The Influence of the *Donghak* on the Emergence and Task of Minjung Theology

Introduction

Minjung[1] theology is "a contextual theology of the suffering people in Korea."[2] It attempts to contextualize the Christian message to the Korean context. Thus, minjung theologians consider Korean history as an important dimension in its theological reflection. Nam Dong Suh says, "Korean history is one of the paradigms of Korean minjung theology."[3] Those who have studied Korean history are familiar with its oppression, poverty, and affliction imposed upon the Korean people due to frequent invasions by foreign powers, as well as the political oppression under tyrannical rulers. In history, Korea had experienced brief periods of peace and autonomy. According to Sok Hon Ham, throughout the history, there were foreign invasions every thirty years.[4] One of the reasons for this is that geopolitically, the Korean peninsula occupies an important strategic position in northeast Asia and is surrounded by three

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[1] *Minjung* means "mass of people." However, in minjung theology, the term minjung indicates a common people who act contrary to rulers. See Sung-joon Park, "Re-examining A Theology of Minjung: In Pursuit of a New Horizon in the Understanding of 'Minjung,'" in *Vitality of East Asian Christianity: Challeges to Mission and Theology in Japan*, ed. Hidetoshi Watanabe, Keiichi Kaneko, and Megumi Yoshida (Delhi, India: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 2004), 267-299.

[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 252.

[3] Nam Dong Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 167.

[4] Byung Mu Ahn, "Ssialgwa Pyonghwasasang [Seed and the Thought of Peace]," in *Ham Sok Hon Sasangul Chajaso [In Search of the Thought of Ham Sok Hon]*, ed. The Ham Sok Hon Memorial Foundation (Seoul: Samin, 2001), 61.

major powers: China, Russia, and Japan. Because of this strategic position, the Korean peninsula has served as a battleground for its powerful neighbors in times of war. The general experience of the Korean people in this whole process has been that of the "Queen of Suffering."[1] This experience of suffering has given rise to a unique Korean feeling referred to as "han."[2]

As Korea's indigenous religion, the *Donghak* ("East Learning") movement rose and spread widely among the oppressed at the end of the *Chosun* dynasy. It advocated an egalitarian ethical practice on its doctrinal bases of *Innaechun* ("Humanity is Heaven"). Minjung theologians insist that the *Donghak* spirit was inherited by the minjung democratization movement in the 1970s and they adopted the spirit in order to find a biblical vision of God's will for social justice. They paid much attention to the *Donghak* message of egalitarianism and wanted to make the Christian faith relevant to concrete socio-political realities. Minjung theology emerged as some Korean theologians reflected on the historical situation and the relationship between their faith and their involvement in the struggle on behalf of the oppressed.

A Brief Sketch of Korean Religious Traditions

Because Korean history has evolved in a multi-religious milieu, one of the best ways to

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[1]Sok Hon Ham, *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, trans. E. Sang Yu (West Chester, PA: Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1985), 23.

[2]*Han* is the minjung's feeling of misery, agony, grudge, resentment, accumulated bitterness, and so forth. Like minjung, *han* is difficult to define. Minjung theologians contend that han comes from the evil structure of oppression. They argue that the gospel cannot be understood without knowing the han of the minjung. They have identified several elements that make up the Korean minjung experience of han: the foreign invasions, the oppression of the rulers, the chauvinistic Confucian laws and customs, and the practice of hereditary slavery in Korea. Park, "Re-examining A Theology of Minjung," 284; Nam Dong Suh, "Towards a Theology of *Han*," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 58-69. Cf. Kyung Sook Lee, "The Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation from the Perspective of Asian Christian Women: Recovering the Liberation-Tradition of Early Christianity in Korea," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard (London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 164-170.

understand the history is to study the various religions along with their implantation and development.[1] Korea is one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world; Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, as well as several other religious movements, coexist in Korea. Korean history is divided into six different periods.[2] Koreans trace their origins to the founding of Ancient *Chosun*, the period of prehistoric Dangun mythology.[3] The second period includes the Three Kingdoms: *Koguryo* (A.D. 37-668), *Baekje* (18 B.C.-A.D.660), and *Silla* dynasty (A.D. 57-932). In A.D. 668, *Silla* unified them all. Following the Unified *Silla*, Korea witnessed the rise and fall of two dynasties, the third and the fourth period—*Koryo* (932-1392) and *Chosun* (or Yi) dynasty (1392-1910). The fifth period was that of Japanese occupation (1910-1945), and the sixth and present period (1945-) is that of a divided Korea: North and South.[4]

Shamanism existed during the ancient periods before it was named Korea; Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced in the fourth century. Taoism was introduced in the seventh century by China, but it has never been a dominant religion in Korea. Until the fourth century A.D., shamanism was the only dominant religion of the Koreans. From the mid-fourth century to the end of the fourteenth

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[1]Cf. Carter J. Covell, *Korea's Cultural Roots* (Seoul: Hollym International Corp., 1982).

[2]Ung Kyu Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, Asian Thought and Culture, v. 50. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 12-13.

[3]Dangun, the forefather of the Korean race, is known as the one who established the Ancient *Chosun* in 2333 B.C. The Dangun myth explains the origin of the Korean race. The date of Korea's origin is controversial, but a date around 2300 B.C. is generally accepted. Historians say that Korea has been a nation for more than 4,300 years. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Korean race was linked with the people of Siberia and Mongolia as early as 3000 B.C. Woo-Keun Han, *The History of Korea*, trans. Kyung Sik Lee, ed. Grafton K. Mints (Seoul: Elyoo, 1970), 4-12.

[4]Djun Kil Kim, *The History of Korea* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 13-31; Ki-Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. Edward W. Wagner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 13-65; David Rees, *Korea: An Illustrated History-- from Ancient Times to 1945* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2001), 1-11. After its liberation in 1945, pre-negotiations between the allied nations, the Soviet Union, and the United States separated Korea into North and South.

century, Buddhism became the official state religion of the Three Kingdoms, Unified *Silla*, and the *Koryo* dynasty. During the *Chosun* dynasty, however, Confucianism took the place of Buddhism as the national religion. Before the coming of Protestant Christianity at the end of the *Chosun* dynasty,[1] the religious orientation of the Korean people could be described as the syncretistic mix of three major religious traditions: shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. As one Westerner observed, a Korean carries "a Confucian head, a Buddhist heart, and a Shamanistic belly."[2] At the end of the *Chosun* dynasty, Korean society was marked by the rise of the *Donghak* movement and the coming of Christianity.

The Rise of the *Donghak* and Its Main Doctrine

At the end of the *Chosun* dynasty, Korean society experienced great social and political upheaval. Je-Woo Choi, the founder of the *Donghak*, felt a calling to transform the contemporary social situation from its root cause by confronting the social injustice and political corruption.[3] Choi, a man of deep thought and insight, felt the "nearness of the end of the world."[4] Even though he believed that religion constituted the deepest fundamental needs of human beings, Choi considered the traditional religions "dead" since they were powerless to reform a corrupt society.[5] Accordingly, Choi first explored the

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[1]Roman Catholicism was introduced into Korea one century before Protestant Christianity came to Korea. However, because of its refusal to accept ancestral worship, the Confucian government issued an edict to ban the Catholic faith for over one century.

[2]David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, Commission on Theological Concerns, 1991), 107.

[3]Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, 18; Dong Shik Ryu, "Ch'ondogyo: Korea's Only Indigenous Religion," *Japanese Religions* 5, no. 1 (July 1967): 62-63; Benjamin B. Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1966), 7-8.

[4]Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, 18.

[5]Choi understood that Confucianism, which had been a strong supporter of the political and social status quo of the *Chosun* dynasty over five hundred years, was unable to correct the corruption of the society. He also believed

universal truth in the religious traditions of his time and then wandered and observed the world for several years. Through extensive study, Choi selectively integrated the essential features of the traditional religions and created the *Donghak*. Thus, the *Donghak* was in essence a syncretistic religion. For example, Choi took the ethics from Confucianism such as proper inter-human relationships; from Buddhism, the concept of heart cleansing and the respect of all things; from Taoism, the idea of immortality such as *jisang shinson*, "a Taoist hermit with supernatural powers on Earth"; and from shamanism, the liberating spirituality for the minjung.[1]

Choi's primary motivation in creating a new religion was to rescue people from their socio-political turmoil as well as their spiritual poverty. Sang Jin Ahn claims that Choi's starting point was the social situation of his day and his method of transforming the present social situation was in discovering a connection between past religious ideas and the present reality. Choi's teaching was summed up in the *Donghak*'s main doctrine *Innaechun*, which is translated—"Humanity is Heaven."[2] The concept of *Innaechun* is seen in the theory of *Jisang Chunguk*, "Heaven on Earth." In order to bring this about, Tuk-hwang Kim states, spiritual, national, and social enlightenment must proceed. The spiritual enlightenment involves individual liberation and changes in the idea of humans. The national enlightenment involves the liberation of every nation from foreign domination. The social enlightenment means the elimination of all obstacles that hinder progress in society.[3] Thus, the concept of *Innaechun* expresses the dignity and

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that Buddhism and Taoism had no spiritual power to save the people and the nation from the current turmoil. Sang Jin Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 46, 58.

[1]Wi Jo Kang, "Belief and Political Behavior in Ch'ondogyo," *Review of Religious Research* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1968): 39; Yong Choon Kim, *The Ch'ondogyo Concept of Man: An Essence of Korean Thought* (Seoul: Pan Korea Book Corporation, 1977), 114, 115; Jong Sun Noh, "Donghak and Liberation," *Ching Feng* 35, no. 3-4 (December 1992): 218, 219; Ryu, "Ch'ondogyo: Korea's Only Indigenous Religion," 76.

[2]Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 62-67.

[3]Tuk-hwang Kim, *Han'guk Sasangsa [The History of Korean Thought]* (Seoul: Han'guk Sasang Yon'gusa, 1963), 232-233.

equality of all people,[1] and its norms are "equality, freedom, and justice."[2] The ultimate thought of the *Donghak*, Woo-Keun Han states, draws the conclusion: "It envisioned an earthly paradise which should come into existence when the corrupt bureaucracy had been overthrown and the foreigners, with their disruptive ideas and their crude commercialism, had been driven away."[3]

Consequently, Choi viewed inequality as the main cause of widespread corruption among the different social strata in the Confucian *Chosun* dynasty. His goal was to dismantle inequality in all areas of social life. His way of tackling the ideology of the oppressive ruling class was "a radical reinterpretation of human nature."[4] Choi believed that when people came to realize their worth as human beings, they could be changed and then would change society.[5] On the doctrinal basis of *Innaechun*, Choi advocated an egalitarian ethic which served to shed a new light on the self-understanding of the people. The *Donghak* ideals of egalitarianism and social justice had great appeal to the oppressed populace,[6] and the *Donghak* was eventually embraced as Korea's indigenous religion.[7]

The *Donghak* Revolution of 1894

[1]Ryu, "Ch'ondogyo: Korea's Only Indigenous Religion," 77.

[2]Noh, "Donghak and Liberation," 223.

[3]Han, *The History of Korea*, 356-357.

[4]Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 66, 67. Choi's sincerity was seen in the way he set his slaves free: he made one of his maids his daughter-in-law, and the other his adopted daughter.

[5]Lee, Sang Taek. *Religion and Social Formation in Korea: Minjung and Millenarianism* (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 118.

[6]Ibid., 119.

[7]The *Donghak* was an effective transition for the people who had been shaped by shamanistic culture. The shamanistic faith was, Jong Sun Noh states, "incorporated as a positive and authentic religious experience of the socially discriminated, educationally deprived, and politically oppressed people." Thus, "shamanism in Donghak made Donghak a religion of the oppressed." ("Donghak and Liberation," 218, 219).

The *Donghak* movement culminated in the *Donghak* Revolution of 1894. It was February 15, 1894, when the peasants in Gobu, Cholla Province, revolted against the corrupt local aristocrats. Gobu was known as the most fertile land for rice production. Since the unequal treaty with Japan, the peasants were forced to sell their rice to Japan in cheaper price. The peasants gathered around Bong Joon Chun (1854-1895), one of the *Donghak* leaders. Chun "was strongly influenced by *Donghak* beliefs and principles."[1] He appealed for support to all *Donghak* leaders in the country, and some 600,000 followers joined the revolution. It quickly swept across the Cholla Province, the southern part of Korea, and beyond.[2]

The central government was greatly threatened and asked China to send its military. In June 1894, about three thousand Chinese soldiers came. As China became involved, Japan feared a Chinese monopoly in the Korean peninsula. So Japan also sent seven thousand soldiers. This resulted in the Sino-Japanese War, in which the Japanese defeated the Chinese army. The Japanese overcame the Korean government army and then turned against the *Donghaks*. Now the goal of the *Donghak* army shifted from economic and political reform to the expulsion of the Japanese. The *Donghak* army was attacked and crushed, and Bong Joon Chun, the leader of the revolution, was captured and executed at the end of 1894.[3]

This revolution was, Yong Choon Kim states, "the concrete expression of the spirit of *Innaechun*."[4] The *Donghak* belief instilled a revolutionary mindset in the oppressed, playing a critical role in the revolution[5] and the rise of a new government.[1] Significant aspects of the *Kab-O* Reform (a

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[1]Lee, *Religion and Social Formation in Korea*, 122.

[2]Kang, "Belief and Political Behavior in Ch'ondogyo," 41.

[3]See Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 67-69; Kang, "Belief and Political Behavior in Ch'ondogyo," 38-42; Lee, *Religion and Social Formation in Korea*, 120-127.

[4]Kim, *The Ch'ondogyo Concept of Man*, 113.

[5]Ryu, *Han'guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity]*, 103.

renovation of the political system) that occurred later in the same year were the following reforms: (1) a restructuring of the class system; (2) abolition of the slavery system; (3) abolition of the law that prevented widows from remarrying; and (4) abrogation of the national examination for government positions; among other reforms.[2]

The Influence of the *Donghak* on Minjung Theology

According to minjung theologians, the spirit of the *Donghak* was passed down to other minjung movements throughout the twentieth century in Korea, particularly the minjung democratization and human rights movements of the 1970s.[3] During the military dictatorship in the 1970s, minjung theologians reread the *Donghak* history while being expelled from their professorships or jailed for their involvement in protest for democratization and human rights. With careful analysis of the *Donghak* liberation ideology, minjung theologians attempted to discover a biblical vision of God's mission in the *Donghak* movement for justice.[4] The *Donghak* belief emphasizes the importance of the individual in relation to others within the society. Their concerns were social justice, protection of the nation, and security for the people.

The *Donghak* notion of salvation is concerned with both individual and social dimensions. The *Donghak*, Wi Jo Kang states, "never separated the individual from the society; rather the teaching emphasized the importance of the individual in relation to his fellowmen and his countrymen. For the

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[1]Ibid., 105-106.

[2]Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 70; Kim, *The Ch'ondogyo Concept of Man*, 113-114; Ryu, "Ch'ondogyo: Korea's Only Indigenous Religion," 75-76. See also Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 49-71; Wanne J. Joe, *A Cultural History of Modern Korea: A History of Korean Civilization* (Seoul: Hollym, 2000), 95-139, 216-250; Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 281-299.

[3]Chai Yong Choo, "A Brief Sketch of the Korean Christian History: From the Minjung Perspective," in *Theology of Korean Culture*, ed. The Theology of Korean Culture Society (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2002), 227, 228.

[4]Daniel J. Adams, "The Sources of Minjung Theology," *Taiwan Journal of Theology*, no. 9 (1987): 189-192.

disciple of Donghak, 'Any personal salvation is but a constituent element in social salvation. Salvation is the liberation of mankind from all man-inflicted suffering.'"[1] Consequently, the minjung theological movement of the 1970s "can trace its inspiration, in part, to the *Donghak* leaders' thinking."[2] The legacy of *Donghak* belief was an influence on the emergence of minjung theology. According to Daniel Adams, minjung theology has inherited the essence of the *Donghak*, such as minjung consciousness, the liberation movement, and a this-worldly view of social change.[3]

The Emergence of Minjung Theology

Korea's experiences of suffering in the twentieth century led some Korean theologians to discover a new spirit of inquiry regarding the Korean situation.[4] Their theological reflection would contribute greatly to the movements in minjung theology.[5] An awareness of minjung theology must begin with a consideration of the existing Korean Christianity as well as the current socio-political oppression. After the failure of the March First Independence Movement in 1919, the Korean church was severely persecuted during the period of Japanese colonial rule. This was because of the close connection between nationalistic and independent movements. In this situation, the conservatism within the Korean church, that emphasized personal and spiritual salvation with a strong eschatological expectation, grew strongly after 1919. Because of the Japanese persecution and the conservative tendency of the church,

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[1]Wi Jo Kang, "Indigenous Tradition of Korean Religions," *Sinhak Nondan [Theological Forum]* 14 (July 1980): 214.

[2]Noh, "Donghak and Liberation," 213.

[3]Adams, "The Sources of Minjung Theology," 187-189.

[4]Dong Shik Ryu, "Rough Road to Theological Maturity," in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 171.

[5]John C. England et al., eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*. Vol. 3. (Delhi; Quezon City; Maryknoll, NY: ISPCK; Claretian Publishers; Orbis Books, 2004), 540.

"Christianity began to lose its leading role in the society"[1] and "stayed passive in political matters for the last hundred years or so."[2] Theological conservatism was determined and reinforced by the theological direction of the early missionaries. Most missionaries believed in political neutrality, and the church stressed the importance of the separation between politics and religion.[3]

The 1920s, however, witnessed the rise of socialism and the occurence of liberal theology. In Korea, the social gospel was introduced by American missionaries, but Christian socialism was initiated mostly by Christian nationalistists.[4] When the Christian faith began to incline to its other-worldliness and lack of social concern and did not fulfill the Christian nationalists' desire to reform society, its place was taken by socialism.[5] Many Korean nationalists and young intellectuals in the Korean church were interested interested in the ideas and principles of socialism, along with those of the social gospel.[6] There has been a critical reassessment of the missionaries' efforts within the Korean church by liberal theologians. Liberal theologians have emphasized the human rights issues and stood for the poor and the oppressed. They contend, "The attempt of the missionaries was to spiritualize the Christian message and thus to depoliticize and even denationalize Korean Christianity. . . . The revival meetings set the subsequent tone of

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[1]Pong Bae Park, "The Encounter of Christianity with Traditional Culture and Ethics in Korea" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1970), 282.

[2]Andrew Eungi Kim, "Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea: A Sociological Survey," *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 4 (2002): 301.

[3]See Donald N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (Lanham, MD; New York, NY: University Press of America; Asia Society, 1986), 8-10, 39-40.

[4]Jin Kwan Kwon, "Minjung and Church in a Generation of Radicalism, 1920s-30s," in *Iljeha Han'guk Kidokkyowa Sahoijuui [Christianity and Socialism in Korea under Japanese Rule]*, ed. Heung-soo Kim (Seoul: The Institute for Korean Church History, 1992), 22.

[5]Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, 163.

[6]According to James S. Gale, Koreans were intensely aware of the spread of socialist doctrines after the failure of the March First Independence Movement. Richard Rutt, *James Scarth Gale and His History of the Korean People* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1972), 66.

Christianity in Korea as emotional, conservative, individualistic, and other-worldly."[1] Liberals believe it is a Christian duty to struggle for economic and social justice. When the Japanese forced the Presbyterian Seminary in Pyongyang to be closed in 1938, Jae Joon Kim, the godfather of liberal theology, left for Seoul in 1940 and founded the new "*Chosun* Theological Seminary." This was an effort to become liberated from the influence of conservative Presbyterianism.[2] With the liberation in 1945, this seminary became the cradle for the present Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (*Kijang*),[3] which became a prime exponent of minjung theology.[4]

Since the 1970s, such "dissenting elements within the church have been brewing a unique Korean theology,"[5] namely, minjung theology. In the view of minjung theologians, traditional Christianity has

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[1]David Kwang-sun Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 21.

[2]Donald N. Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity in South Korea," in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 94.

[3]In 1953, due to the emergence of liberal theology, the Presbyterian Church split into two streams, commonly known as the *Ki Dok Kyo* (Christ) Presbyterian Church (or Kijang, for short) and the *Ye Soo Kyo* (Jesus) Presbyterian Church (or Yejang, for short). The "Jesus" group is relatively more conservative, and the "Christ" group is more liberal in style and theology. The dividing lines between conservatives and liberals in Korea are their views on the Bible and their attitudes toward ecumenism. The *Ye Soo Kyo* (Jesus) Presbyterian Church views historical and critical study of the Bible as heretical and rejects the ecumenical movement and emphasizes evangelism and revival meetings for church growth. The *Ki Dok Kyo* (Christ) Presbyterian Church, however, accepts both of them and stresses the human rights issues. The framework of its thought is the participation in history, democratization, and social involvement. One of the representatives of this group is Nam Dong Suh. Ryu, "Rough Road to Theological Maturity," 171; David Kwang-sun Suh, "American Missionaries and a Hundred Years of Korean Protestantism," *International Review of Mission* 74, no. 293 (January 1985): 13.

[4]Jae Joon Kim's strain of Presbyterianism today is headquartered in the Hanshin Seminary. See Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity," 93-95; Sang-Bok Lee, *A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology from a Missiological Perspective*, Asian Thought and Culture, vol. 22 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 58-60; Ryu, "Rough Road to Theological Maturity," 168-169; idem, *Han'guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology]*, rev. ed. (Seoul: Jun Mang Sa, 2000), 183, 252, 282.

[5]Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*, 44.

been in favor of oppressors and ignored the social responsibility of defending the oppressed emphasizing salvation in an individual, spiritual, and other-worldly way.[1] Myung Soo Kim critically comments on this: "Most of the Korean churches blocked themselves to the unjust society and avoided the responsibility for the society, repeating the prosperity-oriented message as a unique method of salvation."[2] As a challenge to traditional conservative Christianity, minjung theology emerged largely as a result of "the experiences of the theologians who were involved in the Korean human rights movement and in the mission of the church with the lower echelon of Korean society, namely, the minjung."[3] It manifests itself in various theological themes such as the concept of minjung and han, soteriology, and biblical hermeneutics.[4]

The Contribution and Task of Minjung Theology

Minjung theologians opposed the dictatorial military regime and played a leading role in the movements for human rights and social justice in the 1970s. They believe that the traditional approach to salvation is powerless to transform the deep-seated social injustice built into the socio-economic and political systems in Korea. As a challenge to the existing traditional theology, minjung theology is not only an affirmation of the minjung traditions of liberation in Korean history, but also a theological product shaped by the turmoil of Korea's socio-political context. Minjung theology is the first attempt in the

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[1]Keun-Won Park, "Evangelism and Mission in Korea: A Reflection from an Ecumenical Perspective," *International Review of Mission* 74, no. 293 (January 1985): 56.

[2]Myung Soo Kim, "Haechejuuiwa Minjung Sinhak [De-Constructionism and Minjung Theology]," in *Minjung Sinhak Immun [Introduction to Minjung Theology]*, ed. The Institute of Minjung Theology (Seoul: Hanul, 1995), 204.

[3]Yong-Bock Kim, "Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement for the People," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 80.

[4]Paul Yunsik Chang, "Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours: The Sociopolitical Origins of Minjung Protestant Movements," in *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Bushwell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 204.

history of Korean theology to interpret Scripture from the socio-economic perspective, emphasizing the relevance of the relationship between theology and historical situations. Minjung theology's emphasis on the socio-economic and political dimensions of biblical interpretation as a significant correction has challenged the traditional theology to call attention to the contemporary socio-political and economic dimensions of sin and salvation. Its recognition of the wretchedness of the poor and the oppressed in the society is an important contribution to Korean theology.

Minjung theology, however, has some tasks to solve. It expresses the root of sin exclusively in social structures and fails to address the source of social evils. It emphasizes a high degree of social determinism and neglects the importance of individual autonomy. Thus, minjung theology continues to retain a one-sided view of theological issues, confining salvation within the bounds of the contemporary. This attitude can lead to a loss of balance. Just like the *Donghak* emphasizes the strong relationship between individual and society, minjung theology also needs to promote social change on the basis of personal salvation. The Bible emphasizes both personal salvation and social salvation. We are living in a growing society that is much changed compared with that of 1970s. The number of foreigners and immigrant laborers is increasing. Therefore, minjung theology aims to serve the oppressed in North Korea, immigrant laborers who are suffering from low wages and exploitation, as well as minorities and the weak. The *Donghak* spirit tried to achieve equal rights within the society on the basis of human dignity, and minjung theology should also try to transform the society through the power of the gospel. For that reason, minjung theology must build a comprehensive, scriptural soteriology. Evangelicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are good models for this. They regarded the gospel as inherently social as well as individual, and understood that the gospel demanded a comprehensive approach. Their concern was broader than soul saving, not only in terms of the poor but also in terms of the transformation of society. The early evangelical causes such as abolition of slavery and enforcement of temperance "are

noteworthy examples of the attempts to save both souls and society."[1] They were among the leading advocates of major changes in England and the United States.[2] John Wesley believed that personal faith is essential, but the evidence of faith should be a social and outward witness. Albert C. Outler says, "For Wesley, the essence of faith was personal and inward, but the evidence of faith was public and social. . . . The Christian Community must be committed to social reform. . . . The Word made *audible* must become the Word made *visible*."[3] Thus, Wesley's theology had a tremendous impact on social transformation in the eighteenth century in England. Wesleyanism not only contributed to the anti-slavery issue[4] but also saved

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[1]Vincent Bacote, "What Is This Life For? Expanding Our View of Salvation," in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 98. See also Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Smith, *Transforming the World?*

[2]Between 1900 and 1930, however, evangelical Christians retreated from their earlier social reform interests into an emphasis upon personal evangelism. Some scholars have labeled this shift as a "great reversal" which led to a distinct de-emphasis on matters of social concern. This change was a reaction to the social gospel of liberalism and the result of a rise of dispensational premillennialism. Focusing on revivalistic conversion as their major ministry, fundamentalists and evangelicals directed their soteriological concern toward the inner life and eternal matters. See David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelicalism Versus Social Concern* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972); Ed Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Edward E. Hindson, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981); Robert Webber, *The Secular Saint: A Case for Evangelical Social Responsibility* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979).

[3]Albert Cook Outler, *Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 22. Italics his. Moreover, Wesley demonstrated "a sociology of mission" that recognized that the gospel was proclaimed in society normally from the least to the greatest, not from the greatest to the least: "And in every nation under heaven we may reasonably believe God will observe the same order which he had done from the beginning of Christianity. 'They shall all know *me*,' saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least . . . but, 'from the least to the greatest.'" John Wesley, Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," § 19, *Sermon II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *Works*, 493-494; quoted in D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "'Let Us See Thy Salvation': What Did It Mean to Be Saved for the Early Evangelicals?" in *What Does It Mean to Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 49.

[4]Wesley and other evangelicals were opponents of slavery. With the conversion of elites such as William Wilberforce and other members of the so-called Clapham Sect, they acted in an organized way to effect change. Thus, the Abolition of Slavery Bill finally passed in 1807. Hindmarsh, "Let Us See Thy Salvation," 60.

England from the crisis of a revolution similar to the French Revolution.[1]

Conclusion

The *Donghak* had a great influence in the emergence and task of minjung theology. The spirit of the *Donghak* aiming to save the suffering and oppressed people in the society had played an important role in the formation of minjung theology. Minjung theology succeeded the spirit of the *Donghak* in areas such as concern for the poor and weak, an emphasis on social salvation, and a protest against the iniquity of the society. Almost forty years has passed since minjung theology was born in Korea. As a theological development arising from the desperate situation of the minjung in South Korea, it has helped Korean Christianity to recognize its oppressed brothers and sisters crying for a resolution to their *han*. The strength of minjung theology lies in its conviction that Christians should not remain indifferent to the plight of the oppressed. It has urged Korean Christians to read the Scriptures anew in order to find what God has to say regarding the sufferings around them.

On the other hand, minjung theology needs to build a theology based on biblical salvation that emphasizes both personal and social salvation and this must be put in practice. Social justice that is not rooted in personal salvation can be nothing but political action. Similar to the evangelicals in the 18th and 19th centuries we can achieve social justice by changing people, focusing on the transformation of the society based on personal salvation. When minjung theology is faithful to sustain a balanced soteriology, it will not only seek justice for the han of those who suffer from the injustice of the unfair socio-political and economic systems, but also proclaim personal salvation.

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[1]Elie Halévy made a famous thesis that Wesleyanism prevented revolution in England in the 1790s. Halévy interpreted the social impact of Wesleyanism in his writings. See Elie Halévy, *England in 1815* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968); idem, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, trans. Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Abstract

Minjung theology is an attempt to contextualize the Christian message for the Korean situation. So the Korean history and social context play an important role in the concept of minjung theology. The various religions that have been implanted and have developed in the history of Korea reflect the Korean mind-set and have helped minjung theology to emerge. Shamanism existed in Korea from ancient times; Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced in the fourth century and became the major religions in the *Koryo* and *Chosun* dynasties. At the end of the *Chosun* dynasy, Korean society went through great social and political struggles, and the *Donghak* movement arose and spread widely among the oppressed. The Korean people have suffered from political oppression under tyrannical rulers throughout their long history. This experience of suffering created a unique Korean feeling called “han.” The founder of the *Donghak*, Je-woo Choi, wanted to transform society, which was full of social injustice and political corruption. He integrated the essential features of the traditional Korean religions and created the *Donghak.* The main purpose of the *Donghak* is *Innaechun*, which means “Humanity is heaven.” The concept of *Innaechun* expresses the dignity and equality of all people, and its norms are “equality, freedom, and justice.” The *Donghak* appealed greatly to people and it became a national movement throughout the oppressed in the society.

Minjung theologians adopted the spirit of the *Donghak* and attempted to find a vision of God’s will in the *Donghak* movement for social justice. Hence, minjung theology emerged as a number of Korean theologians reflected on this historical situation and the relationship between their faith and their involvement for the oppressed. They wanted to make the Christian faith relevant to concrete socio-political realities. They read the Scriptures from the socio-economic perspective and emphasized the relationship between theology and historical situations. As a theological development from the oppressed in South Korea, minjung theology has helped Korean Christianity to recognize its minjung crying for a

resolution to their han. The contribution of minjung theology lies in its conviction that Korean Christians should read the Scriptures considering their suffering neighbors.

Minjung theology has a broader task than it had in the past. It must now consider the oppressed in North Korea, immigrant laborers who are suffering from low wages and exploitation, as well as the victims of the world powers. In order to accomplish the task, minjung theology needs to keep a balance between social justice and personal salvation. The *Donghak* emphasized the relationship between individual and society. Evangelicals in the 18th and 19th centuries also had that balance. They regarded the gospel as inherently social as well as individual, and understood that the gospel demanded a comprehensive approach. Their concern was soul saving, not only for the poor but also in terms of a transformation of society. Thus, minjung theology needs to pursue social justice on the basis of personal salvation. The exclusive one-sided emphasis upon either the "spiritual" or "physical," "personal" or "social," "historical" or "eternal" dimension of salvation is a departure from the holistic view of the Bible. The comprehensive, scriptural character of salvation must be respected both in the dogmatics and in the ethics of minjung theology.

Keywords: Donghak, Korea, minjung theology, salvation, Wesleyanism

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