to participate in the work of Heaven and Earth. In Daesoon Jinrihoe’s theology, Heaven and Earth are believed to be

ultimately fair and just to humans according to their circumstances and affairs. Humans are also submitted to tests. The *Jeong-yeong* explains that tests include subjects such as household management, each man’s and woman’s nature and broad-mindedness, as well as the agony of mind, physical pain, starvation, economic suffering, and afflictions caused by failures at work (*Jeong-yeong* [2010], *Acts* 3:50 and 4:31; *Reordering Works* 1:15, 1:18 and 3:21; *Progress of the Order* 1:39; *Dharma* 1:42). The proper reaction to these trials is not harboring grievances against Heaven but reflecting on our condition and endure the sufferings. Humans who pass the tests, Daesoon Jinrihoe teaches, will be protected by divine beings and supported by Heaven. Accepting sufferings caused by CERT in the Former World is a deed of considerable value, and indeed hastens the coming of the Later World.

Mutual Overcoming	1. No Liability to Humans		MOC	Mutual Overcoming of the Cosmos
	2. Victim’s Perspective		VMOH	Victims of Mutual Overcoming Caused by Humans
			VMOO	Victims of Mutual Overcoming Caused by Others
			VUD	Victims of Unintended Deeds
	3. Perpetrator’s Perspective		PPT	Punishment of the Perpetrator or Transgressor
			PUW	Punishment of the Perpetrator or Transgressor for Unintended Wrongdoing
	4. Matter of Desire	Appropriate Ambition	SPD	Self-Perpetrators Who Conceive Vain Desires, Obsessions, and Grievances
		Inappropriate desire	ELJ	Enforcement of Law or Practice of Justice
			CERT	Cultivation, Enacting the Reordering of the Universe, Ritual Practices, Promotion of Fortune, Tests

Table 1. Four Categories and Nine Models of Suffering in Daesoon Jinrihoe.

Conclusion: Suffering in Daesoon Jinrihoe and in Traditional East Asian Religions

Those experiencing severe sufferings ask why exactly this is happening to them. It is both an age-old and a reasonable question. When practicing religious cultivation, Daesoon Jinrihoe followers interact with mentors (called *seon-gak*, lit. “the ones who have become enlightened before”) and receive advice from them. Mentors offer a third person’s point of view and, when confronted with suffering, can classify individual cases into the nine models and the four categories, revealing to the devotees the precise causes of their afflictions.

Daesoon Jinrihoe believes that the first reason for the sufferings derives from the mutual overcoming program of the cosmos (MOC). Secondly, suffering is attributed to the mutual overcoming caused by nations and societies, as well as other organized groups (VMOH). Third, it results from the intentional mutual overcoming acts of individual humans (VMOO). Fourth, also unintentional acts by humans may create mutual overcoming (VUD). Fifth, some humans are sinners and offenders, and are punished or must pay a price (PPT). Sixth, our own deeds may unintentionally create mutual overcoming and be punished (PUW). Seventh, sufferings exist because humans create further mutual overcoming through their own vain desires, obsessions, and grievances. Eighth, some experience sufferings from mutual overcoming during the process of implementing law, public order, and justice (ELJ). Ninth, in a world ruled by mutual overcoming, tests are administered to those who practice self-cultivation, participate in the Reordering Works of the Universe, or are under evaluation (CERT).

In this context, Daesoon Jinrihoe provides solutions to the problem of suffering in the shape of a religious portfolio. A mentor and a devotee who is in a situation of suffering can pick and choose an explanation from this portfolio. Or more than one, as the causes for afflictions in actual cases do not come one at a time. Often, two or more models should be applied at the same time. In the end, religions that offer insufficient solutions to sufferings are perceived as unappealing. Perhaps the fact that Daesoon Jinrihoe offers several consistent and various solutions to the problem of suffering is another explanation why this Korean new religion has grown so much in such a short time.

The traditional religions of East Asia have also presented their own answers to questions about suffering. Buddhism teaches that, since suffering is caused by obsession and desire, we should remove these causes of our misfortunes. Confucianism considers that the causes of suffering are wrongdoings resulting from either heavenly will or human desire. Humans should endure afflictions unconditionally. Daoism claims that human-made mistakes cause suffering. To get away from the sufferings, we should respect the divine order of nature. What these religions have in common is that they all perceive human desire as a major cause of suffering, and all recommend the control of desire, although they differ on whether we should accept or escape afflictions. This is based on the respective ideas about the divine or human origin of suffering. In Confucianism, sufferings

are considered as divine punishment or part of the heavenly mandate, while Buddhism teaches that our afflictions result from human action in this or in past lives.

Daesoon Jinrihoe's theology of suffering differs from the traditional East Asian religions in four respects. First, the entire frame that explains the causes of suffering in Daesoon Jinrihoe is mutual overcoming. Without exceptions, all kinds of afflictions are related to mutual overcoming. This cosmic framework is not present in other religions. Daesoon Jinrihoe does not exclude the human responsibility for suffering. Mutual overcoming is often produced by humans, although it is also influenced by its cosmic dimension. However, the faults committed by humans, individually or as social groups, cannot be justified.

Secondly, for Daesoon Jinrihoe the main question is not whether suffering should be accepted or avoided, but whether its circumstances should be evaluated as positive or negative. In the P lineage models (PPT and PUW), the afflictions are a form of penance. Suffering may be connected to positive values such as the realization of justice, law, and public order, and the self-development and self-improvement through discipline. Human nurture of wealth and happiness is connected to suffering in the ELJ and CERT models. On the contrary, there is no redeeming value of suffering in the V lineage models, nor in the MOC model. There, the experience of suffering does not lead to human growth.

Third, Daesoon Jinrihoe teaches that suffering can be removed by striving towards a religious goal, reflecting on ourselves to wash away our sins, abandoning vain desires, pursuing mutual beneficence, disciplining ourselves for a better future, and so on. In a word, suffering is overcome through self-cultivation.

Fourth, Daesoon Jinrihoe's perception of suffering is social. To overcome the suffering caused by vain desire, it emphasizes mutual beneficence, an active practice that does not remain within an individual sphere of self-control but necessarily includes others. The traditional religions of East Asia agree on the theory that vain desire is a main cause of suffering. But they focus on removing the vain desire. Buddhism insists that we should practice the Noble Eightfold Path, getting rid of greed and obsessions. Confucianism calls for a restoration of the order through its theory of the rectification of names, focusing on human nature and proper behavior. Daoism asserts that we should turn to nature and Dao. Christianity also teaches its devotees to get rid of selfishness by obeying

God. All these practices, however, mostly remain within the circle of the individual person and her mind.

Daesoon Jinrihoe also insists on right mindfulness and right behavior. However, its final solution to the problem of vain desire is resolving grievances for mutual beneficence and creating harmony through the grateful reciprocation of favors. These are practices to be carried out in social life. We straighten ourselves out by doing good to others at the same time. In this respect, Daesoon Jinrihoe's notion of how suffering can be overcome is different from the theories and practices of the traditional religions of East Asia, which have focused on the individual sphere rather than on the social dimension.

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