

The Notion of Liberation in *Minjung* Theology¹⁾

- focusing on first generation *minjung* theologians²⁾ -

Park, Sam Kyung³⁾

I. Introduction

A theology reflects a particular situation. Emerging from a particular social reality, theology exposes the truth of a situation and then brings this concrete reality to bear on the Bible and all religious thought. *Minjung* theology emerged from the oppressed political and economic situation of the Korean people between 1970 and 1980, a different situation from which post-Reformation and traditional Western faith-based theologies emerged.

What defines *minjung* theology is the “*minjung* experience.” *Minjung* theology contends that the experience of *han* among the *minjung* has to be given epistemological privilege, and that the *minjung* are active agents engaged in achieving their own liberation. The experience of *han* is central to the ideology or worldview of the *minjung*. *Han* also serves as the key to understanding why *minjung* theology cannot be separated from a praxis for liberation.

Minjung theology is based on the self-awakening of the poor in Korea as well as one's struggles for survival. It has its own voices and is based on specific and

1) This paper is written with the financial support of Seoul Theological University and is partly revised from my Ph. D. dissertation that was written in 2009 at

Drew University.

2) There are at least three generations of *minjung* theologians. The first generation were mostly professors like Suh Nam Dong, Ahn Byung Mu, Kim Yong-Bock, Suh David Kwang-Sun, and Hyun Young-Hak. Their goal was to work for the liberation of the *minjung*. The second generation, followers of the first generation, were educated by the latter. Among them are Park Sung Jun, Kang Won Don, Suh Jin Hwan, Park Jae Sun, and Kwon Jin Kwan. The third generation practices theology immersed in the oppressive situations of the factories, farms, and city slums; among these are Kim J in Ho, Choi Hyong Muk, Kim Myung Soo, Kim Kyung Ho, etc. See Kim Jin Ho and Lee Sook jin, “A Retrospect and Prospect on the Korean Modernity and *Minjung* Theology” PTCA Consultation 2001. Noh Jong-Sun, *God of Reunification - Towarda Theology of Reunification* (Seoul: Yonsei University, 1990).

3) He is an assistant professor of Christian Ethics at Seoul Theological University in Bucheon, South Korea. He received a Ph. D. degree from Drew University in New Jersey, U.S.A.

particular experiences. It refuses to uncritically accept European-based theology. It emerges from political, economic, and religious-cultural situations different from those which constitute the basis for European and American theologies.

Minjung Theology aims for the goal of liberation and empowerment of those who have suffered for centuries in poverty and political oppression as a result of long periods of colonialism—the *minjung* of Korea. In this paper, I will examine the meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology, a 20th-century Korean liberation theology that emerged from the context of oppression and injustice during the Park regime in South Korea. The understanding of liberation is the theology central to ethical-theological meanings and it links liberation to the “Kingdom of God.” In discussing the Kingdom of God, I will focus on the work of *minjung* theologian, Kim Yong-Bock. He is a first generation *minjung* theologian, the teacher from whom I personally heard the centrality of Kingdom of God through his vision of liberation for all Korean people. I seek to make clear how working for the implementation of the Kingdom of God is central to any elaboration of Korean Christian ethics and the work of liberation in Korea.

II. Liberation in *Minjung* Theology

The meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology is similar to that used in Latin American liberation theology. The key to *minjung* theology is the liberation of the Korean *minjung* from socio-cultural, political, and economic oppression. *Minjung* theology focuses on the injustice suffered by the poor and oppressed in Korea. Its goal is the construction of a just society that will contribute positively to the enrichment of human life. Liberation in *minjung* theology is about the development of “a full humanity.”⁴⁾

To understand the meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology one has to remember that when *minjung* theology began to be elaborated, Korea was immersed in poverty, hunger, and oppression, due to neocolonial exploitation and military despotism.⁵⁾ Second, in Korea—as in other parts of Asia—because “religion is a

4) Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 122, 152, 156-157.

5) If *minjung* theology initially had been elaborated during the first decade of the 21st century, I believe the meaning of liberation it uses would be different. For example, it

philosophy of life,”⁶⁾ liberation is what in the West is called a “holistic” concept and enterprise. It is impossible to talk about different “levels” of liberation. The meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology cannot be explained without using religious theological language.

A good place to start a discussion of the meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology is to analyze how it deconstructs the distinction between Christian history and non-Christian history. *Minjung* theology rejects the domination of Christian discourse over non-Christian discourse. Dominant Christian discourse is an essential element of the ruling ideology of the Western modern age. *Minjung* theology, instead, interprets so-called “profane stories” as sacred stories and works to create a “combination of two stories”⁷⁾ –the *minjung* tradition and the Bible. This combination is not natural. It is a dialectical combination in which both the *minjung* tradition and the Bible maintain their identity and critique each other. The most important aspect of this combination is how it keeps the resistant spirit of the *minjung* alive and vibrant against its oppressors.

III. Key Elements of *Minjung* Theology

1. The *Minjung*

Minjung theology emerged in the context of Korean Christian struggles for democracy and human rights. Together with other movements for democracy, *minjung* theology brought about an awareness of the socio-political oppression that was prevalent in Korea during the 1970s and '80s. During the progress towards democratization during this time, *minjung* theologians insisted on focusing on the *minjung*.

The term “*minjung*,” according to Suh David Kwang-Sun, is a combination of two Chinese characters, “*min*”, translated as people, and “*jung*”, translated as mass. *Minjung* literally translates as “the mass of the people.”⁸⁾ However, the meaning of

would include reunification as one of its elements.

6) Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 25.

7) Suh Nam Dong, “Symposium Today and Tomorrow of *Minjung* Theology,” in 신학사상, [The Theological Thought] Vol. xxi, 2nd, 81 (Seoul: Korean Theological Institute, 1993), 21.

8) Suh David Kwang-Sun, “A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed., CTC-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 16.

minjung is more encompassing, referring to people who are politically oppressed, economically deprived and exploited and, therefore, poor, socially alienated, and culturally and religiously repressed. According to Ahn Byung Mu, a late biblical *minjung* theologian, one can identify the *minjung* with the *ochlos* of the Gospels, one of two Greek terms used to refer to the people or the masses in the Synoptic Gospels; the other is *laos*. *Laos* was used to mean, in general, the people. *Ochlos*, on the other hand, refer to sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, prisoners, the sick, and the abandoned of Galilee.⁹⁾ Ahn argues that Mark intentionally uses the term *ochlos* rather than *laos*, which also means people, to focus on those who were isolated politically and culturally, the majority being poor and despised.¹⁰⁾ The *ochlos* also were those who gathered around Jesus as his audience and were seen by Him as the people in the Kingdom of God.¹¹⁾ The *ochlos* were the *minjung* of Galilee. Ahn identifies the concept of the *ochlos* with the Korean *minjung* on the grounds that Jesus sided unconditionally with oppressed and marginalized people. In Korean history, the *minjung* have been the laborers and farmers, the women and the poor who were oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, despised culturally, and uneducated deliberately. Throughout the history of Korea, the *minjung* suffered tremendously not only from political oppression and economic exploitation but also from prejudice based on severe classism and sexism. The political ideology of Confucianism, especially in the period of the Yidynasty (1392-1910), legitimized and made rigid the separation of the classes into the *yangban* (high class) and the *ssangnom* (low class). The *ssangnom* typically worked for the *yangban*, providing for their daily needs, often residing permanently with them as servants. Every activity of the *ssangnom* revolved around the *yangban* households, which were the center of society. The living conditions of the *ssangnom* were extremely harsh and almost hopeless. They collectively carried deep wounds, scars, sorrow, and resentment in their hearts, known as *han*. They passed down their unresolved resentment, despair, and hopelessness to successive generations. If one is born in Korea, one experiences *han*, whether one suffers oppression personally or not.

9) Ahn Byung Mu, "Jesus and *Ochlos*," in *민중과 한국신학*, [*Minjung and Korean Theology*] (Seoul: Korean Theological Institute, 1985), 99-100.

10) *Ibid.*, 103.

11) *Ibid.*, 91.

For Kim Yong-Bock, “*Minjung* signifies a living reality, which is dynamic, changing, and complex. This living reality defines its own experience and generates new acts and dramas in history; and it refuses in principle to be defined conceptually.”¹²⁾ Kim Yong-Bock posits that the *minjung* are subjects of history who create their history by themselves. He considers the social biography of the *minjung* as the principal historical frame of reference; they are known through their own story, through their own social biography. Their life story is not just their story, but the basic form of *minjung* life.¹³⁾ He posits that the *minjung* are not identified with the Messiah; rather, they will become the *minjung* as the subjects of their history when the messianic reign is realized in the future.

2. *Han*

Minjung theologians interpret the *han*-ridden life of the *minjung* from a theological perspective.¹⁴⁾ *Minjung* theologians posit that God did not come to Korea in the missionary ships, but that God was already in Korea in the midst of *minjung han*.¹⁵⁾ Despite *han*, a desire for fullness of life still lurks in the hearts of *han*-ridden Korean people. Suh Nam Dong insists that Korean Christians should take *han* as their theme, for it is indeed a central element of their experience.¹⁶⁾ If one does not hear the *han*, the sigh of the *minjung*, one cannot hear the voice of Christ knocking on the door. Park Andrew Sung points out that *han* is the pain of victims who experience injustice.¹⁷⁾

Park understands *han* to be both active and inactive.¹⁸⁾ *Han* is active when the emotion turns aggressive; it is inactive when the person experiencing *han* is passive. People with active *han* are restless and possess a spirit of revenge because of the injustices committed against them. In contrast, inactive *han* turns

12) Kim Yong-Bock, “Messiah and *Minjung*: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed., CTC-CCA (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books: CTC-CCA, 1983), 184.

13) Kim Yong-Bock, *Messiah and Minjung: Christ’s Solidarity with the People for New Life* (Kowloon: Hong Kong, Christian Conference of Asia, 1992), 5-7.

14) Ahn Byung Mu, “*Minjung* Movement and *Minjung* Theology,” in 한국민중신학의 전개, [The Development of Korean *Minjung* Theology] ed., Korean Theological Institute (Seoul: Korean Theological Institute, 1990), 25.

15) Hyun Young-Hak, “A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed., CTA-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 51,54.

16) Suh Nam Dong, “Toward a Theology of *Han*,” in *Minjung Theology*, ed., Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 66-67.

17) Park Andrew Sung, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 70.

18) *Ibid.*, 31.

one's suffering inward and becomes self-destructive.

The *han* of the Korean *minjung* not only expresses the feeling of abandonment of the powerless but also refers to the growing self-consciousness of the *minjung* in Korean society. Suh Nam Dong defines *han* as the political consciousness of the oppressed people in Korea.¹⁹⁾ *Han* is not just an individual feeling of repression nor is it a sickness that can be cured by psychotherapy. It is the collective feeling of the oppressed in the face of their social fate and the social contradictions they experience.²⁰⁾ This feeling of *han* rises above the level of psycho-political anger, frustration, and indignation. It could arouse a sense of revenge, but mostly it results in submission or resignation to fate.

Hyun Young-Hak suggests that the feeling of *han* is not fatalistic. Instead, it enables the experience of transcendence.²¹⁾ "It creates among the *minjung* the wisdom and the power to survive." By becoming sure of the fact that "the existing world is a fallen one and that they are standing over, against, and beyond it, the *minjung* are able to bear the hardships of the world with good humor."²²⁾

About *han*, Kim Yong-Bock writes that it is a Korean term, very difficult to explain. For him, *han* "is an intense, accumulated, suppressed feeling of injustice, a deep sense of indignation. It is a kind of universal feeling of all the Korean people. When you are feeling oppression or exploitation, injustice or discrimination, especially when you experience this innocently without any cause, you experience *han*."²³⁾ For Kim, *minjung* theology was born out of the people's experience of *han*, and to counter the effects of *han*, the power of the people must be mobilized. In *minjung* theology, the many folk tales of *minjung han* —the social and historical biographies of their struggles, otherwise hidden in Korean history - serve as a theological foundation rather than metaphysical or ontological presupposition.

IV. Meaning of Liberation in *Minjung* Theology

Bringing together these understandings of the *minjung* and then *han*, one can begin to delineate the meaning of liberation in *minjung* theology. This meaning, as suggested above, has religious understanding and implications as core elements. *Minjung* theology regards the Bible as an account of oppressed people's experience, history, and culture. *Minjung* theologians see in the Bible a framework

19) Suh Nam Dong, 60, 64.

20) Suh David Kwang-Sun, "A Biographical Sketch an Asian Theological Consultation," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed., CTC-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 25.

21) Hyun Young-Hak, "A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea." in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, 50

22) *Ibid.*, 52.

23) Kim Yong-Bock, *Messiah and Minjung*, 276.

and paradigm for liberation. They understand the Bible to be a history of the love and hope of a people for liberation. The exodus event in the Hebrew scriptures – the central historical liberation event of God’s people – and the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament are keys to the Biblical hermeneutics used by *minjung* theology.²⁴⁾ These two Biblical events led *minjung* theologians to understand that God’s self-revelation and the salvation of humanity happen in and through historical events rather than spiritual events or events outside or beyond human history.

For *minjung* theology, salvation is intrinsically linked to the historical liberation of the *minjung* from all bondage and oppression. *Minjung* theology finds God in the struggle of the *minjung* against the powers that have frustrated their aspirations for liberation throughout Korean history.²⁵⁾

Minjung theology depicts the *minjung* as the rightful masters of their own destiny. *Minjung* theology, regardless of Western theology, refuses to accept an absolute God. Instead of asking who God is, *minjung* theology asks “How does God act in history?”²⁶⁾ *Minjung* theology sees God’s actions as related to the *minjung*’s suffering and hope. *Minjung* theology recognizes God acting in human history. Thus, Ahn Byung Mu describes *minjung* theology as the “theology of witness or the theology of event.”²⁷⁾

Minjung theology views God as a co-liberator with the *minjung* in history. That is, God suffers with the *minjung*. God hears the human cries and groans that arise from the *minjung*’s existence.²⁸⁾ In the historical transformations towards liberation, God and the *minjung* are co-sufferers and “co-operators.” *Minjung* theology therefore, understands the *minjung*’s suffering to be the voice of God; *minjung*’s suffering is the messianic voice exposing structural contradictions. God is also the one who liberates the *minjung*.²⁹⁾

24) Suh Nam Dong, “Historical References for a Theology of *Minjung*,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed., CTC-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 158.

25) Kim Yong-Bock, “Messiah and *Minjung* Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism,” in *Minjung Theology*, ed., CTC-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 186.

26) Suh Chang won, *A Formulation of Minjung Theology: Toward a Socio-Historical Theology of Asia* (Seoul: Nathan Publishing, 1990), 173.

27) Ahn Byung Mu, *민중신학이야기*, [*The Story of Minjung Theology*] (Seoul: Korean Theological Institute, 1988), 26.

28) Suh Changwonwon, 169.

29) *Ibid.*, 171.

God's revelation is deeply related to the salvation of the *minjung*. In *minjung* theology, the cross and the resurrection are symbols of the *minjung*'s salvation. The death of Jesus reflects the *minjung*'s suffering and death, which is a natural consequence of the *minjung* struggles for justice. The *minjung* suffer or are killed by the oppressors because they protest against their oppressors, much like Jesus did against those who oppressed the common people in his life time. Again and again, the *minjung* have risen and will continue to rise until the day of full liberation comes. According to *minjung* theology, the *minjung*'s resurrection is always happening because Jesus' resurrection is an ongoing rising up against oppression for a revolution. *Minjung* theology focuses on what Jesus did, not on who He was.³⁰⁾ *Minjung* theology understands Jesus to be present in the *minjung*'s struggle for liberation.

What *minjung* theology emphasizes is the significance of the *minjung*'s historical mission in the struggle for justice and liberation. *Minjung* theology identifies the *minjung* as true subjects of historical transformation and affirms them as chosen by God to lead the liberation struggle that will contribute to the coming of the Kingdom of God. For *minjung* theology, Jesus is the *minjung*, and the *minjung* themselves become Jesus, concretely and historically incarnating His spirit in history.³¹⁾ This understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the *minjung* revolutionizes the role of the oppressed people as the resurrected ones, the ones filled with divine power to overcome the forces of death in history. This emphasizes the eschatological role of the poor as the true subjects of the Kingdom of God.³²⁾

V. Religio-Cultural Elements in *Minjung* Theology

When one analyzes the religious elements of Korean culture, a variety of religions or philosophies need to be acknowledged—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shamanism, and Christianity. A high percentage of the South Korean population is Christian, which is related to the Korean belief that religious faith results in worldly blessings. In other words, believing results in prosperous living on this

30) Ibid., 174, 177.

31) Ibid., 179.

32) Ahn Byung Mu, 민중신학 이야기, [*The Story of Minjung Theology*], 232, 241.

earth. Most Korean Christians believe that God provides economic and psychological blessings, a lesson well taught by Western missionaries. In addition, Western missionaries taught that religion and faith have to do with individual salvation. Social justice was mostly absent from their preaching and teaching.

There is no doubt that the roots of Korean Christianity are found in Western Christianity. But *minjung* theology fights against domination by “Western metaphysical-oriented theological imperialism.”³³⁾ Thus, *Minjung* theology has begun to find identifying elements within each ethnic religion and culture that help to break Western theological imperialism while developing aspects of indigenization. *Minjung* theology has been part of the effort to elaborate a contextualized Korean Christianity. Korean Christianity has evolved from a missionary effort; it exists today in a pluralistic religious setting. At the same time, Korean Christianity has a strong eschatological focus and a literalist interpretation of the Bible.

Minjung theology examines the great Korean religious traditions—Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—and highlights the liberating aspects of these traditional Korean religions.³⁴⁾ These religious traditions link liberation to freedom from selfishness in both personal and societal spheres.³⁵⁾ In the quest for liberation in Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, there are two different types of negation of worldly reality. One refers to how people become forgetful of their socio-political responsibility. A second kind of negation of worldly reality leads people to become involved in the historical struggle for liberation. This struggle does not engage in direct confrontation, but is often hidden behind *talchum* (mask dances), *mindam* (storytelling), and *pansori* (dramatic solo performances that use songs and poems).³⁶⁾ Use of these *minjung* cultural forms by *minjung* theology is itself a critique of the totalitarian government in the decades from 1960 to 1980, which ignored traditional *minjung* culture. These cultural means served also as social analysis and an acknowledgment of the value of the *minjung* way of understanding and relating to reality. They are all

33) Suh Changwon, 216.

34) Ibid., 232-233. See also, Suh David Kwang Sun, *The Korean Minjung in Christ* (Hong Kong: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1991), 89, 133, 159.

35) "The Fianal Statement" in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, ed., Virginia Fabella, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 157.

36) Hyun Young-Hak, "A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea." in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, 47-54.

expressions of *minjung* consciousness.

These traditional cultural performances enable the *minjung* to release their accumulated repressed feelings of *han*. In mask dances, for instance, performers and the audience together ridicule corrupt Buddhist monks and Confucian aristocrats and their present-day descendants who oppressed them, making them the butt-end of their jokes.³⁷⁾ These mask dances are expressions of how the *minjung* see reality. The movements of these dances are not graceful or elegant; they are rough, passionate gestures, almost grotesque and ugly. The performers' dialogue is full of vulgar and foul words as well as sexual innuendos. The music is loud, and the crowd response is filled with laughter and shouting. In the dramas portrayed by mask dances, the lower class, the *ssangnom*, holds a higher position than the higher class, the *yangban*, allowing the poor to ridicule, attack, and curse the *yangban*. In these performances, the ruling class is treated as "criminals" and is judged by the *minjung*, making obvious the wickedness, hypocrisy, and superficiality of the ruling class in dealing with reality.

Whether as performers or as spectators in the *talchum*, the *minjung* experienced and expressed a critical transcendence over this world and laughed at its absurdity.³⁸⁾ This experience of transcendence gave the *minjung* the wisdom and power to survive with good humor. In the mask dances, the *minjung* are not passive about their harsh reality. The *talchum* is a way of protesting, demonstrating solidarity, and challenging the ruling class. *Talchum* collectively channels their hopeless reality into positive action —they resist by ridiculing the oppressors. The experience of the *talchum* provides the *minjung* with the courage to fight for their liberation.

For *minjung* theology, liberation from poverty and from Western Christianity can lead to "a full humanity."³⁹⁾ A full humanity includes self-determination and an ability to fully contribute in political, economic, and religio-cultural liberation. In religious, ethical, and theological language, this refers to the Kingdom of God.

37) Suh David Kwang-Sun, "A Biographical Sketch an Asian Theological Consultation," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, 25.

38) Hyun Young-Hak, 50.

39) The theme, "a full humanity," was the focus of the EATWOT conference in 1979 that met in Wennappuwa, SriLanka. Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 122, 152, 156-157.

VI. Liberation and the Kingdom of God

Religion differs from ideology when it comes to the future.⁴⁰⁾ Religion is about an Absolute Future. However, “religion does emphatically teach that the Absolute Future has to be anticipated here in this life, not only through the spiritual achievements of individual persons but also through visible structures in human society.”⁴¹⁾ The concept of the Kingdom of God refers to the anticipation of the Absolute Future, to the fullness of life that is the goal of liberation and of salvation.

Kim Yong-Bock on his part distinguishes messianic politics from political messianism.⁴²⁾ Political messianism is based on the ideology of rulers, while messianic politics is based on the servanthood of the *minjung*. For Kim, the millennium denotes the historical, earthly kingdom of the Messiah, which is to be established by the *minjung*. That is, the Kingdom of God is experienced in the millennium when a liberation movement led by the *minjung* over throws the old order.

For Kim Yong-Bock, the kingdom of God signifies that the *minjung* are indeed able to be historical agents,⁴³⁾ that is, self-defining people contributing to their own liberation. In the messianic kingdom, God’s kingdom signals the rule of *koinonia* (fellowship and participation), *shalom* (peace), and justice.⁴⁴⁾ According to Kim Yong-Bock, “Justice is a faithful relation or a faithful interweaving of the stories of the people and power so that there is no contradiction between them: *koinonia* is the content of the creative interaction that will take place among people; and *shalom* is the wholesome development of humanity and its well-being.”⁴⁵⁾ *Koinonia* has to do with effective sharing of authority and power. Justice results in the

40) Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 25.

41) Ibid.

42) Kim Yong-Bock, “Messiah and *Minjung*: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, Ed., CTC-CCA (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 183.

43) Kim Yong-Bock, *한국민중의 사회전기* [The Social Biography of Monjung in Korea], (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1987), 249-250

44) Ibid., 255.

45) Kim Yong-Bock, “Messiah and *Minjung*: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism,” 187.

protection of the powerless and suffering. *Shalom* “is concerned with saving and transforming the *minjung* so that its subjecthood [agency] may be realized.”⁴⁶⁾ All three ethical virtues emphasized by Kim Yong-Bock are understood in a way that highlights areas of *minjung* growth through their struggle.⁴⁷⁾

VII. Conclusion

For Kim Yong-Bock, the Kingdom of God refers to a society where the *minjung*'s human dignity is valued, where their human agency is fully respected. For Suh Nam Dong, God's kingdom refers to a social life that guarantees human freedom and equality through “participatory (*minjung*) democracy.”⁴⁸⁾ For Ahn Byung Mu, God's Kingdom is to return to an egalitarian society.⁴⁹⁾

Kim Yong-Bock contends that the *minjung* are the true subjects or agents of the Kingdom of God. Suh Nam Dong posits the importance of social transformation (millennium) for a better and more humane society rather than personal salvation (Kingdom of God). For Ahn Byung Mu, the Kingdom of God is not an individual event, and its purpose is to return to an egalitarian society. All three agree that *minjung* theology has to emphasize a radical social change in order to bring about an alternative community of justice based on the recognition of the full human dignity of the *minjung*. Theirs is an ethical vision that has to do with creating a *han*-less society. Luke 17: 21 says that the Kingdom of God is among us. This means that the Kingdom of God is not a foreign or future reality but in truth is “here and now.” I remember in my college years singing a *minjung* song during the student demonstrations that refers to the hope of seeing the Kingdom of God. “It will not be an empty dream; after the long wearisome suffering, the dream will come true and it will be filled with a sea of peace and waves of justice. When that day comes, our waiting will not have been in vain, proving that our dream is not an empty dream.”

For *minjung* theology, the Kingdom of God will be realized on earth, in some form. Such society in 21st-century Korea, I propose, will not exist without reunification

46) Ibid.

47) Ibid., 192-93.

48) Suh Nam Dong, *민중신학의 탐구*, [The Search for *Minjung* Theology], (Seoul: Han Gil Sa, 1983), 139, 148, 157-58.

49) Ahn Byung Mu, *민중신학 이야기*, [The Story of *Minjung* Theology], 246.

of North and South Korea. A *han*-less Korea entails a society beyond northern totalitarianism and southern authoritarianism. The Kingdom of God, according to *minjung* theology, does not exist without true justice—liberation. I believe justice cannot flourish in Korea without the reunification of the Korean people. Therefore, one can indeed claim that reunification, liberation, and salvation are intrinsically linked in Korea.

Abstract

What defines *minjung* theology is the “*minjung* experience.” *Minjung* theology contends that the experience of *han* among the *minjung* has to be given epistemological privilege, and that the *minjung* are active agents engaged in achieving their own liberation. The experience of *han* is central to the ideology or worldview of the *minjung*. *Han* also serves as the key to understanding why *minjung* cannot be separated from a praxis for liberation. *Minjung* theology is based on the self-awakening of the poor in Korea as well as their struggles for survival. *Minjung* theology has its own voices and is based on specific and particular experiences. It refuses to uncritically accept European-based theology. In this paper, I will explore the notion of liberation in *minjung* theology, a 20th-century Korean liberation theology that emerged from the context of oppression and injustice during the Park regime in South Korea. The understanding of liberation in *minjung* theology is central to ethical-theological meanings and it links liberation to the Kingdom of God.

In discussing the Kingdom of God, I will focus on the work of a *minjung* theologian,

Kim Yong-Bock, compared with Ahn Byung Mu and Suh Nam Dong. These men all are first generation *minjung* theologians, the teachers from whom I personally heard the centrality of Kingdom of God through their vision of liberation for all Korean people. In conclusion, I seek to make clear how working for the implementation of the Kingdom of God is central to any elaboration of Korean Christian ethics the work of liberation in Korea.

Keywords: *Minjung* Theology, Liberation, *Han*, the Kingdom of God, The first generation theologian.

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