

Post-modern Interpretation of Ham Sokhon's *Minjung* Pacifism¹⁾

Jiseok Jung

1. Introduction

This essay explores the post-modern characteristics of Ham Sokhon's *minjung* pacifism in terms of the *minjung* democracy, the global *minjung* nationalism, anti-statism(the global *minjung* community) and the nonviolent pacifism. Ham Sokhon was the great thinker of peace in the twentieth century Korea.²⁾ First of all, we deal with Ham Sokhon's idea of the *minjung* as a foundational idea of his *minjung* pacifism.

2. *Minjung* Pacifism

1) Ham Sokhon's Idea of *Minjung*

Ham Sokhon's idea of the *minjung* was first expressed at his witnessing the suffering of Korean people under the Japanese imperial oppression in 1930s.

In general, the *minjung* meant the ordinary people at grass-roots level, as opposed to the elite or rulers, but Ham Sokhon reinterpreted the *minjung* in terms of their religious and historical significance. He applied the meaning of Christ's redemptive suffering on the Cross to the history of the suffering Korean nation. His Christian interpretation of Korean history saw the suffering of the Korean nation as an example of how suffering like Christ's could be seen as redemption for the sins of the world. In this regard, the *minjung* were understood not only as the historically suffering people but also as the redemptive people for the sinful world. Ham Sokhon said: 'the closer to the minjung, the stronger the movement of salvation becomes.'

1) This essay was presented at the XXII World Congress of Philosophy in Seoul, 2008.

2) Kim Sungsoo, a writer of a biography of Ham Sokhon, describes Ham as follows: "Ham Sokhon was one of Asia's most important voices for democracy and non-violence during the 20th century. He lived from 1901 to 1989." *Ham Sok Hon: Voice of the People and Pioneer of Religious Pluralism in Twentieth Century Korea*(Seoul: Samin Books,2001), p. 5.

The *minjung* are not simply the ruled and oppressed but the history-makers. This is a core message of Ham's idea of the *minjung*.³⁾ He distinguished the *minjung* from the various expressions such as proletariat, *In-min* as an expression of class equality by North Korean Communists, *Kungmin* used by South Koreans, *Simin* as citizen. He wanted to use the *minjung* as a trans-ideological notion as the more appropriate term in an age of democracy. Therefore he reinterpreted the *minjung* as the history-makers and the prime movers of a new history and the people of dignity with divinity. In this respect, Ham Sokhon's idea of the *minjung* was completely different from that of the powers who regarded the *minjung* as the ignorant and selfish. The powers saw the *minjung* as the object of education and ruling, but Ham Sokhon insisted that the powers distorted the consciousness of the *minjung* and therefore should be educated by the *minjung*.

Ham Sokhon's idea of the *minjung* is based on a religious ground.⁴⁾ He believed in God's presence in the *minjung*. This belief brings a firm base to the dignity of the *minjung* who have hitherto been treated as slaves or things by the ruling classes. The *minjung* are the messengers who convey the truth of God into contemporary history. Ham Sokhon's idea of the *minjung* provided a fundamental source to his political and historical thoughts: the *minjung*'s history and sovereignty with which are dealt in detail later. Ham Sokhon's belief in the *minjung* was not based on their knowledge and intelligence but rather on their historical and religious existential significance.

The renewed term, *minjung*, appeared as a core idea envisioning a new era, reveals Ham's post-modern characteristic. He said: 'Throughout history the privileged class has used several usages of '*minjung*' to rule the people. Therefore, those who want to learn from

3) Ham Sokhon, *Ham Sokhon Chonjip 4*[*The Complete Works of Ham Sokhon 4*](Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993), 133.

4) Jiseok Jung, *Ham Sokhon's Pacifism and the Reunification of Korea*(Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 162-166.

history should not use the old terms. Revolution needs new ideas and the new ideas come out of new terms.'⁵⁾

2) *Minjung* Pacifism

Ham Sokhon's *minjung* pacifism is grounded on his religious belief and historical experience which the *minjung* love peace and abhor war.

First, Ham Sokhon believed that God is present in the *minjung*. Based on this belief of '*minjung* divinity', Ham Sokhon developed the ideas of the *minjung*'s immortality, conscience and goodness, which provided spiritual sources to his idea of the *minjung* pacifism.⁶⁾ Ham Sokhon understood the *minjung* as being in possession of a divine aspect, for instance, conscience. Ham Sokhon said: 'when the *minjung* live by conscience spontaneously peace is realized'. Trusting the *minjung* is the tap root of Ham's idea of the *minjung* for he believed in the *minjung*'s inherent goodness. As the *minjung* recognize themselves as immortal, they naturally become pacifists who can kill or assault nobody because they are immortal. The idea of the *minjung* divinity upholds the human rights and life of the *minjung*, and in this regard is closely connected with the idea of the *minjung* humanism. The *minjung* perceive the connection by themselves and try to make a cooperation and solidarity to each other, and in doing so become peacemakers. Nonviolent peace is a natural manifestation of the *minjung*'s true nature.

Second, the *minjung* oppose war and militarism because they have always been victims of them.⁷⁾ Meanwhile political and economic powers distort the *minjung*'s peacefulness and provoke a negative human nature in the *minjung*'s heart to make war between the *minjung*. The *minjung*'s involvement in warfare is only the result of politicians' manipulation of the *minjung*. In particular, politicians

5) Ham Sokhon, *ibid.*, 206.

6) Jiseok Jung, *ibid.*, 166-170.

7) A. J. Muste, 'Pacifism and Class War', Walter Wink ed., *Peace Is the Way* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 4-7.

exploited a nationalist sentiment and national security and patriotism to manipulate the *minjung*. In this regard, Ham Sokhon perceived that nationalism and statism were main obstacles of the *minjung* pacifism. Minjung democracy, global nationalism and anti-statism are considered as core elements of Ham's minjung pacifism.

3. Post-modern Characteristics of the *Minjung* Pacifism

1) *Minjung* Sovereignty (*Minjung* Democracy)

Ham Sokhon maintained the idea of the '*minjung* sovereignty' which the *minjung* were the subject of politics. This is a core idea of the *minjung* democracy in which the political powers could not distort and manipulate the *minjung*. Ham insisted that the *minjung* democracy was an essential way to prevent the war policy made by the warlike politicians and military industrialists. In this regard the *minjung* democracy is an essential part of Ham's *minjung* pacifism. Contemporary *minjung* are no longer the ignorant people of the past but the people morally enlightened by their own efforts. Therefore, the former concept of politics as top-down rule needs to change to the politics of the *minjung* self-determination, grassroots government by the *minjung* from the central authority. This shift denotes a characteristic of post-modern politics revealed in Ham's *minjung* pacifism.

2) Global *Minjung* Nationalism

Ham criticized a nationalistic sentiment as a main obstacle to distort the *minjung*'s consciousness and to cause war and violence. He perceived that the resistant nationalism against imperial powers could be a substantial way to sustain a national community. But he believed that blind and exclusive nationalism is an obstacle to a historical progress towards the minjung pacifism. On the other hand he stressed a national independence and a minjung nationalism to contribute to the peace of humanity in the world. In this respect, we may call the nationalism, which Ham advocated, as the global minjung nationalism. This new type of nationalism including the nation, the minjung and the world could be an appropriate model for the globalized complex national society in which various ethnics and nations live together in

transboundary. Many warfares between ethnics and nations exploded in the era of the Post-Cold War requests a peace-centered nationalism beyond a hostile nationalism. In this respect, the global minjung nationalism which is an essential part of Ham's minjung pacifism provides us to think about a true globalization which the minjung as the suffering people are able to be main actors and prime movers as peacemakers.

3) Anti-Statism (Global *Minjung* Community)

Ham Sokhon saw that modern states were military states which they were necessarily relied on the military power. He considered imperialism as an example of a military state to oppress weak and small countries and to destroy the peace of the *minjung*. Ham Sokhon defined statism as the ideology of the militaristic and nationalistic nation-state. Statism brings about the near total dominance of the state by the central government authority as well as warfare.⁸⁾ The First and Second World Wars were imperialistic wars which entailed enormous sacrifices of the minjung. The core need of statism is power. Peace is seen to be about an equilibrium of power. Ham sokhon criticized this kind of peace as morally the poorest way and an inborn limitation of the modern state.

Ham Sokhon realized that statism deeply resided in the mind of politicians and even in the mind of the minjung.⁹⁾ There is a symbiotic relationship between statism and the rulers, which are incompatible with the freedom of the minjung. Statism provokes selfishness, separatism and discrimination in order to govern the minjung. Rulers could easily manipulate the minjung in the name of patriotism. In particular, patriotic enthusiasm has often brought about warfare, genocide and oppression of individual freedom. An ideology of national security has been used to justify a human-right violation, a military dictatorship and a military buildup. Ham Sokhon became disillusioned about state power through his experiences of Japanese

8) Peter Brock and Nigel Young, *Pacifism in the Twentieth Century*(New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 6.

9) Jiseok Jung, *Ibid.*, 170-174.

colonialism, Communist rule in North Korea, and a military dictatorship in South Korea. He thought that statism was the most serious spiritual obstacle to the minjung pacifism.

Ham Sokhon believed that statism was an old-fashioned ideology in the era of cosmopolitanism and that the minjung could overcome statism and violence through their mutual solidarity. He stressed cosmopolitanism of which the United Nations was an embodiment of an alternative to statism. In thus rejecting statism he envisioned a global minjung community where all nations could coexist peacefully. To resolve the problems of energy, food, environment and nuclear weapons which we are facing today, international cooperation at global level beyond statism is necessary. Ham's idea of a global minjung community could be considered to be a philosophical contribution to the new global tasks.

4. The *Minjung's* Nonviolent Pacifism and Struggle for Liberation

Liberation of the oppressed people could be a necessary pre-condition for the peace of the minjung because liberation could bring about peace. In this argument, violence is justified as inevitable. The liberation theories have advocated this idea that the minjung's violence for their liberation is just and necessary.

Ham's minjung pacifism, however, is different from the liberation theories. He advocated 'peace by peaceful way' and denied the use of violence for the liberative peace. This firm conviction is grounded on Ham's historical experiences. He said: 'I never seen that the minjung went into peace by the struggle for liberation in history. If the minjung use violence for their liberation, peace is impossible and true liberation as well.'¹⁰⁾

Ham Sokhon's nonviolent peace-based liberation recognizes an enemy as a main actor to transform a social evil. This means a

10) Pyongmu An, *Minjung Sagon Sogui Kuristo[Christ in Minjung Event]*(Seoul:KTI, 1989), 108.

transformation of our thinking about an enemy. An adversarial dichotomy between friend and enemy is gone. An enemy is treated as an equal human being with conscience by which we can believe in the human goodness in evildoers and in turn it saves those same evildoers. The enemy is not defeated by my actions but changed by their consciences. This is Ham's belief and a core idea of the minjung pacifism which provides an answer to the efficacy of peace for the social transformation.

Jiseok Jung (Ph.D, Peace Studies and Theology).

Director of Korea Christian Peace Institute(KCPI)

pecom2003@yahoo.co.kr