

Minjung Theology as a Counter Theology: Suh Namdong's Case

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I. Introduction

This year is the 30th anniversary of the passing of the late Professor Suh Namdong (1918-1984), one of the founders of minjung theology. Prof. Suh died in 1984, when minjung theology was a growing theological voice in the global ecumenical world. I estimate that the year 1975 was when minjung theology started. Prof. Suh published early in 1975 an article entitled "Jesus, Church History, and the Korean Church," where he argues that Jesus identified himself with minjung, spoke for the voices of minjung, liberated them, but although the established Christianity has played as a dominant ideology, a new Christianity is emerging and recovering the hitherto lost social dimension of the gospel, social salvation, and the gospel of liberation. During the period of less than a decade, 1975-1984, Prof. Suh devoted himself to constructing a unique minjung theology. During the period Prof. Suh spent 22 months (March, 1976-December, 1977) in prison for his involvement in fighting the dictatorial government. He was ousted from his university by the state government in 1975-1980. In the meantime, he was appointed in 1977 as the director of the Institute of Mission and Education and provided theological education for the students who had experienced imprisonments for their involvement in democracy movement.

I will first describe briefly Suh Namdong's theological journey throughout his life. Second, I will analyze Suh Namdong's theology in view of his conception of counter theology. Third, I will discuss further about the discourse of counter theology in comparison with the following three discourses that have appeared in the course of the development of minjung theology. They are the discourse of traditional theology, the discourse of science and theology, and the discourse of 'theology of culture'. These three discourses were also dealt with in some way by Suh Namdong. I will analyze some theologians who have made evaluative comments on minjung theology from the viewpoints of these three discourses.

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The fundamental argument in this essay is that some advocates of the three discourses significantly misunderstood or even distorted key ideas in Suh Namdong's minjung theology. Suh Namdong's minjung theology was a significant event in the history of Korean theology; it broke into a new territory that had not been explored by creating new ideas and concepts such as *han*, *dan*, the confluence of two stories, and the infrastructure of revelation. Those discourses inclined to nullify the eventual characteristics of Suh Namdong's minjung theology by blunting the creative edge of Suh's counter-theology. They ended up with depoliticizing it. I would criticize them more harshly. They trivialized Suh Namdong's theological enterprise and legacy and threw it into a garbage can of obsolete ideas. I believe that the only way to relive our creative past in our present time is to preserve and make alive the creative side of our past. It is worthwhile to relive Suh Namdong's project of counter theology in the present time.

My initial argument will be that minjung theology as a counter theology should be understood as a non-metaphysical and anti-philosophical discourse that does not seek to ***understand*** the world in a metaphysical framework, but seek to find or contrive ideas that brings about the ***change*** of the world. Many discourses aim at interpreting the world. But minjung theology must move further to change the world. The integrity of a discourse is not determined by its consistency to a certain metaphysical system, but by its applicability to the practical world and to its change.

II. Suh Namdong's Theological Journey

I would divide Suh Namdong's theological journey into two phases. A significant event took place in summer, 1974, when he participated in the WCC Faith and Order Conference in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. At the conference he was asked by foreign participants about the situation of human rights and democracy in Korea. He was also asked about the imprisoned poet Kim Chiha, who was a symbol of democratic movement in Korea. Suh Namdong later confided that he had been very ashamed of not knowing much about the social and political situation as a contextual progressive theologian. On the way back home, Suh Namdong stopped and stayed in Tokyo for a few days to study poems and writings of Kim Chiha, and students and workers movements for democracy and human rights in Korea. Thus, there was a big leap in his theology after the event. Suh Namdong left the so-called Western style theology behind and committed himself to a new Korean theology, i.e., minjung theology.

Suh Namdong started his teaching career at the seminary in the 1960's. As his nickname "antenna of Western contemporary theologies" suggests, he studied broadly contemporary theological trends in the West and updated himself to the frontier theologies. He was interested in the theology of Bohnhoeffer, theology of indigenization, theology of secularization, theology of hope, political theology during the 1960's. He especially researched the area of 'science and theology' during the period of 1969-1974. During the period he studied Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary and theological thought, process theology, and religion and science. He attempted at unifying religion and science, and evolution and theology. He attempted at making good sense of Christianity before the challenge of the scientific and technological world. His half transit toward the discourse of minjung theology took place in the early 1970's. In November, 1970, Chun Taeil, a textile worker, made self-immolation by setting himself on fire in order to bring to public attention the inhuman conditions of labor and the violations of human rights of his fellow workers. At this incident, quite a few intellectuals were alarmed about the situation of industrial workers and converted to the cause of the human rights of workers and oppressed people. Korean theologians also began to be aware of inhuman situation of minjung such as industrial workers and the urban poor, which had been created by rapid industrialization process controlled and driven by the then military government. Suh Namdong took lead in drafting the monumental minjung-oriented theological statement in 1973 entitled "The Statement of Korean Christians." But it was after the experiences he had during the WCC Faith and Order meeting in Tanzania in summer, 1974 that he wholly turned around from Western theological paradigm to a new theological paradigm, which he named minjung theology.²

It took a while before Suh Namdong's monumental pieces of work came out, such as "The Confluence of Two Stories" (the title of its English translation is "Historical References for a Theology of Minjung") and "Towards a Theology of Han." These articles appeared in 1979 and were published both in English and Korean. *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* was published by Christian Conference of Asia in 1981, and later it is revised and translated into other languages. The Korean translation entitled *Minjung gwa Hankookshinhak* (Minjung and Theology in Korea) came out later in 1985 one year after Suh Namdong's death. The year 1983 was a significant year for Suh Namdong's

² I am indebted to Kim Hiheon, a third generation minjung theologian, in demonstrating a sketched outline of Suh Namdong's theological journey. Refer to his book, *Suh Namdong ui Chohak* (Philosophy of Suh Namdong's Minjung Theology) (Seoul: Ehwa Womans' University Press, 2011), 265. Sohn Kyutae's article was also useful for our understanding of Suh Namdong's theological journey. Refer to Sohn Kyutae, "Jookje Suh Namdong ui Minjung Shinhak gwa Yoonrisasang" (Ethical Thought in Suh Namdong's Minjung Theology), November 16, 2012, *Veritas* Archive, http://www.veritas.kr/archive/bbs/board.php?bo_table=drson_2&wr_id=54&page=2.

theology. It was when he published such important articles as “Theology of Folktales: a Counter Theology,” “Christ, the Life of the World,” “Theology of Culture, Political Theology, and Minjung Theology: An Appraisal of C.S. Song’s Theology,” and “Sociology of the Poverty and Theology of the Poor.”³

As previously indicated, Suh Namdong constructed crucial ideas and concepts that would chart minjung theology for years to come in those pieces of work published in 1979-1983. They are *han*, *dan*, the confluence of two stories, the infrastructure of revelation/gospel, and counter theology. These ideas appear quite frequently in his later work. I would like to designate a structure of theology constructed upon and around those ideas and concepts as a discourse of counter theology.

III. Minjung Theology as a discourse of Counter Theology

1. The Confluence of Two Stories of *han* and *Dan*

Before we explore the connectivity of *han*, *dan* and the confluence of two stories, we need to define the concepts of *han* and *dan* as Suh Namdong employed them. *Han* is an unresolved, conscious or unconscious feeling accumulated in the individuals and the collectives who have experienced a long period of sufferings. When individuals and collectives are treated as slaves or the subaltern by the ruling elite, they suffer from sickness of *han*, and it can be cured “only when the total structure of the oppressed society and culture is changed.”⁴ In 1979, Suh Namdong quoted the poet Ko Eun: “We are born from the womb of *han*, and raised in the bosom of *han*.”⁵ *Dan*(단) is cutting off. By exercising *dan* one cuts off his/her own desire to be comfortable and stable in his/her private life in order to be engaged in public action for freedom and justice in society. In other words, one puts historical tasks for minjung first before his/her own private desire and need. By committing oneself to *dan*, one manages a

³ These articles are written in Korean and carried in Suh Namdong, *Minjung Shinhak ui Tamgu* (Exploration of Minjung Theology) (Seoul: Hankilsa, 1983). Hereafter this work will be referred to as *Tamgu*.

⁴ David Kwangsun Suh, “A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation,” *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, Kim Yongbock, ed. (Singapore: CCA, 1981): 28. Hereafter, it will be referred to as *Minjung Theology*.

⁵ *Tamgu*, 87.

life of the “saint” seeking truth and justice for everybody in this divided world and expanding the horizon of loving responsibility to the whole people and creation.⁶

Suh Namdong states that minjung theology is emerged from the encounter and confluence of the minjung tradition in the Bible and the minjung tradition in the Korean history.⁷ The confluence of the two different traditions and stories is possible because they share the commonalities, *han*, an outcome of long unjust repression, and *dan*, the practice of following God’s command by cutting off one’s egoistic desire for private wellness and taking the risk of suffering for justice and peace in society.

Han is also found in the story of the people of the Bible. The *han* of the oppressed Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt erupted into a liberation movement reported in the book of Exodus of the Hebrew Bible. God is a God who hears the cry of *han* of his people. God responded to the *han*-ridden cry of the Hebrew people and led them to freedom. Jesus responded to, taught, and protected the *han*-ridden *ochlos*, the so-called sinners who gathered around him. Likewise Korean Christians believe that God heard the cry of the Korean people and led them to the movement for freedom and independence. During the colonial period Korean Christians regarded Moses and Jesus as liberators. Following the lineage of liberation tradition in both Korean churches and the Bible, minjung theology interpreted God the Father, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit as the empowering transcendent agents for the liberation of the oppressed people. Jesus Christ himself was born in the womb of poverty and raised in poverty. He was wounded in the path to the cross and died on the cross. The Holy Spirit is a wounded Spirit and a Spirit of suffering and *han*. Apostle Paul closely connected the Spirit with suffering and weakness.

The confluence also occurs on account of the shared experiences of *dan* in the two stories. Gestures of liberation and freedom of the suffering people are the phenomena of *dan*. March 1st independence movement in 1919 was an example of such a gesture. Apostle Paul tries to describe the procedure of the turning of *han* through *dan* toward hope. He proclaims,

“We rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”(Rom 5:3-5)

⁶ By the saint I mean a fighter and protester to maximize freedom and justice for all people. Refer to the comparison of saintliness and priesthood made by Alain Badiou, in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 38-39.

⁷ *Tamgu*, 223.

The turn of *han* to *dan* is created by the Holy Spirit that works in the heart of suffering people. Such terms as endurance, character and hope describe the state of minjung who practice *dan* out of and transcending *han*. The Holy Spirit is not a Spirit that maintains the status quo of the world. It is a Spirit that transforms the world so that *han*, suffering and tears no longer exist in it.

The confluence of two stories can take place because they share the same qualities, *han* and *dan*. According to Suh Namdong, the Spirit is a dynamic interpretative power that creates the confluence of two stories. The Spirit experiences both *han* and *dan* of all suffering beings. It suffers with us, but also helps us in our *dan* for liberation: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Rom 8:26)

The subjectivity of minjung is divided between *han* and *dan*. A truthful event divides the subjectivity into two parts: *han* and *dan*. *Dan*, like *pneuma* or spirit, makes minjung to be the subjects of history. *Han*, like bodily primitive power or libido, provides minjung with the potentiality to be the subjects of history. *Han* can, however, devour and stifle people like a life-destroying monster. This monster can be tamed by *dan*, which cuts the vicious circle of revenge.⁸ But it is also true that those who have not accumulated *han* within themselves in different reasons do not have the potentiality to exercise *dan*.⁹ While *han* requires a priest, a mediator, who understands and consoles it, and resolves its intensity, *dan* creates a fighter for universal love, freedom and justice for all creation, transcending his/her own provinciality.

According to Suh Namdong, the confluence of the two stories takes place as a hermeneutical moment in the historical minjung who undergo a historical crisis and seek to find collective wisdom to overcome it. Minjung bring the two stories/traditions of *han* and *dan* into their own reflection and praxis and seek to discern the Spirit in action that will guide them in historical action to overcome the crisis in history and society. Suh Namdong adopts pneumatological interpretation as his major method. He contrasts it with the traditional method of Christological interpretation.¹⁰ Pneumatological interpretation is an ongoing process and evolves into a new understanding, as minjung continue to engage themselves in historical action and reflect on it. Historical action provides an energy that lets the

⁸ *Minjung Theology*, 61.

⁹ I have discussed the dynamic relation of three concepts: *han*, *dan*, and event in my article, "The Subjecthood of Minjung History through Han, Dan and Event: An Interpretation of Suh Namdong and Ahn Byungmu," *Madang, International Journal of Contextual Theology*, Vol.16 (15th December, 2011): 55-68.

¹⁰ *Minjung Theology*, 179.

hermeneutic circulation proceed and creates a new understanding and action by bringing the two stories into their reflections and praxis at different moments of history. As I pointed out above, the confluence of the two stories is possible because they share commonalities, that is, *han* and *dan*.

2. The Infrastructure of Revelation and Counter Theology

The concept of the infrastructure of revelation and gospel as the socio-political base of religious ideas must be the most important insight in Suh Namdong's counter theology. Without this concept Suh Namdong's theology would not be a full-fledged political discourse. Suh Namdong wants to salvage the political and historical dimension of Biblical revelatory events such as cross, resurrection, and sin from the trap of religious fixation and "spiritualization." In order to make alive the political dimension of revelation/gospel, one must be clear about the socio-economic base of religious ideas. Suh Namdong affirms that Christian revelatory ideas must not function as ideology to serve the interest of the powerful in the world, but must be the gospel for the poor and the weak. Thus he argues that the real base of the authentic Christian revelation is the poor, and that the words in the Christian Bible are the gospel (the good news) of the poor.¹¹ I will quote Suh Namdong's lengthy statement on the infrastructure of the gospel.

The chronological and historical origin of key theological ideas such as revelation, covenant, chosen people, gospel is the poor. They are mediators and agents of revelation and gospel, and furthermore a constituent part of 'historical revelation'. Traditional theological ideas such as revelation, covenant, chosen people, and gospel need their carriers, transmitters, and agents. I would designate the former as the superstructure (ideology) of revelation and gospel, and the latter the infrastructure or base of revelation and gospel. The superstructure is the object of theological study, while the infrastructure is the object of socio-scientific study. Both are constitutive elements of 'historical revelation' and 'substantial gospel'.

In the historical church and traditional theology, however, both are separated from each other. The latter (the base) is removed, while the former is incorporated into oppressive dominant ideology and becomes the advocator of the oppression and coercion in the name of maintaining the order, as well as the opium to anesthetize the pain of the poor. Original revelation and gospel consists of an ideological part, namely, the superstructure, and a material part, namely, the base, which is social, historical and bodily. The base of historical revelation is bodily. The body of revelation is the poor. Therefore if we and churches today wish to take part in and inherit the Biblical revelation and gospel, we must go into the solidarity with the poor. Once the poor, a major constitutive part, is extracted from historical and structural gospel and revelation, the latter will remain an abstract ideology. This would be false and opium. Only solidarity with the poor, the sacrificed, would guarantee our inheritance of the gospel

¹¹ *Tamgu*, 357.

and revelation. Solidarity is not carried out through theological 'interpretation', but through social and political praxis.¹²

The recovery of the socio-politico-economic base of revelatory ideas in theological reflection opens up the critique of traditional theology that does not take its social, economic base into account. The absence of critical analysis of the political and economic base of theological ideas leads to the creation of a theological ideology, which can be the "opium of people." Traditional theology is an ideology of the oppressive system, which widens the gap between the poor and the rich. The institutional church employs traditional theology as its ideological weapon. The awareness of the infrastructure of the gospel and revelation allows us to see the socio-political dimension of theological ideas beyond their religious and spiritualized dimension.

For Suh Namdong, the death of Jesus was not a natural one. It was a murder and execution by the political power. It is not natural death of disease or old age. It is socio-politically caused. For Suh belief must possess some knowledge of the socio-political dimension of the death of Jesus. Therefore, he likes to speak of "historical knowledge" in place of religious faith. Suh argues that the latter focuses on the inner and spiritual aspect of historical events such as crucifixion and resurrection, neglecting their socio-political significance. Historical knowledge is an "interpretation of historical reality."¹³ A dictionary defines historical reality as "the real facts and events as they occurred historically"; it "stands opposed to wishful fantasies" that are not grounded on historical facts and reality.¹⁴ But it is my opinion that Suh Namdong understood historical reality in a more dynamic way than the above definition. So I think that Suh understood the historical reality as an ever emerging reality. Of course, it includes the past and the present, not to mention things yet to come and yet to emerge. The past and the present can be changed by our present decisions. Therefore the historical reality does not consist only of real facts and events as they occurred historically, but of facts and events yet to come. Therefore, it is not possible for any knowledge to wholly grasp the historical reality. Reality cannot be mastered by any discursive knowledge. It is an opened-ended reality. Then, historical knowledge must be an open-ended knowledge. But it is not deterministic knowledge of any rigid materialist determinism, moralism or scientism. It is not ideological knowledge subtracted from

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tamgu, 172.

¹⁴ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435300637.html>. (accessed May, 2014).

its historical base. It is a “self-related” holistic interpretative knowledge of the historical reality through interpretations of different materials and data such as historical documents, inscriptions in historical monuments, essays, novels, treatises, and etc.¹⁵ Historical knowledge as an alternative to religious and pietistic faith is part of Suh Namdong’s project of counter theology. Historical knowledge of revelation draws on not only theological symbols, ideas and concepts, but also their socio-economic base. For Suh historical revelation gives rise to historical knowledge. Our action is guided by historical knowledge, not by unmediated faith. I think Suh Namdong’s conception of historical knowledge is close to the thought of the spirit (*phronema tou pneumatos*), whose fruit is life and peace (Rom. 8:6). It is the thought guided by the Spirit. It is knowledge that is reached by pneumatological interpretation.¹⁶

Counter theology is a type of discourse in which thinking employs no deductive method, but an inductive method. It starts with historical events and facts. For example, when it interprets the reality of resurrection, it does not consider resurrection as an eternal principle that comes after our natural death. It considers resurrection of Jesus as a rise from the socio-political death, a political execution of crucifixion by the Roman imperial power. Therefore, resurrection has a political meaning. It is a rise of the sacrificed, of the poor. When traditional theology discusses sin, counter theology talks about *han* of minjung. When the minjung theologian looks into the situation of minjung, he/she finds reality of *han* not that of sin. Sin for the oppressed people is simply a label attached to them by the present structure.

Counter theology is a discourse from the bottom, or from the oppressed. Its language is story of minjung. Story is a language of the body rather than abstract language of the brain. It considers first the infrastructure of theological ideas and symbols. It makes critique of theological ideas and symbols from the perspective of the poor minjung. It counters to any discourse that claims mastery over the historical reality. It especially counters to any determinist and metaphysical discourse which makes exclusive claim on universal truth.

IV. Three Discourses and Counter Theology

¹⁵ Ibid., 172-73.

¹⁶ *Minjung Theology*, 179.

There are various discourses that attempted at interpreting Suh Namdong's theology in their own directions. I divided in the above Suh Namdong's theological journey throughout his life into two phases. One is the phase of pre-minjung theology; the other is the phase of minjung theology as counter theology. As I promised at the beginning of the essay, I will compare the following three discourses with counter theology. They are again traditional theology, science and theology, and cultural theology. I will attempt to demonstrate the core claims of each of these discourses and show how they diverge from the discourse of counter theology.

1. Traditional Theology

By traditional theology Suh Namdong means Christological theology. Herein historical events are transformed to religious, pietistic ideas. The political execution of crucifixion is elevated to the symbol of cross, the object of our prayer and dedication. Messianic millennium is spiritualized into the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Political figure of the messiah is upgraded to the religious figure of the Christ.¹⁷ Suh Namdong argues that by the process of religious sublimation of Christian symbols and gospel the historical nuclei therein are lost and forgotten.¹⁸

According to Suh Namdong, traditional theology is absent of the consideration of the infrastructure of theological symbols and doctrines. For the traditionalist, inherited dogmas and doctrines are the criteria by which to measure the truthfulness of theological thoughts and ideas. Traditional theology has transformed socio-political and historical events and facts into personal and spiritual factums so that the latter are organized to fit the inner need of spirituality of persons. It is seemingly apolitical, but in essence, it is political because it supports the status quo of the dominant structure.

I will analyze some theologians who interpret Suh Namdong's minjung theology, to a great extent, from the viewpoint of traditional theology. Yim Taesoo argues that minjung theology of the first generation needs to be amended especially in view of the traditional Christological doctrine that the Christ is the Son of the living God.(Matt 16:16) He claims that

¹⁷ *Tamgu*, 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

minjung theology must confess Jesus Christ as the divine person.¹⁹ Yim Taesoo tackles with both Ahn Byungmu and Suh Namdong and argues that these two founders of minjung theology are not clear about Jesus' redemptive work for the humanity, because they claim that minjung achieve their salvation by their own action and work.²⁰ Suh Namdong made a bold statement for minjung theology: "In the case of minjung theology, Jesus is the means for understanding the minjung correctly, rather than the concept of minjung being the instrument for understanding Jesus."²¹ Suh Namdong continued in that direction, stating that the Scripture is a reference book for discerning the activities of the Spirit in our history and society. Yim Taesoo certainly disagrees with Suh Namdong's position that the Scripture be a reference book that helps us to understand minjung.²² Yim Taesoo worries about the decline of the church members and church goes both in Korea and in the West. He argues that the Luther's doctrine of justification by faith only is limited and has become a cause of the irrelevance of the church to our times. He argues that minjung theology must be based on the doctrine of salvation by faith and action, which is the motto of his so-called Second Reformation. Yim argues that this doctrine will help cure and correct problems contemporary churches are facing.²³

Oh Seungsung, another critic of minjung theology, recently presented a paper at a minjung theology seminar meeting.²⁴ Responding to Yim Taesoo's claim on Protestant tradition that it lacks action as constitutive condition of justification and salvation, Oh Seungsung argues that the Reformed Church has since its beginning emphasized the importance of action in Christian faith.²⁵ Oh's argument on minjung theology is that hitherto minjung theology has not done justice to existing churches. Traditionalists such as Oh claim that minjung theology as a counter discourse produces ideas, concepts, doctrines and tenets that are not applicable to the

¹⁹ Yim Taesoo, "Je2Jonggyogaehyuk ul Jihyanghanun Minjung Shinhak" (Minjung Theology on the Way to the Second Reformation," *Suh Namdong kwa Onul ui Minjung Shinhak* (Suh Namdong and Minjung Theology Today), (Seoul: Dongyon, 2009): 176-79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180-81.

²¹ *Minjung Theology*, 160.

²² Yim Taesoo, 184.

²³ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁴ Oh Seungsung, "Toward a Minjung Theology in the Faith of the Reformed Church." Unpublished paper presented at the March, 2014 seminar in Seoul organized by Korea Association of Minjung Theologians.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

situation of churches. Oh claims that minjung theology must contribute to the betterment of ordinary and traditional churches by its own theological ideas.²⁶

Oh argues that in order for minjung theology to contribute to ailing both traditional and minjung churches in our times, Oh argues, minjung theology must undergo a significant change of its theological contents. The core of his argument is that minjung theology must accept the faith of the Reformed tradition and revise itself to be a “minjung theology with Reformed Faith,” which is definitely distinguished from the “classical minjung theology” of Suh Namdong and Ahn Byungmu.²⁷ Oh wants to remodel minjung theology after the mode of the Reformed Tradition.

The traditional discourse has a constant factor that cannot be moved and changed. This factor is tradition. Oh Seung-sung makes a consistent argument for the need of the convergence of minjung theology and the Reformed Faith. He believes that convergence, synthesis, or hybridity of the two will make both healthy. He argues that the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK, a relatively progressive denomination) should take that option. Perhaps such strategy can be one of the options minjung theologians may also want to take. Oh argues that minjung theology has become more or less a foundationalist discourse, which adopts a rigidly exclusive reasoning.²⁸ He argues that James Cone, perhaps the most prominent black theologian, is flexible and open enough to have incorporated major ideas of the Reformed Faith into his black liberation theology.²⁹

Yim Taesoo and Oh Seung-sung are to a great extent traditionalists. They want to return to the Reformed Faith that believes that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God and the savior, and the Bible of 66 books is the Canon, the only direct revelation, and the fundamental source for Christian spirituality. Minjung theology as counter theology or de-theology breaks any kind of foundationalism and dogmatism. In the process of deconstructing and destructing any foundationalism and dogmatism, minjung theology must be aware of the danger of being the captive of its own foundationalism and dogmatism. Also, minjung theology endeavors to understand the situation of minjung in light of Biblical revelation. It draws not only on the Reformed Tradition, but also on the Catholic Tradition, and other traditions too. It freely

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 8-10.

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

employs any science, method, and material if they provide sources for understanding the subjective and objective situation of the poor for their betterment.

2. The Discourse of Science and Theology

As I have noted already in the above, Suh Namdong spent years to study the discourse of science and theology. Before he jumped into minjung theology, he had been devoted to this discourse. He studied Teilhard de Chardin, Whitehead, and other thinkers in the same category. There are some minjung theologians who want to understand Suh Namdong in the direction of this discourse. To a great extent, two young minjung theologians Kim Hiheon and Chung Kanggal fit this category. For them the organic worldview based on process thought allows us to get access to the historical reality. Chung complains that minjung theology hitherto has not established itself upon a metaphysical foundation. He argues that process metaphysics is the most fitting as the metaphysical foundation for minjung theology.³⁰ Kim Hiheon also claims that Whiteheadian organic conception of reality and panentheism is a metaphysical and foundational framework for minjung theology.³¹

Kim Yongbock, a first-generation minjung theologian, takes up the discourse of life as his own way of doing minjung theology. He coined neologisms such as zoography (biography of life)³² and zoeology (study of life). Kim Yongbock tends to employ a foundationalist reasoning. The concept of life is so broad that it covers living beings and their reality. But the problem is that reality cannot be wholly dealt with by a few fundamental concepts. He believes that the idea minjung can hardly open a space where we can also discuss the problems of life in general. Actually when he began to talk about the study of life, minjung theology had lost its impetus and receded from its peak, mainly due to the change of the situation. The life issue emerged with power. Later Kim Yongbock began to speak about the idea of convergence and employ it to explain how the reality of life evolves in our world.

Kim Yongbock's analysis of the current situation is that life and its ecology is "under the pervasive threat of an omnicide (total death)."³³ I quote Kim Yongbock,

All living beings resist the powers of death and destruction. Therefore the zoography is fundamentally the story of resistance to the powers of death and destruction of life. In

³⁰ Chung Kanggal, *Whitehead and a New Minjung Theology*, (Seoul: Korea Christian Institute, 2006), 47ff.

³¹ Kim Hiheon, 56-61.

³² According to Kim Yongbock, "zoography is a neologism for the descriptive story of the experience of life of all living beings. It is an analogue to the social biography of the Minjung." Kim Yongbock, "The Politics of Jesus the Asian against the Empire," *Madang*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 2004): 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

Asia the people and the living beings have resisted these powers throughout the history of the earth.³⁴

Above, we can see Kim Yongbock juxtaposes *minjung* with life or living beings. In another essay, Kim states that “the *minjung* and *saengmyung* [life] are sovereigns.” He continues, “In Jesus, faith in God the Creator creates life as subjects, and makes all living beings partners of covenant, which means the bond of justice, peace, love and life.”³⁵ Sometimes Kim Yongbock simply juxtaposes *minjung* with life; other times, he uses the term life inclusive of both human and nonhuman beings. With the ideas of life and living beings Kim Yongbock expands his theological horizon from a human-oriented *minjung* theology to a creation-oriented ecological *minjung* theology. But in this process Kim Yongbock tends to drop the keen interest in the discourse of *minjung* theology as counter-theology.

In view of the present ecological crisis and the dominance of the combined power of the bio-nano-info-cognitive technologies and the power of global Empire over all living beings, Kim Yongbock speaks not only of the *han* of the poor, but also of the “cosmic *han*” of all living beings.³⁶ For him, the culprit of the cosmic *han* is Biotech Industry. The cosmic *han* can be resolved by the Cosmic Christ who will preside the “offering of sacrifice for peace.”³⁷ He imagines a grand “festival of life,” through which all evil power is eradicated and the *han* of all living beings is resolved.³⁸

Kim Yongbock believes that the pervasive power of Empire is buttressed by the convergence of different technologies and powers. This convergence is heightened by the global market competition. He argues that the present time is an apocalyptic era created by the convergence of the military and economic Empire and high technologies.³⁹ Kim Yongbock observes that convergence does not take place only in the field of technologies and Empire. It takes place in every walk of life. He states that “convergence is the essential dynamic of all

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Kim Yongbock, “Power and Life in the Context of Globalization: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” *Madang*, Vol.1 No.1 (June, 2004): 24.

³⁶ Kim Yongbock, “On the *han* Discourse of Suh Namdong,” *Suh Namdong kwa Onul ui Minjung Shinhak* (Suh Namdong and *Minjung* Theology Today): 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

³⁸ Ibid., 28.

³⁹ Ibid., 27.

things.”⁴⁰ He even argues that convergence or fusion takes place among different discourses. For example, Donghak (the Eastern Learning), a convergence of divergent religions, “surpassed all divergent visions, enhancing them to a new plane and to a new horizon.”⁴¹ Another example is March First Independence Movement in 1919. He suggests that this Movement is a Kairotic moment of convergence of freedom, justice, and peace, and the convergent moment of the visions of Buddhism, Donghak religion, Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism, Shamanism, and etc.⁴² He seems to surmise that if good discourses meet together and interact together, there takes place convergence among them, and then as a result a better discourse emerges. Such a surmise partly makes sense. But convergence does not always take place. There can be divergence or compromise. Or, a fresh new and different discourse can emerge and strike out the rest. Where does creativity rest? Is it on convergence or divergence? Sometimes convergence, other times divergence. I would like to test another similar idea: dialectic. Does dialectic explains everything? Can we say that dialectic is the essential dynamic of all things? No. There are so many non-dialectic or anti-dialectic phenomena. Hegel attempted at explaining the relationship between cross and resurrection by the logic of dialectic. It looks like making sense. But still it is far off from Christian understanding of cross and resurrection. It is no doubt that dialectic and convergence can explain some dimension of life. But if I claim that all the dynamics of movement and change can be explained by them, I am already a rigid and exclusive metaphysicist. Kim Yongbock adopted the terminology convergence from the field of scientific technology and applies it without caution to people’s movement and theological discourses. But by relying excessively on it in understanding the reality he ends up bypassing, neglecting, or overlooking other important aspects of reality.

Following Suh Namdong, I would argue that liberation discourse and language is created out of the interpenetrative dynamics that takes place within the poor (or, intellectuals in the solidarity with the poor) between revelatory ideas and the politico-economic situation (base) of the poor. The Donghak and its discourse is a typical example of it. The interpenetrative dynamic relationship between ideas/symbols and the politico-economic base is not a metaphysical scheme, but a place or a site where new things (event) can emerge. Minjung theology as

⁴⁰ Kim Yongbock, “Convergence of Liberation Discourses for Conviviality of All Living Beings,” *Madang*, Vol.8 (December, 2007), 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

counter-theological discourse should not be arrested in any metaphysical framework. It always counters any discursive exclusivism in the form of metaphysics, scientism, or traditionalism.

3. The Discourse of theology of culture

To this category indigenization, inculturation, and many other models of theology of culture belong. Among many theologians in this category only Kim Kyungje and C.S. Song will be discussed here. I will first address Kim Kyungje's evaluation of Suh Namdong's missiological model in terms of the relationship between the gospel and culture. Kim Kyungje compared four models: models of seed planting, fermentation by leaven, grafting, and confluence. Confluence model is of course Suh's model. Kim Kyungje brought out a few characteristics of the confluence model. Firstly, it ignores qualitative differences in the experiences of salvation in each of different religions. Confluence means two streams merge into one bigger and wider stream. In the bigger and wider stream the difference and uniqueness in each of the original two streams disappear. Secondly, confluence has a dynamic nature; it integrates different elements not only into one, but into a wider and bigger unified one. Thirdly, the confluence model does not have interest in the way two or more different traditions and religions interact each other or create a new hybridity. Rather it seeks to change culture and world.⁴³ It means that the confluence model does not belong to the theology of culture, but to political theology. Kim Kyungje chooses the model of grafting as the most appropriate cultural theology among four models.⁴⁴ The grafting model respects the independent uniqueness of both Christian Gospel and Korean indigenous culture. It makes hermeneutical circulation operate between the two.⁴⁵ It seeks to achieve "incarnational fusion of religions" or "convivial fusion of religions."⁴⁶

Now, I would like to return to Suh Namdong's critique of theology of culture. In 1983, Suh published an article "Theology of Culture, Political Theology, and Minjung Theology: an Introduction and Evaluation of C.S. Song's Theology." According to Suh, C. S. Song finds in Asian and Chinese culture the Christian Gospel at work. In order for mission to Asia to be successful, Song argues, Christianity and its Gospel must be indigenized and actualized in Asia. And

⁴³ Kim Kyungje, *Haesokhak kwa Jongkyoshinhak* (Hermeneutics and Theology of Religions) (Chonan: Korea Theological Institute, 1994), 217-18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.

theologians work hard to transpose Christian faith in both Asian culture and Asian political and social reality.⁴⁷

After introductory remark on the C. S. Song's theology, Suh Namdong starts to criticize aspects of Song's theology of culture. Suh argues that Buddhist Zen, Confucian propriety, and tea ceremony have nothing to do with the life of minjung, the lower classes, because these are of culture of higher classes. Suh opines that most of them are not historically and socially oriented. Christian revelation, on the other hand, he continues, is historical one that has its historical, politico-economic base (infrastructure of revelation). Suh Namdong pushes his point further and claims that Biblical revelation is a "historical and material" revelation. In other words, revelation has its infrastructure, which is composed of socio-economic base and the poor. The poor is the carrier and medium of revelation. The infrastructure is part and parcel of revelation.⁴⁸ Suh argues that Song neglects the infrastructure of the Biblical revelation. He continues that Song simply takes out Biblical ideas and transposes them into the sphere of Asian cultural ideas and mixes the both. Suh claims that religious ideas floating around without being deeply connected to their infrastructure are ghosts and furthermore, anesthetizing opium, and easily turn out to be an illusive ideology that puts people in uncritical consciousness.⁴⁹

V. Conclusions

As we have seen in the above, among various ideas in Suh Namdong's creative mind the idea of the infrastructure of revelation constitutes the most important part of his counter theology. The key of the method of counter theology lies in constructing the mutual dynamic "interpenetrative" relation between ideas and their historical and socio-politico-economic infrastructure. The awareness and concern for the infrastructure of revelatory symbols and ideas makes possible the materialist and political understanding and critique of religious ideas.

Traditionalists induce minjung theology to be remolded after traditional theology such as Reformed theology. For them orthodox tradition is unchanging standard to check the validity of minjung theology. The farther from authorized ecclesial theology the minjung theology

⁴⁷ *Tamgu*, 371.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 378-79.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 379-382.

separates itself, traditionalists say, the more it is irrelevant to churches. If minjung theology wants to make contribution to churches, traditionalists claim, it must give up the discourse of counter theology, because gospel and mission is not for the poor, but for the church and its people.

The discourse of science and theology believes that it has an all-explaining scheme, either in a form of metaphysics or in a form of idea, e.g., convergence. Relying on metaphysical system or idea can result in bypassing or neglecting other parts of reality that cannot be explained by such a scheme. Counter theology breaks down all exclusivist metaphysical systems and ideas. Counter theology simply maintains and even creates the integrative and dynamic relation between ideas and their politico-economic base, so that theological ideas may be relevant and practical to empower minjung.

Suh Namdong points out that theology of culture does not consider the infrastructure of theological and religious ideas as an integral part of the theological reasoning. The absence of the awareness of the socio-economic base of all cultural ideas in the theology of culture lets ideas be uprooted from the politico-economic base and float around like ghosts. However, the theology of culture can become a critical and politicized theology, when it critically studies and interprets correlatively the infrastructure of theological and cultural ideas from the perspective of the poor. Then we can have a critical and political theology of culture. The latter surely is part and parcel of minjung theology.

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Abstract

This essay compares Suh Namdong's counter-theological discourse with three different theological discourses and attempts at finding the divergent points among the discourses. This essay argues that there are constitutive elements of Suh Namdong's counter theology. They are *han, dan*, the confluence of two stories, and the infrastructure of revelation, among which the last one, this essay argues, is the most important. The comparison of different discourses in this essay aims at clarifying what the project of counter theology of Suh Namdong is all about and where are the divergent points among those discourses including that of counter theology. The three discourses are the discourse of traditional theology, the discourse of science and theology, and the discourse of 'theology of culture'. They have appeared in the course of the development of minjung theology. The fundamental argument in this essay is that the advocators of the three discourses significantly misunderstood or even distorted key ideas in Suh Namdong's counter-theological discourse. Suh Namdong's counter-theological discourse was a significant event in the history of theology in Korea and Asia. But some leaders of the three discourses deny the eventual characteristics of Suh Namdong's minjung theology by blunting the creative edge of Suh's counter-theology. This essay argues that minjung theology as a counter theology should be understood as an anti-metaphysical discourse that does not seek to understand the world/reality in a metaphysical framework, but seek to find or contrive ideas that empower the poor and thereby bring about the change of the world.

Key words: Suh Namdong, counter theology, *han, dan*, confluence of two stories, infrastructure of revelation.