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The hermeneutical concepts of Minjung theology in historical perspective¹

ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain the hermeneutical concepts of minjung theology as a genuine Korean form of liberation theology in historical perspective: the concept of minjung as the oppressed masses; the Missio Dei as a missiological paradigm of minjung theology that understands redemption as covering all aspects of human life; event such as the Jesus event which has continuously happened as minjung's socio-economic-political events in history, and the doctrine of the minjung messiah as an acting subject in history. It can be stated that the gospel is contextualised in an encounter with the socio-political injustice and the religious-cultural spirituality within the specific national context during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and the 1980s.

1. INTRODUCTION

Minjung theology was born from the experiences of Korean Christians within the specific national context during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and the 1980s. The political oppression and economic exploitation of that time were viewed as a deep social crisis. Minjung theology is a theological innovation deriving from a dialogue with the so-called Minjung movement, the opposition movement against the military dictatorship. The



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Minjung movement aimed at reformulating national identity in times of an overall social crisis.

In fact, the Korean economic miracle under the dictatorship was based on high profits from exports coupled with extreme low wages. The distinct economic growth gradually produced the exploitation of urban workers that was mainly generated by the rapid urbanisation. The wages level could only be kept low by the use of immense political pressure such as the prohibition of free trade unions, the refusal of workers' rights, and governmental price pressure on agriculture, causing disastrous consequences for the rural population. In this situation, some progressive and socially engaged theologians and ministers participated directly in the democracy movement. Because of their political engagement and uncompromising attitude, they were not only rejected by the institutionalised churches, but also brutally oppressed by the ruling government.

This contextual background reveals how Korean minjung theology forms its theological framework in the relationship between the context and Christian theology. In this article, I want to explain the hermeneutical concepts of Minjung Theology in historical perspective. I will discuss four important aspects of Minjung Theology: The concept of Minjung; the *Missio Dei* as a missiological paradigm of Minjung Theology; event as the key to the hermeneutical approach of Minjung Theology, and the doctrine of the Minjung messiah as Minjung's specific understanding of the Messiah.

2. THE CONCEPT OF MINJUNG

Nowadays, the Sino-Korean word "Minjung" means the suffering population that is politically oppressed, socially despised, and alienated from culture and religion. Minjung is a combination of two Chinese terms: "min" and "jung". "Min" may be translated as "people" and "jung" as the "public". Minjung theologians regularly speak of a historic and political identity of the Korean Minjung, meaning a collective "socio-political biography" of the Minjung. They believe that this identity cannot be fixed conceptually, but that it can only be unfolded narratively. The suffering of the Minjung is experienced not individually, but collectively. Regarding the definition of Minjung, the linguistic-philosophical attitude of these theologians must be considered. They avoid translating the word into other languages and believe that traditional theological perspectives do not appropriately grasp Minjung. Even the established types of Liberation Theology are considered inappropriate for the understanding of Minjung. Instead, they try to preserve the originally popular meaning of Minjung (Kröger 1992:20-21). Reflecting on the historical and cultural situation of Korea is considered to be a key to understanding this word. Minjung theologians

dispense with any precise definition of Minjung, because an objective, generally binding scientific definition would not meet the particularity of the concept, and would thus be a dead concept, not a living one (Ahn 1983:27). To make Minjung an object of scientific interest would contradict the self-conception of Minjung as an active subject. Nevertheless, an explanation of the word “Minjung” is not categorically refused.

The life of Minjung is characterised by suffering and “Han” (Chinese character: 恨). “Han” literally means “a heart that has stopped”. To make this word understandable, it is mostly translated as “rumbling grief”. In the article “Towards a Theology of *Han*”, Suh Nam-dong, one of the core founders of Minjung Theology, defines *Han* as an accumulation of suppressed and condensed experiences of oppression. Thus, the accumulated *Han* is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people (Suh 1983:64). In this context, redemption is given a new meaning, because redemption is realised through the liberation of the Minjung, who suffer from political and economic oppression or cultural alienation (Suh 1983:43). Christ is thought to be present in the suffering. Minjung theologians claim that they do not idealise Minjung morally or otherwise; they simply emphasise the presence of Christ through Minjung as the oppressed masses (Ahn 1988:85).

The definition of “Minjung” can be found in both the biblical tradition and the current situation of the Korean society. In the New Testament, two words that come close to the meaning of Minjung are λαός (*laos*) and ὄχλος (*ochlos*). The word λαός can be translated as “people”. The λαός is formed by all citizens who are entitled to protection and rights within their social or religious group. The concept of ὄχλος can also be translated as “people”, yet it is different from λαός. ὄχλος means the “marginalized people” who actually belong to the *laos*, but cannot exercise their rights. The ὄχλος are the outcasts of the λαός as the suffering people. Jesus is not an isolated person who dissociates himself from the events around him. On the contrary, Jesus stands in the middle of the Minjung.

It should be borne in mind that the concept of Minjung played a vital role in Korea’s democratic movement during the period of military dictatorship. Yet the concept of Minjung as an oppressed class from the Marxist perspective must be reinterpreted in present times, because the middle class is the key player of the social movement nowadays. The end of the so-called “really existing socialism” requires the concept of social class to be modified. That is why some young Minjung theologians are seeking a re-classification of the middle class.

In this regard, it is very helpful to consider the current definition of Minjung. The second generation Minjung theologian Kwon Jin-Kwan (2009:34) claims that

[t]he concept of Minjung needs not to be limited to class of the poor. Minjung is an expression for all the different groups, that are excluded from the ruling order. When they participate in the history of liberation.

This re-definition means the end of the classic concept of class, but it allows for widening the concept of Minjung in a changed social situation. There are several aspects of social discrimination. Even nowadays, there is a large number of underprivileged people, despite modern representative democracy.

3. THE *MISSIO DEI* AS AN IMPORTANT PARADIGM OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

In considering the concept of *Missio Dei* beyond the church, this concept means that the triune God himself is the subject of all missionary activities. The term "*Missio Dei*" was first used in 1952 at the World Mission Conference in Villigen. Since then, *Missio Dei* is the mission theology of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC is the result of the merger of the International Mission Community (IMC) with the third WCC Assembly, which took place in New-Delhi in 1961. During this development phase, the concept of *Missio Dei* was eagerly discussed and theologically reworked. The concept attracted much attention in the church and was received partly with sympathy, and partly with criticism. Conservative and fundamentalist theologians and churches heavily criticised the concept, due to its new understanding of mission in terms of humanisation and a new notion of humanity. The problem escalated at the WCC Assembly in Uppsala (1968) and Bangkok (1973). Since then, many Christians and theologians have endeavoured to overcome the polarisation regarding the understanding of the *Missio Dei*. There can be no doubt that these endeavours had a great effect on the new mission-theological thinking and practice, especially on the churches' ecumenical cooperation. Nevertheless, the tensions have not disappeared completely. The following statements can be regarded as fundamental for the *Missio Dei*. This theological concept served as a theological justification for the Christians' mission and as the motivation for Christians' responsibility for the world.

- Mission is not the church's or man's mission, but God's mission. The church is simply a means of the *Missio Dei*, which is planned and developed by the triune God himself.
- God works not only inside, but also outside the church. The *Missio Dei* aims at the universal saving activity in the world.

- The place of the *Missio Dei* is not transcendent, but of this world. The Korean church's most urgent task is the re-interpretation of the *Missio Dei*.
- The realisation of the *Missio Dei*, which aims at a humanisation of society, can be successful only when it is led by God alone, and when people and the churches obey God's leadership.

Suh Nam-Dong points out:

It is the Minjung Theology's task to recognize God's intervention in history, that is the work of the Holy Spirit and the exodus event, in today's Minjung movements, to interpret it theologically and to get involved in it (Kwon 2009:271).

During this process, Minjung theology emphasises secularisation and the work of the Holy Spirit. For Minjung theologians, the Spirit is a "dynamic force for the realization of Minjung consciousness" (Kim 1982:134). In the activity of the *Missio Dei*, there is a confluence of the Minjung tradition in Christianity and the Korean Minjung tradition (Suh 1983:178). In contrast to the traditional concept of mission, which emphasises the individual dimension of redemption, the *Missio Dei* understands redemption as covering all aspects of human life. It is characterised by active participation in politics, society, ecumenism, and human rights movement.

Therefore, mission is not the service of the church, but conversely mission makes use of the church to fulfil its task. For those churches that were already involved in missionary work among the poor, peasants and workers, the idea of *Missio Dei* meant a great impulse and a new widening of the concept of mission. For the other churches, particularly Evangelicals and Conservatives, it meant a great threat to church identity, because Minjung theology as a contextualised theology focuses on the actual struggles of the life of the Korean Minjung. Nevertheless, the concept of *Missio Dei* as an important missiological paradigm of Minjung theology influenced the Korean missionary movement in so far as it made them rediscover Christian social responsibility.

4. EVENT AS A SPECIFIC HERMENEUTICAL CONCEPT OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

Event – that is the in-breaking of the vertical word of God in the horizontal history (Ahn 1986:25) – is the key term of Minjung theology's hermeneutics. Due to this hermeneutical method, Minjung theology considers the Jesus event not as an isolated event in the past, but as a constant presence. Thus, Minjung theology attempts to understand Jesus and Minjung as belonging together, and to experience Christ's presence in the Minjung movement.

Minjung theology takes the Minjung's socio-economic-political events in the Bible, church history, and Korean history as its theological references. Therefore, Minjung Theology is called an "Event Theology" (Ahn 1987:28). The Minjung theologians' task is to discover the historical Jesus here and now as the event of Jesus in the context of Minjung movements: the suffering of Minjung is interpreted as God's revelation as the Jesus event (Ahn 1984:167). This definition means that events are primary and fundamental, whereas theological reflection is secondary. The following crucial points, which are generally regarded as Minjung theology's paradigms, should be considered (Suh 1984:176), namely the events of the exodus and the crucifixion of Jesus, and church history, which takes up the Minjung tradition of resistance in Korean history.

The Old Testament exodus event must be considered a political event against the socio-economic background of the concrete liberation from slavery. The Israelites, who were forced to work in giant building projects and agriculture as slaves and serfs, rebelled against the ruling system of oppression in Egypt under Moses' leadership. This political event is considered as the core of the exodus narration. Just as the archetype of God's intervention in history was a political event against a socio-economic background, God's present intervention in history has to take place against the socio-economic background. Together with the crucifixion of Jesus in the New Testament, this exodus event is crucial for the Minjung's salvation. The whole testimony of the Bible can be illuminated and understood in light of these two events.

Analogous to the exodus event in the Old Testament, the crucifixion of Jesus in the New Testament is the most important paradigm for Minjung theology. Yet there are certain differences and contrasts between these two events. Moses was a liberation hero as a leader of Minjung, whereas Jesus was the Minjung's companion of the liberation. Jesus was the personification of the Minjung and the symbol for the Minjung. The Independence Movement against Japanese colonialism (1 March 1919) or the liberation (15 August 1945), as national salvation events worked by God, could be understood as an exodus event in the sense of the Old Testament exodus event.

According to Ahn, theological statements have become an end in itself in western theology. It lacks a sense of reality. By contrast, Minjung theology strives to find biblical answers to the questions raised through events and history (Ahn 1987:28-29). One can say that Minjung theology is no longer determined by ideas, but by historical experiences and deeds. Therefore, the Jesus event of 2000 years ago was not a single event; it repeats itself in the course of history through collective events of the Minjung, which suffers from political and economic ideology and is killed, but also resurrected. Minjung theology is not a theology "from above" but "from below"; it is not a deductive or

systematic theology, but an inductive "Theology of Event" (Scharf 1984:234). Ahn (1987:25-26) explains event as follows:

I would like to see Jesus as the event of Minjung, a collective event. The event of Jesus was not a complete, once and for all event two thousand years ago. It happens again and again not only in the church, but in history.

Ahn mentions the following words of Jesus as an example: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for sabbath." (Mk 2:27). According to Ahn, western theologians, especially Form critics, consider only Jesus' speech to be important, but not the event. Western theologians believe that Jesus' speech is primary, and the explanation of the context secondary. The explanation of the context is thought to have been added in the process of the tradition of Jesus' word.

Ahn strictly rejects such a western theological view. Instead, he mentions:

I consider the event of the hungry disciples picking some heads of grain illegally on Sabbath (Mark 2,23f) to have been prior to Jesus' word. I am calling more attention to the Minjung's reality than to Jesus' speech ... From the perspective of the existing law, the pharisees condemned the Minjung as lawbreakers, which had to pick some heads of grain due to the want of hunger on the Sabbath. Jesus was on the hungry Minjung's side. In this perspective, the meaning of Jesus' speech becomes clearer (Ahn 1987:30-31).

At the same time, he calls attention to the fact that the biblical text's living conditions have been disregarded (Ahn 1982:292). It should be noted that some Westerners develop the theology of the Word based on the view that in the beginning was the Word, but this is Greek thinking. As far as the Bible goes, in the beginning was the event (Ahn 2019:218).

In this regard, it should be noted that Suh Nam-Dong differentiates between scripture and narrative in order to underline the Minjung speech's characteristic. While scripture must be regarded as an abstract and analytical speech of reason, "narrative" as an everyday life's form of expression conveys facts and events directly, concretely, and quasi bodily (Suh 1983:303). Suh (1983:303) argues that scripture is rulers' speech, oppressing speech, whereas "narrative" is Minjung's speech as liberating speech.

5. THE DOCTRINE OF THE MINJUNG MESSIAH AS THE MINJUNG'S SPECIFIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE MESSIAH

According to Minjung theology, Jesus and Minjung cannot be separated from one another. Jesus himself lived like and with the Minjung. Jesus is present in the suffering Minjung as the liberator. For Suh, the suffering Minjung – as the suffering Messiah – sets up a new era, in which a just society is established. Therefore, Christ's resurrection is understood as the Minjung's uprising or liberation practice. There are no spectators, only participants in the inseparable relation between Jesus and Minjung. Therefore, Jesus must not become an object (for example, in adoration). This seemingly paradoxical attitude is designated as the "power of self-transcendence" as the "Minjung's messiahship" (Kim 1984:109-123). This theological definition means that the Minjung itself is the carrier of redemption or liberation. This Minjung theological view is made possible by regarding Jesus not as an individual person, but as a collective designation. Ahn (1987:99) points out that Jesus' death on the cross does not designate an individual's dying, but the oppressed Minjung's dying. Minjung theologians spot Minjung in the Jesus event and conversely Jesus in the Minjung event. They try to discover and experience Jesus' presence in the actual Minjung events. For that reason, Ahn strictly rejects the "subject-object scheme". Ahn (1984:163) claims:

The western theologians constantly tried to consider him as an individual. But that is objectively unjustified. In fact, it is just an attempt to identify him with Jesus as an individual. Jahwe's object of salvation was Israel as a collective community. At the same time, Jahwe is subject not vis-a-vis to individuals, but to a collective.

That is why it identifies Jesus Christ primarily with a political liberator, and interprets the crucifixion of Jesus as analogous to the suffering Minjung's oppression under the military dictatorship. It must be viewed as a sociopolitical hermeneutic of the Gospel, characterised as a socio-theological biography of the suffering people. Minjung theology demonstrates how Christian churches articulate their theological notions in such a way as to stop the sin that pervades society, but seemingly ignore the personal and religious sin that pervades in every individual.

Syntactically and due to the present hermeneutic research results, Jesus surely is the Gospels' central figure and also the subject *vis-à-vis* the Minjung as an object. There is, however, neither a subject nor an object from the perspective of Minjung theology. Minjung theologians developed the so-called "Minjung doctrine of the Messiah", according to which the Minjung owns the messiahship or is the Messiah. Suh (1983:181) claims:

Participating in the Minjung's suffering is the way to becoming human and redemption. The suffering Minjung is the Messiah and the carrier of a new era.

Similarly, Ahn (1987:96) argues:

The spiral of revenge will start to cease, when the Minjung remembers, that it is suffering for the world and the final kingdom of God as the reign of God will come about. In this sense, the suffering Minjung is the Messiah.

However, the emphasis on the Minjung's independence must not lead to the fallacy that Minjung does not need Jesus. The opposite is true. Through Jesus, in whom Minjung lives, Minjung can develop the courage and strength to fight actively against oppression. In this sense, the Minjung is considered not as an object of theological research, but as an acting subject in history.

6. CONCLUSION

South Korea evolved into a modern industrial state under the military dictatorship in the 1970s, during which time theological reflections on current issues were made, with a particular focus on the economic suffering of the workers. But this rapid economic growth was purchased by means of massive political oppression as well as economic exploitation. They had to work under desperate conditions, live in extreme poverty, and express their discontent about the situation in protest movements. These protest movements were basically the poor people's struggle for sheer material survival (Hyun 1990:446).

As noted earlier, Minjung theology, a Korean contextual theology as a genuine Korean form of Liberation theology (Cho 2018: 240)² first arose in the 1970s, when Korea was undergoing rapid industrialisation under Park Chung Hee's military dictatorship (1961-1979). Minjung theology thus served as a rallying force against the economic exploitation of Korean workers. It attempted to explain the Minjung's suffering from a theological perspective, and to re-

2 Despite being the first native concept of Korean theology, it features a deliberate reception of western theology based on Joachim of Fiore's and Thomas Muntzer's impact on Minjung theology. They both offered important impulses. While Joachim of Fiore was relevant for pneumatology, Muntzer's sociopolitical thoughts served to emphasise the sovereignty of the Minjung. In the context of the Minjung theological understanding of history, Joachim von Fiore and Thomas Muntzer gained a relevant response and became a source of inspiration insofar as Minjung theology considers the Minjung as the most important subject from a pneumatological perspective and emphasises the people as the subject of history. The innovative reception by Joachim von Fiore and Thomas Muntzer as the most important hermeneutic category aims to establish the desirable continuity between Western church history and Minjung theology within the contemporary Korean context.

read the Bible from the perspective of Minjung. Minjung theology in the 1980s shifted its focus to political issues as Democratization Movement against Chun Doo-Hwan's military dictatorship under a succession of authoritarian regimes (1980-1988). Minjung theology has its strongest supporters in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, the most ecumenically oriented among the diverse Presbyterian denominations.

It can be stated that Minjung theology became closely associated with both the labour movement and the democratisation movement of the 1970s and the 1980s. In this situation, the political, economic, and social liberation is viewed as the main message of the Bible in soteriological perspective. The gospel is contextualised in an encounter with socio-political injustice and religious-cultural spirituality.

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