

## Minjung Theology and the Social Aphasia: A Dialogue with the Liberation Theology

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to study the specific contributions of *Minjung* Theology within the wide field of liberation theologies, especially in dialogue with Latin American Liberation Theology. For this purpose, we will analyze: (a) the current relevance of the concept of *minjung*; (b) the relationship between the narratives and testimonies of the *sufferers' communities* and the social analysis in the methodology of *Minjung* Theology; (c) the phenomenology of suffering in neo-liberal globalization and *social aphasia*.

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- Keywords

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In the early 1970s, the world began to hear of a strange and even dangerous theology: Liberation Theology. In a continent marked by Catholicism and the alliance between the Church and the social and political order, this new theology filled the scene with new and conflicting theological notions: options for the poor, a *God* of the poor, and a praxis, or practice, of the liberation of the poor as well as others. Soon after the public appearance of Liberation Theology in Latin America, another similar theology appeared on the other side of the world: the *Minjung* Theology of South Korea. Soon, the theological communities of this side of the world began to call it a Liberation Theology from Asia or South Korea. I, myself, as a theology student in the early 1980s – having been born in South Korea and later migrated to Brazil in 1966 – referred to *Minjung* Theology as the Korean Liberation Theology.

The world setting was characterized by the Cold War between the capitalist bloc, led by the United States, and the communist bloc. Within this framework, Latin America and Korea had very similar contexts: Politically, both were under military dictatorships; economically, both underwent a process of rapid transformation – from an agrarian to an industrialized economy – which, under the logic of capital accumulation through cheap labor, culminated in urbanization, a phenomenon that increased the growth of peripheries in the great cities. It is in this panorama that the two theological frameworks emerged - as opposed to the classical and liberal theology of Europe and the United States. In a common understanding, both emphasized the interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the practices of liberation, as well as the importance of the social role of Christianity and of the churches in society.

However, these similarities in the socioeconomic context and in the origins of the Latin American Liberation Theology (LALT) and the *Minjung* Theology (MT) should not cause us to forget some of the important distinctive traits.

First, Latin America is a continental and mostly Catholic region. The number of theologians who shared this line of theological thinking and produced works of LALT is much greater than that of the followers of the MT. Moreover, most of them are Catholic. Without entering into the discussion of the importance of Protestant theologians at the origins of the LALT – such as Míguez Bonino and Rubem Alves – and of its ecumenical character, it is necessary to recognize the Catholic hegemony in LALT. In contrast, Korea was a small Christian minority country in the 1970s, where two-thirds of the Christians were Protestants. It had gone through a recent period of colonization by Japan, which lasted until the end of World War II, and had been divided into north and south by the Soviet Union and the United States. In this context, the theological community of the MT was fundamentally Protestant and much smaller when compared to the LALT.

However, the purpose of this article is neither to discuss the current relevance of these theological approaches nor to make a comparative study of them. Its objective is to study, in a dialogue with LALT, a methodological specificity of the MT, namely the tension between the relationship between silence and clamor – the social aphasia and the testimony of the *poor* – and the need for objectivity in social analysis and theology. Aiming at this, I intend to study (a) the concept of *minjung*, (b) the MT methodology and (c) testimony and *social aphasia*.

## 1. The concept of *minjung*

The Korean word *minjung* (民衆) is a junction of the two Chinese ideograms *min* (民), which means ordinary people under the power of rulers, and *jung* (衆), multitude. In the history of the last two centuries, the term *minjung* came to acquire a new connotation, that of *political consciousness from lower class people*. It became a key concept for the understanding of Korean history and society. It is not possible to reduce this *political awareness* to the concept of *proletariat*, as Western intellectuals and politicians marked by the struggle between liberal and Marxist thinking have the tendency to do. However, it is necessary to include here the class struggle and the proletariat.

The *minjung* movement produced an interpretation of Korean history as a history of suffering and resistance of the *minjung* people as they faced centuries of Chinese hegemony, the Japanese colonization (1905-1945), the division of the country (1945), and the painful war between the two Koreas (1950-1953). In the 1970s, under the military dictatorship and the oppression of workers, there was a *cultural renaissance*, which strengthened the workers and students' movements. Examples of this revival are the recovery and revival of the shamanistic rituals (*kut*), the traditional masque dances (*talchum*), and the return of operas' performances with a single singer (*pansori*).<sup>1</sup>

In this period occurred various movements – for human rights, for democracy, of students and intellectuals for social and political reforms and for workers – converging all of them in the so-called *minjung*

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1 Choi Chung Moo, "The Minjung Culture Movement and the Construction of Popular Culture in Korea," in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 105–118.

*movement*. It was in this context that the so-called *Minjung* Theology was formed and developed during the 1970s and 1980s. This was a time of military dictatorship, rapid industrialization and economic development, a massive flow of rural workers to cities and their crowding into slums.

Because of their involvement in this large movement, many Christians – including several theologians – were arrested, tortured, sentenced to prison, and even executed. The *Minjung* Theology represented and sharpened the consciousness of Christians involved with the movement. MT theologians, such as Byung Mu Ahn, Nam Dong Suh and Yong Bok Kim<sup>2</sup>, analyzed the socio-political-economic situation, interpreted the Bible as a *minjung* book. They affirmed that Jesus was a *minjung* of his time in Palestine.

In characterizing Jesus as a *minjung*, the MT did not want to use the concept or notion of *minjung* as a noun that could be defined and therefore objectified. Its thinkers tried to avoid its definition “because to define the minjung is to objectify and inflict terms and categories of the observer upon the minjung, and thereby to control the minjung. To define the minjung is to create different *minjung* in the observer’s terms.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, the MT assumes that the written history is the historiography done by the powerful and dominators, and that the events and narratives of the *minjung* must be excavated and rediscovered from their meanings. More than that, the MT stated that the minjung is the subject of history. This tension or conflict with the notion

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2 Because of differences in the order of Korean names in Western writing, especially the locus of the family name - there are authors who start with the family name while others put it at the end - I will capitalize the surname.

3 Jin-Kwan Kwon, “A Preliminary Sketch for a New Minjung Theology,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 1 (June 2004), 56.

of *minjung* as object and subject is a key issue in MT (it will be discussed below in Section 2 of the paper).

Despite the great similarity between the LALT and MT, I think it is important to highlight – in this article – *liberation* as a substantive that dialectically and simultaneously is also an objective. In LALT, the identity of this theology occurs in the notion or concept of *liberation*. Hugo Assmann,<sup>4</sup> in a 1970 text that presents the concept of liberation theology, states that “the theological and political theme of *liberation* is, therefore, rooted in the current Latin American historical context. It is the evident *correlate* of the social – and analytical – theme of dependence”.<sup>5</sup>

In the same line of Assmann, Gustavo Gutierrez, in his classic book *Theology of Liberation*, says that “to speak of liberation theology is to seek the answer to the question: what relationship does exist between salvation and the historical process of liberation of man?”<sup>6</sup> Then he widens the theological notion of liberation by relating three levels of meaning to this term: “a) economic, social, and political liberation; b) liberation that leads to the creation of a new man in a society of solidarity; c) liberation from sin and entry into communion with God and with all men.”<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, Leonardo Boff<sup>8</sup> penned an affirmation in the 1970s that became more influential among liberation theologians and Christian

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4 Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación: ensayo teológico desde la América dependiente*, 2<sup>a</sup> ed. (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1976).

5 *Ibid.*, 34.

6 Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teologia da Libertação. Perspectivas*, 6<sup>a</sup> ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1986), 49.

7 *Ibid.*, 203.

8 Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, *Como fazer Teologia da Libertação*, 2<sup>a</sup> ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1986).

communities involved in liberation struggles: “The liberation category implies a global refusal of the development centered system and a denunciation of its enslaving structure. It is urgent to break away with the dependencies’ network.”<sup>9</sup> Then, quoting Cardinal Eduardo Piro-  
nio, he stated that “...on the one hand, liberation is conceived as an overcoming of all slavery. On the other, it is as a call [to people] to be to be new men, creators of a new world.”<sup>10</sup> This understanding of liberation *from* all forms of all slavery to create a new world became a *two-pole (from-to) consensual structure* in LALT. The concept of *liberation* ceased being an object of fundamental theological reflection as well as the concept of *poor* or *subject of liberation*.

The fact that *poor* was not the *object* of discussion in LALT did not mean, as in MT, an attempt to maintain its character of subject as it appears in the subject-subject relationship in the community or in dialogues between people. I think that the substantive character, i.e., something objective, of the notion of *the poor*, *the subject of history* or *liberation*, was accepted with no problems. Essentially, the rationale and the logic of the modern social sciences were assumed without problem.

One of the few LALT thinkers, or at least the only one from the 1980s, that questioned this conjecture was Ivone Gebara in a 1991 article, during the height of LALT. Reflecting on the experience of evangelization in the midst of an impoverished people, she wondered if there wasn’t a growing gap between the *evangelization theories* learned in the books of theology and the experience of the poor. And she boldly says: “I wonder if our ‘discourse’ to the poor about their liberation, about the

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9 *Ibid.*, 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 19.



conquest of the land, about justice... is not being distorted by a beautiful idealism or by hope without a sufficient analysis of the objective conditions of our history.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, she called for a more serious reflection about the notion of *poor* and *liberation* in LALT. Moreover, she differentiates the objective aspect of social theories and LALT on the one hand and the experiences of the poor, just like the *minjung* theologians explicitly intended.

Rather than a problem of social analysis or philosophical or theological idealism with respect to hope, Gebara proposed to rethink LALT's own mission or identity: “I dare to think that we, the nuns, should start the process of refusing the ‘cheap consolation’ as Rachel (Jer. 31:15) who refused consolation when facing the death of her children. She preferred to remain in mourning and crying, that is, in the reality of her pain, instead of ‘swallowing’ an anesthetic that could create illusions and false hopes.”<sup>12</sup> For her, false and alienating hopes demobilize the forces of effective transformation.

Without entering into a theological discussion about refusing consolation or advancing in the announcement of a deliverance promise, Gebara made an analytical critique of idealism or hope with an insufficient analysis of the objective conditions of history, especially of the qualities of the *subjects* of liberation, the poor. In other words, the two-pole structure of the concept of liberation *from* and *for* in the LALT included a fundamental epistemological or theological problem. And that was what Gebara was warning against.

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11 Ivone Gebara, “Hora de ficar: dificuldades das religiosas na evangelização em meio a um povo empobrecido,” *Vida Pastoral* 160 (1991), 2.

12 *Ibid.*, 4.

Differently, in MT there are explicitly three terms: (a) *minjung*, (b) situations and structures of suffering and oppression, and (c) liberation practices. In this sense, the epistemological structure of MT is a three-pole one. That is, in addition to the poles *from* and *to*, this *minjung* concept, which gives the identity of this theology, is also an object of necessary discussion. Thus, even if the founders of MT attempted not to objectify the notion of *minjung* to maintain its character as subject, they had to give a theoretical explanation about this ambiguity or singularity.

Jin Kwan Kwon, a second-generation MT theologian, explicitly recognizes that it is necessary to discuss and deepen the concept of *minjung*. While agreeing with the opinion of those of the first generation, that intellectuals tend to distort and manipulate this concept, he states that we must define it: “We must try to make the meaning of the *minjung* as much clear as possible.”<sup>13</sup>

He proposes to relate it to the notions of proletariat, citizen, nation, alterity (which is also connected to the notion of minority), and subalterns (which comes from postcolonial theory). For him, the term *proletariat* – or the broader notion of class of workers – is related to *minjung*, but this is not a strictly economic concept. It is a term more political than economic and emphasizes *minjung* as actors in society. More than that, as cultural, historical, political and economic beings. According to Kwon,<sup>14</sup> “Marxists consider the elite socialist (e.g., intelligentsia and party leaders) as leaders of the proletariat and give them

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13 Jin-Kwan Kwon, “An Overview of Minjung Theology: A Theology Based on Social Movement,” *Dalit and Minjung Theology: A Dialogue* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006), 149.

14 *Ibid.*

a status superior to individual workers.”

The term citizen is similar to *minjung*, but distinct. Citizens, by definition, enjoy full membership and rights in society and in the country. The *minjung* were excluded from full participation in society. “*Minjung* theology believes that the *minjung* must be subjects of history. It is not a descriptive statement. It is an ought-to statement.”<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the nation, Kwon states that according to Korean history the fate of the nation was controlled and decided upon by the collaboration between external powers and the internal elites. The *minjung* were veiled and obscured by the nation. They were isolated and oppressed. In this sense, the *minjung* are understood as *subjects of history* in the futuristic sense. That is why the MT uses metaphors, such as messiahs and suffering servants of God, using *minjung* in the sense of future, of going beyond the present situation.

Finally, the concepts of *minorities* – of postmodern-influenced Korean thinkers, including some of the new generation of *minjung* theologians – and *subalterns* – from the postcolonial theory, which are widely used by *dalit* theologians in their dialogue with the MT,<sup>16</sup> are also concepts related to *minjung*, but distinct.

This list has not as its objective simply to appraise the level of the discussion on the debate of the identity of the MT, but rather to show how it can be useful to social sciences, both in the broadest sense and in the *minjung* movements. As Kwon says: “For the Korean context, the term is more suitable for service than nation, proletariat, citizens, minorities, and others. In this sense, the idea of the *minjung* and the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Jin-Kwan Kwon, “Encountering the Minjung through Three Symbols: The Multitude, the Inmin, and the Subaltern,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 14 (December 2010), 17-34.

Theology of *Minjung* are not obsolete and outdated. They are viable and usable today.”<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The methodology of Minjung Theology

In the scope of Asiatic Christianity, *Minjung* Theology was the first theology to discuss the question of the poor and the practices of liberation of the oppressed. This does not mean that there were no original theological reflections in Asia, as if there were only copies or translations of European and North American theologies. For example, the work of Kazoh Kitamori, *The Theology of The Pain of God*,<sup>18</sup> was translated into several languages and has been an object of discussion of several international theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann, D. Solle, and Hans Küng. In this book, Kitamori departs from Western philosophical and theological culture and says that God’s pain does not exist in Him/Her as a substance – a fundamental concept for Western metaphysics – but rather as an expression of His/Her love on the cross, of the pain-love present in Jesus, who suffered outside the gate (Heb. 13:12). The novelty of MT lies in the production of a historically contextual theology and in the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

After the beginning of the MT, other Asian liberation theologies emerged, such as Dalit Theology in India,<sup>19</sup> Buraku Theology in Japan,<sup>20</sup> and Asian feminist theology,<sup>21</sup> which is subdivided into sev-

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17 Kwon, “An Overview of Minjung Theology,” 154.

18 Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

19 e.g., Vincent Manoharan, *Towards a Practical Dalit Theology* (Delhi: ISPC, 2016); Samson Prabhakar & Jin-Kwan Kwon eds., *Dalit and Minjung Theology: A Dialogue* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006).

eral theoretical lines. Among these several currents the *Dalit* and the *Minjung* theologies have maintained constant dialogue, usually every two years (Prabhakar & Kwon, 2006, various issues of the Madang international journal).

In the late 1980s, Hyun Kyung Chung,<sup>22</sup> a Korean feminist theologian, who recognized herself as a second generation of *Minjung* Theology, used one of the characteristics of MT as something common to all liberation theologies in the struggle of women in Asia: the *circular steps* method. "The EATWOT method has its circular steps: listening to individual's situation, social analysis, and then the theological analysis."<sup>23</sup> The differences between the famous method of *socio-analytical mediation*, *hermeneutic-theological mediation*, and the *pastoral-political-mediation* spread by the LALT and the perspective of *Minjung* Theology emerge in the practices of poor women of the Asian theologies and in their *narratives* or their *storytelling*. "It starts with women's storytelling. Women from various backgrounds gather and listen to one another's stories of victimization and liberation. (...) The power of storytelling lies in its embodied truth. (...) Their bodies record what happened in their lives. Their bodies remember what it is like to be a no-body and what it is like to be some-body."<sup>24</sup>

Chung refers to one of the creators of *Minjung* Theology, Yong Bok

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20 e.g., Teruo Kuribayashi, "Recovering Jesus for Outcasts in Japan: From a Theology of the Crown of Thorns," *Japan Christian Review* 58 (1992), 19-32. Internet: nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/4133.

21 e.g., Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1990).

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, 104.

24 *Ibid.*

Kim, who proposed a methodology based on the telling of life stories dominated by a sense of suffering (*han*) of Korean women and other oppressed people. Before following the proposal of Y.B. Kim, it is important to understand that this concept of *han*, untranslatable into a Western language, is primal to *Minjung* Theology. For Nam Dong Suh,<sup>25</sup> one of the three most important theologians of MT (the third is Byung-Mu Ahn), *han* is an unresolved feeling, either conscious or unconscious, accumulated in individuals and collectives who have experienced a long period of suffering.

From this concept of *han*, Y.B. Kim,<sup>26</sup> proposed a method of socio-biography aiming at showing an understanding of history that cannot be perceived by the so-called objective social analysis, such as that of Western modern rationality. For him, the socio-biography of the oppressed reveals the *hidden reality* behind sociological analyzes or official histories. The listeners hear not only cold data, but also the sufferings, the cries, the memories and the yearnings of real people.

This is a methodological characteristic of the MT. As Chung put it, these narratives of meetings and communities in dialogue generate a *built-in truth*: “Bodies remember what it's like being a *nobody* and what it's like being *somebody*.” This type of experience is also present in the Latin American grassroots church communities inspired by the LALT. In this sense, this experience of embodied truth, made body, of becoming *someone* in mutual recognition, is common to TM and LALT. The difference is that in MT the experience of *telling-hearing* is a part of the

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25 Nam-Dong Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

26 Yong Bok Kim, “The Socio-biography of Minjung and Theology,” in *Minjung and Korean Theology* (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1982).

methodology, while in LALT the first step is the socio-analytic mediation. It is important to clarify that this is different from what the LALT has called relationship between praxis and theory.

For LALT, this moment of experience occurs within the praxis and differs from the second step, which is the theological theory. This is composed of three theoretical mediations or three theoretical stages: socio-analytical mediation, hermeneutic mediation and practical mediation.<sup>27</sup> MT intends to go beyond – or precede – the subject-object relationship of social and philosophical theories and intends to assume the subject-subject relationship that occurs in the dialogue of people in community as they share stories of suffering and liberation struggles. In other words, MT proposes a rupture with Western reason that reduces theories, including theology, to the subject-object relationship, and proposes to recover the role of storytelling – the traditions and narratives of the lives of the poor – as part of its theological methodology.

I think that in the early decades of MT these theologians also did not perceive the passage from the subject-subject relationship in the *telling-and-listening* to the *subject-object* relationship in the analysis of social structures. Perhaps this was not clear to them. Take, for example, the relationship between poverty and capitalism or the strong oppression of women under the patriarchy and machismo of Korean and Asian culture. MT theologians have clearly stated that socio-biographical narratives reveal the suffering present in human reality that is hidden in sociological analyses or official histories. This does not mean that such analyses are not necessary.

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27 Boff & Boff, *Como fazer Teologia da Libertação*, 40; Clodovis Boff, *Teoria do método teológico* (Petrópolis: Vozes 1998).

Jin-Kwan Kwon, one of the main theologians of the MT's second generation, and Samson Prabhakar, a *dalit* theologian, wrote in the presentation of *Dalit and Minjung Theology: A Dialogue*<sup>28</sup>: “We need more than just theologize. We are called to witness to the suffering reality of the *dalit* and the *minjung* and get involved in their struggles for their own liberation and freedom.”

In this concise statement, we find four fundamental elements of MT: a) theologizing is not enough, but necessary; b) the fundamental concept of *witnessing* to the reality of sufferers, that is different from the concept of seeing or analyzing social reality; c) the need to get involved in the struggle of those who suffer; d) the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed themselves. I do not want to discuss here the common problems to LALT and MT that are present in the notion of social struggles and *liberation*,<sup>29</sup> but the relationship between testimony / narratives and the issue of social analysis and struggles. I want to discuss here the need to articulate the relationship between the narrative or the testimonies and the more objective analyses, that is, the object that must be understood and modified.

Won-Don Kang<sup>30</sup> wrote that minjung theologians have recently rediscovered economic, political, social, geopolitical and ecological issues: the growing numbers of precarious and temporary workers, the dramatic growth of unemployment among young adults, and the protests and strikes in large factories. He says that “there is a long list of current issues with which *Minjung Theology* should deal from the

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28 Prabhakar & Kwon eds., *Dalit and Minjung Theology*, vi.

29 See, H. Assmann & J.M. Sung, *Deus em nós: o reinado que acontece no amor solidário aos pobres* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2010).

30 Won-Don Kang, “Some Tasks of Minjung Theology in the Age of Globalization,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 22 (December 2014).



perspective of *minjung*. The condition and process of globalization has accelerated the social polarity along with the spread of poverty, the retrogression of democracy and human rights, and the ecological crisis, which are threatening the life and living of *minjung* tremendously. Thus, it is urgent that *Minjung* Theology should engage in discussion of identifying problems and seeking alternatives.”<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to note that, among MT scholars, there is a consensus that it was profoundly hit by the tragedy of a textile worker, JEON Tae-II, who immolated himself by fire as a protest. He tried to improve the horrible working conditions and the low pay he and his companions received. Despite the lack of education in his poor childhood, he, along with some friends, fought and sent petitions to the government for the improvement of these conditions, but received no response and was fired by his boss. It is important to remember that the Korean economic *miracle* began in the early 1970s with the export model of cheap and low-tech products such as textiles, while workers received very low wages and suffered repression from the dictatorship against their organization. Because of this, JEON Tae-II “chose self-immolation as the last means of appeal. As he set fire to himself on November 13, 1970, he yelled, ‘We are not machines!’ Since his death, he has been remembered as the symbol of Korean labor movement.”<sup>32</sup>

This self-immolation was certainly one of the catalysts of the emergence of MT. Later, Nam-Dong Suh said that as a progressive, contextual theologian, he was very ashamed for not knowing much about

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31 *Ibid.*, 9.

32 Yong-Yeon Hwang, “The Person Attacked by the Robbers is Christ: An Exploration of Subjectivity from the perspective of Minjung Theology,” in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Selected Writings by Ahn Byong-Mu and Modern Critical Responses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications (Kindle Edition), 2013), 216.

the social and political conditions of the workers and the nation. After this event, he began to better study the workers and students' movements for democracy and human rights in South Korea. As Kwon says, a major leap in his thinking occurred: "He left the so-called Western style theology behind and committed himself to a new Korean theology, i.e., Minjung Theology."<sup>33</sup>

In this process of construction of MT, Suh,<sup>34</sup> in one of his most important works, "Towards a Theology of Han," proposes that *han* can be either creative or destructive. As we have seen above, *han* is an accumulation of repressed and condensed experiences of oppression that can kill, generate revenge, destroy and hate endlessly. However, this *force* can also be a creative force when transformed or sublimated into a higher spiritual power. Following Suh's thinking, Kwon reminds us that "this positive power arises when *dan*, self-denial and cutting off the evil cycle within oneself, is practiced. (...) By [the] practice of *dan*, *han* is transformed into a creative force."<sup>35</sup> *Dan* would be the overcoming of the destructive and nihilistic aspect of *han*.

As Kwon says, "By exercising *dan* one cuts off his/her own desire to be comfortable and stable in his/her own 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."<sup>36</sup> For the main MT theologians, there is a relationship between *han* and the Holy Spirit. For them, the apostle Paul (cf. Rom.

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33 Jin-Kwan Kwon, "Minjung Theology as a Counter Theology: Suh Namdong's Case," *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 21 (June 2014), 31.

34 Suh, "Towards a Theology of Han."

35 Kwon, "Minjung Theology as a Counter Theology," 60.

36 *Ibid.*, 33.

5:35) connects closely both the notion of suffering and weakness, *han*, and the gestures and actions of deliverance, *dan*, with that of Spirit: "The Apostle Paul tries to describe the procedure of the turning of *han* through *dan* toward hope. (...) The turn of *han* to *dan* is created by the Holy Spirit that works in the heart of suffering people."<sup>37</sup>

Joseph Comblin, the liberation theologian who most developed a theology of the Spirit, comes near this conception of the *han-dan* dialectic by saying: "Jesus' message is a call to the poor for them to raise their heads, to awaken, to hope and begin the struggle for life."<sup>38</sup> For him, human beings "not only fight against the threatening forces of biological death, but also against the forces of death that kill. This is the Spirit's task."<sup>39</sup>

There is no space in this article to deepen this *han-dan* relationship. What I wanted to show in this section is the epistemological specificity of MT, namely the tension between the subject-object analysis (in the mediations of the modern social and human sciences) and the subject-subject aspect of the witness-narrative (the *storytelling*) in MT, i.e., the dialectic between *han-dan* and socio-historical contexts. In other words, this articulation – between (a) the narratives and testimonies of those who are crushed by *han* and struggling, moved by the Spirit, for their liberation, and (b) the need for *objective* analyses of social realities – is, simultaneously, a major contribution of MT and one of its theoretical challenges.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> José Comblin, *A vida – em busca da liberdade* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2007), 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

### 3. Social aphasia and the phenomenology of suffering

In the first section of this paper, we discussed the concept of *minjung* and its current relevance. In the second section, we discussed the subject-object relationship in MT methodology, especially the *minjung* narratives and testimonies, and the analysis of the more objective issues of social realities and of hermeneutic-theological discussions. In this final part, I want to present the relationship between the *minjung* and the talk of the *communities of sufferers*, articulating their relationship to the notion of *social aphasia* in MT and subjectivity in the dominant culture in globalization.

Won-Don Kang, one of the authors who has most discussed the topic of economic globalization inside the MT in South Korea, recognizes that “While minjung theology had a keen awareness about how the suffering of Korean minjung was connected with the contradictions of the world, it has not transcended its political boundary of a national state.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, MT must go beyond its Korean cultural and social context. It must analyze and reflect theologically about the process of capitalist globalization.

In this wider context, MT theologians are seeking to produce a synthesis between this understanding of history and the context of Korea and globalization, without losing the contribution and epistemological identity of their theology. Jin-Ho Kim, one of the main names of the third generation of MT theologians, believes that “in a consumer society, [the] desire to consume plays a decisive role in the formation of subjectivity.”<sup>41</sup> Like many researchers of global capitalism culture, he

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40 Won-Don Kang, “Some Tasks of Minjung Theology in the Age of Globalization,” *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology* 22 (December 2014), 5-6.

criticizes the phenomenon of the *marketization of citizenry* in which citizenship is related to whether or not citizens belong to the market. With this, the notion of *minjung* becomes more complex as well as the struggles and concepts of Minjung Theology.

As we point out the challenge of the discussion on economic globalization and the culture of consumption within the MT, we cannot forget that this theology seeks to maintain the centrality of the *minjung* as subject and, at the same time, the relation between subject and object in its reflections. As we have said before, for the MT the *minjung* only becomes and recognizes himself/herself as a subject capable of participating in the struggle of its liberation when he/she is able to express himself/herself, that is, to tell his/her story and to be heard by others. However, in the present global consumer culture, this human experience of *telling-hearing-sharing* is socially relevant only when it is mediated by the buying and selling of goods within market relationships. For example, the coffee shop has replaced the free space for conversation that existed in the squares. As Marx said, the social relations between *goods*, i.e., the fetish, replaced social relations between people. Thus, the non-consumers, the poor, are not considered as subjects of social relations, as beings capable of talking about themselves, of telling their stories and their hopes.

That is why Jin-Ho Kim retakes an important concept in the origin of MT, that of sin. For him and others, unlike classical and liberal theologies, sin is not understood as disobedience to God's laws, but as a language and expression of an oppression system. The *minjung* are not understood as the sinners, but as sufferers *under sin*. Sin is not un-

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41 Jin-ho Kim, "Ochlos and the Phenomenology of Wretchedness," in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 205.

derstood as a result of guilt on the part of the *minjung* but as a result of exclusion and discrimination. "Suh says, sin is the name that the powerful gave to the powerless. Those who dominate the language are the ones in power. Therefore, sin has the effect of depriving language from the powerless. In other words, *han* is the phenomenon of disability (psychological and physical) on those who suffer exclusion and discrimination and cannot express their sadness properly. The language of *minjung* is stolen by the dominant system, which accumulates the wretchedness of *han*. (...) Aphasia, dysmnnesia, and every other illness of the mind and body represent this."<sup>42</sup>

The *stealing of the word* is a way of denying the ability of someone to be a subject, to express and share his/her life, his/her sufferings and hopes. The dominators try, but they cannot completely deny the languages of the dominated because these are parts of human condition. As Suh and Kim say, the *minjung* may not adequately express their sadness and hope, but their bodies resist this phenomenon of language deprivation and seek their ways. "That is why they often speak a language that is hard to understand. These are symptoms of *han*. According to Suh, *han* is the "sound of depression which appeals to the heavens, the sound of the nameless and the helpless."<sup>43</sup>

Before going ahead with this reflection, it is important to clarify that the translation of this expression – *sound of depression which appeals to the heavens* – into English is not an adequate one. *Han* could be used for depression situations, but it is more than that. For the liberation theologies of various trends in the world, including MT, this sentence is directly linked to the famous expression in the book of Exodus

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

which says: “Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings’” (Exod. 3:7 NRSV). Therefore, *the sound of the nameless and defenseless is the sound of the clamor that cries out to the heavens*, that is the sound of the *han*.

This *clamor* theme is also present at the origin of LALT. In this sense, although the theme or concept of *social aphasia* was not deepened in it, there is a convergence between these two theologies regarding this question. After all, both theologies start from the sufferings and struggles of the *minjung/poor*. For LALT, the emphasis was on the relationship between their *historical memory* and God’s revelation in history as a response to their clamor.

The theme of the clamor runs throughout the Bible and has a technical meaning: it is the *complaint for the injustice inflicted*. In an important book in the first phase of LALT, Porfírio Miranda<sup>44</sup> says, “Cain is the first concrete man, and with Gn. 4:11 begins the human history. ‘Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!’ (Gen. 4:10 NRSV). This is the essential presentation of God who intervenes in it, before there were alliances, patriarchs, promises and commandments.”

For Miranda and others from the LATL,<sup>45</sup> the *clamor* is more than a simple cry. Its secret is not in the sound, for even the most *voiceless* ones cry out to the heavens. Clamor is a cry of despair of those who are hopeless, given with the vibration of the vocal cords or with those of the suffered body, but at the same time it is a cry that is born from the deepest bottom of the being, that is born from the innards, in the

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44 José Porfírio Miranda, *Marx y Biblia*, 2<sup>a</sup> ed. (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1975), 115.

45 José Comblin, *O clamor dos oprimidos. O clamor de Jesus* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984).

*hope against all hope* of being answered, of being heard.

What is different in the MT is that in this theology, the clamor and language of the minjung were and are one of the central objects in its reflection. Therefore, they are constantly retaken as the social context changes, as new forms of oppression arise, and as new struggle subjects emerge and cry out.

However, insofar as the body demands the expression of its suffering and hope, the systems of oppression also create and develop new processes of management of hatred and *false hope* among people. In the case of South Korea, at the time of the development of the MT, there were two main ideologies articulated for social control: the ideologies of anti-communism and of economic development. The hatred of communist North Koreans over the 1950-53 war, which killed millions of people, justified the military dictatorship. The promise of overcoming the nation's poverty through capitalist economic development brought with its low wages to the workers and oppression upon them.

In recent years, with the replacement of the ideology of development by neoliberalism and the culture of consumption, there is a change in the structure of *social consciousness* and control. On the one hand, there emerged the hatred of communists and LGBT communities on behalf of the defense of the traditional family, the basis of the nation.<sup>46</sup> On the other, emerged the desires of individual consumption, no longer the development of the nation. Thus, hatred and individual desire, according to Jin-Ho Kim, began to drain from civil society its ability to think about others and about the nation as a whole.

This articulation between social hatred and individual desire gen-

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46 Min-Ah Cho, "If They Send Me to Hell, Jesus Will Rescue Me: Minjung Theology and the Iban Movement," in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*.



erated a new social consciousness, a new alliance between the defense of the neoliberal market against *communists* (and the social rights of the poor) and social-family conservatism. In other words, hatreds and consumer desires have created an alliance between elites and those who *consider themselves to be socially worthy of acceptance* against the *minjung*. The new context demanded new perspectives from the MT.

Just as the worker's suicide in 1970 changed theology in Korea, the suicide of an *iban* – an inclusive notion for sexual minorities in South Korea, equivalent to queer in English (people who do not follow the model of heterosexuality or gender binarism) – impacted the Korean theological community in 2003. A Catholic devotee and poet, he was known only by his pseudonym *Yookwoodang*, *the person who has only six friends*: alcohol, cigarettes, sleeping pill, makeup base, green tea and rosary.

He was nineteen, a gay activist and poet, and was struggling against the classification of homosexuality as a sexual perversion and obscenity by the Youth Protection Committee. At that time, a Korean newspaper run by a fundamentalist Protestant church was promoting homophobia throughout the country, to overturn the decision of the National Committee for the Protection of Human Rights in Korea, which had called for the removal of prejudice against sexual minorities in textbooks and in the list of social perversions.

On April 26, 2003, he committed suicide. His body was found by his fellow gay activists at the door of his small office. "In his will he wrote, 'I haven't achieved anything in all my life but suffered depression all the way through. After death, I want to go to heaven where I can proudly say I am gay, with no need to suffer, no need to hide myself anymore.' He was a devout Christian. He dreamed of the boundless

love of Jesus that would heal the wound he had received from ‘the ministers and priests’.”<sup>47</sup>

This testimony of suffering, faith and hope of an *iban* demands theological reflections able at articulating the phenomenon of the emergence LGBT communities all over the world, the alliance between the defense of the traditional family – religious or not – and the neoliberalism that denies the human rights, in particular the social rights of non-consumers. But this broad theme transcends this article. Therefore, let us return to the theme of the testimony and the notion of social aphasia discussed by Kim Jin-Ho.

Kim, a disciple of Ahn, whom he calls the master, a theologian who associates the notion of *ochlos* (from the gospel of Mark) with that of *minjung*, says that it is necessary to listen to the nonverbal sounds of suffering of the *minjung* and try to break the system of oppression so that their lives can be restored. For this, it is necessary to denounce the system of domination and the misery and sufferings of the *minjung*, to rescue the genuine voice of their language, interpreting the biography of the sound and not only their words. In this sense, he proposes to develop the *phenomenology* of pain or suffering. He uses the term *phenomenology* to avoid theories about the essence of suffering and focus on the experiences of the place of pain. He proposes a “theological anthropology as a tool for the study of [a] phenomenological theology of pain. *Anthropology* emphasizes the task of looking at multilayered causality, entangled synchronically and diachronically in the experience of people who are suffering. Meanwhile, *theological* emphasizes liberation and salvation of people who are suffering.”<sup>48</sup>

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47 *Ibid.*, 184.

48 Jin-ho Kim, “Ochlos and the Phenomenology of Wretchedness,” 210.

It is interesting to note that Ivone Gebara, who by the end of the 1980s was already criticizing an *objective* and *scientific* perspective of social analyses in LALT, also proposed a phenomenological methodology. In her book, whose title *Rompendo o silêncio: uma fenomenologia feminista do mal* [Breaking the Silence: A Feminist Phenomenology of the Evil] is quite appropriate for these reflections, she says: "We know that a phenomenological position rests upon the data of concrete existence, on things that emerge in the field of our experience. And it is in these experiences that it bases its interpretation and its later reflection. Phenomenology does not explain events and things from the outside, such as Cartesianism, but attempts to understand them from within, even though it never gets to reach 'clear and distinct ideas'." <sup>49</sup>

In a most similar way to the theologians of the MT, she asked in 1991: "We live in a moment of manifest weakness of the institutions (churches included) and popular organizations. Is it not a time to listen again? In fact, 'listening' is a part of our faith tradition. (...) There are no recipes but convictions. There is an urgent need of welcoming the different ones and help the earth to get rid from so much 'filth' and oppression so that the 'flower may be born from the impossible ground'." <sup>50</sup>

In the same way, Jin-Ho Kim takes up the sufferings of the people, which are a part of life and reach everybody with no exception. He seeks to better understand their various coping mechanisms. He says:

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49 Ivone Gebara, *Rompendo o silêncio: uma fenomenologia feminista do mal* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000), 43.

50 Ivone Gebara, "Hora de ficar: dificuldades das religiosas na evangelização em meio a um povo empobrecido," *Vida Pastoral* 160 (1991), 8.

"Suffering or pain comes to everyone without exception, and everyone has a coping mechanism. Some sufferings are uttered while others are not. Some responses, such as shouting, are uttered. But some others cannot be uttered and expressed through substitution. Substitution happens when one is faced with overwhelming events or when one cannot handle repetitive pain."<sup>51</sup>

The most common substitution is hatred. And this can be expressed in self-hatred, manifested in mechanisms of self-destruction and, ultimately, in suicide. Or it can be expressed against others, as it imposes pain upon them, such as in situations of domestic violence, exclusion of people, the transfer of pain upon minority social groups, or, in some cases, in holocausts.

*Minjung* is a term that refers to people who have been excluded in various ways, from the pains that arise from inescapable human conditions, from the sufferings that arise from individual and/or collective human evil, as well as from the pains of social systems invisible to the eyes of individuals, such as neoliberal capitalism. In this context, Kim proposes that "the phenomenon of the wretchedness of the *ochlos-minjung* can be best understood when the multilayered reality of their site of suffering is examined. In this sense, *ochlos-minjung* and phenomenology of wretchedness go side by side. Therefore, asking about *ochlos-minjung* theologically is like setting up a monument for those who are forgotten, or hidden, from the gaze of those who are dominant in our age."<sup>52</sup>

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51 Jin-ho Kim, "Ochlos and the Phenomenology of Wretchedness," 212.

52 *Ibid.*, 213.

## Final words

To recover the history of those who are forgotten or hidden in this global world, and to create new ways for these subjects to become persons and communities of dignity and not bankrupt sinners – this is what is common between Minjung Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology. It is a great challenge, in a time these theological frameworks, to recognize the power and the oppression of the global capitalist system.

The births of the LALT and MT are marked, not by declarations about the certainties of history, but by radical hopes. These are hopes that generate action and commitment and are marked by the *han-dan* dialectic. Therefore, I want to finish this text with the speech of the devout Christian *iban*:

“I haven’t achieved anything in all my life but [have] suffered depression all the way through. After death, I want to go to heaven where I can proudly say I am gay, with no need to suffer, no need to hide myself anymore”. At the end of his note, this suffering and hopeful young man, who dreamed of the boundless love of Jesus, who would heal the wounds he had received from the world and from ministers and priests, says: “If they send me to hell, Jesus will *rescue me*.”<sup>53</sup>

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53 Min-Ah Cho, “If They Send Me to Hell, Jesus Will Rescue Me,” 184.

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