University of
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St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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First published: 23 March 2023

https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MinjungTheology

Citation

Kim, Andrew Eungi and Jongman Kim. 2023. 'Minjung Theology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MinjungTheology Accessed: 13 November 2025

Copyright information

This article is an adaptation of the following paper, originally published in Korean: Kim, Jongman. 2022. ‘A Study on Two Masters of Korean Minjung Theology: Focused on Ahn Byung-mu and Suh Nam-dong’, *Sinjonggyoyeongu (The Journal of the Korean Academy of New Religions)* 46: 117–151.

ISSN 2753-3492

Minjung Theology

Andrew Eungi Kim and Jongman Kim

This article explores Christian liberation theology in the Korean context, namely minjungsinhak, literally meaning 'people's theology', discussing its history, characteristics, recent developments, and implications. This article shows how the new theology arose as a theological tradition in the 1970s, committed to the promotion of justice and the stoppage of economic exploitation and political oppression. Korea at the time was undergoing rapid industrialization at the expense of the working poor, while a de facto dictatorial regime harshly suppressed not only political opposition but also any type of labour or student activism. It will be argued that the ideas of minjung – literally meaning 'the people' – and han – often translated as sorrow, resentment, bitterness, grief, or regret – are central to Korean liberation theology. Han expresses both personal sorrow and 'shared suffering' of Koreans throughout history, for example through continual foreign invasions and occupations, including the exceptionally atrocious Japanese occupation (1910–1945). This article also examines how minjung theology in due time focused on the issue of reunification with North Korea and how it inspired many religiously-motivated social movements that are collectively serving as a major force in struggles for various causes in Korea, including those for human rights, the environment, and gender equality. Lastly, this article reflects on the role of religion in light of minjung theology, arguing that religion can be, and should be, a force of reform and change in society, hence the increasing relevance of the concept of 'ecclesiastical social responsibility' (Kim 2018: 12) in contemporary settings.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Practical theology, Minjung (the people), Han, Democracy, Marginalization, Human rights, Gender equality, Ecclesiastical social responsibility

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1 Introduction

Minjung theology (Minjungsinhak in Korean), literally meaning 'the people's theology', arose in South Korea (henceforth Korea) in the 1970s. The emergence of the theology was prompted by the consciousness of both the historical and contemporary suffering of the Korean people. Historically, Koreans had suffered from repeated foreign invasions and occupations, the most atrocious of which was committed during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), during which Koreans suffered from forced labour, discrimination, sexual slavery, and cultural genocide. The suffering of the masses continued in the period immediately following the country's liberation in 1945, owing to political instability caused by the division of the country and to widespread poverty caused by economic underdevelopment. The country began to undergo significant socioeconomic changes beginning in the early 1960s as it launched an industrialization drive, which was accompanied by a rapid urbanization. During this period of rapid economic growth, Korean workers received low wages and were subjected to poor working conditions. Any attempt to fight for labourers' rights was met with harsh punishment, as the authoritarian regime sought to keep the masses under tight control. Additionally, the benefits of economic growth were concentrated in the economic elite, while workers, farmers, and the urban poor were excluded from the distribution process. These social contradictions turned into tensions and conflicts, resulting in student and labour movements calling for social fairness and justice. Rapid urbanization also meant that many Koreans could not have access to secure, affordable housing, as they were forced out of economic necessity to relocate to already overcrowded cities.

It was in this socioeconomic and political context that proponents of minjung theology began to reflect on the role of Christianity, criticizing how the latter focused only on personal spirituality while neglecting its social responsibility and not paying enough attention to the suffering of minjung. In full agreement with liberation theology in Latin America, minjung theology called for reinterpretation of the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized. As with other forms of liberation theology, minjung theology is committed to helping the powerless to achieve liberation and empowerment. As the movement evolved, minjung theology became concerned with other issues, including democracy, the reunification of North and South Korea, gender inequality, environment, and human rights issues relating to migrant workers and migrant brides. Minjung theology has also inspired various religiously-motivated NGOs, including some Buddhist organizations, all of which have been launched to fight for justice in Korea.

This article mainly consists of five parts. The first part examines the historical background in which Korean minjung theology arose. The second part examines the unique characteristics of minjung theology, followed by a discussion of the notions of minjung and

han. The next part focuses on the theology of Nam-Dong Suh and Byung-Mu Ahn, both of whom have exerted great influences on the first generation of minjung theologians. The article concludes by examining recent developments in minjung theology, including Korean feminist theology.

2 The rise of minjung theology: the beginning

The rise of minjung theology was shaped by the historical background of Korea in the 1970s. Key political events of the 1960s provided an ample opportunity for Korean minjung theology to eventually emerge, including the April 19 Revolution of 1960; the military coup of 1961; a de facto military dictatorship from 1961 to 1963; and the 1965 Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty, a treaty which reinstituted diplomatic and consular relations between the two countries, which had been absent since the former's liberation from Japan in 1945. In 1962, the Korean National Council of Churches (KNCC) issued a statement urging the military government to transfer the power to civilians. In July 1965, 240 Christian leaders issued a declaration against the unjustness of the dictatorial regime and the inappropriateness of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, as the latter refused to apologize for all the atrocities it committed during its rule in Korea, particularly forced labour and sexual slavery. The declaration announced that '[w]e Christians resist all forms of dictatorship, injustice, and corruption. We reject slavery to, or subservience to, foreign powers that are impure in all aspects of economy, culture, morals, and politics' (Joo 1982: 233–234).

The emergence of minjung theology also coincides with the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization. The export-led industrialization, which relied heavily on the price competitiveness of Korean goods in the international market at the time, kept workers' wages very low, while subjecting them to long hours of work (a seventy hour work week was not uncommon, typically with no overtime pay). Even when the country began to reap the early success of industrialization, the gap between the rich and the poor did not improve significantly, as a large majority of Koreans were still living under poverty. The authoritarian government banned all types of demonstration and activism, imposing harsh punishment against anyone violating the law. It was during this time of repression that minjung theology arose as a new theological way of thinking that reinterpreted the Bible from the perspective of the poor (the masses) and that was committed to the promotion of justice, especially in stopping the exploitation of labourers (Kim 2018: 6; see Lee 1988; Suh 1991; Kwon and Küster 2018). For example, minjung theology provided a theological justification for a notable expansion of the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) movement (Lee 2001: 41). Those who became involved with UIM worked at factories themselves alongside the workers and many leaders of UIM comprised of pastors and preachers who were 'inspired by the theology of "solidarity in suffering," as they shared, and reflected on, the "suffering experience" of those oppressed' (Kim 2018: 6). UIM not only provided

fellowship and spiritual guidance to workers but also joined them in their struggle against labour rights. In this way, minjung theology in the 1970s 'redefined the role of Christianity in Korea by articulating and sympathizing with the economic and social sufferings of the underprivileged and by championing their rights for better treatment' (Kim 2018: 6).

Minjung theology underwent three main periods of development: (1) a developmental phase in the 1970s, during which minjung theology began to take shape as a distinct theological movement, albeit largely focused on the exploitation of labourers; (2) a second phase in the 1980s, when its focus shifted to more political issues, namely the democratization movement; and (3) a third, 'mature' phase in the 1990s, when minjung theology became concerned with other, global issues, including human rights, gender equality, and peace (Lee 2001: 44; cited by Kim 2018: 5–6). Furthermore, minjung theology can be said to have three starting points, according to Ahn, Suh, Han, and Chae. The first starting point is its resistance against the fundamentalism of Korean Christianity, particularly as found in Protestantism in Korea; the second is a resistance against dictatorship; and the third is an attempt to 'bring together' both Korean and Christian traditions, facilitating a 'cultural indigenization' or 'Koreanization' of Christianity (Ahn et al. 1993: 9–19; cited by Kim 2018: 6).

The first generation of leading minjung theologians include Byung-Mu Ahn, Nam-Dong Suh, Young-hak Hyun, Dong-hwan Moon, Wan-sang Han, Yong-bok Kim, and David Kwang-sun Suh, all of whom were active during the democratization movement of the 1970s (Kim and Lee 2001; Park 2012: 129; Kim 2011: 131). Among them, two central figures in minjung theology are Nam-Dong Suh and Byung-Mu Ahn, whose ideas will be examined in greater detail in sections 5.1 and 5.2.

3 Characteristics of minjung theology

From its inception, minjung theology understood the underlying problem of Korean society to be the 'structural evil' in which the oppression of the masses is innate, with the greed generated by capitalism being the most immoral. Minjung theology, emerging from the specific historical context of Korea, shows a profound empathy for the suffering of the underprivileged in society. Such empathy for the suffering of the masses is both the inspiration for the rise of, and a characteristic of, minjung theology. Minjung theology is about the development of 'a full humanity' (Fabella 1980) as it aims for the liberation and empowerment of the poor and the powerless. As David Kwang-sun Suh (1991: 17) puts it, minjung theology represents not only 'a development of the political hermeneutics of the Gospel in terms of the Korean reality', but also a demand for justice and a more compassionate society. Minjung theology is also a criticism against Christianity, which has largely remained silent and ignorant of the suffering of the masses. The theology of the leading minjung theologian Byung-Mu Ahn comes from such critical reflection:

> Why are they poor? Why should they starve? Why should they weep? Who hates them, rejects them, swears at them, and frames them? Christian history has not asked such questions for a long time, dismissing them as matters of inner heart. (Ahn 1974: 35)

Minjung theology thus focuses on revealing the meaning of divine salvation in the present 'situation'. Akin to various forms of liberation theology which arose to reveal theological truth in specific regional and political contexts, including liberation theology in South America, Black theology in North America, and feminist theology, as well as third world theologies of Asia and Africa, minjung theology is a 'contextual theology' (Kim 2014: 42). These contextual theologies share the following characteristics: an emphasis on the social situation over traditional teaching; a focus on the social rather than personal dimension of faith; a regard for 'ethics'; and they argue that the gospel can be freed from the bondage of ideology and convey Christian message more truthfully (Kim 2014: 43). In addition to its similarities with other forms of liberation theology, what distinguishes minjung theology as a theological movement is that it recognizes – through the concepts of minjung and han – the underprivileged, who suffer from hardship due to economic constrictions and oppression. Minjung theology seeks to shed light on this understanding of minjung through the framework of Christian theological and biblical hermeneutics. Furthermore, minjung theology is a uniquely Korean theology that seeks to develop an indigenous and practical theology through insights from the historical, social, and cultural experiences of the Korean people.

Minjung theology is not an 'ideal theology' asking who God is, but a 'theology of action' that focuses on what God does. Indeed, minjung theology 'focuses on what Jesus did, not on who He was' and it asks 'How does God act in history?' instead of questioning who God is (Suh 1990: 173–174; cited by Park 2016: 7–8). Minjung theology also understands 'Jesus to be present in the minjung's struggle for liberation', seeing 'God's actions as related to the minjung's suffering and hope' (Park 2016: 7). As with other contextual theologies, the uniqueness of minjung theology is that it reinterprets Christian faith according to the cultural, social, political, and religious context of Korea (Kim 2014). This involves reinterpreting the Christian gospel and theology so that the latter can respond to the sufferings and hopes of the lives of Koreans by pointing out minjung as the subjects who have carried the weight of the country's religio-cultural, economic and political history (Kim 2014: 46).

In other words, reinterpretation on the part of minjung theology has involved 'the process of establishing a "people-centered view" that interprets the Bible and constructs theology from the people's side' (Kim 2014: 46). Such a characteristic of minjung theology is clearly revealed in Ahn's argument, as summarized by Myung soo Kim below:

> Minjung theology is not a speculation which arose from a library, but a historical product and theological consequence from the Korean political scene. More specifically, minjung theology was born in cognizance of the suffering of the masses under the dictatorial regime and in involvement with 'liberation' movements of the people. (Kim 2011: 133)

In this respect, minjung theology can be said to be an antithesis to traditional theology (Choi 1992: 682).

4 The concepts of minjung and han

A key word in minjung theology is 'minjung', which is a term that combines the Chinese characters min, meaning 'the people', and jung, meaning 'public' or 'the masses'. Minjung thus means 'the masses' or 'the people' (Lee 2010: 23). Nam-Dong Suh (1983a: 188–189) argues that the 'historical Jesus' was minjung, as he identified himself as a poor and oppressed person who underwent great ordeals, much like Korean minjung. Seok-heon Ham, a Korean Christian thinker who is renowned for championing democracy and for exploring the spiritual meaning of Koreans' painful experience throughout their history, differentiates minjung from 'human beings' as a more general term, by arguing that the former are specifically 'ordinary' people (i.e. people without any status), implying that they can be subject to prejudice or discrimination (Ham 1982: 9–10). Such view is consistent with Young-hak Hyun's definition of minjung: he characterizes minjung as people with no political power, economic wealth, social status and higher education, the polar opposite of the elite and the privileged (Ham 1982: 15). Similarly, the biblical theologian Cyris H. S. Moon defines minjung as 'those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters' (1985: 1). And Dong-hwan Moon, a minjung theologian, defines minjung in the Korean context as follows:

> The term was first used during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), when the masses were dominated by the aristocratic yangban class. At that time, all the people who did not belong to this class were minjung. Under the Japanese colonial rule, all the Koreans, except a small minority of those who cooperated with the Japanese, were minjung. Today [in the 1970s and 1980s], the term minjung can be used to refer to all persons who are excluded from the privileged lifestyle under the dictatorial regime. (Cited by Lee 2010: 23)

Additionally a comparison of minjung with the meaning of the biblical Greek word *ochlos* in the New Testament is noteworthy, as done by the renowned minjung theologian Byung-Mu Ahn (1985: 91, 99–103). Park summarizes Ahn's comparison of the two terms as follows:

> One can identify the minjung with the *ochlos* of the Gospels, one of two Greek terms used to refer to the people or the masses in the Synoptic Gospels; the other is *laos*. *Laos* was used to mean, in general, the people. *Ochlos*, on the other hand, refer to sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, prisoners, the sick, and the abandoned of Galilee. Ahn argues that Mark intentionally uses the term *ochlos* rather than *laos*, which also means people, to focus

> on those who were isolated politically and culturally, the majority being poor and despised. The *ochlos* also were those who gathered around Jesus as his audience and were seen by Him as the people in the Kingdom of God. The *ochlos* were the minjung of Galilee. Ahn identifies the concept of the *ochlos* with the Korean minjung on the grounds that Jesus sided unconditionally with oppressed and marginalized people. (Park 2016: 4)

As such, the concept of minjung in minjung theology is a sociological concept that refers to a group that is politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially deprived, and marginalized. Central to minjung theology is thus a unique Korean concept of han. Although it is difficult to exactly define the term in English, han can be referred to as deep-seated grief, sorrow, despair, resentment, regret, or bitterness. More specifically, han refers to a sentiment in which anger, bitterness and resentment accumulate and are internalized in the face of continuing hardship and injustice: 'it is the collective feeling of the oppressed in the face of their social fate and the social contradictions they experience' (Park 2016: 6). James Cone, a leading proponent of Black liberation theology, in characterizing the experience of African Americans as 'blues', attempted to compare it with Korean experience of han (see Commission on the Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia 1983: xi). Han articulates not only personal griefs, such as poverty, illness, or discrimination but also bitterness felt collectively as members of a group, including a nation (e.g. suffering under the Japanese colonial rule). As the historian of Korean Christianity Donald N. Clark (1986: 44) argues, 'the history of the Korean people is a history of oppression, of sadness and frustration, which has given rise to a unique mind-set called han'. Although not every Korean theologian agrees, minjung theology can be said to be 'the theology of han, the inner dynamics of the oppressed Korean minjung' (Moon 1982: 13).

Theological engagement with the concept of han began in earnest with Nam-Dong Suh (see 2018b). In one instance, Suh describes the meaning of han through the personal experience of a female factory worker:

> Let's explain han from the story of Kyung-sook Kim, a skilled worker who worked at YH Trading Company. Kim joined the YH branch of the National Textile Workers' Union and fought against inhumane treatment and injustice toward employees […] On August 11, more than 1,000 police officers were dispatched to disperse the striking workers. She was killed during the police raid. Kim was only 21 years old and […] [d]uring her eight years of employment at the factory, she suffered countless nosebleeds from overwork, worked for three months without pay, went on the verge of starvation, lived without a change of clothes, and worked without heating in the winter […] Her death embodied the 'han' of 8 million Korean workers. (Suh 1983a: 56)

Suh distinguishes between the idea of sin as conceived by traditional Christian theology and the concept of han that was formed through minjung's real experiences (see Kim 2011). According to Suh, traditional theology sees the problem of sin as a problem

between God and human beings; the sin that occurs among humans is dismissed as secondary to that primary definition. This erroneous premise of traditional theology has resulted in the 'degeneration' of traditional theology into a doctrine serving the interests of the ruling class. Therefore, the subject of theological consideration should be 'not only the religious relationship between God and human beings but also the socio-political relationship among the latter and the "structural evil" that exists as a historical result' (Kim 2011: 121). As Suh asserts:

> From a sociological point of view, 'sin' and 'condemnation' are just labels that the rulers attach to the weak and the opposing party. Developing a theology without a sociological analysis of 'sin' would rather betray the basic biblical intention and become dysfunctional. Therefore, prior to the theory of sin, 'sinned against' should be an issue. The so-called 'sinners' are 'those who are sinned against,' that is, those who are victimized. In other words, sin is the language of the ruler, while han is the language of the people. (Suh 2018b: 140–141)

Nam-Dong Suh also argues that Christian theology until now has been preoccupied with the problem of sin; however, the task of minjung theology is to 'resolve the han of the people', because it is 'more meaningful than being forgiven for committing sins' (1983a: 243).

Suh, who understands sin and han as the language of the ruler and minjung, respectively, views han as not only the political consciousness of the oppressed people but also the growing self-consciousness of the weak (Park 2012: 140; Suh 1983a: 60, 64). For Suh, the root of han is 'being wronged' and minjung who are marginalized feel the pain of han in real life, whose pain can only end in death. As such, han can include:

> people's han against their ruler, women's han against the patriarchal cultural system, […] [a] nation's han against an empire, the worker's han against the capitalist, the tenant farmer's han against the landowner, the poor's han against the rich, han of the uneducated against the learned, and han of the weak against the powerful. (Kim 2009: 23)

As the sentiment of han arose from Koreans' collective and personal experiences, Koreans are referred to as people of han. While Korean theologians do not universally agree, many argue that minjung theology is a 'theology of han', making the proponents of the theology 'the priests of han' (Kang 2011: 88). In this sense, minjung theology rejects the role of church serving as a mediator of atonement and repentance as part of the hierarchical ideology of the rulers, as in some Western theologies. Instead, minjung theology emphasizes the role of church 'in relieving the pain of, and comforting, the people' and in 'serving as a place where people find their own liberation and salvation in the process of establishing their self-identity' (Suh 2018a: 104–105). Suh further argues that although relieving han can be an important function of religion – such as through

providing spiritual relief from unreasonable oppression and unfair circumstances – if its role is limited to merely relieving han, religion can only serve as an opiate (which is akin to Marx's view) or be used by the ruling elite to prolong their own power. Suh emphasizes that relieving han must involve an element of 'protest', whereby all social problems must be 'analyzed, uncovered, and criticized through social science' (Suh 2018c: 257–258). With such forceful reinterpretation of han, Suh is credited as the first scholar to engage with minjung theology on an academic level.

5 Prominent minjung theologians

5.1 Minjung theology of Nam-Dong Suh

In addition to his extensive work on the concept of han, Nam-Dong Suh is also recognized as one of the leading minjung theologians. As insinuated above, Suh puts the main reference point of his theological work not on the Bible as claimed by traditional theology, but on the historical experience of the people. In his 1973 work entitled *The Confluence of Two Stories*, Suh (2018a) makes a radical claim that 'the subject of minjung theology is the people rather than Jesus', arguing that history is none other than the 'language of God' and that the priority of 'materials' in theological work is the current socio-historical situation rather than a dialectic of Christian doctrine (Kim 2014: 21). Suh has systematized his theological theory through the so-called 'hermeneutic of convergence', merging minjung's history and tradition in the Bible with the history and tradition of Korea (Choi 2018). While traditional theology regards the Bible as the norm of theology, Suh regards the incidents of the people as testified by the Bible, Christian history, and Korean history as having the same status as the Bible itself. This is not a disregard for the importance of the Bible, but rather a result of the theological critique of the literal and universal status of the Bible that transcends the times (Choi 2018: 651–652).

In emphasizing the importance of the socio-historical situation in his theology, Suh has also created a 'substructure of revelation' as his theological methodology (Choi 2018: 657). According to the substructure of revelation, God's revelation itself has a material substructure, arguing that 'revelation is not the foundation of existence, but rather existence is the foundation of revelation' (Choi 2018: 657). It functions as an epistemological framework to criticize the existing theology and construct a new theology through sociological or materialistic interpretations (Choi 2018: 657; Kim 2012: 11). Since revelation is the subject of sociological study to Suh, revelation becomes both a historical and a material revelation. Therefore, Suh's theology from the perspective of the substructure of revelation is not a theology of domination that justifies the duality of free people and slaves, metaphysical dualism of matter and spirit, and social dualism, but a theology for those who wish to escape from conditions of slavery. It is an 'anti-theology' in that it is critical of, and trying to correct, the ruling ideology, the ruling system

and its culture; it is a ‘de-theology’ in that it tries to overcome traditional theology which advocated the status quo; and it is a ‘peripheral theology’ in that it is not fully accepted by the theological community.

5.2 Byung-Mu Ahn: a theologian on the road

The life and theology of Byung-Mu Ahn did not stay in one place; rather Ahn can be said to have been a ‘theologian on the road’. He makes it clear that minjung theology did not develop as an exclusive, academic theology but came from the events and experience of minjung on the street. As Yong-Bock Kim argues, minjung ‘signifies a living reality, which is dynamic, changing, and complex’ and this living reality ‘defines its own experience and generates new acts and dramas in history; and it refuses in principle to be defined conceptually’ (1983: 184). Ahn’s theology focuses not only on the experience of the people but also its participatory aspect. It is noteworthy that Ahn’s theology has always been an open process rather than a perfect form, evidenced by the fact that his theological themes underwent multiple transitions ‘from existence to history, from history to the people, from the people to life, and from life to nature’ (Kim 2011: 52–53, 133; see Ahn 1993a; 1993b; 2019; Kang 1997). Ahn is also well-known for having tried to develop minjung theology as a distinctive Korean (and Asian) theology, i.e. as a genuine alternative to Western theology.

Ahn’s theological methodology is based on the Korean concept of uri (literally meaning ‘us’). Uri describes a relational existence, that sees the masses as having a community of destiny. Although the masses usually act according to selfish motives, in the face of suffering, the consciousness of ‘us’ is activated to create, work, and fight together to change reality. Ahn conceptualizes minjung theology as: ‘without me there is no you, and without you there is no me. What really exists is not me and you, but “us”’ (cited by Kim 2011: 133). Ahn also advocates ‘Christology from below’ and the ‘peopleness’ of Jesus Christ (see Christological Anthropology), especially the latter’s empathy for the people in the bottom of the social ladder, such as the poor, the weak, and the socially marginalized who are being abused and persecuted (Kim 2011: 133–136). Indeed, ‘the followers of Jesus were poor people; the people Jesus was most concerned with was the poor; and the Gospel of Luke reveals that Jesus’ calling is for the “oppressed” and “captives” along with the poor’ (Ahn 1993c: 213–214). In this respect, minjung theology follows the view of ‘the preferential option for the poor’, in accordance with liberation theology. However, there are differences between the two theologies. According to Kim Hee-heon, while the theological commonality between liberation theology and minjung theology lies in the ‘liberation’ of the poor and the oppressed, the former stresses that the poor need the solidarity of external sympathizers to achieve their liberation from the painful historical reality, whereas in the latter case, the people themselves transcend suffering as a historical constraint (Kim 2014: 50).

It is at this point that the ‘minjung messiah theory’, the view of salvation in minjung theology of self-transcendence and self-salvation of minjung, comes to the fore. The minjung messiah theory argues that minjung are not the object of salvation, but the subject who can save themselves from the events which are causing their suffering. The theory makes a radical claim that minjung are the Messiah, departing from the soteriology of traditional Western theology which presupposes God’s supernatural power in salvation, Jesus as the subject of salvation as a divine person, and humans as the object of salvation (Kim 2014: 62). Although minjung theology is a contextual theology that arose in the special historical context of Korea, it is such ‘radical’ Christology and soteriology that caused frictions with other theological traditions. Ahn and Suh have been the scholars who have been at the centre of the discord.

The final destination of Ahn’s minjung theology is life. He defines minjung as the source of true life (Ahn 2001: 271) and argues that they live not by external possessions but by inner self: ‘people who own many things live their lives not being themselves, but by what they have. The moment they lose their possessions, they cannot sustain life’ (Kim 2011: 166–167). Ahn sees minjung ‘as the source of life and the life itself and as those who do not give up despite hardship, do not depend on others’ help, and live on their own strength’ (Kim 2011: 166–167). Therefore, Ahn testifies that minjung is life itself, as they persevere in spite of severe hardship and suffering.

5.3 Second and third generation minjung theologians

Second generation minjung theology inherited the legacy of first generation minjung theology, but also tried to critically overcome its limitations. The former claims that its works amount to a ‘theology of movement’, empathizing with the ideologies of both the student and labour movements in adopting the anti-capitalist strategy while seeking a dialogue between minjung theology and Marxism (*Gyosusinmun* 2002). The second-generation minjung theologians were also critical of the role of the United States on the Korean peninsula, especially its support for a succession of authoritarian regimes, and warned against the negative consequence of blind anti-communism, as it impeded the potential for dialogue with North Korea for peaceful coexistence or reunification.

Third generation minjung theology (that is minjung theology that has been carried out since the 1990s) became concerned with varying issues, including ecological concerns, women’s rights, problems caused by increasing globalization, the rise in the number of megachurches, and discrimination based on regionalism (Hwang 1995: 147; see Kim 1993; 1997). For example, a study by a third generation minjung theologian Jin-ho Kim (2020) critically analyzes the mechanisms utilized by Korean churches to become megachurches (defined as churches that have 2,000 or more people in average Sunday service attendance) and discusses various problems associated with the rising number of

megachurches in Korea. These include the transformation of megachurches as entities akin to ‘enterprises’, overtly concerned with the enlargement of their congregations, financial corruption, and hereditary pastoral succession. Kim argues that Korean megachurches, of which there are more than 900, are typically conservative in theological orientation and political stance and exert considerable influences in Korean politics.

Another noteworthy development for the third generation minjung theology, as indicated above, pertains to the development of ‘Korean theology’: that is, a theology which can offer an understanding of a myriad of religious topics in view of Korean tradition and context (Park 1995). Such an effort towards the indigenization of theology is based on a premise that in providing answers to Korean problems, theology needs to be Koreanized (Hwang 1995: 151).

6 Minjung theology: recent developments

As noted above, minjung theology in the 1980s shifted its focus to political issues as it voiced its support for democracy. The call for democracy had been gaining momentum since 1972 when the then president Park Chung-hee amended the constitution to implement the Yushin Constitution, which essentially gave Park dictatorial powers. Koreans’ hope for democracy following Park’s assassination in October 1979 was dashed as the then army general Chun Doo-hwan became president after carrying out a coup d’état in December the same year. Intense demonstrations ensued in the following years, which prompted a presidential election to be held in 1987, opening the way for ‘full democracy’ in the country.

From the late 1980s onwards, with the country having attained a remarkable economic growth and having become a democracy, minjung theology turned its attention to other issues (Kim 2011; Kwon and Küster 2018). For example, minjung theology became concerned with the issue of reunification with North Korea, as the proponents argued that ordinary North Koreans suffered from oppression much like themselves (Kim and Kim 2013: 263–289; see Han and Kim 2006; Chung 2003). Minjung theology’s involvement with the reunification issue was also informed by the recognition that the issue of reunification should be a concern for the whole Korean people, whether they are living in the North or the South, and that the governments of both sides should not monopolize the issue (Yeon 2000). Therefore, minjung theology, along with progressive Christian leaders, played a crucial role in making non-governmental input into the reunification dialogue, which hitherto had been monopolized by the government.

Minjung theology also became concerned with the human rights of both foreign migrant workers and marriage migrants, whose numbers greatly increased since the late 1990s. In particular, the importation of large numbers of foreign workers has been a noteworthy demographic trend in Korea. As wealthier, better educated, and status-conscious Koreans

shunned low-paying and less-prestigious jobs, such as jobs in small to medium sized manufacturing firms, the latter resorted to bringing in foreign migrant workers, whose numbers soared from nearly 500,000 in 2000 to over one million in 2018. Korean society in general, and Korean firms which hired these migrant workers in particular, seem to have been ill-prepared to treat them fairly, as Koreans have long prided themselves as members of an ethnically homogeneous group. Under such cultural milieu, many migrant workers faced racism, discrimination (in terms of lower pay and less benefits), and harassment.

Another issue that attracted the attention of minjung theology was the persistence of income polarization in Korea (see Moon 2000; Kang et al. 2010). Although Korea achieved rapid economic growth, a considerable number of Koreans were still working poor and house poor as a result of neoliberal economic policies of the Korean government. Korea suffered a financial crisis in 1997–1998; and in return for accepting a $58 billion bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government was forced to implement labour flexibility, producing a large number of irregular workers, who are typically paid about a half of the salary of regular workers doing the same kind of work and are deprived of many work-related benefits. Since the early 2000s, official data has placed the proportion of irregular workers in the total workforce at around one-third, although more wide-ranging data shows that up to a half of all the workers in Korea are irregular workers (Kim 2003; 2022). A conspicuous income gap between regular and irregular workers as well as a resulting sense of relative deprivation felt by the latter has reportedly worsened over the years.

Interestingly, minjung theology has inspired the emergence of many religiously-motivated NGOs, Christian or Buddhist, which are essentially civic groups fighting for various causes in Korea (Ro and Park 2010). Of particularly importance is minjungbulgyo, literally meaning ‘people’s Buddhism’ (Han 1986; Beop 1989), which has galvanized the religion to become more concerned with secular matters, especially in helping the poor and the underprivileged. The most prominent religiously-motivated NGOs in Korea include:

> The Catholic Human Rights Committee, Catholic Women Groups Alliance, Christian Alliance for Justice and Peace, Korean Christian Environmental Movement Solidarity, Christian Alliance for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice, Buddhists Alliance for Activism, Buddhist Coalition for Human Rights, and Buddhist Coalition for Environment. (Kim 2018: 7)

Albeit concerned with disparate, wide-ranging issues, these groups are united in the belief that ‘religion can be, and should be, a force of reform and change in society’ (Kim 2018: 7).

7 Conclusion

Like liberation theologies elsewhere, minjung theology has newly envisioned the role of Christianity in Korea by interpreting the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the underprivileged. Minjung theology is a practical ethos that has also tried to pursue justice, equality, freedom, and liberation from a 'people-centred perspective' based on the experience of the poor and the suffering. These theological characteristics are clearly shown in the theology of the first generation minjung theologians, particularly Nam-Dong Suh, Byung-Mu Ahn, and David Kwang-sun Suh. Minjung theology exposes the structural contradictions of politics, economy, and society in Korea, disclosing human rights violations and discrimination against, and marginalization of, the masses – minjung. At the same time, it is a theology of action that aimed to reestablish the dignity of minjung by healing their pain and wounds. These characteristics inherent in minjung theology drew attention from the international theological community and the latter recognized the Korean theology with a proper noun. Such developments can be said to be a significant legacy, given the fact that the theological tradition of Korea as a whole had remained in the periphery. The strength of minjung theology is revealed in the praise it received from the African-American theologian James Cone, who is renowned for his work on black liberation theology: 'Korea's Minjung theology is an example of efforts to achieve self-liberation from the oppressive influence of Western theology and is one of the most creative theology born out of the political struggle of the people of the Third World' (1983: x).

Minjung theology has been concerned with various causes, including reunification, gender equality, and the environment. Interestingly, minjung theology has inspired other religions, especially Buddhism, to become actively involved with social issues, as indicated by a considerable number of religiously-motivated NGOs which are of non-Christian origin. What can be learned from minjung theology is that its raison d'être is still largely as relevant today as it was in the 1970s when it first arose in Korea. While its theological influence has retreated considerably over the years, the persistence of many social problems affecting Korea, including the increasing polarization between the rich and the poor, the rise in housing poor, burgeoning youth unemployment, educational inequality, persistence of gender inequality, and proliferation of irregular workers, have made minjung theology still as relevant today as they did a half century ago. What this shows is that the invisible hierarchical structure of Korean society has continued to produce a large number of economically and socially marginalized people. Koreans may be living in a democracy and enjoying higher living standards, but there are still a large number of them who are marginalized, making minjung theology still relevant to their lives. Therefore, minjung theology is not a situational theology of the past – rather it is a living theology.

Liberation theology as a whole thus shows that religion can play an important socio-political function for individuals in contemporary society, serving as a means to remedy

injustice and oppression that persist in today's world. Liberation theology reveals that religion can actually make itself more relevant to people's lives today by becoming more actively involved with social issues. This is where the concept of 'ecclesiastical social responsibility' (ESR) can become relevant. ESR was inspired by the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), defined as 'actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by the law' (McWilliams and Siegel 2001: 117), including a 'pyramid of responsibilities' towards the community in which it operates, including ethical, environmental, and philanthropic responsibilities (Sheehy 2005). ESR is discussed by Andrew Kim as something akin to 'actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the church and that which is required by the doctrines' (2018: 12).

It is thus worth asking the following question inspired by a central viewpoint of liberation theology: is not life in this world that is less afflicted by hunger, poverty, injustice, and oppression just as important as salvation in the next world? This question is pertinent given the fact that religious organizations are perhaps the most powerful non-governmental organizations in the world, complete with immense financial resources, strong organizational structure, and a large number of devotees who can easily be swayed for socio-political actions.

Attributions

This article is an adaptation of the following paper, originally published in Korean: Kim, Jongman. 2022. 'A Study on Two Masters of Korean Minjung Theology: Focused on Ahn Byung-mu and Suh Nam-dong', *Sinjonggyoyeongu (The Journal of the Korean Academy of New Religions)* 46: 117–151.

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