

## Reading the Bible from an Asian Perspective

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### Introduction

Since the 1970s distinct theologies have been emerging in many Asian countries. They are Minjung Theology in Korea, Dalit Theology in India, Buraku Theology in Japan and Struggle Theology in the Philippines, etc. These Asian theologies are entirely different from the Western theology which has dominated the world of theology for the last 2000 years. The Asian theologies (together with the liberation theology of Latin America, Black peoples's theology of North America, and Feminist theology) with their large influence are renovating and reforming world theology. As a matter of fact, each Asian theology has unique characteristics of its own as much as common features shared with other Asian theologies.

In this presentation, the discussion will concentrate first on the common features of Asian theologies and Asian readings of the Bible rather than the differences, and secondly on the problems and objectives of Asian theologies. The explanation will be focused mainly on Minjung theology despite the title, **Reading the Bible from an Asian Perspective** on account of my personal interest in Minjung theology. Theologies and Bible readings in other countries of Asia will be examined with reference to it. While there is no proper general term which covers the Minjung, Dalit, Buraku, the poor, and the oppressed, yet for convenience I will use **Minjung** as the general name for them. Expressions like **Asian theologies**, **reading of the Bible in Asia**, and **Asian theologians** do not refer to theologies, readings and theologians of every country in Asia but only to those of Minjung, Dalit and Buraku theologies in the narrow sense.

### Characteristics

Since the characteristics of Asian theologies and readings of the Bible are interchangeable, it may be unjustifiable to make a sharp distinction between them.

In spite of this, for convenience, I am going to examine the characteristics of Asian theologies and readings of the Bible separately.

#### The Characteristics of Asian Theologies

Asian theology has many characteristics. Let us look into some of the main features.

#### Post- and Anti-Western Theology

Asian theologies use the slogan of anti-Westernism, because Western theology does not suit the situation of each Asian country. Moreover, it cannot satisfy the aspirations of the Asian churches, and it has even been hostile toward the situation of Asia.

In Korea, for example, under the Japanese regime, most American missionaries were against the independence movement. Korean pastors and Christians, however, took part in the 3.1 March 1st Independence Movement in 1919. They resisted the Japanese regime and proclaimed its brutal reality to the world. The Church played a leading part in the 3.1 March 1st Independence Movement. During the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s, Korean churches were dominated by the theology of separation of Church and State which missionaries had claimed under the rule of Japanese imperialism. The theologians, pastors and Christians in Korea (with the idea of the separation of Church and State) considered it wrong to resist the military regime that suppressed, exploited, and even murdered the Minjung. They regarded it as something a Christian should not do. They treated pastors, theologians, and Christians who participated in the democratization and human rights movement as heretics and were busy denouncing them. Furthermore, some leading pastors who seemingly claimed the separation of religion and politics on the surface, however, have blessed the military regime at morning prayer meetings, have spoken supportively to them in sermons and lectures, and have given support to them by holding important positions in the government. On the contrary, some theologians and pastors with social conscience fought at the head of the democratization and human rights movement, in spite of opposition from the churches and intimidation by the military regimes. They were even imprisoned and tortured severely: Suh Nam-Dong, Ahn Byung-Mu were two of them. The other reason why Korean theologians like them opposed Western theology was because it was the theology of idealism, which was irrelevant to the concrete situation in Korea.

It was only an ivory-towered Wissenschaft of just a few scholars which was irrelevant to the real life situation of the Minjung. Western theology was no help to solve our concrete difficulties. It was rather a disturbance. So Minjung theologians cried out for post-Western, anti-Western alternatives and advocated 3.1 theology of context, 3.1 theology of event and 3.1 theology of praxis. The traditional Indian

Christian theology influenced by the Western missionaries was on the side of the upper castes. It was a Dalit-oppressing and Dalit-discriminating theology all the way which was never aware of the agony of Dalit, and never made efforts to lighten their loads or liberate them. Things were the same in Japan, where the Japanese traditional theology and churches were under the influence and dominance of the West. Not only the general public but also the Japanese Church discriminated against and despised the Buraku seeking to drive them out from the church. The disappointment in such anti-evangelical aspects of Korean, Indian, and Japanese traditional theologies and churches called for the new theologies in Asia.

#### Theology of context

The traditional theologies before the emergence of a distinct theology in each Asian country, were generally bound by the biblical text and Western theological dogma. Theology and sermon were limited to the pulpit of the seminary and Church. The picture of Asian theologies and the church situation at that time was that of a dead theology which could not perceive the imminent social problems and react to the concrete context. This was the picture of the traditional churches and theologies before the emergence of distinct Asian theologies. Although the historical context was imminent and a context in which the Minjung groaned in pain, Korea was ruled by a military dictatorship, the Dalit in India suffered class and caste discrimination, Buraku and Korean residents in Japan were discriminated against and the Philippines was under the dictatorship of Marcos, theology assumed the attitude of an onlooker in this historical situation and was too busy maintaining the status quo. Moreover it aggravated the situation by having a cozy relationship with power holders. That was the actual situation in the 1970s and 80s in the Asian church and its theology.

Asian theologians got very impatient with the traditional theology which looked the other way and was unable to react to such circumstances. So they tried to make a resolute departure which resulted in new Asian theologies of their own. A group of theologians who felt cooped in by the traditional theology, responded to the cries of the Minjung and participated in the struggle for liberation. In this process they became skeptical of the validity of Western traditional theology a skepticism which led them to fly out of the coop under the flag of anti/post-Western theology; that is the very theology of context. It was the contextual theology of each Asian country which disclosed the shackles and dehumanizing circumstances of its history and pursued liberation from restraints. Thus the contextual theology of Asian countries prefers the inductive method to the deductive method of Western theology. It, however, never remains in the context; it views and interprets the context from a new angle, and then goes back to the context, i.e., the circulation of hermeneutics.

### Theology of the ruled

Another main feature of the Asian theology is that it is not a theology for the ruler or the ruling class but the ruled, not a theology for the oppressor but the oppressed. That makes it distinct from western theology. Since Constantine the Great, western Christianity has been the theology of the ruled and religion for the oppressor. There was no room for the ruled, the oppressed, namely, the Minjung, Dalit, Buraku, Aborigines, women and the disabled. Asian theology, however, is a theology of and for the oppressed and the suffering. Asian theology is based on the resolute intention to deny the rule of the world powers after the bitter experience of Western imperialism and Japanese colonialism. The fact that the theology for the oppressed is a dominant influence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is a revolutionary phenomenon in the 2000 years of Christian history. The Asian theologians have a confident belief that theology for the ruled, and the oppressed is what true theology should be.

### Post-colonial Theology

Right now, the post-colonial discourse draws world-wide attention. It is a discourse to overcome the imperialistic world view, sense of values and culture, and the way of living of the West. The new born theologies of Asia have the character of post-colonialism, whether consciously or unconsciously. Of course, the beginning of the Asian theologies was before the development of the post-colonial discourse. So we cannot say it was influenced by it. No, it is quite the opposite; post-colonial discourse came into being in the spirit of the Asian theology which had arisen earlier. Minjung theology appeared in the early part of the 1970s, long before the post-colonial discourse arose. In this aspect, Minjung theology is the frontier and the forerunner of post-colonialism. It just became apparent that it implied many of the post-colonial issues which are currently under lively discussion and it seems that the post-colonial characteristics in Asian theologies will come out more clearly in the future. Even though Asian countries were liberated from Western imperialism, the Western imperialistic world view, sense of values, culture, and life style, have not gone and they still overwhelm Asia. In such times, Asian theologies must achieve liberation from the subordinate position through more fundamental and drastic efforts. For the time being, we are dressed in unsuitable Western clothes. All the more, this was the case in the field of theology. But now it is time to throw off unfit clothes and make and wear clothes of our own. Such tailoring is the new work of theology and it began long ago. We have to make a vital and zealous development of the work which has started already.

### Theology for Liberation

Asian theologies have started with the concrete goal, which was not theology for theology's sake but for liberation from oppression; Minjung theology in Korea

aimed for liberation of the Minjung from the military autocracy; in India, liberation of the Dalit from the caste system; in Japan, liberation of the Buraku from the discrimination against non-Buraku and in feminist theology, liberation of women from the control of men. It was never a theology for theology's sake without any concrete goals, which makes it distinct from Western theology. Asian theologies will not and should not be theology for theology's sake but should aim for concrete liberation.

#### Theology of Multi-religious Society

There is another characteristic of the Asian theologies. They are theologies of multi religious societies. Unlike the Western society of mono-theism, Asia is a multi-religious society with Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Islam. Christians constitute less than 1% of the Asian people, with the exception being Korea (Christian 25%) and the Philippines. Other religions are by far outnumber Christianity. Such a multi-religious society may be a threat but an opportunity at the same time for Christians.

The threat is the fact that Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Islam, which have longer traditions and deeper roots than Christianity, could prevent the evangelization work of the Christians. Moreover, religious syncretism in the process of inculturization is probable. In spite of hazards and obstacles, the opportunity is that the sacred scriptures and the morality and ethics of these religions can act as a challenge, and it can also be a stimulus and reference to improve Christianity. Right now in Asia, there are attempts for interaction and dialogue between Christianity and traditional religions, and they try to learn from each other. There are also joint activities in political, economic, social and environmental fields. It is desirable.

#### The Characteristics of Asian Readings of the Bible

Western readings of the Bible do not suit the Asian circumstances in three respects. Firstly, Western readings of the Bible are slaves to academicism which the general reader finds inaccessible. In other words, Western reading of the Bible is too theoretical. It is a reading without the context for the most part. Secondly, Western Bible reading is estranged from the reader. Western theology mostly deals with matters irrelevant to everyday life. Thirdly, Western Bible readings are unhelpful to churches. They are even an obstacle to them in the extreme case. In short, most Western theology is rather a self-absorbed theology, than a help in the daily life of people and the churches. Asian theology and Bible reading are aware of Western reading's weaknesses and limits. Now we are going to examine the characteristics of Asian Bible reading.

#### The Reading of the Bible from Below

Ever since Constantine the Great officially recognized Christianity in A.D. 313, biblical interpretation has usually developed toward approving and supporting the ruling class. Martin Luther's reformation succeeded in liberating churches from the control of the Roman Catholic Church, but it failed to make churches stand on the side of the peasant and the ruled. The historical-critical method which was developed after the Enlightenment in the 18th century, opened the possibility for biblical interpretation bound by the tradition and doctrine of churches and interpreted the Bible according to reason unrestrictedly. It gave an epoch-making contribution to biblical interpretation. But most biblical interpreters who use this historical-critical method are not beyond the dimension that supports the existing ruling order because they also belong to the classes that have vested interests in Western society. Such a reading is reading the Bible from above. Therefore, biblical interpretation until now could not show the meaning of the Bible clearly. The Bible is not a book that supports rulers or classes who have vested interests or which oppresses and exploits the ruled, namely the Minjung, in order to maintain the ruling system. On the contrary, the Bible is a book that describes the acts of salvation of God who releases the ruled, that is the Minjung, who are oppressed and exploited by rulers or classes that have vested interests. If we read the Bible from above, we cannot have a right understanding of it. If we want to have a right understanding of the Bible, we should read it from below. Reading of the Bible from the perspective of Asian theology is a reading of the Bible from below. The Old Testament is the story of patriarchs of Israel, Hebrew slaves in Egypt, Israel that underwent a trial by world power, and the oppressed themselves in Israel. The New Testament is the story of prostitutes, fishermen, the sick and the poor, the alienated. Asian theologies read the Bible from the viewpoint of the oppressed, i.e., Minjung, Dalit, Buraku, Aborigine, the poor, the sick, and the disabled.

#### Partisan reading of the Bible

Bible reading from below reads the Bible primarily standing by the unfairly exploited and the oppressed. This partisan reading of the Bible is inevitable. Many criticize that Asian Bible reading has too much of a tendency to be partisan and partial for standing by the side of the oppressed like this. They criticize that such a reading damages God's salvation of all people and the will of Jesus Christ for universal salvation. However, this is due to the lack of proper understanding of those who are ill informed of the genuine meaning of the Bible reading standing by the side of the oppressed.

As testified to in the Bible, God does have the idea of universal salvation of all people. But he is also the God who takes the side of the oppressed first of all. God wants the ultimate salvation of non-Minjung and anti-Minjung as well. But when anti-Minjung exploits and oppresses Minjung, God takes the side of the latter

to liberate and redeem them. Jesus as true God, true man and Messiah liberates and redeems the Minjung. We can compare God's preferential love toward the Minjung with a mother's love that makes two brothers stop quarreling. When an elder one knocks unfairly his younger brother, their mother makes the brothers stop quarreling and rebukes the elder; but she soothes her younger son and treats his hurt. In this case, we cannot say that the mother loves just the younger brother only but hates the elder one. The mother's love is the same for both, but it is only expressed in a different way. The mother loves the elder son even as she rebukes him for knocking his younger brother unfairly. On the other hand, she expresses her love to the younger as she consoles him and treats his hurt. God's love for the Minjung is similar to this. God and Jesus favour and relieve the Minjung who is in the same place with the younger. In this way, the possibility of salvation for non-Minjung and anti-Minjung is always open. God and Jesus support and redeem the Minjung in the situation of the younger brother. He redeems the anti-Minjung at the same time by eliminating the un-righteousness and vice and makes them join together. That is how all the people get redeemed. That is what the Old and New Testaments testify. Asian theologies start from the taking partial part and aiming at universal salvation.

#### The Reading of the Bible for Practice

Asian theology was not formed on the table. It was formed at the very spot where the liberation movement took place. This indicates clearly the character of Asian theology to make a great account of practice. Minjung theology does not seek after theological theory only. It makes a great account of practice. Therefore, reading of the Bible from the perspective of Asian theologies is not pursued only to get biblical knowledge. It is a reading of the Bible for practice. The reading of the Bible from the perspective of Asian theologies seeks to reform the misguided faith of the existing churches about the dogma, *man is justified by faith alone*. This concept of the Reformation, *man is justified by faith alone (sola fide)*, has dominated the faith and theology of protestant churches as their central belief since the time it originated from the Reformer, Luther himself, five centuries ago. But this dogma resulted in leaving only an empty faith bereft of practical and ethical dimensions in Protestant churches. Christianity has been reduced to a faith which excludes the practical and ethical dimension. It is true that nowadays Christians who long for only *cheap grace* without following Jesus Christ form the main current of churches. Asian theology advocates a soteriology that lays particular stress on practice in order to correct these abuses of Christianity which excludes doing and lacks ethical values.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, *Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.* He also says in the parable of Matthew 25:31-46, that the criterion of

the Last Judgement is whether one took care of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and prisoners or not, that is, whether one works or not. James 2:14 asks, **What use is it, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?** James 2:24 also says, **a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.** In these verses James emphasizes that Christians can be justified by both faith and works, too. If we synthesize Jesus' and James' words above, though we can say **no faith, no salvation** is right, at the same time we can understand that **no works, no salvation** is a truth which the Bible says. In this sense, Asian theologies emphasize works, and Asian theologies premise works for reading of the Bible.

Asian theologies had a tendency to pay attention only to great praxis. Small praxis were excluded, as if they were not so essential a practice. For instance, the struggle against structural vices, the democratization movement, the struggle for human rights, the struggle against dictatorship and other such great practices were regarded as the only true praxis. Small acts like relieving the poor, nursing the sick were not a real practice to them. But the Bible embraces great acts as well as small acts alike, as being what God desires. In the parable of Matthew 25:31-46, it is said that the standard of judgement on the Last Judgement Day will be the acts which fall in the category of small acts. The Asian theologies must therefore, include both great and small acts in the category of praxis.

#### Bible reading of Minjung-Subjective

Reading of the Bible from the Asian perspective is that of the Minjung, Dalit, Buraku, Aborigines, the poor, the sick, and the disabled, who are oppressed and placed at the bottom of society. It is the Bible reading from below. Reading of the Bible from below can be done in many aspects. Theologians, pastors, priests, for example, can read, interpret, preach, the Bible with the viewpoint from the bottom. The most desirable way, however, is enabling the people at the bottom to read and interpret the Bible based on their own personal experiences. In this case, the guide such as the theologians, pastors or middle level leaders like elders, deaconesses, and deacons, who take part in the **reading of the Bible from below** should be completely as enablers and facilitators whose sole part is helping the Minjung to speak and interpret the Bible. The enabler must not exceed the job of a helper in any way or else it will degrade Bible studies into a cramming lecture or preaching - as is delivered in most of the traditional churches.<sup>1)</sup> Minjung should completely be the total subject in the reading of the Bible by Minjung.

#### Multi-Scriptural Reading of the Bible

Unlike Western society, Asia is a multi-religious society with Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Islam. These religions have sacred scriptures which have come down over thousands of years. This makes us Asians



to be living in a multi-scriptural context. Varying in quality, there are high-level scriptures, among them which contain pregnant doctrines befitting a so-called higher religion. They are after all, still very popular in Asian countries. Their teachings have had a tremendous impact on people and society. Asian Christians did not know how to regard these scriptures. Baring few exceptions, most of the Asian missionaries in the early days looked at these scriptures as heathen, and kept them at a distance. They ignored and proscribed the heretical literature and listed them as banned books.

Nowadays some Asian theologians insist on not banning and ostracizing them unilaterally but making positive use of such scriptures of Asian traditional religions. Suh Nam-Dong, a Minjung theologian said in his writing, **Confluence of two stories** that the assignment of Minjung theology is to testify to the confluence of Christian tradition of Minjung and Korean tradition of Minjung as the work of **missio dei**. He meant that the Korean Minjung tradition, as the tradition of revolutionary rebels in Korean history (Man-Juk, Yim Kkuk-Jung, Gal-Cho-Sa, Jun Bong-Joon, Myo-Chong, Sa Myung-Dang, Soo-Oon, Man-Hae etc.), and folk tale, pansori (a long epic song, a solo opera drama),<sup>2)</sup> though it does not exactly agree with the Asian religious scriptures, there is a thread of connection between this and multi-scriptural Bible reading, in a broad sense. Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan theologian, asserts the need for Asian Christians to reread the Asian religious scriptures, such as the Vedas, the Bhagavat Gita, the thoughts of Confucius, Laotse, and the Qu'ran, from the viewpoint of liberation of God because the words of God are also included in other religious scriptures.<sup>3)</sup> Aloysius Pieris, also from Sri Lanka, thinks that the adherents of other religions are **anonymous Christians** and persists in inserting phrases of the Buddhist scriptures for use in the ceremonies of the Church. But his assertion met with opposition from the Sri Lankan Protestant churches and his Roman Catholic Church. Archie C. C. Lee in Hong-Kong maintains Cross-textual reading of the Hebrew Scripture. He persists that we should not discriminate between Asian religious scriptures and the Holy Bible. We should not let the absolute authority of the Bible put others to silence but respect each other and lead to mutual criticism and revision.<sup>4)</sup>

In this context, Korean Yang Kwun-Suk advocates Inter-textual Interpretation, that is, Asian scriptures and the Holy Bible effecting mutual criticism in order to aim at self-reformation.<sup>5)</sup> We should not prohibit and discard these fertile traditions and scriptures of other religions in Asia unconditionally and exclusively. We have to use them as resources to enrich and complement Christian traditions, because these sources have admirable contents which the Bible or the Western Christian tradition does not possess. Making use of the traditions and scriptures of Asian religions will render Asian Christians be more genuine Christian too.

The Socioeconomic-Historical Interpretation of the Bible

Asians read the Bible in diverse ways. One of the most prominent ways is the reading using socioeconomic-historical method. For example, Korean people in the Christian and theological circles read and understood the Bible only from a religious viewpoint until the early 1970s. In such a climate, the socioeconomic-historical method was used for the first time in Korea by Minjung theologians. They advocated the participation of churches in the political, economical, social, and cultural fields and the obligation for their reformation. Therefore, they did not just remain passive readers of the Bible using the socioeconomic-historical method, but acted as they studied. They participated in politics for which act they were expelled from the universities and imprisoned. This was an epoch-making event in the history of 2000 years. As a matter of fact, the socioeconomic-historical reading of the Bible began in the West, but it yielded fruits in Asia.

Many other Asian theologians use this socioeconomic-historical method elsewhere. This method is important to them because Asian theologies are not mere academic work. They aim at practice outside the fence of the Church and embrace every realm of human life where the dominion of God reaches.

## 2. The Problems

We discussed the characteristics of Asian theologies and readings of the Bible above. Now let us examine their problems.

### Problem of Syncretism

Because most of the Asian countries are multi-religious societies, Christianity in those countries is able to reform itself through interactive dialogue with them and also through mutual criticism. That may bring forth a reformed and more developed Christianity which will be an improvement over Western Christianity. But on the other hand, the contact with other traditional religions can lead Asian Christianity to syncretism. Enculturation or indigenization is a desirable thing. Yahwism in Israel and Christianity have been enculturated for a long time up to the present. But syncretism is prohibited both in Yahwism and Christianity, as we can see in the Bible and in the history of the Church. Because enculturation and syncretism have many similarities, although scholars define them in many different ways, they could be confused. The most notable characteristic of syncretism is ㉠the unification of the god㉠s world㉠ (die Einheit der Goetterwelt). Mensching said ㉠unification of god㉠s world㉠ is achieved through identifying one㉠s own gods with other foreign gods.<sup>6)</sup> For example, the assertion that ㉠Jesus is Christ; but not only him. Rama, Krishna, Ishvara, Purusha, Tathagata are also Christ㉠,<sup>7)</sup> or ㉠the oriental religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Shamanism, Chondo-kyo, Daechong-kyo and Hinduism are surrounding the universal Christ with equality without any differentiation,<sup>㉠8)</sup> is what syncretism insists on. It is all right for

feminist theology to refer to Asian goddesses<sup>9</sup> liberated character for their liberation movement. But, if feeling regret at the absence of goddess in Christianity, they add a goddess and try to worship a goddess alongside Jesus, then that would mean syncretism.

#### Problem of Canonicity

In Asian readings of the Bible, there is a challenge to the canonicity of the Bible. The canonicity of the Bible comes under challenge. Ahn Byung-Mu says he cannot accept the canonicity of the Bible. The reason is that <sup>10</sup>the canon became the canon not because it is the truth, but because the Church authority chose only these 66 books among other books.<sup>9</sup>

Suh Nam-Dong does not deny the <sup>11</sup>canonicity<sup>10</sup> of the Bible and calls the Bible <sup>12</sup>canon.<sup>10</sup> But he prefers to call the Bible a <sup>13</sup>point of reference,<sup>11</sup> or <sup>14</sup>reference book.<sup>11</sup> It would be a big obstacle if we do not accept the canonicity of the Bible. Asian Christians believe in the canonicity of the Bible. We cannot say they are wrong. It is unwise if we give them an obstacle which would make them stumble.

It is no exaggeration to say that the history of Christianity is a history of interpretation of the Bible. In many cases the same text of the Bible has been differently interpreted in different periods and by different persons. This can happen even if we agree with the canonicity of the Bible. So without saying the irritative word that we reject the canonicity of the Bible, we have the possibility of interpreting the Bible anew in Asian theology.

Ahn Byung-Mu's insistence on denying the canonicity of the Bible arises not only from his critical viewpoint of itself, but also from his discontent with the way in which the Bible was interpreted by the traditional Churches and theologians. Therefore, instead of denying the canonicity of the Bible we should just correct the wrong interpretations of the Bible.

Most Asian people, including Koreans, read the scriptures of the Asian religions, especially of the religions they believe in, with great respect. For Asian people, doubting the religious scriptures could not happen nor even be imagined. They read the religious scriptures with complete trust and without doubting them. If they cannot understand the scriptures they find the reasons in their own lack of ability and try to read them again and again instead of doubting or mistrusting them. With this same attitude, Christians in Korea read the Bible as canon with respect and trust. Asian theology should respect such a traditional faithful attitude to the Scriptures.

According to Suh Nam-Dong, <sup>15</sup>references<sup>12</sup> or <sup>16</sup>reference books<sup>12</sup> include Church history and Korean Minjung tradition besides the Bible. Unlike the Bible the Minjung traditions are diverse in their contents and value orientations. Therefore, they are inconsistent in many cases and some of them are even contradictory to the Bible.

We cannot say that all the Minjung traditions which are either contradictory or against the Bible are not always right. We need a standard to discern, judge and evaluate the Minjung traditions. I think the Bible is the standard, i.e., canon. In this sense I think the Bible is a book on a different level from the Minjung traditions. If we do not admit such a standard (canon), we may fall into the confusion of values. The canonicity of the Bible has another challenge in Asia. It arises from the multi-scriptural reading of the Bible. Of course multi-scriptural reading of the Bible can play a positive role for Asian Christians as mentioned above. I agree with its role and necessity. But I just want to point out that there is a possibility of damaging the canonicity of the Bible in the insistence of multi-scriptural reading of the Bible. While Archie C. C. Lee in Hong Kong insists on cross-textual reading of the Hebrew Scripture, he says that no one text, be it biblical text or Asian religious text, should hold absolute sway over the other text nor should the other text be suppressed or silenced.<sup>12)</sup> A lot of Asian theologians agree with the insistence of Archie C. C. Lee. Let us pose a question in the face of such insistence. What should we do when the thoughts of the Bible and the Asian Scriptures are against each other? Should we suspend value judgement in such case? Should we endorse both or repudiate both? If we read the Bible and the Asian Scriptures without any decisive standard of value judgement, we would fall into the error of the equivalent relativism or the eclectic pluralism of post-modernism. We need a standard (canon) to prevent such confusion of value judgement. I think that standard is the Bible. If we do not admit the canonicity of the Bible and its authority over other religious Scriptures in Asia, we cannot achieve our expected purpose in the reading of the Bible.

#### The Problem between Particularity and Universalism

Minjung theology, Dalit theology and Buraku theology started as specific theologies for the particular classes and were intended to be particular theologies. Of course, a special theology has to be continued until it solves the sufferings and problems which the special class has undergone for thousands of years, until now. But the Asian theologies should not remain as special theologies for the specific classes. Even though Asian theologies started as particular theologies for specific classes, they should aim at becoming a universal theology.

After hearing my lectures on Minjung theology students used to ask me, **뭘**Is Minjung theology only for Minjung?**뭘**, **뭘**Can**뭘**t non-Minjung be saved?**뭘**, **뭘**Can**뭘**t the rich be saved?**뭘**, **뭘**Isn**뭘**t Minjung theology too exclusive and partisan?**뭘**I think these are not questions asked only regarding Minjung theology. These questions are not only addressed to the Minjung theology but also with regards to all specific theologies, i.e., Dalit theology, Buraku theology, Black theology, Feminist theology etc. Asian specific theologies could answer such questions. Minjung theology in Korea should develop a theology which includes the salvation not only of Minjung

but also of non-Minjung. Dalit theology in India should develop a theology which includes the salvation not only of the Dalit but also the non-Dalit and likewise, the Buraku theology should develop a theology which includes the salvation not only of the Buraku but also the non-Buraku. Furthermore, Asian theology should develop a theology which covers the salvation of people all over the world. The salvation is not limited to a specific class. God has a plan to save people all over the world (John 3:16). Asian theologies should understand such an intention of God and develop theologies befitting this.

In relation to the partisanship of Asian theologies there is yet another problem. Asian theologians and activists tend to create ghettos unnecessarily. I think it is unwise from the strategical point of view. As Jesus says, **He who is not against us is on our side** (Mark 9:40). If non-Minjung want to participate in the Minjung movement, they should accept non-Minjung and carry on the Minjung movement together. If the non-Dalit want to join with the Dalit movement towards abolition of discrimination against Dalit, then the Dalit should accept them as friends and work together. In the same way, if non-Buraku want to join with the Buraku theology and the movement for the abolition of Buraku discrimination out of good will, then the Buraku should accept them and work together without hesitation. The feminist movement should accept men, not as enemies, but as supporters and solidifiers. Theologians and activists of specific movements should not regard people who do not belong to them as enemies and expel them. Otherwise those theologies and movements will become ghettos for minority theologians and activists, and in that process lose the power needed for such theological movements. Those who do not belong to the specific class, Dalit or Buraku, could become solidifiers and participate in both the liberation and theological movements together. In the Bible, in the history of the Church and in human history we can find ever so many such solidifiers of Minjung. Asian theology, in the long run should aim at the reconciliation community ultimately. In this reconciliation community anti-Minjung, suppressor and exploiter should give up their wrong deeds and participate in it together. For that sake, specific theologians and activists should accept solidifiers who understand their movements and form a common front first. Asian theological movements should exhibit broad mindedness and embrace everyone. In the Asian theological movements there are signs to form ghettos and it is accompanied by some evil influences already. We should be cautious about it.

#### Using the Bible in One-sidedness

Since Asian theologies started as partisan theologies, they liked to refer to select biblical texts with similar characteristics. We cannot say that such usage of the Bible is wrong. But in Asian theologies they tend to stick to their own theologies and defend them by using only a few chosen preferred texts. On the other hand they neither like to use the rest of the Bible nor deny some part of it even as time

is passing by. As a result, they just stay as specific contextual theologies, having come to a standstill, and unable to develop into an universal theology.

In future, Asian theologies could and should explain their own theologies (Minjung theology, Dalit theology, Buraku theology) by using all parts of the Bible. Theology which could be supported only by some parts of the Bible and not by the whole text of the Bible cannot go far enough.

Asian theologies started as specific theologies in specific situations, but they have the potential to become universal theologies which can embrace not only special classes but also all the people in the world. From now on Asian theologians should not give up nor mar the specific theologies, but at the same time they should try to develop an universal theology by using all parts of the Bible.

#### Problem of Minjung Messianism

✠Minjung is Messiah✠ is a theme, which among the Asian theologies, Korean Minjung theology insists on in particular. I find one of the Dalit theologians has similar thought.<sup>13)</sup> Among the Minjung theologians, Prof. Ahn Byung Mu insisted on this theme very strongly, and some of the second generation of Minjung theologians have the same opinion. Korean traditional churches do not accept such a thought. Hence, they reject it strongly, and close the door to Minjung theology.

At first, Minjung Churches accepted this Minjung-messianism but later, from experience they found it an obstacle for the church. So they turned their back on that theory. Even Jürgen Moltmann who was very hospitable to Minjung theology raised an objection to this thought. Many others have also raised similar objections to Minjung Messianism. I too raised an objection to it in a seminar with Ahn Byung Mu way back in 1993. My contention was and is that ✠Jesus is Minjung✠ is right, but ✠Minjung is Messiah✠ cannot be found in the New Testament. Professor Suh Nam-Dong prefers to say, ✠Minjung do the ✠role✠ of Messiah✠ rather than ✠Minjung is Messiah✠.✠ I think Suh Nam-Dong's opinion is better.

Including Minjung theology, all Asian theologies agree that the suppressed poor Minjung are the subject of history and have the power to change history. ✠Minjung is Messiah✠ was also a theological slogan raised by experiencing the power of Minjung in the course of the democratization movement in the 1970s and 80s. I understand what the slogan meant in such a context. Although the affirmation, ✠Minjung is Messiah✠ could be agreed upon as a slogan in the non-Christian Minjung movement, it could not be justified as a theological affirmation within the Church. This opinion is expressed not only by those who are against Minjung theology, but also those who have affection for Minjung theology.

We agree, the role of the suppressed Minjung has infinite potential and forms the main stream in history. But Minjung is not Jesus, the messiah himself. If we insist on that theory further, such theology will not enter the Church and so cannot change the Church. It is clear that this kind of theology lost its position as a Church theology. Theory has no connection with the Church. And that means we

cannot play the role to change society nor history. That is important because nobody else but Christians are interested in Minjung theology. After all, unlike the 1970s and 80s, nowadays the place of Minjung theology in the 90s, is not the common Minjung place; but the Church itself. The theology which cannot find acceptance in the Church and is not concerned with the Church cannot survive. In this way Minjung theology should be the theology of the Church, and should be the theology which the Church can accept. So we should not say **민중**Minjung is the messiah**민중** but **민중**Minjung is a messiah**민중** which means that Minjung do the part of messiah. That is more biblical and realistic.<sup>14)</sup>

If Dalit theology says, **민중**Dalit is the messiah**민중** or Buraku theology say, **민중**Buraku people is messiah**민중**, such a theology will be far from the Church and will lose its dynamic power of changing both the Church and the history. The theology which is far from the Church, the theology which lost its place in the Church, eventually, loses its life.

## Objectives

### Strengthen the Theology for Church Ministry

Asian theology must be a theology for the Church. In the 1970s and 80s Minjung theology did its role in democratization and in the human rights movement in Korea. At that time the audience of Minjung theology included not only Christians but also other general Minjung. People used the Minjung Church as a place for the Minjung movement. But in the 90s when the civil government was established and the Minjung movement succeeded, somehow, almost all the Minjung left the Church. Pastors in Minjung churches did not try to convert them into Christians, but were satisfied with the success of the Minjung movement itself. But the heart of these pastors in Minjung churches became too lonely and empty after the people in Minjung movement and labor movement left. Under this experience pastors tried to make a gathering Church instead of a spreading Church. They tried to do ministry according to Minjung theology to make the Church into a gathering Church. But after time passed they found out that Minjung theology is a good theology for society but not for the Church itself. So when these pastors faced some troubles, they tried to find out a solution in traditional theology or method of ministry practiced by the traditional Church and tried to listen to it. Pastors in the Minjung churches asked the Minjung theologians to make a Minjung theology for the church. But Minjung theologians could not fulfil that request until now.

One of the Minjung Church pastors, Ro Changsik, says lately in his article, **민중** Objectives of Minjung Theology from the Ministry of Minjung Church**민중** that **민중** Minjung theology is not for running the Church. But we have been trying to apply it to the Church thoughtlessly. It needs to be a theology for Minjung in the church, and if Minjung theology is interested in the growth of church they need to extend

the area, such as self-reflection, praying, healing, inner-satisfaction and sanctification.

This requirement is one of the main objectives of Minjung theology, and I think this will be the same for Dalit theology and Buraku theology as well, because they have the same character. Asian theologies should be theologies not just only for the church. As we know well, Asian theologies are for society as their primary character. But if they want to be theologies for society, they have to be theologies for the Church first. The reason is that the people who work for society come from the Church. Non-christians outside the Church do not have an interest in theology. So, we need to realize the paradox that Minjung theology must be a theology for the Church and at the same time, it has to be a theology for society.

#### Strengthening Feminist Theology

Minjung theology always had a concern for women who are Minjung among Minjung and talked about their pains and aspiration for liberation from their pains. Feminist theology in Korea has acknowledged that it was influenced by Minjung theology directly and indirectly. But Minjung theology did not contribute much for the development of Feminist theology. Minjung theology and Feminist theology did not work together within a fence. Feminist theology in Korea is separated from Minjung theology and is actively involved in the women's liberation movement with other organizations. These two theologies have a lot of things in common; yet it is very unfortunate that Feminist theology and Minjung theology have to be separated. Let me briefly list the criticism of Feminist theologians in Korea about Minjung theology.

1. Minjung theology usually mentions Minjung but it does not make sufficient note of the reality of women nor does it adequately acknowledge the sacrifice of women in the history of male centered society.
2. Minjung theology failed to read the Bible from the perspective of women (who are Minjung among Minjung) and the man-oriented text in the Bible provided no scope for it.

I think such critical comments of the feminists are not just voiced only to Minjung theology. In India Dalit woman theologian did the same criticism in the case of Dalit theology.<sup>15)</sup> In future, Asian theologies need to show more attention to women's problems and take initiatives to articulate feminist concerns in their theological task.

#### Strengthening Theology of Spirituality

Asian theologies need to develop a theology of spirituality. Spirituality in Asian theologies including Minjung theology used to be interpreted as democratization movement, human-rights movement, labor movement and abolition of discrimination



movement. These developments in the theology of spirituality were rebounding against the Asian Church, especially the Korean Church, which had laid emphasis on the spirituality of the Day of Pentecost and had pursued an exclusive, flexible and church-centered spirituality. In addition, it pointed out one of the ideological solutions to heal and recover the convention.

This liberal spirituality movement brought many positive consequences. But the theology of spirituality should not stay only within the liberation movement. There is another dimension. One such spirituality is stated in Acts 2, which is the spirituality of the Day of Pentecost, and the other is in 1 Corinthians 12. I agree that there are some parts that have been distorted in interpretation. But what I am trying to say is that the spirituality of the Day of Pentecost is not the same as that one.

The prophets used to have the experiences of seeing God. Elijah encountered God on Mount Horeb. Isaiah, before he was called, had an experience of meeting God seated on a throne in heaven and having his sins forgiven (Isaiah 6:1-13). Jeremiah experienced ecstasy and saw a vision (Jeremiah 4:19-26), and Ezekiel captured by God's spirit saw the vision of the reconstruction of Israel. The prophets prayed enthusiastically (1 Samuel 12:23, Amos 7:1-6, Jeremiah 7:16, Isaiah 37:4, 56). Examples like this are easy to find in the Bible. The prophets who experienced God and received God's spirit impeached immoral kings, proclaimed liberation of the Minjung and prophesied the future of their folk and the world. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus in the form of a dove when he was baptized. Also, Jesus exhorted us to pray for the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit. Peter and Paul were the very men (Acts 4: 8, 13:9) filled with the Holy Spirit. The spirituality of Pentecostal experience and the spirituality of liberation are not contrary things. But the Korean Church just allowed it to be distorted.

Minjung theology and the other Asian theologies need to get that distorted relation in order. Strengthening the theology of spirituality on this biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit is essential to become a theology for the church, as we already pointed out. The spirituality of liberation alone is not enough for the Church. It is impossible to run the Church even if we keep telling about the spirituality of liberation for 365 days. In the Church we need something more than the spirituality of liberation. In order to take part in the liberation movement or any other social movement continuously, we need the spiritual experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit of the Day of Pentecost.

#### Strengthening Theology of Ecology

These days it is not a new fact to say that the earth is in crisis. There is nothing but pollution such as of the air, water, river, sea and soil everywhere. We can hear the groaning of nature everywhere, as Paul said in Romans 8:18-22. Until now Asian theology focused on the liberation of people who were suppressed and had

lost their human rights. But now, it is time we seriously take care of the preservation and liberation of nature. As a writer, I regard the dying nature as a sort of Minjung. Nature can feel suffering and tears with oppression and extortion. We must make haste to rescue it. If other living creatures cease to exist on earth, neither can we, the human beings. If they do not survive, neither do people. So, the liberation movement for the oppressed people and protection and preservation movement for nature and all its creatures would be directly the same as those for the people. Until now some Asian theologians have shown interest in and have written a few essays on life theology but it does not take a big part in Asian theology. From now on this part needs to given urgent attention both in terms of concern and study.

#### Strengthening solidarity among the Asian theologies

As stated above, Asian theologies have some merits and specific characteristics which Western theology does not have. If we could overcome those problems we discussed above and duly develop further, then the Asian theologies can become anew with the ability to reform and transform both the Asian Church and society. Besides, Asian theologies can reform and renew the World Church. Asian theologies will be able to play a leading role for the Church all over the world. We need a second religious reformation. The churches in Europe are becoming empty and loosing their vitality. The Church in Islamic countries is being suppressed by Islamic power. The Church all over the world is in crisis. There seems to be a very dark future for the Church in the world. In such a depressed time, it is encouraging to see Asian theologies making a new vivid wind in the world. If Asian theologies want to reform the Church in the world and make it alive and active, they need to build very close relationships and get together to do that mission. Asian theologies such as Minjung theology, Dalit theology and Buraku Theology have hitherto managed to articulate and develop their own theories to solve their respective problems without any close communication and connection with one another. So they did not take any keen interest in other Asian theologies nor did they look at other Asian theologies as partners. But through the consultation in India in 1997 and the consultation in Korea in 1998 we have got to know other Asian theologies and so could have concern for other Asian theologies. I can say that we are fortunate to have this interaction for the further development of Asian theologies. Now I suggest three proposals in order to make our interest deeper and develop a theology which provide scope for mutual learning and helping one another.

1. Continuous theological interchange
2. Annual publications of journal of Asian theology

### 3. Building the network.

14) V. Devasahayam says  $\text{the Messianic character of the oppressed}$ , in: Reading the Bible from Dalit Perspective: A Case Study, unpublished paper. Fr. Maria Arulraja says too  $\text{the Dalits...evolve new messianic role of emancipating the oppressed}$  Dalit Spirituality and Holy Spirit, unpublished paper.

15) Elizabeth Joy,  $\text{A Critique of Dalit Christian Theology from a Feminist Perspective}$ , in Minjung-Dalit Theologians Dialogue Consultation in Madras 1997, p. 13, 18, 22, 25.