

MINJUNG THEOLOGY OF KOREA

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Abstract

The emergence of minjung theology in South Korea and the existential contributing factors are discussed in this article. It is pointed out that minjung theology can be categorised as liberation theology, though not as systematically developed as Latin American Liberation Theology. It is essentially a theology of suffering and hope. Finally, it is a theology done by the people from the very depth of their experience of suffering, as synchronised with the suffering of God.

Minjung theology is a recent theological phenomenon in the Third World. It arose out of the experiences of those ministers and professors who resisted the South Korean dictatorship in the seventies and were taken to prison and tortured. In 1979 they discussed their new concept for the first time before a large audience. This was at a conference of Asian theologians, organised by the Theological Commission of the National Council of Churches in Korea, of which the theme was 'Minjung and the mission of the Church'. The conference reports were soon published and the new ideas became widely known throughout Asia and even in the Western world.

The essence and characteristics of minjung theology might be best illustrated by the experience of Professor Byung-Mu Ahn, who is one of its initiators and leaders. He studied at Heidelberg University and completed his doctor's degree under Professor G Borkham, adopting the historical-critical and form-critical methods of interpretation. For nine years he immersed himself in European theology, and, as he recently mentioned in a report, '...it satisfied me scientifically and intellectually. It intrigued me'. 1) But looking back, he found that in all those years he failed to get involved in the issues of church life, to say nothing of the social reality, of West Germany. Everything was dominated by the logos. Professor Ahn is distressed at the dissociation of theological-academic research from the community, at the strong links to the philosophical features of theology, and at the 'Babylonian imprisonment' of theology in purely kerygmatic theology, which relinquishes its connections with history, operating in the thin air of a solely kerygmatic orientation.

The ministers then experienced imprisonment and learnt to live with people of a different class, whose dull, coarse and even primitive language they did not understand. They were shocked by the death of a 22-year old worker Tae Il Chun, who burnt himself on November 13, 1970, crying out 'We are human beings, we are not machines!' 2) This made them recognise the immense gap between themselves and the people. They became aware of how little they knew of the deep suffering of the people. And they realised that it was a task of the greatest theological relevance to understand this suffering and to explain it. So, first of all, the theologians had to develop a sensitivity to the people's language in order to discover their feelings and thinking. They faced a barrier of alienation through language. In this situation nobody could have contributed more to the hermeneutic clarification of this thinking than the poet

1) Ahn, B M 1987. Das leidende Minjung, Koreanische Herausforderungen an die Europäische Theologie, in EK, 12-16.

2) Moltmann, J (ed) 1984. **Minjung, Theologie des Volkes Gottes in Korea.** 60. cf Ahn, op cit 9.

Chi-Ha Kim, who had taught them that there were means of communication other than those of philosophical and theological discourse, and that there were forms of expression other than the elaborate Western and Chinese languages, namely songs, aphorisms, legends, earthy jokes and popular drama, and especially naive folk stories, all of which expose knowledge - or conceal it.

And in fact, concealing and masking is often the intention of these forms of expression, as the theologians found. They also had to learn to understand the descent into speechlessness, and the nameless, infinite pain which cannot be expressed in any way but tearless, black silence. Layer after layer had to be exposed, and the sediment of centuries of oppression, suffering, hunger, discrimination, and persecution had to be removed in order to uncover the true source of the people's feelings. They found out what the real tragedy of the people was - their inability to express their feelings; and they began to understand how serious the consequences of oppression had been - alienation from the self, alienation leading to an inability to speak. 'A lament can to some extent provide alleviation and liberation from distress; the term "han", however, stands for the torment which cannot be taken away. Although there is a mouth, it does not help; although there are hands to write, they can do nothing. Nor can the thoughts convey clearly to the consciousness where the torment comes from and of what kind it is'. 3) But the theologians also came to understand that 'han' itself provides a chance of survival for the people, since it contains a force which prevents the will to resist from slipping away. In 'han' the people found their 'self', and 'han' strengthened their will for self-assertion. In 'han', the minjung, in spite of its oppression, still keeps the strength of its selfhood.

The minjung theologians set about searching for a culture that was unknown to them. They discovered old tales, and learnt the full glory of the folk plays, and they tried to find out the meanings of the mask dances. Some of them traced their own genealogies. Byung-Mu Ahn recalls: 'My mother originated from the class of Ean Mun,

3) Ahn, B M 1982. Was ist die Minjung-Theologie? JK 6, 291.

whereas my father belonged to Han Mun, which is the class of the Confucian Chinese writing. Although my father used to tell me incessantly Confucius said this and Mengtse said that, I can hardly remember anything. Whereas, I do remember what my mother told me in quite simple words. Mother, who was of the Eun Mun class, instead of citing Confucius or Mengtse, just told me stories, and that was not all; frequently she also sang gentle songs while rocking me on her back to quieten me. The texts of these songs, with their quite simple melodies, are still in my mind, and have left their imprints on me for a long time'. 4)

Japanese theologians have also investigated ways to perceive the suffering heart of the people (Kitamori) and of the individual (Takizawa) and have gone into history (En-do) in order to get an understanding of the whole of the Japanese culture. Similarly, the Korean theologians endeavoured to discover the roots of their culture in the people, and in this way they enriched their theology. 5)

However, comparing the theologies of Japan and Korea, we find quite obvious differences. Although in both societies the academic middle class is involved, the focus in Korea is on the experiences in prisons and efforts to overcome the class differences established by Confucianism ethically and theologically. Kitamori, on the other hand, in its attempt to enrich theology through the Japanese Kabuki theatre, perpetuates the differences between the social classes and associates these differences with man's relation to God.

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- 4) Ahn, B M 1986. Christen und die Sprache des Minjung, in Ders., Draussen vor dem Tor. Kirche und Minjung in Korea. Theologische Beiträge und Reflexionen, TgÖ 20, 85-98.
- 5) Takizawa K 1987. Das Heil im Heute. Texte einer japanischen Theologie. ThÖ 21, 128-180. Cf Takizawa's interpretation of Soseki's novel Kokoro.

Through his experiences, Professor Ahn came to find a new perspective in the New Testament. He discovered that the evangelist Mark depicts Jesus' specific relationship with the people of Galilee; it is a relationship which had not been noticed before, but which is essential to Markan theology, says Ahn. Instead of using the term *laos* from the LXX, Mark, in his summaries, always employs the theologically irrelevant Greek term *óchlos*. *Óchlos* stands for the non-free inhabitants of Galilee, deprived of their rights, and politically oppressed. They are not simply used as an audience for the words of Jesus, or as objects for his teaching, or as unimportant admirers of his miracles, (as form criticism holds), but they are an essential part of the history of Jesus. Ahn has found that Jesus never rebuked or scolded the *óchlos*, whereas the upper classes of Jerusalem received many warnings and reproaches. Jesus stands with the people unconditionally; He accepts them into his community as they are. The people are honoured by Jesus' conviviality. It is the people that are invited to the great feast (Luke 14,15ff), the marginal, the crippled, the sick, and the beggars in the streets and alleys. The minjung theologians refuse to interpret this parable religiously or spiritually; they interpret it as a realistic depiction of the underdogs Jesus associated with in Galilee.

Jesus lived with these people; his identification with them lasted until his death. He died outside Jerusalem, the metropolis, the city of the rich, the place of the upper classes and of the oppressive Roman rulers. In the opposites - Galilee-Jerusalem - the experience of upheaval of the Korean minjung seems to be reflected. The city and the country become the basic symbols for the great antagonistic forces in oppressive systems. So in Jerusalem there cannot be salvation. One has to leave Jerusalem. Jesus died outside the city-walls 6). The words in Hebr 13:13 become the hermeneutic key phrase for Byung-Mu Ahn: "Let us go out beyond the city walls to bear his shame". Within the city walls live the so-called righteous, outside live the *óchlos*. We have a large number of these *óchlos* who have been chased out of the place. They are similar to the scapegoat that carried the people's sins on his back, and has been chased into

6) Cf Ahn, 1986.

the wild land, where death waits for him. Exactly this happens to many young people who don't find a place to learn and to work, and who therefore hang about in the streets. For these people this confession in the letter to the Hebrews is an infinite comfort, since here they can identify themselves with Jesus'. 7)

The close connection between the interpretation of the text on the one hand, and of their own situation on the other, is typical of Biblical interpretation in minjung theology. But before asking what effect this has for the interpretation of reality, we should first try to understand the new image of Jesus. The minjung theology belongs to the Third World liberation theologies. Although it has much in common with Latin American theology, there is one important difference: the *óchlos* is not considered as a class in a Marxist sense. The term includes people of all classes, and they may be 'slaves, homeless wanderers, beggars, or foreign mercenaries' 8); they may also be exploiters, and they may not have a position at all, for instance, they may be tax collectors who have an unjust occupation and work for the exploiters, but are also deprived of their religious rights. Jesus empathises with them, but He calls them from their self-centred life to the road of liberation. It is an invitation, since Jesus does not make any conditions.

The history of liberation begins with an exodus. The point of departure is the path leading to the cross, leading to death. As the people had experienced death for centuries, without hope, without light, without future, so Jesus died on the cross, with the cry of being deserted by God on his lips (Mk 15:34-37). Jesus' suffering and death are, in the eyes of Mark and the minjung theologians, not simply representative historical events **for** other people, but Jesus shared in the people's fate, unreligiously and unpretentiously. His death does not symbolise anything, nor does it stand for reconciliation. He did not die **for** the people, He died **with** them, and He died as they

7) Cf Ahn, 1986, 33

8) Ahn, quoted in Sundermeier, T 1985. *Das Kreuz als Befreiung*. 17ff, 27.

die. A vicarious death would separate him from the minjung 9). The line between Jesus' death and that of the minjung becomes blurred. Jesus' death is not an individual's death, but that of the suffering people. His death is understood as a collective death, like that of the Lord's servant in the Old Testament. His suffering reflects the people's suffering, and in the people's suffering, and in the people's suffering that of God's Son is present. 'This forlornness, this hopelessness, this dying in loneliness was no hero-like death. He was neither hero nor messiah, just helpless and defenseless. Although He had a mouth, He could not speak powerful words; although He had feet, He could not flee. One thing is sure: through the suffering minjung we met the suffering Christ.'

Although Jesus' death was unreligious in a religious context, and although, as in the history of the minjung, there were no miracles, but only the feeling of the absence of God, his death is not pointless. One must not seek sense, or God, outside that death. God was crucified. Jesus' death grants the cognition of God. 'This God is the powerless and suffering God, who was nailed to the cross' - reads the confession of the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea 10). Jesus' death shows how God acts. God acts as a loser, but while losing, He overcomes violence. In a sense He 'cuts' it. Here again the experience of the imprisoned resistance member helps them to gain an understanding. The ministers were full of hatred for the regime: thoughts of revenge gnawed at their hearts, until they became aware that Jesus did not submit to hatred and this 'cut' (Korean 'dan') the vicious circle of hatred and violence 11). His death, so to

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- 9) 'Ich will ganz bewusst den Gedanken, dass Jesus für Minjung da ist, beseitigen. Er ist mit Minjung. Man darf Minjung und Jesus nicht in das Objekt-Subjekt-Schema einrahmen'. Ahn, B M, 1982. Was ist die Minjung-Theologie? JK 6, 292.
- 10) Quoted in Moltmann, J (ed) 1984. **Minjung, Theologie des Volkes Gottes in Korea**. 108.
- 11) It is Chi-Ha Kim who draws the attention to these correlating twins. (Han-dan).

speak, swallowed the violence and injustice, says Ahn, taking his reference from Paul and Luther 12). But not the grave, nor death, nor Jerusalem was to keep him: they had to 'spew him out'. In the message of the risen Lord the disciples are referred to Galilee, that is, to the oppressed, to the minjung.

Let us summarise: in minjung theology, the close relation between Jesus and the people is the basis for 'doing theology'. This means in the first place going back in history. But the event around Jesus cannot be reduced to a single historic event; it has become the hermeneutic key to an understanding of the present. As the people of Galilee became active and strong through the presence of Jesus and his suffering became subject of their history, the sense of which is revealed in Jesus' suffering and death, so one can and must understand the recent history of the minjung in Jesus' suffering and death as well. The time between then and now becomes irrelevant, it is a 'pneumatological-synchronic' interpretation: the life of Jesus is a present event. In the diachronic interpretation 'Jesus of Nazareth is the Redeemer "for me" and "in place of me" , whereas in the synchronic interpretation "I" live the life of Jesus, and his life is embodied in "my" life' 13). More important than this individual identification, which is also possible within a mystical theology, is the identification of the salvation event with the event in the minjung itself as a collectivity, or with the event in the life of individuals who represent the minjung.

Events in minjung history are not confined to fixed limits, they reach far beyond. They are secular and unsecular. They happen as if there were no God, and yet they harbour salvation. The events transcend themselves. This had not been noticed in history, and it was deliberately suppressed by the ruling class. The ruling class wants to reduce the minjung to passive objects of history. Theology has to learn how the people always used to be active in forming their

12) Cf Ahn, 1986: 169.

13) N.-D Suh, in Moltmann, *Minjung* 207.

history, and that they are the true 'subjects' or movers in history, that through this, God is involved.

This experience of transcendence is not confined to a special event or to what looks obviously religious. It is present in every-day experiences. To conceive this, one has to descend to the darkness of mankind, with the *minjung*. One has to know 'han', the nameless, voiceless suffering, but also the expressiveness, as it is unveiled in the mask dance, in the popular plays, in traditional songs, and in art. The *minjung* theologians are very much devoted and open to all this, although not in the interests of the proclamation or interpretation of the Gospel as a hermeneutic help. Instead, they follow the Gospel's movement itself: the starting point is the incarnation, the **event**, as Byung-Mu Ahn says - in contrast to the John-related occidental interpretation of the term 'logos'. They look for the 'basis of the revelation' 14), and attempt to understand it. The Biblical key events which help to identify the present *minjung* movement as 'the partners of the covenant with God' and as 'agents of the restoration of God's justice in history', are the exodus and the crucifixion 15) or, anthropologically, experiences of distress and hope. What happens today in the *minjung* is understood as 'reactualisation or reincarnation of paradigms or archetypes, or both' 16). One has to trace them. This tracing, however, is no mere academic-theoretical enterprise. One has to participate in the world of the *minjung* and, as Young-Hak Hyun says, 'to overcome the dichotomy between metaphysical and physical categories, so that you "feel" theology in your body and dance with it, before you think it.' 17)

Let me summarise the basic points.

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- 14) N.-D Suh, quoted in Ahn, 1987. Herausforderungen, 13.
 - 15) N.-D Suh, in: Moltmann, *Minjung*, 175 f.
 - 16) Cf Ahn, 1987.
 - 17) Suh, in: Moltmann, *Minjung*, 59.

1. Actually, there is no equivalent translation for the term 'minjung'. It suggests the common people in contrast to the ruling class, people who live a wretched life under oppression.

Minjung should not be identified with 'Volk' in the German or Afrikaans sense, a term originating in the Romantic Era; even less justified is the translation 'people of God', as suggested by J Moltmann in his book on minjung theology, since this implies a differentiation and specification which is contrary to the actual intention of the source term; it does not stand for a class either.

2. The minjung theology is a liberation theology similar to those of Latin America and South Africa. They all find their archetypical, Biblical model in the exodus. However, the exodus motif is not simply a model of hope which overcomes the Cross, but the Cross itself helps interpret the exodus: the exodus from Jerusalem through the city-gates, and the suffering on the fringes of society until the eventual crucifixion.

3. The minjung theology aims at participation. It does not presuppose a social analysis as does the liberation theology of Latin America.

4. Scarcely conceivable in occidental thinking, minjung theology integrates the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. It is diachronic in that the Koreans want to reflect upon the history of their people and understand the history of the church with the aim of integration, and not separation. The history of the hundred-year-old Korean church is a history of resistance and martyrdom.

It was a resistance against an Asian colonialist power (Japan) while battling for a democratic system, and it has now once more resisted a dictatorship which is bolstered by that political power that has gained the most influence in the Christian area - the United States of America. This resistance also reflects the attempt to conceive the history of Korea as analogous. The history of Christianity and that of the nation belong together. God's work did not begin as late as the

arrival of the missionaries. God's history of salvation is not limited to that of the First World.

Minjung theology is also radically synchronic in that it rediscovers the events of the time of Jesus of Nazareth in the minjung today. Unlike the rationalistic view, and similar to the ideas of the basic church communities in Latin America, the notion of an 'ugly gap' of history (Lessing), which separates the present from the past, does not exist. The historical truths in the Bible are not accidental, but speak for themselves, since they are experienced in the present. They make identification possible, since they have become alive in one's own experience. They are not accidental, but they are symbolic and archetypal, and are thus dissociated from history. This is not meant in a mystical sense, but pneumatologically, and it is based on the deep faith that God is active simultaneously in all events, and thus here, that is, with the minjung, it sets history free. (See Suh Nam-Dong, in: *Minjung*, 207, and Kim Yong-Bock, in 217.)

Synchronic and diachronic thinking are integrated in the experience of suffering, which does not induce passivity in the people, but, through the spirit, graciously endows them with strength, activity and autonomy, and through rebirth, they become 'co-workers' and 'partners in God's history of salvation' (Suh-Nam-Dong, *Minjung* 1985 [207]).

5. Liberation theology does not have such clear-cut ideas about the future as is sometimes suggested. Minjung theology does not offer an utopian vision of social justice: it does not develop a plan to apply in theology, since the idea of the Exodus as leading to suffering is at the centre. Instead, liberation theology has the key notion of the Millennium. It is the 'reverse side of the belief in resurrection' and goes beyond 'social and political revolution' (Suh-Nam-Dong). It does not symbolise the ultimate (the Kingdom of God), but the earthly and 'semi-ultimate' (Minjung 1985). Here the historical hope of the minjung crystallizes.

All over the world the oppressed people tend to refer to the apocalyptic words in the Bible, which themselves were articulated

in times of oppression. The strict adherence to the idea of the Millennium is the Korean characteristic of minjung theology.

6. The origin of minjung theology is Korean, and its representatives - resisters who experienced suffering in community with others - have discovered dimensions of feeling, expression and imagination among the common people and thus have been able to inspire theology. The terms **han** and **dan**, but also **zhong** (= patience, see Soon-Ja Goo) open doors of communication with the people, offering new means of identification unparalleled in other Third World theologies. It is not the hermeneutic attempt to bridge the communication gap artificially in a type of translation. It is the standing with the people which reveals both the nature of the Korean people and the depths of Biblical anthropology. This is what makes minjung theology contextual theology. Although it does not claim universality, it wants to be an active participant in theological dialogues. It might become a model for others.