

The God-talk of the Oppressed: An Asian Contribution

David Kwang-sun Suh

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[The text of footnote 1 on page 50 of the original printed version of this article appears to belong to footnote 28 on page 26 of the Tok Pisin article “Diveelopmen na Wok Bilong Sios”, and has now been placed there. Because the correct reference details for footnote 1 of this article are not known, the footnote has been deleted. –Revising ed.]

Towards Ideological Independence

I have been teaching systematic theology at both undergraduate and graduate Departments of Christian Studies, in the faculty of liberal arts of a traditional mission school in Korea. Like most theological seminaries and academic departments of theology, we organised our four-year undergraduate curriculum with core courses on the Bible, church history, systematic theology, ethics, preaching, religious education, worship, etc.

Most of the teachers in these institutions are recognised by Western institutions of theological education as academically-qualified teachers and researchers, trained in one or more Western languages, besides their own mother tongue. We theological teachers mostly follow, and imitate, what our Western teachers were doing when we were students, sometimes with feelings of inadequacy and frustration, because of the lack of library resources, and the students’ limited language ability to read the great Western theological authors. So we become involved in the development of theological textbooks, which are mostly translations of the famous “classical” books we became familiar, with when we were studying theology in the West.

Teaching theology in our part of the world is, thus, mostly translation work: it is to translate Western authors into our native language, and it is also to translate the culture-laden Western Christian theological concepts into our own language, to make them sensible and meaningful.

Problems arise, however, when Western Christian theological concepts and dogmas do not make sense at all in our native language. The traditional way of solving this problem was to memorise the whole body of Christian dogma, letter by letter, without making any connection with the social and historical context, from which these concepts and dogmas had come. These Western missionary theological concepts and dogmas, we swallowed as an important part of believing in the new religion, and of following the way of Jesus Christ. Our missionary theological mentors were inadequate in translating the difficult theological concepts into the strange language; they had only limited skill in the native tongue, and they were not trained theological teachers. There had been little theological development in the churches in Asia, where the dominant theological ideology was fundamentalism, until the time when the colonised countries gained political independence from Western imperialism in the 1940s.

During the last 40 years, in spite of political independence, or the struggle for it, Christian theology in formerly-colonised countries – like most other academic fields of study in the universities in these countries – has not gained ideological independence. The Korean theologians could speak Korean better than the American missionaries, when they taught theology, and preached in the churches. But the language problem still remained: they had to translate the Western concepts, and Christian dogmas, from English or German into Korean, but such language skill was as limited, as that of the missionary teachers, when they spoke Korean.

Since I came back to Korea from the United States, in the late 1960s, I have enthusiastically introduced my students to the theologies of Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, and Harvey Cox, because I was excited about them, when I was studying in American theological schools. But I only created confusion and frustration among my students. Bultmann's demythologisation is not only tongue-twisting; it shocked their fundamentalist, anti-hermeneutic understanding of the Bible. In the theological climate of Korea, where Karl Barth's thinking is condemned as dangerous liberal theology, an introduction of the whole theological enterprise of the last two centuries in the West is, itself, a new way of teaching/doing/learning theology.

What is new about introducing contemporary Western theologians? It is new, because these names are unheard-of, either because of theological ignorance or because of ecclesial prohibition. But, it is also new, because these theologians, themselves, introduced new ways of doing theology in Western society. Paul Tillich took culture seriously, even though the culture he spoke of was high-brow,

Western, bourgeois culture. He made me talk positively about our Asian religions, and traditional culture, and about the existential situation, from which theological questions arise. Bultmann opened up a wide horizon to my students, enabling them to read the Bible from an entirely different perspective, even going beyond his existential interpretation of the kerygma. The reading of Bonhoeffer's prison letters, in Korean translation, has made our students think about the political history of Korean Christians, which is filled with martyrs, standing up against the ideological idols of the dominant powers. While Harvey Cox introduced the secular world of the West to our students, they incorporated him into their experience of revolutionary struggles for the building of a new nation. Moltmann's theological writings stimulated our political imagination, and enabled us to interpret our theological politics.

What is new in these theologians' doing of theology was that they took their world seriously: Bonhoeffer took Nazi Germany seriously; Cox took his secular American society seriously; and Moltmann took the political world of the West seriously. I do not know whether these theologians thought of themselves as doing and teaching theology, from the ecumenical perspective, but, I think, when we take the real, concrete, political and social world seriously in doing theology, it is the ecumenical way of doing theology.

The whole question of theological legitimacy used to be a question of the academic standard set by Western theological schools, and the denominational authorities. But, in the new way of doing theology, I have discovered that theological legitimacy depends on its relation to the world. The new way of doing theology is theologically responsible to the world: it is doing theology *from* the world, *for* the world, and *in* the world. This is, as I learned in my situation, the responsible ecumenical way of doing theology.

Starting From Our Own World

Once we realise that our Western contemporary theologians are taking this world seriously, in their doing of theology, we do not have to stay with their theological writings alone, thinking about their theological struggles in their Western context. Now, we can turn to our own context, to our own world. That is to say, we start our theologising anew; we do not start from the Western theological package, but from our own world of politics, economics, traditional religions, and our native cultures. As we interpret what Western Christian thinkers are saying in their own context, we begin interpreting the Bible, and Christian traditions, from our own perspective of our own world. When we take our world seriously, and try to respond to it, the problem of hermeneutical

suspicion comes up. We cannot simply use the entire Western ideological framework of Christian theology, in our reading of the Bible, and in our mission of word and action. We have to critically question the dominant ideology of Western Christian theologies in our doing/teaching/learning, in our experience of the contemporary political world.

Until I was forced to confront the powerful, military dictatorship of the 1970s in Korea, which was, to me, the most concrete and real world of politics, I did teach systematic theology in the comfortable world of Western philosophy, and liberal ideologies, interpreting Western political and philosophical theologies. But, when I took the risk of losing my respectable position as a university professor, by signing petitions, and political statements for the Christian and secular student democratic human-rights movement, I was forced to take my political world seriously, in my actual doing and teaching of theology. I had to learn how to articulate my theology, and biblical understanding, as I drafted political statements, and declarations, for the humanisation of politics, and for economic justice for the workers, and disinherited farmers, in the rapidly, and forcibly-industrialising, society of Korea. Our doing theology in such a political situation is critical and confrontational: we have to be critical of the dominant ideology, in both politics, and in the churches; we have to confront the most powerful ideological superstructure of the dominant political system. We also have to discover a new way of reading the Bible, on the basis of our political struggles, and to construct an eschatological vision of the kingdom of God, which is operative in our history.

Our job of doing and teaching theology has not been limited to the confines of classrooms, church podiums, and lecture halls. We have had to go out into the world: holding ecumenical conferences, open forums, and theological debates, drafting political statements, holding seminars with labour union workers, and farmers' movement members. Sometimes, we have been taken into the police torture chambers, for an investigation of our theological lectures and political statements. Some of us have had to end up in prison. And when we come back again into the classrooms to teach Augustine, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Jim Cone, and Gutierrez, we talk about them from the perspective of the world, as we have experienced it. Our theological language can no longer be the *ghetto* language of the comfortable academia of dignity and authority. It should become the humble language of the world, full of anger, ambiguity, and frustration against evil in the world. Thus, our God-talk becomes alive, like the action of God in the world. And our God-talk is, inevitably, iconoclastic and exorcistic. Our teaching of systematic theology has to become a systematic destruction of the ideological

idols of Christian religion. And our doing of theology is the exorcising act of casting out the political demons in the world. Identifying and naming the idols and devils in the Christian churches, in our cultures, is the first task of teaching systematic theology. We have to call on the help of those who have been doing “philosophical theology” in a new way. The new way is not to “philosophise” theology, but to make a connection between faith and ideology. The new way of doing theology is not only just to understand what theology is, but to change it, and, with it, to change the world.

The doing of theology, in an ecumenical way, in the traditionally non-Christian world of Asia, includes an extra task. The non-Christian world is based on a religious-cultural-ideological superstructure, which is totally ignorant of, and alien to, the Christian ideological superstructure of the Western world. The task of doing theology, in a non-Christian world, goes far beyond doing translating work. We must take the language of the non-Christian world seriously, as we undertake the hermeneutical task. We should be liberated from the illusion that the theologians’ task is to speak about the Christian God in the heathen world. The language and culture of the heathen world must interpret the gospel, as the heathen world of the Greeks and Romans took up the hermeneutical task of understanding the Christian gospel. Thus, our task of doing theology, in this “heathen” world, has to become *creative*. Going beyond learning and teaching Asian cultures and religions in order to see how this alien Christian gospel took such deep root in the superstructure of Eastern ideologies. Our task of doing theology, in the Eastern, “heathen” world, has to be creative, as we try to interpret the gospel in the language and culture, from which we have come. Like American black theologians, and feminist theologians, we can no longer be consumers of Western theological products – feeling and thinking, as if we have become Western persons. We have to create our own way of speaking about God, from our deep and rich resources of traditional culture, and Asian religions. As we took our traditional culture and religion seriously, we have come to realise that our tradition is not something inferior or incomplete, but is complete and sufficient as part of God’s creation.

The Need to Reshape Curriculum

Therefore, the whole theological curriculum has to be reshaped, and reorganised, when you take your own world seriously. Those of us, who do and teach theology in this part of the world, cannot, as in the past, organise our own theological teaching schedules, as our Western theological teachers did. We cannot spend all of our time reading Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich, and interpreting

them to our young students, who are only awed by our incomprehensible, and irrelevant, language of theology, in the context of their contemporary struggle for living. The bringing of our world into the scene of doing theology cannot be a spare-time, or extra-curricular, effort. So to speak, we cannot only consume the Western-made Christian theological “care” package.

When we take our world seriously, we have to take seriously those contemporary theologians, who took their world seriously. And, when we find ourselves doing the dangerous and risky work of idol-breaking and exorcising, we identify ourselves, in solidarity, with those ecumenical theologians, who have been working for the liberation of theology, and for the liberative task of theology. We bring together, in our task of doing theology, Latin American liberation theology, feminist Christian theology, American black theology, and liberational political theology in the Western world. And we learn from them how they have brought together their experience in transforming their hermeneutical framework; how they have related their faith to ideology; how they have broken their own religious and ideological idols; and how they have taken the suffering people’s stories seriously. To use Prof. Geense’s language, finally, we learn from them how they *confessed* their faith in their particular situation.

Furthermore, when we take the task of theology as liberative and liberating, we bring our own world into our doing of theology. In our doing of theology, we have to understand the basic structural character of our contemporary political-economic world, in order to understand and name the physical, mental, and spiritual suffering of oppression, in order to understand the suffering of God, and what God is doing in this world with people.

In order to understand our Christian religion, we have to examine our hermeneutical framework, our traditional cultural and religious framework, from, and through, which we interpret and understand the Christian gospel. Non-Christian religions are not only the ideological superstructure of our world, but they are also rich resources, from which we can reshape our ideology, in relation to our faith. We must bring non-Christian religions into our task of doing theology, as our theological forerunners have insisted on bringing non-Christian worldviews and myths into their task of doing theology in their world. As they were creative in their doing of theology, we can and ought to be creative in our doing of theology in our world.

As we take our world seriously, we must take the people, who are suffering and struggling for liberation, seriously. The stories of our suffering people, in our

particular world, have to be brought into our task of doing theology. And those stories ought to be told, as vividly, and as passionately, as we can. If we ignore, and forget, the socio-biography of the people, we might fall into the serious mistake of ignoring, and forgetting, the spoken socio-biography of the people of Israel, and the voice, with which God has spoken to us. We have to reread our own political history, not just as the history of domination of the powerful, but as the history of the suffering and liberation of the people of God.

The ultimate task of doing systematic theology is to hear, and articulate, the word of God, and to confess our faith in Jesus Christ. Then our experiences: theological, political, cultural, and socio-biographical, should be brought together to make our theology and confession meaningful and powerful, to change the world, and liberate our theology. Thus, our doing/teaching/learning of systematic theology is a constant writing and rewriting of our confession of faith, and that confession is written, not only in the secluded place of the altar or lecture hall, but also in open, public places, where our act of confession can be seen and heard by the oppressors and exploiters.

Doing systematic theology, in an ecumenical way, is doing theology in the world. And teaching systematic theology, in an ecumenical perspective, is doing it from the perspective of the world, and of the suffering and oppressed people of God. Therefore, doing theology becomes dangerous and risky; it means taking up the costly discipleship, which follows the cross of Jesus Christ Himself. Doing theology, in an ecumenical way, demands commitment to the liberation of theology, and of the oppressed people of God.