The Emergence of Minjung Theology and its Understanding of Reconciliation

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the theology of minjung. It is an accumulation and articulation of theological reflections on the political experience of Christian students, laborers, the press, professors, farmers, writers, and intellectuals as well as theologians in Korea in the 1970s. Minjung theology of Korea has been known as a branch of liberation theology. However, minjung theology was born in a special situation in Korea and has distinctive features from liberation theology. Through this research, I examine the definition, background, and characteristics of minjung theology, and attempts to research reconciliation, an important topic of modern theology, from the perspective of minjung theology. Minjung is economically poor, politically weak, socially deprived, but culturally and historically rich and powerful. Also, minjung, the poor, can think. They can do theology. There is no need for them to depend upon their oppressors to tell them what the gospel is.

Keywords: Theology; Minjung; Liberation; Korean; Asian; Gospel.

Introduction

Minjung theology of Korea has been known as a branch of liberation theology. However, minjung theology was born in a special situation in Korea and has distinctive features from liberation theology. This paper examines the definition, background, and characteristics of minjung theology, and attempts to research reconciliation, an important topic of modern theology, from the perspective of minjung theology.

Minjung theology or theology of minjung is an accumulation and articulation of theological reflections on the political experience of Christian students, laborers, the press, professors, farmers, writers, and intellectuals as well as theologians in Korean in the 1970s. It is a theology of the oppressed in the Korean political situation, a theological response to the oppressors, and it is the response of the oppressed to the Korean church and its mission.[1]

On the one hand, minjung theology is an example of what Korean Christians in particular and Asians generally are doing to liberate themselves from the stifling effects of European theology. But on the other hand, minjung theology is more than a rejection of European theology. Minjung

[1] Kwang-sun David Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, ed. The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conferences of Asia (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 16.

theology is not identical with black, Latin, African, or even other Asian theologies. Rather it is a theology defined by the minjung reality. It is the Korean story of suffering and hope.[2]

According to Byung-mu Ahn, one of the foremost minjung theologians, "minjung, like Jesus, is indefinable". For him, it is a holistic, dynamic and changing reality, one which escapes categorization. Once it is subjected to the definition, it becomes the victim of ideology and the object of speculation. The word minjung(民衆)is a Korean pronunciation of two Chinese characters, "min (民) " and "jung (衆)." "Min" literally means "the people" and "jung" "the mass." Combining these two words, we get the idea of "the mass people" or simply "the people."[3]

Minjung is the common people who have been oppressed by the small group of the elite or yangban class, the ruling class during the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), also known as gentry. In the modern mean, "the minjung are those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in the cultural and intellectual matter," stressed a biblical theologian Moon Hee-suk.[4]

If the Minjung were merely a byproduct of socioeconomic classification, they would be identified with the proletariat in Marxist terminology. Minjung is much more inclusive, however, because it denotes all the common people who have been regarded as the subject of Korean history and culture.[5] James H. Cone stressed that on the contrary Latin American theology has said much about the liberation of the poor, the form and content of their theology do not reflect much of the history and culture of the poor, especially among Indians and blacks on that continent.[6] Besides minjung is neither a Marxist definition of the proletariat or history nor a Maoist notion of "inmin (人民)" which upholds supremacy and dictatorship of the proletariat and totalitarianism.[7]

Minjung is economically poor, politically weak, socially deprived, but culturally and historically rich and powerful. Also, minjung, the poor, can think. They can do theology. There is no need for them to depend upon their oppressors to tell them what the gospel is. When the poor begin to think, they become aware of an identity that transcends the world created and controlled by the oppressors.[8] Therefore, the minjung is recognized as the subject of history, who is in charge of production labour, create culture, and move historical movements into practice.

Yong-bok Kim, a minjung theologian, explains the concept of "minjung's social biography" while defining the minjung. The minjung understands themselves and defines themselves by the social biography of the minjung who express their hardships and hopes through stories. Mark of Gospel is a representative example of social biography, and in Korean tradition, folk story, mask dance, and pansori. It is not defined objectively and numerically by others, but it is a process in which the minjung becomes self-conscious in a 'narrative'. The minjung concept is therefore

[2] James H. Cone, "Preface," in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, ed. The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conferences of Asia (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 16.
[3] Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," 15-16.
[4] Hee-suk Moon, A Korean Minjun Theology: An Old Testament Perspective (Maryknoll, New York and Hong Kong: Orbis Books and Plough Publications, 1985), 1.
[5] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 3-4.
[6] Cone, "Preface," xv.
[7] Ibid., 30.
[8] Ibid., xv-xvi.

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personal, even religious. Minjung theologian Ahn said, "Jesus is the minjung, and the minjung is Jesus." we strongly deny the concept that Jesus is leader, liberator, and educator 'for' the minjung. Jesus did not give himself to save the minjung. Jesus is not the subject that makes the minjung conscious and causes them to start a liberation movement. Jesus is one of minjung and minjung is like Jesus. Also, when it is said Jesus as the representative of the minjung, it does not mean that Jesus is an example that the minjung should follow Him as a role model of the minjung. The word "minjung is Jesus" logically means that the story of Jesus and the minjung's self-experience occurs simultaneously. In other words, it is said that the people of the day who transmitted the story of Jesus looked at their suffering amid the execution of Jesus and became the "subject of passing down the story" who transmitted the story of Jesus. The story of Jesus made the minjung conscious, and the self-conscious minjung in hardship passed on the story of Jesus.[9]

Background of Emerging of Minjung Theology in the history of Korea

1) The long saga of oppression, poverty, and dehumanization inflicted upon the Korean people by such great powers as China and Japan. For more than four thousand years of national history, Koreans have enjoyed only a relatively brief period of peace and autonomy, and have suffered and been oppressed by the powers, especially by different and various empires of China. After World War II, Korea was divided into North Korea and South Korea instead of division of Japanese territory which was the war criminal. And the civil war in 1950 did not attain the unity and autonomy Koreans had sought and, devastated the whole country, and plunged the people into a deep mire of poverty, causing unspeakable suffering.[10]

Despite the suffering owing to foreign oppression, there have always been a self-serving few who have collaborated with the foreign occupiers to advance their own interests. They became the elite or the ruling group and oppressed the majority of the Korean minjung. The common people, therefore, have been doubly oppressed by the foreigners and by the elite (traitors) of their own society.[11]

2) Korea, unlike many parts of Asia, was not colonized by European imperial powers, but rather by China and then Japan. Hence, Confucianism and Buddhism are perceived not as liberating, but rather as enabling oppression and marginalization, as these two religious traditions were co-opted by the Korean ruling class and therefore became tightly interwoven into the political landscape in Korean history. By contrast, when Christianity arrived in Korea, it was not the faith of a colonizing power, as was the case in many Asian countries, but rather a powerful liberating message for the Korean subaltern masses from Chinese and Japanese domination.[12] For this reason, early Christianity in Korea was able to get along with the people easily and gain recognition from

[9] Dong-min Jang, "From Minjung to Life: the contribution of Chi-ha Kim in the development of Korean Theology"[민중에서 생명으로: 한국신학 발전에서의 김지하의 영향], unpublished article.
[10] Jung Young Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," in An Emerging Theology in World Perspective Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology, ed. Jung Young Lee (Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988, 5.
[11] bid., 5.
[12] Jonathan Y. Tan, "Ecumenical and Inter-religious Contributions to Asian Liberation Theologies," The Ecumenical Review 69, no. 4 (December 2017): 486.

the people. Christianity played an important role in the independence movement and contributed greatly to the establishment of the present Republic of Korea.

3) In the modern era of Korea, Jeon Tae-il's death (August 26, 1948 – November 13, 1970) was one of the main causes of minjung theology. Jeon was a Korean sewing worker and workers' rights activist who committed suicide by burning himself to death at the age of 22 in protest at the poor working conditions of Korean factories on 13th November 1970. At the time, the labor movement that had not taken root under the military dictatorship of Park Jeong-hee began to sprout little by little, and the development of the labor movement, which began with Jeon's death, became the root of the development of the democratic labor movement in the 1970s. Besides, it became a catalyst for intellectuals to be interested in the labor movement, and people's lives and struggles began to emerge at the forefront of history, and it became a historical event that accelerated democracy.[13] In the 1970s, therefore, more than 2,500 trade unions were formed, and events announcing the birth of a large corporate democratic union occurred one after another.[14] Upon facing the death of Jeon Tae-il, on other hand, theologians in Korea came to have religious reflection and theological reflection, which influenced the birth of minjung theology.

The Emergence of Minjung Theology

Although liberation theologies in Latin America and other Third World countries in the 1960s and 1970s, Korean theologians could not be affected by them. Because the Korean government (under military dictatorship in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) censored all materials dealing with liberation movements, only a few of Korean theologians were informed about liberation theologies. Moreover, most Christian leaders in Korea were quite conservative and fundamentalist in their theological orientation. This relative isolation from the development of liberation theologies in other parts of the world made Koreans enabled to develop their own indigenous theology.[15]

The rise of minjung theology is owed to the suffering of the masses during the country's industrialization drive from the early 1960s. During this period of rapid industrialization, Korean workers were subjected to artificially low wages and long hours of work with many laborers working upwards of 70 hours a week, under poor working conditions. Any attempt to fight against workers' exploitation was met with harsh punishment, including imprisonment.[16]

While activities of the Urban Industrial Mission and serious Christians volunteered to work at least six months as evangelists and laborers in the urban industrial complex were doing in the early 1960s, they were faced by tremendous injustices and unconscionable working conditions and perceived the struggle for social justice as part of their apostolate. In the early 1970s, several Urban Industrial Mission groups were formed to combat the abuses of the workplace and became involved in the creation of labor unions and the advancement of workers' rights issues. In this

[13] "A Martyr Jeon Tae-il," The foundation of Jeon Tae-il, accessed Nov 24, 2020, http://www.chuntaeil.org/?r=home&c=1/2/8
[14] Ibid., http://www.chuntaeil.org/?r=home&c=1/2/8
[15] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 6-7.
[16] Andrew Eungi Kim, "Minjung Theology in Contemporary Korea: Liberation Theology and a Reconsideration of Secularization Theory," Religions 9, no. 12(December 2018): 416.

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period of awakening for human rights and social justice, the emerging theological concern was on the minjung, the poor and oppressed mass. In other words, the evils of dehumanization and social injustice for the poor became the object of theological concern. In solidarity with the poor and oppressed majority, these theologians began to reinterpret the Christian faith in light of the minjung experience. They believed that Jesus not only sided with the poor, weak, and oppressed people (stressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer) but also came to liberate them from the ruling elite. They wanted to side with the minjung in the struggle for justice and liberation.[17]

Minjung Theology and Reconciliation

Han is a term that denotes the feeling of the suffering of a person who has been repressed either by himself or through the oppression of others. And this feeling of han is a collective feeling in the collective social biography of the oppressed minjung of Korea. This feeling of han is not just a one-time psychological response to an oppressed situation but is an accumulation of such feelings and experiences.[18]

Han is unique to the experience of the minjung, but the closest to the meaning of han is the 'blues' in the U.S. black experience. James H. Cone, best known for his advocacy of black theology and black liberation theology, who had fellowship with Korean Churches in the context of minjung theology, said:

> When I told them [Korean Christians] about our 'blues', they told me about their 'han'. When I told Koreans that my 19th Century slave grandparents sang spiritual songs about the exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt, identifying themselves with the Hebrew slaves and white slaveholders with the Egyptians, Koreans smiled and then shared with me their 'slave' songs about the exodus that they created during their servitude under the Japanese in the 20th century. The similarities between Korean and black experiences of oppression and liberation astounded me.[19]

According to Nam-dong Suh while he explains about fourfold han of Korean people, Koreans have suffered numerous invasions by surrounding powerful nations so that the very existence of the Korean nation has come to be understood as han; Koreans have continually suffered the tyranny of the rulers so that they think of their existence as baeksong[20]; Also, under Confucianism's strict imposition of laws and customs discriminating against women, the existence of women was han itself; At a certain point in Korean history, about half of the population were registered as hereditary slaves and were treated as property rather than as people of the nation.[21]

[17] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 7-8.
[18] Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," 24-25.
[19] Cone, "Preface," xi-xii.
[20] Baeksong: individually or collectively, those under the rule and control of a sovereign. This term is used to mean "common people" nowadays and can be replaced the term "minjung."
[21] Nam-dong Suh, "Towards a Theology of Han," in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, ed. The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conferences of Asia (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 58.

As mentioned above, han results from sins, the sins of the ruling group; therefore, resolving han, which means to restore justice, is different from the forgiveness of sin or salvation in the traditional sense. Han cannot be resolved without justice. In minjung theology, justice seems more important than forgiveness and love. Justice alone heals the wound of han and restores the minjung to their rightful place.[22]

Dan (斷) means to resolve han, literally 'cutting off'. It is to cut off the chain of han that creates vicious circles of violence and repression. According to Kim Chi Ha, a literary man and minjung activist, dan has two dimensions. One is self-denial or self-sacrifice at a personal level which is the only way to cut off han. The other is social and collective levels, however, dan can work toward the transformation of the world. Dan can sublimate the entire world to a higher level of existence by the implementation of four steps, then, the world becomes just and han disappears from the world. The four steps are: (1) to realize God in our heart so that it motivates us to worship God; (2) to allow the divine consciousness to grow in us; (3) to practice what we believe in God, with our struggle to overcome the injustice of the world through the power of God; (4) to overcome the injustice through transforming the world so that resurrection takes place from death and coming of the Kingdom of God is realized on earth. Dan, then, works in these four steps to resolve han.[23]

Characteristic of Minjung Theology and reconciliation

From the perspective of reconciliation, we could examine the characteristics of Minjung theology that began in a specific context of Korea as follows.

1) Han as the Cluster of Minjung Experiences

For minjung, Jesus is the messiah who liberates oppressed and marginalized people, who weeps with suffering people, and who bears their burdens on his cross. More importantly, Jesus is the liberator who has come to bring new life and freedom from oppression and exploitation to minjung. In this regard, Jesus empowers minjung to release the han from their lives. Minjung is not merely the hearers of Jesus' good news. Rather, they become a part of the basileia that Jesus has sought to establish with his outreach to the anawim of his day.[24] The concept of Han, as will be mentioned later in the small chapter 5, is connected with the concept of Dan. In minjung theology, reconciliation can be explained in terms of Han and Dan.

2) The Centrality of the Jesus-Event

The kerygma, which was formulated after the event of Jesus, was intended by the early church to unify the message of the New Testament. Whereas the Jesus event is holistic, dynamic, and changing, the kerygma is ideological, static, and unchanging. In Minjung Theology, Jesus-event

[22] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 9-10.
[23] Ibid., 10-11.
[24] Tan, "Ecumenical and Inter-religious Contributions to Asian Liberation Theologies," 487-88.

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means the ministry that Jesus directly showed us through his actions, and kerygma means the theological expression and interpretation of Jesus' ministries. From this point of view, minjung theology is based more on the Jesus event, the life and actions shown by Jesus than on the kerygma, the theological and theoretical interpretations about Jesus's ministries. Jung Young Lee continually claimed:

> What, then, is the Jesus-event? It is the liberating event, the event of suffering, death and resurrection. Through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, the ochlos of Mark's gospel, which is close to the meaning of minjung, have been liberated. Therefore, the Jesus-event means the liberating event. Whenever there is a liberating event, there is the presence of the living Christ. ...[25]

Minjung theology is considered to focus on more practical parts rather than abstract and theoretical concepts. Minjung Theology believes that the Jesus event of reality in the past has the same influence and is real today. Therefore, the fact that Jesus cared for the poor and oppressed in the past and opposed the unjust social structure is interpreted as being repeated in Minjung theology today.

3) The Movement of the Holy Spirit

Minjung theology emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit who extends the concept of the historical Jesus in the gospel to the cosmic Christ. Lee stressed:

> The importance of the Jesus-event is understood not only through the study of the historical Jesus in the gospel but also through the cosmic Christ who acts in the Holy Spirit. The movement of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is also a central theme for minjung theology.[26]

In the view of minjung theology, the trinitarian hierarchy is completely reversed. It is not the Father who surpasses the Son, but the Son who surpasses the Father. Moreover, it is not the Son who surpasses the Spirit, but it is the Spirit who surpasses the Son and the Father.[27]

Moreover, it was the power of the Holy Spirit that moved the hearts and minds of the people and that carries out the work of justice and liberation for the poor and the oppressed. The Jesus-event is carried out by the power of the Holy Spirit.[28]

In minjung theology the role of the Holy Spirit is emphasized for Jesus, who existed in the past, to be considered the same today. Minjung theology says that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus in the past can continue his activities today. This understanding of the Holy Spirit serves to buffer

[25] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 11.
[26] Ibid., 11.
[27] Nam-dong Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of Minjung," in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, ed. The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conferences of Asia (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 164.
[28] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 14.

the radical tendency of minjung theology that the people themselves save the people. From this point of view, the Holy Spirit, as well as the people and oppressors, become important parties in the Reconciliation in minjung theology.

4) The Messianic Kingdom and the Millennium

According to Suh, the symbol of the Messianic Kingdom is more closely associated with the idea of the millennium than that of the Kingdom of God [=Heaven].[29] Suh consequently argues, "while the Kingdom of God is used in the ideology of the ruler, the millennium is the symbol of the aspiration of the minjung." The idea of the Kingdom of God has become so abstract and non-political that it has actually been used to oppress the poor and the weak whereas the ides of the millennium, which emphasizes this world, is much more closely associated with the original idea of the Messianic Kingdom that the early Church associated with the second coming of Christ. He understands the Kingdom of God as the place the believer enters when he dies, but the Millennium as the point at which history and society are renewed.

Besides, Suh connected the concept of Utopia with the Kingdom of God and claimed that Utopia, the dream of the bourgeoisie, signifies an ideal land which certain elites, who leave their irrational society, establish on an isolated island. On the contrary, the Millennium is the minjung's aspiration, in which the whole society is renewed in history. Therefore, he argued that the messianic Kingdom, as the place Millennium comes, means to be a concrete and real-world where justice and the love of God would be actualized in real-life situations.[30] With the second coming of Christ, the millennium or the Messianic Kingdom will be established on earth.

It is believed that heaven, the Kindom of God, in minjung theology is difficult to be achieved in this world. The world is full of Han, and it is best to sublimate Han to form Dan while we live on this world, and it is believed that this world can be truly reconciled only when Jesus Christ, as the Messiah, will return.

5) The reversal of Traditional Approaches

In minjung theology, the culture of minjung tends to transform the image of Christ (rather than Christ transforming the culture) to meet the needs of the cultural adaptation of Christianity and the structural reform of society to liberate the minjung. The minjung becomes the subject of salvation history and Christ the object of it by identifying himself as the servant of the minjung. Christ came to serve the minjung and identified himself as one of the minjung. This reversal of roles between Christ and the minjung seems to be a key to understanding the basic methodological implication of minjung theology, the cultural transformation of the image of Christ.[31]

[29] The corresponding Korean word for Kingdom of God is 'Heaven'. It is reasonable to think that this is different from the concept of Kingdom of God in modern theology. In the process of translating Korean word 'Heaven' into English, the term Kingdom of God was used, but in minjung theology, the Kingdom of God is closer to the meaning of 'Heaven'.
[30] Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of Minjung," 164-87.
[31] Lee, "Minjung Theology: A Critical Introduction," 18-9.

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This reinterpretation of the image of Christ appears as works of art in various forms in minjung theology. In art forms such as paintings, stories, pansori, and dance, Jesus is expressed as a worker, a labor, a slave, and as one of the oppressed. In this way, the people, as the minjung, identify Jesus with themselves and sublimate their han into dan. Therefore, han is no longer sad, mutual feeling, and self-destruction, but transforms into a 'sad laughter' that enables the people, the minjung, to empower in a world under oppression. In the process of transforming han to dan, the oppressed people have room for reconciliation with a world that seems to be never changed and with the oppressors in the world.

3.2. Understanding of Reconciliation in Minjung theology

From the point of view of minjung theology, true reconciliation is impossible on this world. True reconciliation is possible only on the day when Jesus, the Messiah, comes again, the very day when the millennium comes, and the day when 'new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17)' come to this world. Nevertheless, minjung endlessly strives to gain the strength to live in this world. In the long term, they try to change the social structures that have created oppression, and in the short, they try to find little happiness in their lives through folk culture, the culture of the minjung, even though they are in an oppressed situation. Also, spiritually, the minjung tries to make this world the kingdom of God full of justice and peace, and religiously they try to reconcile and forgive the oppressors.

The suffering which minjung theologians thought existed only in the Bible, linked the oppression and suffering of numerous victims hidden in the splendour of modern economic development in Korea. The sufferings of the Israeli people 'then there' were linked to the sufferings of the minjung 'here and now'. Minjung can understand Christ's suffering through their own suffering, and seeing the resurrection of Christ overcoming suffering and death, they believe that the minjung will also be able to overcome the suffering. Because Jesus is regarded as a symbol of the minjung and minjung is a symbol of Jesus.[32]

From this point of view, the social movement by the minjung, as non-Christian, is regarded as a movement to pursue justice, but it can be said that minjung theology seeks to live together of the people, the oppressed and oppressors, and forgiveness by sublimating han into dan. Of course, as we have seen above, justice can be said to be an important fact for solving han as one of the process of reconciliation in minjung theology, but it is believed that the oppression and han in this world cannot be resolved until the Messiah comes. That is why minjung theology focuses on not only pursuing justice and but also sublimating han.

Conclusion

We looked at how minjung theology was born and what characteristics it has through the previous chapters. Minjung theology is a theology that began in the Korean context, and we have come to know that it has a close relationship with the minjung's 'han'. Minjung theology identifies

[32] Jin Kwan Kwon, Theology of Subjects: Towards a New Minjung Theology (Taiwan, Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia, 2011), 115.

Jesus Christ with the minjung and recognizes the minjung as the subject of liberation, that is, the subject of reconciliation. Therefore, it can be seen that minjung theology was not started and developed by some intellectuals, but was born and is still developing by those who are suffering and oppressed.

Minjung theology passed the flow of the first generation insisting on liberation from hardships and oppression and passed the second wave of concentrating on the protection of human rights and democracy, confronting the evils of dictatorship and capitalism. And the third generation of minjung theology has evolved until now in the form of a peace movement and an environmental movement in conjunction with globalization in the 1990s. In addition to the theme of reconciliation, an important trend of theology, attention is drawn to how minjung theology will develop in the future.

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