

# Minjung Theology : A Korean Contextual Theology

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Theology is contextual. Liberation theology emerged from the concern of Latin American theologians for the poor in their countries. Political theology came into being in response to the privatized hermeneutics of existentialist theology in Germany. Black theology arose from the struggle of the Blacks for their civil rights in the United States. Feminist theology emerged from women's awareness of themselves in relation to God's freedom. Minjung theology came out of the struggle of concerned Korean Christians for social and political justice in Korea.

This paper is written to introduce Minjung theology and to discuss its salient points. Since Minjung theology is a theology in the making, this paper attempts to show the growing edges of this theology called Minjung.

## I. The Origin of Minjung Theology

In the 1970s, a handful of theologians and lay leaders became involved in the struggle of the "minjung" (the oppressed) for justice and freedom. As their involvement on behalf of the Minjung intensified, the Korean government dismissed them from their universities and seminaries. Having lost their teaching jobs, they chose to participate more actively in Minjung movements. They chanted with laborers staging sit-in-strikes, demonstrated with students in the streets, and cried with the families of political prisoners. When these Christians committed themselves to

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Minjung movements, they "were forced to reflect upon their Christian discipleship in basement interrogation rooms, in trials, facing court-martial tribunals, hearing the allegations of prosecutors, and in making their own final defense."<sup>1</sup> Out of these in-depth human experiences, Minjung theology was born.

## II. The Meaning of "Minjung"

Tong H. Moon, one of Minjung theologians, defines the meaning of "Minjung" in this way: "The term came to be used first during the Yi dynasty (1392-1910) when the common people were oppressed by *Yangban* class, the ruling class of the time...At that time anyone who was excluded from the *Yangban* class was a Minjung. During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), most Koreans were reduced to Minjung status except for a small group who collaborated with the Japanese imperialists. Today the term Minjung may be used for all those who are excluded from the elite who enjoy prestigious positions in the present dictatorial system."<sup>2</sup> The Minjung are those people who have suffered from exploitation, poverty, socio-political oppression, and cultural repression throughout the ages. They know the pain of dehumanization. Their lives have been rooted in the age-old experience of suffering and the present experience of it. They have been treated as non-beings by their rulers. Yet they have not given in but resisted the oppression of their rulers. They have suffered for changing Korea into a just nation. This is the positive dimension of the Minjung suffering. The Minjung identification, at any rate, can be found in suffering caused by socio-political and cultural oppression.

## III. The Goal of Minjung Theology

With what problems do Minjung theologians deal? What is the nature of the Minjung experience? "Han" lies at

1. David Kwang-sun Suh, "Minjung and Theology in Korea: A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation", In *Minjung Theology*, ed. Yong-Bock Kim (Singapore: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), p. 18.
2. Tong Hwan Moon, "Korean Minjung Theology", January 1982. (Type-written). pp. 3-4.

the heart of the Minjung experience. It is the obstacle that stands between the Minjung and their abundant life.

What is "Han"? According to a renowned Minjung poet, Chi-Ha Kim, "Han is the Minjung's anger and sad sentiment turned inward, hardened and stuck to their hearts. Han is caused as one's outgoingness is blocked and pressed for an extended period of time by external oppression and exploitation."<sup>3</sup> For example, the feeling of Han developed in the hearts of the bereft families who had lost their loved ones in the masscre of Kwangju in 1980. The Chun's regime slaughtered over 2,000 Kwangju citizens because of their demonstration against him.<sup>4</sup> The deep-seated anger which is internalized turns into Han. Again Han is described as the feeling of deeply internalized lamentations and anger. Han can be accumulated, transmitted, and inherited, boiling in the blood of the Minjung. For the Minjung poet, Kim, it is the "emotional core of anti-regime action."<sup>5</sup>

Dealing with the Minjung's Han creatively is the task of Minjung theology. The goal of Minjung theology is to learn the Han of the Minjung, to unravel its historical complexity, and to transform it for constructing God's kingdom.

#### IV. Methodology of Minjung Theology

How do Minjung theologians treat the questions that the Han of the Minjung raises? "Dan" is the answer they give. "Dan" means "to cut off." The Minjung poet Chi-Ha Kim is the person who has contributed most to developing the theme of "Dan" for Christian theology. He describes "Dan" as having two dimensions; at the personal level, "Dan" means self-denial; at the social level it means to cut off the vicious circle of Minjung's Han and revenge.<sup>6</sup> If Minjung's Han explodes destructively, the Minjung will hate,

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4. This demonstration was suppressed by the extremely violent punishment of the paratroopers. The cruel punishment escalated students' resistance and led them to defending themselves with arms. The military troops moved into the city Kwangju at last and masscred over 2,000 young citizens.

5. Nam-Dong Suh, "Towards a Theology of Han", in *Minjung Theology*, p. 60.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

kill, or revenge their oppressors endlessly. Dan is to overcome the vicious circle of Han.

A dialectic unification of Han and Dan leads the Minjung to their creative liberation. For the poet Kim, the dialectic unification of Han and Dan means to undergo the four stages of revolution. The first stage is "inviting God in the heart" (Shi-Chun-Ju,) the second stage is "letting God grow in the body" (Yan-Chun-Ju), the third stage is "practising the struggle for embodying God" (Haeng-Chun-Ju), the fourth stage is "living as humble and resurrected champions of the Minjung beyond death" (Sang-Chun-Ju).<sup>7</sup> For Kim, revolution for social justice and revolution for individual spirituality are one. This dialectic unification of Han and Dan liberates the Minjung from self-destruction by transforming their Han into creative revolution.

There are several Minjung theologians who deal with Dan from different perspectives. By discussing the view points of four selected theologians, I plan to show different methodologies used in Minjung theology today.

Nam-Dong Suh, former professor of systematic theology at Yonsei University, develops a method of theology in "Minjung's stories" (Mindam). He perceives that in these stories of the Minjung, Han is revealed in its fullest. The power of these stories lies in the imagery that transforms the feeling of Han into a revolutionary consciousness. Suh believes that the mission of Christians is to be the "priests of Han" working for the creative Dan of the Minjung's Han. The Dan of the Minjung's Han is not only the psychological catharsis of the accumulated Han, but a revolution transforming the evil social structure which produces the Minjung's Han. Examples of such a revolution are the April-Nineteenth Student Revolution of 1960 and the March-First Independence Movement of 1919. The stories of the Minjung are the main tools bringing creative Dan into the Minjung's Han.

Byung-Mu Ahn, former professor of New Testament at Hankuk Theological Seminary, calls our attention to the

7. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

scholarly studies which look at the audience to whom Jesus spoke and taught. He holds that New Testament scholarship has focused on the audience of Jesus' teaching, not on the social character of his audience. Consequently, New Testament scholarship has ignored the sociological interpretation of Jesus' teachings.

Through studying the gospel of Mark sociologically and biblically, he reports that Mark avoided using the term "Laos" (God's people); instead, he chose the term "Ochlos" (the outcast). For Mark, Jesus preached the kingdom of God to the Ochlos, and shared the eschatological hope with them. Jesus was always with the Ochlos in his ministry. By providing exegetical evidence for the importance of the Ochlos, Ahn calls our attention to the exigencies of Minjung's liberation.

Yong-Bock Kim, Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development, tries to replace the Western style of systematic theology with the "social biography of the Korean Minjung." But, what concrete social transformations can occur through a social biography of the Minjung? He answers that the Minjung, as historical subjects, transcend the socio-economic determination of history. This he supports through unpacking the stories of Han. This process of unfolding stories itself has the power to move the Minjung to a newly transformed history beyond the presently gloomy structures of oppressive power.

Kim identifies this transformation as the self-transcendence of the Minjung. (He prefers to call it "messianic politics.")<sup>8</sup> The Minjung consciousness of "messianic politics" (self-transcendence) contradicts the false consciousness of modern ideologies. For him, the social biography of the Minjung becomes a means of leading people to a consciousness of "messianic politics". This consciousness identifies with the suffering people and then works as a servant with hope for the liberation of the Minjung.<sup>9</sup>

Younghak Hyun, former professor of religion at Ewha

8. Yong-Bock Kim, "Messiah and Minjung: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism", In *Minjung Theology*, pp. 185-195.

9. David Kwang-sun Suh, "Minjung and Theology in Korea", p. 36.

Women's University, explores the Korean mask dance to understand the Han of the Minjung. In the mask dance, the actors or the actresses, common people, become free and make fun of the ruling class of the old Korean society. In the laughter of mask dances, the performers and the audience experience "critical transcendence" of the injustices of the world. Through the performance of the mask dances, the suppressed feeling of the Minjung's Han explodes into concrete body languages and the Minjung become conscientized. In the process of the explosion, the Minjung will gain a stance of critical transcendence. Such critical transcendence never arises from the biography of an isolated individual, but rather from the socio-political and historical biography of the Minjung. The experience of critical transcendence leads the Minjung to laugh at themselves, transcending the present history, and transforming the world of oppression.

These Minjung theologians work to bring Dan (cutting off the vicious circle) to the Han of the Minjung. They do it by using different methods; Suh uses the stories of the Minjung, Ahn, socio-biblical analysis of the Ochlos, Kim, the social biography of the Minjung, Hyun, the Korean mask dance.

## V. The Significance of Minjung Theology

How is Minjung theology similar to other theologies? What are the salient points of Minjung theology?

### 1. *The Central Theme of Minjung Theology*

For Paul Tillich, the norm of Christian theology is "Jesus as the Christ." Instead of talking about the norm of theology, Minjung theology deals with the central theme of theology. There are two different opinions on the central theme in Minjung theology. Nam-Dong Suh says that the central theme of Minjung theology should not be Jesus but the Minjung. Byung-Mu Ahn says that its central theme is both Jesus and the Minjung because they are inseparable.

Suh asserts that the oppressed (Ochlos) were not a channel to help our understanding of Jesus, but rather Jesus was

the channel to help our understanding of the oppressed. Jesus' cries and suffering represent those of the Ochlos. Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve the Ochlos. Jesus was concerned about the Ochlos than he was concerned about himself. Therefore, the central theme of Minjung theology is the Minjung.

Ahn asserts that Jesus and the Ochlos cannot be understood separately. To develop his theory, Ahn analyzes the term "Son of Man." The title "Son of Man" in the book of Daniel originally connotes a collective expression and later the title was given to Jesus.<sup>10</sup> A few new Testament scholars recognize that Jesus as the Son of Man not only was one person, but also represented a group of people (Ochlos).<sup>11</sup> Hence, Ahn does not separate Jesus from the Ochlos. In fact, Jesus was one of the Ochlos. Without Jesus, we cannot understand the Ochlos. Without the Ochlos, we cannot understand Jesus fully. We are able to find the true identity of Jesus and of the Ochlos only in their relation to each other. Thus, Ahn's theme is Jesus and the Minjung.

## 2. *The Minjung of Korea and the Poor of Latin America*

Some people ask whether the Minjung of Korea are the same as the poor of Latin America. They are not the same.

In Latin American countries, the neo-colonialism of the United States has liquidated their business and industry. Oligarchies prevail in these countries. Poverty is the single biggest problem in Latin America. Because of the huge gap between the rich (minority) and the poor (majority), Latin American liberation theology is mainly concerned with the liberation of the poor.<sup>12</sup>

In Korea, social problems arise from cultural, social, political repression as well as economic oppression. Korean

10. Byung-Mu Ahn, "The Historical Subject in a Perspective of the Gospel of Mark", In *Minjung and Korean Theology*, ed. Committee of Theological Study. KNCC, (Seoul: Korean Theological Study Institute, 1982), p. 179.

11. They art C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, V. Taylor, H. H. Rowley, H. Odeberg, etc.

12. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Trans. by Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 136-37.

society has been torn apart by cultural, social, and political oppressions mainly because of authoritarianism and the hierarchy of Confucianism. Thus, the term "Minjung" designates not only the economically oppressed, but also the culturally, politically, and socially repressed. Of course, the poor in Latin America have been exploited politically, socially, and culturally as well as economically. The main source of their oppression, however, comes from the economic dimension. The problems of the Korean Minjung, somewhat similar to those of the Blacks in the United States, cannot be solved by the elimination of poverty. Their problems are multi-dimensional. The Minjung are made up of political outcasts, laborers, women, the poor, the illiterate, the illegitimate, etc. The concept of "Minjung" is broader than that of the Latin American poor.

### 3. *The Sources of Minjung Theology*

For Tillich, the sources of theology are the Bible, church history, the history of religions, and culture. Moreover, experience is treated as the medium of theology. In Minjung theology, the major source of theology is the experience of the Minjung. The experience of the Minjung is made of two parts: "One is their contemporary experience and the other is their past experiences which we usually call their social biography."<sup>13</sup>

Minjung theology does not exclude other sources of theology like the Bible. For Nam-Dong Suh, both the Christian tradition of the oppressed (the biblical Ochlos and the oppressed in the history of Christianity) and the Korean tradition of the Minjung are the major sources of theology. He sees both the Christian tradition of the oppressed and the Korean tradition of the Minjung as united in God's mission (Missio Dei). God was actively working among the Minjung in Korea while Jesus was teaching and serving the Ochlos in Palestine. In God's eyes, the experience of the Korean Minjung is as important as the experience of the Ochlos in Israel. In the history of Korea, we can find God's salvific work. This means that God's revelation is not limited in the

13. Tong Hwan Moon, "Korean Minjung Theology", p. 2.



events of the Bible but is persuasive everywhere. Minjung theologians insist that the history of Korea is as sacred as the history of the biblical revelation. Thus, they identify the experience of the Korean Minjung as a major source for their theology.

#### 4. *A Theology of Story telling*

In traditional theology, a set of theological tools has been provided by philosophy—especially the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, or Heidegger. Latin American liberation theologians have found another set of tools; they use Marxist theory for the analysis of the situation in Latin America. For them, Marxism is not a world view by which they make their decisions for social actions, but a tool for social analysis. They find that a Marxist social analysis helps them to understand their world better.<sup>14</sup> Marxist socio-economic theory is very pertinent for analyzing the structure of the Latin American society and for constructing liberation theology.

Minjung theologians found that Marxism is not the best instrument to analyze Korean social problems, because the Korean Minjung experience of socio-economic and political oppression occurred before the introduction of capitalism into Korea. Rather than Marxist social analysis, the stories of the Minjung are the tools which effectively unmask the structure of a deeply oppressive society. The stories of Minjung expose the absurdity of society, the injustice of the oppressor, and the deeply hidden Han of the Minjung. Stories contain the history of the suffering Minjung, their courageous resistance against their rulers, and the vision of a new society. In stories, the Minjung accuse, challenge, and lament the injustice of their society. Korean stories are filled with the Han of the victims of starvation, wars, malignant diseases, political conflicts, tyranny, etc.<sup>15</sup> Stories have the potential power of being able to explode the Minjung's accumulated Han and to bring forth a revolution.

14. Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 64-67.

15. Here the term "story" includes folk-tales (Mindam), the scenario of the mask dance and play (Talchum and Yonguk), Korean opera (Pansori), native songs (Hyang-gha), and true stories of the oppressed (Silhwa).

Stories raise the anti-establishment consciousness of the Minjung. Stories lead the Minjung to see the reality of the world holistically. The Minjung do not need philosophical, theological, or sociological jargon to understand truth. Any abstract academic term will turn the Minjung off from seeing truth. Minjung language, which is thoroughly concrete, is story-telling.

Minjung theologians begin to cherish the treasure of Minjung stories, to learn how to listen to these stories and to use them for transforming Korean society. By hearing Minjung stories, these theologians experience their own transformation first; then they seek to share the stories with others. One of the important tasks of Minjung theologians is to be Minjung story-tellers.

## Conclusion

Minjung theology is a socio-political hermeneutics of the Christian gospel from the viewpoint of the past and the present experience of Minjung suffering. This theology shows that the biblical message cannot be fully understood, until we understand the history of the Korean Minjung, because the Bible is rooted in the history of the biblical Minjung. The Christian gospel and the history of the Korean Minjung interpenetrate through the hermeneutical process of Minjung theology.

The basic hermeneutical task of Minjung theology is not to interpret the Bible (the text) in the light of the Korean situation (the context), but to interpret the suffering experience of the Korean Minjung (the context) in the light of the Bible (the text). Minjung theology contends that the Minjung do not exist for the authority of the Bible, but the authority of the Bible exists for the freedom of the Minjung. This does not mean that the Minjung are more important than the Bible; it means that the Minjung are a starting point for a biblical hermeneutics.

Minjung theology is not primarily concerned about the Korean Christians in particular, but the oppressed Korean Minjung in general. This theology specifically discovers the deep-seated feeling of Han in the Minjung and endeavors

to transform it through Dan. Dan means to cut off the vicious circle of the Minjung's Han by exorcizing the evil spirit of revenge against the oppressive rulers from the Han-ridden hearts of the Minjung (self-denial) and by transforming the Han into the power of revolution for establishing a God's nation.

Since Minjung theology is not accepted by a majority of Korean Christians, it remains a challenge for Minjung theologians to persuade Korean Christians to Minjung theology. The destiny of Minjung theology is, however, not to be a theology of church dogmatics but a theology for the oppressed Minjung, of the oppressed Minjung, and by the oppressed Minjung.