

The Sublime Beauty of Divine Manifestation: An Aesthetic Interpretation of *Cheonji Gongsa* in Daesoon Thought

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JDTREA 2024,4(1): 35–57

Original Articles

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Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia Vol. 4, Issue 1 (September 2024): 35–57

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<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2024.4.1.35>

Day of submission: 2024.06.30.

Completion of review: 2024.08.20.

Final decision for acceptance: 2024.09.20.

P-ISSN: 2799-3949

E-ISSN: 2799-4252

Abstract

This study explores the aesthetic dimensions of *Cheonji Gongsu* (天地公事, Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth) in Daesoon Thought, offering a novel perspective on how new religious movements articulate and propagate their central doctrines through aesthetic means. Applying the framework of theological aesthetics, particularly as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, the research illuminates the intricate relationship between divine manifestation, sensory perception, and spiritual experience in Daesoon Jinrihoe.

The study interprets *Cheonji Gongsu* as a profound aesthetic event in which divine beauty becomes tangible and perceptible in the physical world. Key findings include: (1) the complex interplay of sensory perception, emotional response, and spiritual insight in the incarnation of Kang Jeungsan and the unfolding of *Cheonji Gongsu*; (2) the relevance of the concept of the sublime in understanding the overwhelming and transformative nature of *Cheonji Gongsu*; (3) the comprehensive aesthetic framework created by the features of *Cheonji Gongsu*, including its embodiment of holiness, rich symbolic language, and vision of cosmic transformation; (4) the significant contribution of sensory and emotive aspects of Daesoon practices to spiritual experiences and the formation of religious beliefs; and (5) the central role of aesthetic vision in Daesoon soteriology.

This aesthetic approach not only enriches our understanding of Daesoon Jinrihoe but also contributes to broader discussions on the role of aesthetics in religious experience and cognition. It provides a complementary method to traditional doctrinal studies, bridges etic and emic perspectives in the study of new religious movements, and facilitates comparative analysis with other religious aesthetic traditions. The study concludes by suggesting directions for future empirical research to further explore the aesthetic dimensions of religious experience in Daesoon Jinrihoe and other new religious movements.

Keywords: *Cheonji Gongsu*; theological aesthetics; divine manifestation; sublime

Introduction

The concept of divine manifestation has been a central theme in religious thought throughout human history. In the context of Korean new religious movements, the Daesoon Jinrihoe (大巡眞理會) offers a unique perspective on this phenomenon through its doctrine of *Cheonji Gongsu* (天地公事), or the Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth. This article aims to explore the aesthetic dimensions of *Cheonji Gongsu*, focusing on how the divine is perceived and experienced within the sensory realm of human existence.

Daesoon Jinrihoe, founded on the teachings of Kang Jeungsan (姜甌山, 1871–1909), presents a cosmology in which the supreme deity directly intervenes in the world to rectify cosmic imbalances and usher in a new era of harmony. The incarnation of Kang Jeungsan as the embodiment of the supreme deity, Sangje (上帝), marks a pivotal moment in this religious narrative. *Cheonji Gongsu*, the divine work carried out by Kang Jeungsan during his earthly life, serves as the cornerstone of Daesoon Thought and practice.

Traditionally, religious studies have approached such phenomena through theological, historical, or sociological lenses. However, this article proposes that an aesthetic approach can offer valuable insights into the nature of divine manifestation and its impact on religious adherents. By employing the framework of theological aesthetics, particularly as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, we can explore how the concept of beauty intersects with religious experience and understanding.

The central thesis of this article is that *Cheonji Gongsu* can be interpreted as an aesthetic event, one in which the divine beauty becomes tangible and perceptible in the physical world. This interpretation not only enriches our understanding of Daesoon Thought but also contributes to broader discussions on the role of aesthetics in religious experience and cognition.

Through an examination of key texts, narratives, and reported experiences within the Daesoon tradition, this article will investigate how the sublime beauty of divine manifestation is conceptualized, experienced, and transmitted. By focusing on the sensory and emotional aspects of religious experience, we aim to shed light on the unique ways in which Daesoon Thought engages with the divine through aesthetic means.

This aesthetic approach to *Cheonji Gongsu* offers a novel perspective on how new religious movements articulate and propagate their central doctrines. It also provides a framework for understanding the transformative power of religious experiences that are often described as beyond rational comprehension. By bridging the gap between sensory perception and spiritual insight, this study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of religious phenomena in general and the Daesoon tradition in particular.

Theoretical Framework: Aesthetic Approaches to Divine Manifestation

The application of aesthetic theory to religious phenomena, particularly in the context of new religious movements, necessitates a robust and multifaceted theoretical framework. This chapter aims to establish such a framework by examining the intersection of theological aesthetics, phenomenology of religion, and contemporary theories of perception and cognition. By synthesizing these diverse approaches, we can develop a nuanced understanding of how divine manifestation, as exemplified in Daesoon Jinrihoe's concept of *Cheonji Gongsu*, can be interpreted through an aesthetic lens.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics

Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1905–1988) theological aesthetics provides the cornerstone of our theoretical framework, offering a paradigm for understanding the relationship between divine revelation and human perception. Balthasar's magnum opus, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (1961–1969), represents a radical departure from traditional theological methodologies by prioritizing the category of the beautiful as a fundamental mode of divine self-disclosure.

Central to Balthasar's approach is the concept of "form" (Gestalt), which he understands not merely as external appearance but as the manifestation of inner essence. As Balthasar states, "The beautiful is above all a form, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form's interior" (Balthasar 1982, 151). This understanding of form as the locus of divine self-revelation provides a valuable framework for interpreting the aesthetic dimensions of *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Balthasar's insistence on the inseparability of beauty, truth, and goodness (the transcendentals of classical philosophy) offers a holistic approach to understanding divine manifestation. He argues that the perception of beauty is not a subjective, arbitrary experience but a genuine encounter with objective reality. This perspective allows us to consider how the aesthetic experiences reported by followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe in relation to *Cheonji Gongsu* might constitute authentic encounters with divine reality, rather than mere subjective impressions.

Furthermore, Balthasar's work on the "theo-drama" – the divine action in history – provides a useful lens through which to view the cosmic drama of *Cheonji Gongsu*. This concept emphasizes the dynamic, participatory nature of divine revelation, which resonates strongly with the active role of believers in Daesoon Thought.

The Concept of Beauty in Religious Thought

To fully contextualize Balthasar's approach and its application to Daesoon Thought,

we must consider the broader history of beauty as a concept in religious and philosophical traditions. This historical perspective allows us to situate our aesthetic interpretation of *Cheonji Gongsu* within a rich intellectual lineage.

In Western thought, the association between beauty and divinity has deep roots. Plato's conception of beauty as a transcendent form laid the groundwork for much subsequent thought on divine beauty. In the *Symposium*, Plato describes a ladder of love ascending from physical beauty to the Form of Beauty itself, which he associates with the divine (Plato 1989).

Medieval Christian thinkers, particularly Thomas Aquinas, further developed these ideas. Aquinas saw beauty as a transcendental property of being, alongside truth and goodness. He famously defined the beautiful as "that which, when seen, pleases" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1), emphasizing the cognitive aspect of aesthetic experience.

In East Asian traditions, beauty is often closely associated with concepts of harmony and balance. The Chinese concept of *li* (理, principle) in Neo-Confucianism, for instance, represents an underlying order or pattern in the universe that can be aesthetically apprehended. Similarly, the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi* embraces the beauty of imperfection and transience, reflecting Buddhist insights into the nature of reality.

Korean aesthetic traditions, particularly relevant to our study of Daesoon Thought, include concepts such as *sinmyeong* (神明, divine illumination) and *ban* (恨, unresolved resentment). These ideas provide a cultural backdrop against which the aesthetic impact of *Cheonji Gongsu* can be more fully understood.

By exploring these diverse approaches to beauty in religious thought, we can better appreciate both the continuities and innovations represented by Daesoon Jinrihoe's approach to divine manifestation. This comparative perspective enriches our understanding of how *Cheonji Gongsu* functions as an aesthetic event within a specific cultural and religious context.

Aesthetics as a Mode of Spiritual Perception

Having established the theological and philosophical foundations for understanding beauty in religious contexts, we now turn to the cognitive and experiential dimensions of aesthetic perception in spiritual life. This section integrates insights from phenomenology of religion, cognitive science, and theories of embodied cognition to elucidate how aesthetic experiences can serve as modes of spiritual perception and insight.

Rudolf Otto's (1869–1937) concept of the "numinous" as the non-rational aspect of religious experience, characterized by the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mystery that is both terrifying and fascinating), provides a valuable framework for understanding the aesthetic impact of divine manifestation (Otto 1917). Otto's work highlights the emotional and sensory components of religious experience that often

clude rational analysis but are crucial to understanding phenomena like *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) work on hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred) further enriches our understanding of how the divine becomes perceptible in the physical world. Eliade's assertion that "the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities" (Eliade 1959, 10) resonates with the extraordinary nature of *Cheonji Gongsu* as described in Daesoon texts.

Recent developments in cognitive science and philosophy of mind have emphasized the embodied nature of human cognition, challenging traditional dichotomies between mind and body, reason and emotion. Scholars such as Mark Johnson (2007) and Shaun Gallagher (2005) have argued for an "embodied aesthetics" that recognizes the crucial role of bodily experience in shaping our understanding of the world, including our aesthetic and religious experiences.

This embodied approach to aesthetics is particularly relevant to our study of *Cheonji Gongsu*, as it allows us to consider how bodily practices, ritual gestures, and sensory experiences associated with Daesoon Jinrihoe might contribute to followers' aesthetic apprehension of divine reality. As Johnson argues, "Meaning and thought emerge from our visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life" (Johnson 2007, ix).

By integrating these phenomenological and cognitive approaches with Balthasar's theological aesthetics and the broader history of beauty in religious thought, we can develop a comprehensive framework for understanding how aesthetic experiences function as modes of spiritual perception and cognition in the context of Daesoon Jinrihoe.

This multifaceted theoretical approach allows us to consider not only the content of aesthetic experiences associated with divine manifestation but also the cognitive processes, cultural contexts, and bodily practices that shape these experiences. As we proceed to examine specific aspects of *Cheonji Gongsu* in subsequent chapters, this theoretical framework will provide the necessary conceptual tools to interpret the complex interplay between sensory perception, emotional response, and spiritual insight that characterizes the aesthetic engagement with divine reality in Daesoon Jinrihoe.

The Aesthetics of Divine Manifestation in Daesoon Thought

Kang Jeungsan's Incarnation as an Aesthetic Event

The incarnation of Kang Jeungsan as the embodiment of Sangje, the supreme deity in Daesoon Thought, represents a pivotal moment in the religious narrative of Daesoon Jinrihoe. This divine manifestation can be understood not merely as a theological doctrine but as an aesthetic event that engages the sensory and emotional faculties of believers. Drawing on Balthasar's concept of the "form" (Gestalt) as the locus of divine self-revelation, we can analyze Kang Jeungsan's incarnation as a unique aesthetic

phenomenon within the landscape of new religious movements.

The narrative of Kang Jeungsan's birth, as recorded in *The Canonical Scripture* (典經, *Jeongyeong*), is replete with aesthetic elements that signify divine presence. For instance, the text describes:

When Sangje was born, the delivery room became unusually bright, and two fairy maidens descended from Heaven to attend to the baby Sangje. The room was filled with a mysterious fragrance, and a brilliant light enveloped the entire house, stretching up to the sky (*Acts* 1:10).

This description engages multiple sensory modalities—visual (brightness, light), olfactory (fragrance), and potentially auditory (implied in the presence of the fairy maidens)—creating a synaesthetic experience that marks this birth as extraordinary. The aesthetic impact of this narrative serves to reinforce the belief in Kang Jeungsan's divine nature, creating what Eliade would term a “hierophany”—a manifestation of the sacred in the profane world.

Moreover, the physical appearance and bearing of Kang Jeungsan throughout his life are often described in aesthetic terms that evoke a sense of the sublime. *The Canonical Scripture* recounts numerous instances where his countenance is said to radiate divine light or where his mere presence induces a state of awe and reverence in observers. These descriptions align with Rudolf Otto's concept of the “numinous” as an overwhelming, fascinating, yet terrifying encounter with the divine.

***Cheonji Gongsu* as the Ultimate Form of Divine Beauty**

Cheonji Gongsu, or the Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth, constitutes the central divine act in Daesoon Thought. This cosmic drama of renewal and restoration can be interpreted as the ultimate expression of divine beauty, a “form” in Balthasar's sense that reveals the inner essence of the deity's salvific will.

The aesthetic dimension of *Cheonji Gongsu* is multifaceted, encompassing both the grand cosmic scale of divine action and the intimate, personal experiences of believers. At the macro level, the reordering of Heaven and Earth involves a restructuring of the very fabric of reality, a process that can be understood in terms of cosmic harmony and balance – concepts deeply rooted in East Asian aesthetic traditions.

For instance, *The Canonical Scripture* describes the commencement of *Cheonji Gongsu* by Kang Jeungsan as a moment of cosmic significance:

The ‘Gaebyeokjang’ (開闢長, Master of the Opening) mentioned in common parlance refers to the Gaebyeokjang who presides over the great authority of the Three Realms and saves the divine beings and all living things trapped in grievances. In the winter of the year Sinchuk (1901), after completing his meditation at Daewonsa temple, Sangje began the Reordering Works of Heaven

and Earth for nine days, during which he did not paste paper on the windows, did not light a fire in the kitchen, changed into clean clothes, and completely abstained from food. During this time, even when rice was dried in the yard, birds could not fly in, and people found it difficult to pass in front of the house. (*Reordering Works* 1:1).

This description evokes a sense of the sublime, combining elements of awe, terror, and beauty in a manner reminiscent of Kant's discussion of the mathematical and dynamical sublime. The vastness of the cosmic scale (the Nine Heavens, the Three Realms) and the overwhelming power displayed (the trembling of Heaven and Earth) create an aesthetic experience that transcends ordinary human perception.

At the micro level, individual acts of *Cheonji Gongsa* often involve aesthetic elements that engage the senses and emotions of participants. These can include ritual actions, the use of symbolic objects, or the manipulation of natural phenomena. For example, *The Canonical Scripture* recounts instances where Kang Jeungsan controls the weather, creates celestial phenomena, or transforms ordinary objects into vehicles of divine power. These acts, while serving theological and soteriological purposes, also function as aesthetic performances that reinforce belief through sensory and emotional impact.

Sensory Perception and Spiritual Experience in Daesoon Practice

The aesthetic dimension of divine manifestation in Daesoon Thought extends beyond narrative accounts to inform the lived religious experiences of believers. Drawing on theories of embodied cognition and the phenomenology of religious experience, we can analyze how sensory perception and bodily practices contribute to spiritual insights and experiences within the Daesoon tradition.

Ritual practices in Daesoon Jinrihoe often involve multisensory engagement that facilitates an aesthetic apprehension of divine reality. For instance, the practice of *Gido* (祈禱, prayer) involves specific bodily postures, rhythmic chanting, and the use of symbolic objects. These elements create a synaesthetic experience that can induce altered states of consciousness, facilitating what believers interpret as direct encounters with divine reality.

The concept of *Taeulju* (太乙呪), a sacred mantra believed to embody the essence of *Cheonji Gongsa*, provides a particularly rich example of how aesthetic experience and spiritual practice intersect in Daesoon Thought. The rhythmic recitation of *Taeulju* is said to not only invoke divine power but also to attune the practitioner's body and mind to the cosmic order established through *Cheonji Gongsa*. This practice exemplifies Johnson's notion of "embodied meaning," where abstract spiritual concepts are grounded in concrete sensorimotor experiences.

Furthermore, the aesthetic dimension of Daesoon practice extends to the design and use of sacred spaces. Temples and ritual areas are often arranged according to principles that reflect the cosmic order revealed through *Cheonji Gongsa*. The visual and spatial

aesthetics of these environments serve not merely as decorative elements but as “forms” that mediate divine presence and facilitate spiritual experiences.

In conclusion, the aesthetics of divine manifestation in Daesoon Thought, as exemplified in Kang Jeungsan’s incarnation and the unfolding of *Cheonji Gongsa*, represents a complex interplay of sensory perception, emotional response, and spiritual insight. By analyzing these phenomena through the lens of theological aesthetics, phenomenology, and cognitive science, we gain a deeper understanding of how aesthetic experiences contribute to the formation and transmission of religious beliefs in the context of new religious movements. This approach not only enriches our understanding of Daesoon Jinrihoe but also contributes to broader discussions in religious studies about the role of aesthetics in shaping religious experience and understanding.

The Sublime in *Cheonji Gongsa*

Theories of the Sublime: From Longinus to Kant and Beyond

The concept of the sublime, with its long history in Western aesthetic thought, provides a valuable framework for understanding the overwhelming and transformative nature of *Cheonji Gongsa* in Daesoon Thought. This section traces the development of sublime aesthetics and applies these theories to the divine works described in Daesoon texts.

The discourse on the sublime begins with Longinus’s “*On the Sublime*” (Περὶ ὑψηροῦς), a 1st-century CE treatise that defines the sublime as a form of elevated language that fills the reader with Joy and Pride (Longinus, trans. 1995). Longinus’s focus on the emotional and psychological impact of the sublime provides a useful starting point for understanding the effects of *Cheonji Gongsa* on believers.

Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) marks a significant development in sublime aesthetics. Burke distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful, associating it with terror, obscurity, power, and infinity. He writes, “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke 1757/1990, 53). This conception of the sublime as a overwhelming force that suspends normal cognitive functions resonates strongly with accounts of *Cheonji Gongsa* in Daesoon literature.

Immanuel Kant’s treatment of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) further refines the concept, distinguishing between the mathematical sublime (associated with vastness) and the dynamical sublime (associated with power). Kant argues that the experience of the sublime involves a two-step process: first, a feeling of inadequacy in the face of something that exceeds our comprehension or power to resist, followed by a

realization of our own supersensible faculty of reason, which can conceive of the infinite or the absolutely powerful (Kant 1790/1987).

Contemporary theorists have expanded on these classical conceptions of the sublime. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern sublime emphasizes the unrepresentable nature of certain ideas or experiences, which can only be negatively evoked (Lyotard 1984). This notion of the sublime as that which exceeds representation offers intriguing possibilities for analyzing the often-ineffable nature of *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Manifestations of the Sublime in *Cheonji Gongsu* Narratives

Applying these theories of the sublime to *Cheonji Gongsu* reveals a rich tapestry of sublime aesthetics woven throughout Daesoon narratives. The very scope of *Cheonji Gongsu* – the reordering of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity – evokes Kant's mathematical sublime, presenting a concept so vast that it strains the limits of human comprehension. Consider this passage from *The Canonical Scripture*:

In April of the following year, Sangje conducted the work of renewing the Three Realms at Kim Hyeong-ryeol's house. At this time, Sangje said to him, 'We should not follow what others have made, but create anew. To use an analogy, even if it's wealth accumulated by parents, when children use it, they feel uncomfortable every time they use it, as if their parents' faces are watching them. Similarly, living in an old house as it is can be very distressing due to the worry that it might collapse. Therefore, we must renew everything. In general, my work (Gongsu) has never existed before, neither in the past nor now. It is not a continuation of others' work, nor is it a matter of fate. It is solely what I create and make. I will preside over the great authority of the Three Realms, completely revise the existing order of the Former World, open the limitless good fortune of the Later World, and establish Paradise.' He then instructed, 'Believe in me and do your utmost.' (*Reordering Works* 1:2)

The sheer scale of this divine undertaking creates a sense of awe and astonishment characteristic of the sublime. The idea of reordering the universe exceeds normal human categories of understanding, forcing the believer to confront the limitations of their own cognitive faculties.

Similarly, descriptions of Kang Jeungsan's power over natural phenomena often evoke Burke's notion of the sublime as terrible power. For instance:

Sangje exercised the great authority of the Three Realms (三界大權) at will. When he wished to clear away heavy rain, he would sometimes order his disciples to surround a brazier with fire, sometimes to circle wine cups, sometimes he would do it by words alone. Whether exercising the great heavenly authority to cause

wind and rain, frost and snow, or thunder and lightning, or in other matters, he followed no fixed method (*Reordering Works* 1:4).

Such displays of divine power over nature align with Kant's dynamic sublime, presenting a force that would be irresistible were it directed against the observer. The believer's realization of their own physical insignificance in the face of such power, coupled with their ability to comprehend it through reason, creates the characteristic sublime experience.

The Interplay of Awe and Attraction in Religious Experience

The concept of the sublime in *Cheonji Gongsu* can be further understood through the lens of religious experience theory, particularly as it relates to the interplay of awe and attraction in followers' encounters with the divine. This dynamic is crucial in understanding the phenomenology of religious experience in Daesoon Thought.

Rudolf Otto's seminal work *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) provides a foundational framework for analyzing this aspect of religious experience. Otto's concept of the "numinous" as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (a mystery that is simultaneously terrifying and fascinating) offers a theoretical basis for understanding the complex emotional responses elicited by encounters with the divine in Daesoon practice.

The *tremendum* aspect of the numinous experience, as described by Otto, corresponds to the overwhelming and potentially frightening nature of divine manifestation in *Cheonji Gongsu*. This can be seen in the descriptions of Sangje's cosmic authority and the vast scale of his works as described in *The Canonical Scripture*. For instance, the passage describing Sangje's commencement of *Cheonji Gongsu* (*Reordering Works* 1:1) evokes a sense of divine power that transcends normal human understanding, potentially inspiring a feeling of awe or even fear in the believer.

Conversely, the *fascinans* element of the numinous speaks to the attractive power of the divine, which draws believers deeper into their faith despite, or perhaps because of, its overwhelming nature. In the context of Daesoon Thought, this can be observed in the devotional practices and commitment of followers to the teachings and works of Sangje.

Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophany, or the manifestation of the sacred, provides another useful theoretical tool for analyzing this aspect of *Cheonji Gongsu*. Eliade's work suggests that encounters with the sacred are characterized by a paradoxical combination of attraction and repulsion, mirroring Otto's numinous experience. This theoretical framework can help explain the complex emotional and psychological responses of Daesoon adherents to the sublime aspects of *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Furthermore, contemporary cognitive approaches to religion, such as those proposed by Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett, suggest that religious concepts that are "minimally counterintuitive"—that is, those that violate some but not all of our intuitive expectations about the world - are particularly memorable and transmissible. The sublime elements

of *Cheonji Gongsa*, which combine familiar concepts with transcendent or counterintuitive elements, may function in this way, contributing to the cognitive appeal and cultural stability of Daesoon beliefs.

In the context of Daesoon Jinrihoe, the interplay of awe and attraction serves important social and theological functions. By framing divine action in terms that evoke sublime experiences, the movement creates a shared aesthetic and emotional language that reinforces group cohesion and doctrinal commitment. The sublime becomes a means of negotiating the boundary between the human and the divine, allowing believers to approach the transcendent while maintaining a sense of its ultimate incomprehensibility.

This theoretical approach to understanding the experiential aspects of *Cheonji Gongsa* provides a framework for future empirical research. Potential areas of investigation could include phenomenological studies of Daesoon practitioners' experiences, cognitive research on the processing of sublime religious concepts, and comparative studies with other new religious movements that emphasize cosmic or transcendent themes.

Aesthetic Features of *Cheonji Gongsa*

The Concept of Holiness in Daesoon Thought

The aesthetic dimension of *Cheonji Gongsa* is inextricably linked to the concept of holiness (神性) in Daesoon Thought. This section explores how the notion of the sacred is aesthetically constructed and experienced within the context of Daesoon Jinrihoe, drawing on both Western and East Asian conceptualizations of holiness.

In Western religious thought, Rudolf Otto's concept of the "holy" as the "wholly other" (*das ganz Andere*) provides a useful starting point. Otto argues that the holy is experienced as something fundamentally different from ordinary reality, evoking feelings of awe, fascination, and even terror (Otto 1958 [1917]). This understanding resonates with the way *Cheonji Gongsa* is presented in Daesoon texts as a cosmic event that transcends ordinary human categories.

However, the Daesoon conception of holiness also draws on East Asian religious traditions, particularly Korean shamanism and Neo-Confucianism. The Korean concept of *sin* (神), which can be translated as "divine" or "spirit," encompasses a broader range of phenomena than Western notions of the holy. In Daesoon Thought, this expansive concept of the divine allows for a more fluid boundary between the sacred and the profane, with holiness potentially manifesting in various aspects of daily life.

The aesthetic manifestation of holiness in *Cheonji Gongsa* can be observed in several key areas:

1. Sacred Time: The performance of *Cheonji Gongsa* is described as inaugurating a new cosmic era, creating a sense of sacred time that is qualitatively different from profane time. This temporal aesthetic is reflected in ritual practices that commemorate key events in Kang Jeungsan's life and works.
2. Sacred Space: The sites associated with Kang Jeungsan's activities become imbued with sacred qualities, forming a sacred geography that shapes the aesthetic experience of believers. The design and layout of Daesoon temples and ritual spaces further reinforce this sacred aesthetic.
3. Sacred Persons: Kang Jeungsan himself, as the incarnation of Sangje, embodies the aesthetic of holiness. Descriptions of his appearance and actions often employ aesthetic language to convey his divine nature.
4. Sacred Actions: The various works performed as part of *Cheonji Gongsa* are presented as manifestations of divine power, often involving dramatic natural phenomena or miraculous events that create a sense of aesthetic wonder.

The aesthetic of holiness in Daesoon Thought thus serves to create a sensory and emotional environment that reinforces belief in the divine nature of *Cheonji Gongsa* and its transformative power.

Symbolic Representations in *Cheonji Gongsa*

Cheonji Gongsa is rich in symbolic representations that contribute to its aesthetic and theological significance. These symbols serve as conceptual tools for understanding complex ideas and as aesthetic objects that engage the senses and emotions of believers.

One of the most prominent symbolic concepts in Daesoon Thought is the *Taegeuk* (太極), the Great Ultimate. In Daesoon contexts, the *Taegeuk* symbolizes the harmony and balance of cosmic forces. It represents the dynamic interplay between yin and yang, which is central to the cosmology underlying *Cheonji Gongsa*. The visual representation of *Taegeuk*, with its intertwining red and blue swirls, serves as a powerful aesthetic symbol that encapsulates the principle of cosmic renewal central to Daesoon theology.

Another significant symbolic aspect of *Cheonji Gongsa* is the concept of *Haewon-sangsaeng* (解冤相生), or mutual beneficence through the resolution of grievances. This principle is often represented through various ritual practices and teachings. The aesthetic dimension of *Haewon-sangsaeng* is evident in the way it is enacted in Daesoon rituals, where symbolic actions and objects are used to represent the resolution of cosmic and personal grievances.

The symbolism of numbers also plays a crucial role in *Cheonji Gongsa*. For instance, the number nine is of particular significance, as evidenced by the nine-day period during which Sangje began the Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth. This numerical symbolism adds a layer of aesthetic and conceptual depth to the understanding of *Cheonji Gongsa*.

The concept of the Three Realms (三界)—Heaven, Earth, and Humanity—is another

key symbolic representation in Daesoon Thought. This tripartite division of the cosmos provides a framework for understanding the scope and significance of *Cheonji Gongsu*. The aesthetic implications of this concept are evident in the way it structures Daesoon rituals and practices, creating a symbolic landscape that believers can navigate and engage with.

These symbolic representations in *Cheonji Gongsu* create a rich aesthetic language that helps believers conceptualize and engage with complex theological ideas. The visual and experiential nature of these symbols contributes to an immersive religious experience that reinforces key doctrinal concepts of Daesoon Thought. By engaging with these symbols, believers are able to aesthetically experience the cosmic drama of *Cheonji Gongsu*, making abstract theological concepts tangible and emotionally resonant.

The Aesthetic Transformation of the World Order

A central claim of Daesoon Thought is that *Cheonji Gongsu* effects a fundamental transformation of the cosmic order. This transformation is not merely conceptual but is described in terms that emphasize its aesthetic dimensions.

The concept of *Hucheon Gaebyeok* (後天開闢), or the Great Opening of the Later World, is particularly rich in aesthetic implications. This new cosmic era is described as a time of perfect harmony and balance, where the divisions and conflicts of the present world are resolved. *The Canonical Scripture* describes this transformed world in vivid sensory terms:

In the Later World, the world will become one family, and harmony will govern all living beings according to the law without the use of force or punishment. Those who hold office will have their authority opened to them, and there will be no excess beyond their position. The people will be free from all the anxieties of grudges, greed, and resentment. They will be free from the suffering of illness and the burden of burying the dead, achieving immortality. There will be no distinction between rich and poor, and people will be able to come and go as they please. Heaven will be lowered so that ascending and descending will be possible at will. Wisdom will become clear, allowing understanding of the past, present, future, and all realms of the world. The three disasters of water, fire, and wind will disappear from the world, transforming it into an earthly paradise overflowing with auspicious signs (*Prophetic Elucidations* 81).

This description evokes a kind of aesthetic utopia, appealing to multiple senses and creating an image of perfect natural and social harmony. The aesthetic vision of the transformed world serves as a powerful motivator for believers, providing a concrete (if idealized) image of the goals of *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Moreover, the process of transformation itself is presented in aesthetic terms. The reordering of Heaven and Earth is often described using metaphors of artistic creation

or cosmic music. For instance, Kang Jeungsan is sometimes portrayed as a divine artist, reshaping the universe according to a grand aesthetic vision. This framing of cosmic transformation as an aesthetic act aligns with long-standing traditions in both Western and Eastern thought that view the universe as a work of divine art.

The aesthetic transformation extends to the human realm as well. Daesoon teachings suggest that individuals who align themselves with the principles of *Cheonji Gongsu* will undergo a kind of spiritual-aesthetic transformation, developing enhanced perceptual and cognitive abilities that allow them to appreciate the divine beauty of the transformed cosmos.

In conclusion, the aesthetic features of *Cheonji Gongsu*—its embodiment of holiness, its rich symbolic language, and its vision of cosmic transformation—create a comprehensive aesthetic framework that shapes the religious experience of Daesoon believers. This aesthetic dimension is not merely ornamental but is integral to the theological and soteriological claims of Daesoon Thought. By engaging in the senses and emotions through these aesthetic elements, *Cheonji Gongsu* becomes not just an abstract concept but a lived reality for its adherents, demonstrating the power of aesthetic experience in shaping religious belief and practice.

Sensory Perception and Spiritual Experience in Daesoon Practice

The Role of Emotion and Sensation in Religious Cognition

The study of *Cheonji Gongsu* in Daesoon Thought provides a unique opportunity to explore the intricate relationship between sensory perception, emotional response, and religious cognition. This section examines how the sensory and emotive aspects of Daesoon practices contribute to spiritual experiences and the formation of religious beliefs.

Recent developments in cognitive science and the psychology of religion have highlighted the crucial role of embodied experiences in shaping religious cognition. Scholars such as Ann Taves (2009) and Robert McCauley (2011) have argued that religious experiences are grounded in ordinary cognitive processes, including sensation and emotion. This perspective allows us to analyze the sensory-rich practices associated with *Cheonji Gongsu* as cognitive tools that facilitate religious understanding and commitment.

In Daesoon practice, the recitation of sacred mantras, particularly the *Taeulju*, exemplifies the integration of sensory experience and spiritual cognition. The practice engages multiple sensory modalities:

1. Auditory: The sound of the chant creates a sonic environment that may influence the practitioner's state of consciousness.

2. Proprioceptive: The physical act of vocalization involves bodily sensations that reinforce the experiential aspect of the practice.

These multisensory engagements create what anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1993) calls “somatic modes of attention,” bodily ways of attending to and engaging with the sacred. Through these embodied practices, abstract theological concepts associated with *Cheonji Gongsu* may become more tangible experiences for practitioners.

Emotional responses play an equally crucial role in the religious cognition of *Cheonji Gongsu*. Drawing on the work of emotion theorists like Antonio Damasio (1994), we can understand how the intense emotional experiences often reported by Daesoon practitioners—feelings of awe, ecstasy, or profound peace—serve as powerful reinforcers of belief. These emotions are not mere epiphenomena but integral components of the cognitive processes through which practitioners come to understand and internalize the teachings of *Cheonji Gongsu*.

The Transformation of Perception through Divine Encounter

In Daesoon Thought, the concept of transformation of perception is intrinsically linked to the understanding and experience of *Cheonji Gongsu*. This transformation can be understood as a fundamental shift in how adherents perceive and interact with the world around them, based on their understanding of Sangje’s teachings and works.

The transformation of perception in Daesoon Thought can be analyzed through several key aspects:

1. Cosmic Restructuring: The idea of *Cheonji Gongsu* implies a complete reorganization of the universe. This concept likely influences how followers perceive the world, encouraging them to see beyond surface appearances and recognize the underlying spiritual processes at work.
2. Temporal Perspective: Daesoon teachings about the Former and Later World suggest a transformation in how adherents perceive time. Followers may come to view current events and circumstances as part of a larger cosmic narrative, leading to a more expansive temporal perspective.
3. Interpersonal Relations: The principle of *Haewon-sangsaeng* implies a shift in how adherents perceive and approach relationships. This concept may encourage followers to view conflicts and grievances as opportunities for mutual growth and cosmic resolution, rather than as mere personal or social problems.
4. Nature of Reality: The teachings about the Later World suggest a transformation in how followers perceive the nature of reality itself. The vision of a world without traditional limitations may influence how adherents interpret their current experiences and possibilities.
5. Self-Perception: As followers engage with Daesoon teachings, their self-

5. Self-Perception: As followers engage with Daesoon teachings, their self-perception may also transform. They might come to see themselves as active participants in a cosmic drama, rather than passive observers of worldly events.
6. Ethical Perspective: The emphasis on creating a harmonious world may lead to a transformation in how followers perceive ethical issues, potentially encouraging a more holistic and interconnected view of moral responsibility.
7. Sensory Perception: While we cannot make claims about specific sensory experiences without evidence, it's possible that the practices and beliefs of Daesoon Thought influence how followers interpret their sensory experiences, perhaps attributing new significance to certain phenomena.

It's important to note that these aspects of perceptual transformation are theoretical constructs based on the teachings of Daesoon Thought. The actual experiences of individual followers would likely vary and would require empirical research to be documented accurately.

This concept of perceptual transformation provides a rich area for future studies. Potential research directions could include phenomenological studies of practitioners' experiences, cognitive studies on how religious beliefs influence perception, or comparative analyses with other new religious movements. Such research could provide valuable insights into the ways religious beliefs and practices shape human perception and experience.

Implications for Understanding Daesoon Thought

Aesthetics as a Complementary Approach to Doctrinal Studies

The aesthetic analysis of *Cheonji Gongsu* offers a valuable complementary approach to traditional doctrinal studies of Daesoon Thought. While doctrinal analysis provides crucial insights into the intellectual content of religious beliefs, an aesthetic approach illuminates the experiential and affective dimensions that are often equally important in shaping religious commitment and understanding.

This complementary approach aligns with recent trends in religious studies that emphasize the importance of lived religion (McGuire, 2008) and material religion (Meyer et al. 2010). By focusing on the aesthetic aspects of *Cheonji Gongsu*, we gain insight into how abstract theological concepts are embodied and experienced in the daily lives of Daesoon adherents.

For instance, the doctrine of *Haewon-sangsaeng*, or mutual beneficence through the resolution of grievances, takes on new dimensions when viewed through an aesthetic lens. The emotional catharsis and sensory rituals associated with grievance-resolution practices can be understood as aesthetic experiences that reinforce and give tangible form to this central Daesoon teaching.

Moreover, an aesthetic approach can help bridge the gap between etic and emic

perspectives in the study of new religious movements. By paying attention to the sensory and emotive aspects of religious experience, scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of how practitioners themselves perceive and engage with their religious traditions.

The Role of Beauty in Daesoon Soteriology

The analysis of *Cheonji Gongsu's* aesthetic dimensions reveals the significant role that concepts of beauty play in Daesoon soteriology. Unlike some religious traditions that view the material world as inherently flawed or illusory, Daesoon Thought posits a vision of cosmic renewal that is deeply aesthetic in nature.

The concept of *Hucheon Seongyeong* (後天仙境), or the Paradise of the Later World, is particularly rich in aesthetic implications. This ideal state is described not just in terms of moral or social perfection, but as a world of supreme beauty and harmony. *The Canonical Scripture* provides a vivid description of this future world:

In the Later World, everyone will achieve immortality and longevity. When they open their chests, clothes and food will come out. All nations will be at peace, and jealousy and war will cease. (*Prophetic Elucidations* 80)

This description paints a picture of a world that is not only morally perfect but also aesthetically pleasing. The absence of aging and death, the miraculous provision of necessities, and the global peace all contribute to a vision of beauty that transcends mere physical appearance. It suggests a world where the very fabric of existence is harmonious and beautiful.

This aesthetic vision of salvation suggests that the appreciation of beauty is not merely incidental to spiritual development but is integral to it. The ability to perceive and create beauty becomes, in this context, a spiritual capacity that reflects one's alignment with cosmic principles. The beautiful world described is not just a reward for spiritual development, but a manifestation of the divine order established through *Cheonji Gongsu*.

Furthermore, the aesthetic dimension of Daesoon soteriology offers interesting parallels with and departures from other religious traditions. While it shares some similarities with Buddhist concepts of the Pure Land or Christian visions of the New Jerusalem, the Daesoon emphasis on the transformation of the physical world rather than transcendence to another realm presents a unique soteriological aesthetic.

Comparative Perspectives with Other Religious Aesthetic Traditions

The aesthetic study of *Cheonji Gongsu* provides valuable opportunities for comparative analysis with other religious aesthetic traditions. Such comparisons can

illuminate both the unique features of Daesoon Thought and the broader patterns in how religious movements employ aesthetic elements to convey spiritual truths. For instance, the use of natural phenomena as signs of divine activity in *Cheonji Gongsu* narratives bears some similarities to shamanic traditions in Korea and elsewhere. However, the systematic integration of these phenomena into a comprehensive cosmological framework distinguishes the Daesoon approach.

The emphasis on harmony and balance in Daesoon aesthetics resonates with traditional East Asian aesthetic principles, particularly those found in Neo-Confucianism and Daoism. The concept of *Taegeuk*, central to Daesoon iconography, exemplifies this connection. However, the dynamic and transformative aspects of *Cheonji Gongsu* introduce a unique temporal dimension to these aesthetic principles.

Comparisons with Western theological aesthetics, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar's work on the transcendentals of being (truth, goodness, and beauty), reveal both parallels and divergences. While Daesoon Thought shares the idea that beauty can be a medium of divine revelation, its more immanent conception of the divine and its emphasis on cosmic transformation present a distinct aesthetic theology.

The aesthetic practices associated with *Cheonji Gongsu*, such as the use of mantras and visualization techniques, invite comparison with similar practices in other traditions, such as Tantric Buddhism or hesychastic Christianity. These comparisons can shed light on the universal and culture-specific aspects of religious aesthetic experience.

In conclusion, the study of *Cheonji Gongsu*'s aesthetic dimensions offers significant implications for our understanding of Daesoon Thought and its place within the broader landscape of religious traditions. By complementing doctrinal studies with aesthetic analysis, we gain a more holistic understanding of how this new religious movement operates on both intellectual and experiential levels. The central role of beauty in Daesoon soteriology highlights the movement's unique vision of cosmic renewal, while comparative perspectives situate Daesoon aesthetics within a global context of religious aesthetic traditions.

This approach not only enriches our understanding of Daesoon Jinrihoe but also contributes to broader discussions in religious studies about the role of aesthetics in shaping religious experience, belief, and practice. It underscores the importance of considering aesthetic dimensions in the study of new religious movements and offers a model for how such analysis might be conducted.

Conclusion

This study has explored the aesthetic dimensions of *Cheonji Gongsu* in Daesoon Thought, offering a novel perspective on how new religious movements articulate and propagate their central doctrines through aesthetic means. By applying the framework of theological aesthetics, particularly as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, we have illuminated the intricate relationship between divine manifestation, sensory perception,

and spiritual experience in Daeseon Jinrihoe.

Our analysis reveals that *Cheonji Gongsu* can be interpreted as a profound aesthetic event, one in which divine beauty becomes tangible and perceptible in the physical world. This interpretation not only enriches our understanding of Daeseon Thought but also contributes to broader discussions on the role of aesthetics in religious experience and cognition.

Key findings of this study include:

1. The incarnation of Kang Jeungsan and the unfolding of *Cheonji Gongsu* represent a complex interplay of sensory perception, emotional response, and spiritual insight.
2. The concept of the sublime provides a valuable framework for understanding the overwhelming and transformative nature of *Cheonji Gongsu*, evoking feelings of awe, fascination, and even terror in believers.
3. The aesthetic features of *Cheonji Gongsu*, including its embodiment of holiness, rich symbolic language, and vision of cosmic transformation, create a comprehensive aesthetic framework that shapes the religious experience of Daeseon believers.
4. The sensory and emotive aspects of Daeseon practices contribute significantly to spiritual experiences and the formation of religious beliefs, highlighting the importance of embodied cognition in religious understanding.
5. The aesthetic vision of *Hucheon Seongyeong* plays a central role in Daeseon soteriology, suggesting that the appreciation and creation of beauty are integral to spiritual development.

This aesthetic approach to studying *Cheonji Gongsu* offers several important implications for religious studies:

1. It provides a complementary method to traditional doctrinal studies, illuminating the experiential and affective dimensions of religious belief and practice.
2. It helps bridge the gap between etic and emic perspectives in the study of new religious movements, offering insights into how practitioners themselves perceive and engage with their traditions.
3. It facilitates comparative analysis with other religious aesthetic traditions, highlighting both unique features of Daeseon Thought and broader patterns in religious aesthetics.

However, this study also has limitations. The theoretical nature of our analysis could be complemented by empirical research, including phenomenological studies of practitioners' experiences and cognitive studies on how religious beliefs influence perception. Future research could also explore how the aesthetic dimensions of *Cheonji Gongsu* are experienced and interpreted by different demographic groups within

Daesoon Jinrihoe.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the value of aesthetic analysis in understanding new religious movements. By examining how divine beauty is conceptualized, experienced, and transmitted in Daesoon Thought, we gain deeper insights into the power of aesthetic experience in shaping religious belief and practice. This approach not only enriches our understanding of Daesoon Jinrihoe but also offers a model for how aesthetic analysis might be applied to other religious traditions, contributing to a more holistic understanding of religious phenomena in the contemporary world.

Conflict of Interest

Lee Gyungwon has been on the Associate Editor of *JDTREA* since July 2021, but has no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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