

An Intellectual Biography of Ahn Byung-mu: A Search for Jesus in History

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Abstract

This article, presented as a lecture at ‘the Commemorating Conference for the 100th Anniversary of An Byung-mu’s Birth’ in October 2022, attempts to depict his life and thoughts by reading his writings chronologically. It sets the central theme of his entire life as ‘the search for Jesus in history’ and explains how the theme developed in his thoughts by dividing it into four stages. First, the stage of ‘existence’ centered on the period when the journal of *Ya-sung* was published in 1951-56. Second, the theological transition taking place during the publication of the journal of *Hyun-jon* in 1969-80 from the existentialist understanding to minjung theology, Third, the process of establishing full-fledged minjung theology as the ‘theology of event’ with the publication of the journal of *Theological Thoughts* since 1973. Fourth, a theology of life in the time of the journal

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of *Salim* since 1988. Through this process, we can find how he creatively confronted his time and what he suggests to us today.

- Key Words

Minjung Theology, Jesus in history, Theology of Event, *Salim*, *Tal-hyang* (脫-向)

I. Introduction

This article provides an overview of Ahn Byung-mu's life and thoughts while chronologically reading his writings. It is to reexamine his life on the centennial anniversary of his birth and to find a way for a progressive theological movement rooted in his thoughts. The interest of this article is in finding out the legacy of Ahn Byung-mu that can still be pursued in our time, against the so-called 'post-minjung theology phenomenon', a general prejudice against minjung theology that has shrunk or faded as we move into the 21st century. There was a heyday of minjung theology in which the works of the first generation minjung theologians, including Ahn, were called 'theology of witness' and those of the second generation 'theology of movement' from the perspective of 'the theory of generation'. However, now we have passed the theological period of 'movement'. Furthermore, we are standing in front of a civilizational request for a new voice of minjung theology that cannot be covered even by the enormous traditions of 'movement' in the Korean historical context. How can minjung theology respond to this request? The clue is to be found in Ahn's thoughts. If meaningful voices in it could revive today in the process of creative confrontation with the surging history, we may hear the drumbeat to advance in our time.

This article divides the development of Ahn's thought into four stages, characterized by four key words, 'existence → *hyun-jon* (presence) → event → *salim* (life-making), and tries to trace how he searched for the 'Jesus in history' in the entire process. Here, the 'Jesus in history' is a consistent idea to understand

all these flows as the topic of his life. It refers to Jesus coming continually back into history, rather than 'the historical Jesus' as the antithesis of the 'Christ of faith', the binary symmetry in Western theology. As a clue to understanding this process, it would be good to use the four magazines he founded as a standard. First, we can listen to the existential anguish in his young trembling soul in the 12 issues of *Ya-seong* published in 1951-56. Second, the gradual transition occurred in his search for the Jesus in history from the existential inquiry to theological reflections on minjung-event in the 113 issues of *Hyun-jon*(Dasein) in 1969-80. Third, creative activities for establishing his own minjung theology are focused on 'the theology of event' through the journal of *Shin-hak-sa-sang*(Theological Thoughts), which has been being published since 1973 in the legacy of his theology. Fourth, 167 issues of his last journal, *Salim*(life-making) in 1988~2002, provide possible relevance for today's minjung theology.

II. Existence (實存)

In November 1951, 30-year-old Ahn Byung-mu, who dreamed of a religious community movement, gathered in Jeonju with his colleagues from the Christian Student Association, who had been scattered due to the Korean War, and published the first journal named '*Ya-seong*', which literally means 'Voice from the wilderness'. What did they dream of when they cried out in the historical wilderness in the war like John the Baptist? In fact, human being seeking the purpose of life in the great darkness

itself is a question. As if Europeans at the end of the 19th century in indescribable anxiety, deep doubt, pain and obstinacy, indescribable longing in the unfortunate era of struggling, running toward the precipice of war and revolution, gave birth to existentialism, the young soul standing in front of the horrors of the Korean War after severe experiences of Japanese colonialism and the sudden independence cried out in deep existential concerns.

From the beginning, existentialism overlapped with religious questions. This is because the limits of human beings remaining in a place where optimism about historical development has been lifted are so clear, and the activities to go beyond those limits are close to excessive leaps that human existence cannot handle. Religion stirs in the struggle to go beyond the limits of life. Religion is already contained in the ultimate question of existence, which seeks to find the ultimate answer, and in the longing to leap forever beyond the limits of existence, no, to the world beyond death. The point where existence connects with religion lies in the search for the ultimate possibility of human beings. Ah, the possibility of resurrection! However, this last human possibility is ultimately not of human's.

If European existentialism had the risk of sinking into a philosophical exploration of the existence of an isolated individual, Ahn's 'religious existence' does not have any hint of nihilism. For Ahn, who experienced the miserable life of the people under the Japanese rule and the tragedy of war, 'existence' was more religious than philosophical and more historical than cultural. When *Ya-seong* was published, the frequent subject of his writing was on Kierkegaard's existentialism. He saw that

the optimism that swept the European modernity exposed its deceptiveness due to the misery of the World War on the outside and the existentialist philosophy derived from Kierkegaard on the inside. He felt anything unrelated to human existence was a fictional idea, and even a truth separated from life is merely fictitious. At this time, Ahn actively accepted Kierkegaard's teachings that lead to 'religious belief' as the way to freedom from the alienation and anxiety of existence. This is because Ahn was also fighting an 'open struggle' like Paul (Philippians 3:12).

Ahn's religious existence stems from the earnest search for Jesus. When he moved from Jeonju to Seoul in the last phase of the war, he formed a religious community with his friends, which developed sooner or later into Hyangrin Church, and focused on meditating on the Bible. During this period, he serialized 'The Story of Jesus' in *Ya-sung* as a study on the Gospel of Mark. His writings, without sophisticated words of historical criticism, show a pure image of a believer who cherishes Jesus in his faith. Although the theological language has not yet been established in his words, Jesus is understood not as the 'Son of God', the object of worship, but as a true human being who broke through all existential limitations and reached the heavenly Father, and lived amidst all sins and tragedies but kept the human nature that could only be revealed when one reaches heaven. Ahn searched for the great light of forgiveness that covers all the foolishness and mistakes of human beings, the light of God that appeared to the human Jesus.

Ahn's 'religious existence' from the beginning was 'historical and communal' in character. In the trajectory of his thoughts, which gradually penetrates toward the core of history, there

is no hint of the futility of life, a by-product of philosophical existentialism. He acknowledged the existential limitation of human beings in history but did not give up on the human possibility to constantly overcome the conditions of this world. In other words, the human potential he understood was an endless pursuit of the 'ultimate sanctuary'.¹

Why did he, who tried to solve human problems through a community movement, not walk through the socialist line that many of the critical intellectuals at the time went on? It would be a misunderstanding if it was attributed to his religious interests. Was it because of his life ties? As the resentment and anguish of the intellectuals under Japanese colonial rule generally unfolded to a socialist movement, an obvious stream of resistant nationalism combined with Christianity also existed on the other side. Those Christians in Myeong-dong village in Gando profoundly influenced Ahn's life.

In order to explain the social character of his 'religious existence', it is necessary to understand the triggers that made Ahn think more deeply about human problems, namely, cruel experiences caused by ideological conflicts in the turmoil of the post-colonial period. Ahn brought back later in his book *Seon-cheon-daek*, biographical essays on his mother, harsh memories of the tyranny of Soviet soldiers, their 'woman-hunt', and scenes of loss of humanity during the Korean war. Due to the intense, tragic experiences, he finally considered "communism as a representative example of the evil we face today" and claimed that Christianity as the 'son of light' must gain what was lost

1 Byung-mu Ahn, "St. Paul's Existence," *Ya-seong* 11 (May, 1955), 5-11.

from the 'son of this generation', namely communism.²

Historically, Korean Christianity, especially Christians who moved to South Korea after the national division of the peninsula, increased tension with socialism. However, what gave priority to Ahn was humanity itself rather than ideology. Although he was steeped in experiential anti-communism during his earlier time, he never lost a belief in that human being is given a possibility of intoxication as well as a better possibility, that is, the possibility of resisting magic, escaping temptation, and keeping the boundaries of the holy, in short, the possibility of knowing God. At this point, Dostoyevsky would be one of the stepping stones on which Ahn deepened understanding of the religious and social existence of human beings. Although his religious idea is different from the socialist, Ahn also experienced such problems as the nihilism of the upper class and the self-destructiveness of society when separated from the life of the underclass people. Ahn, in his existential anguish, says, "because everything must be expected from the [underclass] people themselves. They will be resurrected, and only this people will have the ultimate say in any case."³

Ahn's religious existence is filled with decisions for something to come: turning to decide to experiment with the growing disappointment of the established churches, and surrendering to the unknown future in spite of the tragic experiences of his time. The decision was realized through religious communions that he continuously made. He organized the *Il-shin-hoe* meeting with his colleagues, served the lay-pastorate in *Il-shin* church, worked

2 Byung-mu Ahn, "the son of light and the sons of this generation," *Ya-seong* 5 (July, 1952), 8

3 Byung-mu Ahn, "Dostoyevsky and Christianity 3," *Hyun-jon* 65 (Oct. 1975), 21.

on collaborative journal publication of *Ya-seong*, and established a faith community at the foothill of Mt. Nam-san in Seoul amidst the ruins of the war. However, these first experiments did not last long. Ahn refers to it as a “desperate failure,” a failure from the “wall of selfishness” which was built within the structure of life. At last, a skepticism arose in his mind that “Christianity to the extent we have learned does not have an ability to transcend itself.” He decided to drop everything and left to study abroad.⁴

III. *Hyun-jon* (現存, Presence)

Ahn spent ten years for study at Heidelberg University in Germany from 1956 to 1965. He deeply looked in R. Bultmann’s existentialist biblical hermeneutics, yet was not fully satisfied with it. Returning to Korea, he published the journal ‘*Hyun-jon*’, whose name might be translated from ‘*Dasein*’ in German, and started his own quest for Jesus in history. The beginning of the research was a conversation with the learning from Bultmann and G. Bornkamm. He later recalled this time of dialogue as follows: “After ten years of study, I returned without learning anything and still continued to utilize their theories for some time. I was swimming in the realm of Western theology and sold it without any belief. In short, I have been doing theology without knowing who Jesus is.”⁵

Then, what does the period in publishing ‘*hyun-jon*’ mean to him? For Ahn, the period was an age of transition from western

4 Byung-mu Ahn, *Seon-Cheon-daek* (Seoul: Beomwoosa, 1996), 161-3.

5 Byung-mu Ahn, “A New Horizon of Minjung Theology,” *Shin-hak-pyeong-non* 5 (Jan. 1997), 10. (Lecture note, delivered in November 10, 1994)

existentialism to more contextual and eastern ideas finally blooming in minjung theology. His idea on *hyun-jon* takes a hint of the existentialist character and has a strong ‘socio-historical’ dimension, just as his concept of ‘existence’ does. It is about understanding the human situation associated with the characteristics of ‘*tal-hyang*’ (脫-向, aus-auf) that infused dynamism into his understanding.⁶ He understands human existence as in/between ‘*tal-hyang*’ in that a living existence constantly transcends into existence by departing (*tal*) from the past and heading (*hyang*) for the future.⁷ That is, the human situation is in movement bursting into an ‘event’ in history, and then the people(minjung) appear as the bearer of the movement.

For Ahn, human existence comes alive in relationships. Human beings are in relationships with God and with neighbors. According to him, the biblical figure which showed human existence well is Abraham. Abraham symbolizes faith that believes in the promise of the future and departs from the past. This departure is not an escape but ‘the first step to regain the lost self’. The foundation of that freedom is faith, and it is the core of existence on the way of *tal-hyang*(Aus-Auf). Ahn says that it was only his faith that Abraham stood up to his hopeless reality rather than making a ‘buffer zone’ and did not avert his eyes from “this eternally insurmountable chaos under his feet.” Faith, for Ahn, signifies “the unhesitating acceptance of the finite condition in existence” and, at the same time, “the bridgehead of a decisive battle against which one will never yield.”⁸ The

6 As far as I understand, the concepts of ‘*tal-hyang*’ first appeared in the article “Abraham, the Hebrew figure of man” published in *Hyun-jon* 4 (October 1969). The ideas seem to have been finally settled in “Human History of *tal-hyang*” in *Salim* 14 (January 1990).

7 Myeong-su Kim, *Ahn Byung-mu, the Witness to the Time and Minjung* (Seoul: Salim, 2006), 102-3.

8 Byung-mu Ahn, “Abraham, the Hebrew figure of man,” *Hyun-jon* 4 (October 1969), 7.

essence of human existence is not the despair of death but the possibility of freedom, and the possibility of leaving home comes from faith.

What does that faith lead to? Ahn says that the Bible is neither given to ‘abstract humans’ but to human beings in concrete historical situations. Here, freedom belongs to those who feel ‘responsibility accompanied by decisions’, and it is fully revealed in Jesus’ love following God’s will.⁹ Human freedom is not an independent concept but is deeply related to the meaning of liberation. In other words, for Ahn, human existence liberates itself only by participating in the liberation movement. Then, the essence of the Christian movement for freedom, the liberating character of the Jesus movement, lies in the liberating movement of history. ‘The first request for following Jesus is “to become one with Christ, who lived his whole life for the restoration of the poor and the oppressed as liberated whole human beings.”’¹⁰ This is also the meaning of ‘existing’ God. God of the Bible is “the God who suffers with sufferers in the historical context of suffering where Christ is present.”¹¹

Ahn is now almost ready to transcend Bultmann’s existentialist theology in his search for the ‘Jesus of today’, that is, the presence of God in the field of suffering and liberation. He received from Bultmann many lessons: understanding of theology as anthropology, the necessity of determination of existence for faith, and the historical criticism that the Jesus in the Bible is not the historical Jesus himself but the Christ

9 Byung-mu Ahn, “The Road to Freedom,” *Hyun-jon* 12 (July 1970), 9.

10 Byung-mu Ahn, “Jesus the Liberator,” *Hyun-jon* 76 (December 1976), 8.

11 Byung-mu Ahn, “The Existing God,” *Hyun-jon* 82 (June 1977), 14.

of the kerygma.¹² However, he went far beyond Bultmann by reaching the conclusion that there are first ‘Jesus-event’ before the confession of the early church. In other words, “the nucleus of the kerygma of Christ is the Jesus in history.”¹³ If his task in the period of *hyun-jon* was to overcome Bultmann’s theology, it was accomplished in the process of discovering the people who participated in Jesus’ event.

The basis of Ahn’s thought that made this discovery possible is the eastern conceptualization that is specifically called ‘theology of event’. He saw that the problem of Western theology, which “de-historicized the presence of God and Jesus in history,” originated from “the subject-object scheme of dualism,” and its root lay in the Greek philosophy. It is not a biblical idea. For instance, Ahn understands Paul’s idea of the body (σῶμα, *soma*) is a challenge to dehistoricizing the Christ-event.¹⁴ Thus, Westernization and Christianization are different, says Ahn, and De-Westernization is not a translation work that transfers the interpretation of Western theology into an Eastern frame of thought, but “releasing the Bible from doctrines formed in the historical situation of the West.”¹⁵ In this revision of thought framework, there must be influences from his life-long mentors, Yoo Young-mo and Ham Seok-heon, who insist that “in order to pull out the boat of history stuck in the deadly mire of the West, it is necessary to jump on the rock of the eastern hill that seemed

12 Byung-mu Ahn, “Bultmann’s Understanding of the Cross,” *Hyun-jon* 74 (September 1976), 61.

13 Byung-mu Ahn, *Jesus of Galilee* (Seoul: Korean Institute of Theology, 1990), 10.

14 Byung-mu Ahn, “With the Body: To Overcome the Dualistic Life,” *Hyun-jon* 18 (February 1971), 10.

15 Byung-mu Ahn, “Christianization and Westernization,” *Christian Thought* 15, no. 12 (December 1971), 68.

to be dead.”¹⁶

It is noteworthy that Ahn's second series of Bible study in *Hyun-jon*, following after the first on Synoptic Gospels, was 'the lecture on 1 John'. It can be said to be the connection between love, the subject of 1 John, and 'in(仁, benevolence), another subject of his doctoral dissertation. The teaching of 1 John that true life is in communion with God, who is love, is in line with the understanding that 'love and benevolence' are the most fundamental way of revolution. Love is made without intention, but it becomes the key that opens all doors.

On the one hand, Ahn took tragic experiences that hostility obliterated humanity.¹⁷ On the other hand, he experienced sharing love that leads to critical reflection on political activities and ideologies. A deep trust in humanity must be the foundation that made him not immersed in the divided world of ideology. Although he showed an anti-socialist attitude in an earlier time, he also persistently criticized the militarized government that attempted to dominate society with an anti-communist ideology. Ahn is wary of 'idealized good and evil' that become a 'ghost' separated from the facts and define reality, and criticizes expanding of a good to an absolute as divine or demonizing evils.¹⁸ In this way, the anti-socialism that colored his earlier social existence became removed on the road to minjung theology.

16 Byung-mu Ahn, "The East, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, and Ssial," *Christian Thought* 26, no. 6 (June 1982), 203. In this article, Ahn confesses that Ham Seok-heon's ideas are a 'second liberation experience' for him.

17 Byung-mu Ahn, "My Social Experiences in the period of the Independence," *Society and Thoughts* 9 (February 1972), 48-9.

18 Byung-mu Ahn, "Religion for Peace," *Sound of Ssial* 9 (February 1972), 48-49.

IV. Event

The era of *hyun-jon* is the period that Ahn formed his own theological ideas and took off into minjung theology. After a few years of preparing an institution to systematically support his research, he established ‘the Institute of Korean Theology’ in May 1973 and published the journal ‘*Shin-hak-sa-sang*’ (Theological Thoughts), which became a famous theological center in leading progressive discourses. Gradually, the theological voyage of his search for Jesus in history reached its climax. It was a conclusion obtained by doing theology on the experiences of ‘events’ historically and theologically. He set the purpose of his theology to follow the Jesus in history. It is to find the Christ present today.¹⁹ He found a clue to his theological work with the concept of ‘event’ and solved problems by connecting ‘Jesus of the Bible’ with the Christ revealed in ‘minjung-event’ today. He says:

[Westerners] only ask “Who is Jesus?”—inquiring only about personal and individual identity. And they get the answer that Jesus is “such and such personality” and are satisfied. But I thought differently: “Jesus is an event! God is an event, too!” I realized, “You are wrong to see Jesus as a persona—a wrong view! This realization was the turning point in my theology.”²⁰

When we understand Jesus as an ‘event’, we can recognize the Jesus of the Bible in relation to minjung-event, and through

19 Byungmu Ahn, *Minjung and the Bible* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993), 328.

20 Byungmu Ahn, *Stories of Minjung Theology: The Theological Journey of Ahn Byung-mu in His Own Words*, trans. and edited by Hanna In and Wongi Park (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 18.

this “minjung events that took place thousands of years ago in the Gentiles are reenacted as our minjung events today.” Also, it became possible “to illuminate our minjung events today as the currently revived events of the minjung events of that time.”²¹ In this way, a new hermeneutics of minjung theology could be born as Ahn spoke of ‘Jesus in history’ not as an individual ‘persona’ but as an ‘event’ with the multitude (ὄχλος) of Galilee.

Such theological ‘discovery’ had been ripening in his life. Ahn’s theological introspections are based on historical experiences, such as the resentment and anger of the three million people who were uprooted from their own lives and escaped to Gando during the Japanese colonialism, and the suffering and misery of the people who were exploited and plundered in modernization, which was tragically expressed by the young labor Jeon Tae-il who burned himself to death in November 1970. Such experiential ‘events’ renewed his perspective.²² “The Statement of Korean Christians” in November 1973 signaled a progressive theological movement in Korea. The lecture, “Nation, Minjung, and Church,” which he delivered in February 1975, announced the birth of the full-fledged minjung theology.

Now, Ahn was no more an academic person but transformed himself as an active intellectual whose life could not be separable from historical events. The imprisonment due to the ‘Declaration of Korean Democracy’ in March 1st 1976 and the subsequent forced discharge of the professorship led him to encounter to the suffering people and to see the ‘Jesus in history’ in their sufferings. From this experience, he understood

21 Ahn, *Minjung and the Bible*, 3.

22 Amos Kisuk Kim, “An Examination on Ahn Byung-Mu’s Hermeneutics Today,” *Madang*, vol. 20 (Dec. 2013), 30.

God's activities through 'events', just as Paul understands his imprisonment as 'advancement of the gospel' (Philippians 1:12). The imprisonment was a critical chance for him to formulate his own 'theology of event'.²³

Ahn's theology of 'event' is a conclusion of his study which is not separated from the experience of discovering Jesus in historical events through minjung's life. This way of understanding is different from traditional hermeneutics. Therefore, he completely broke with Western theological methodology and walked on his own path, declaring, "In the beginning, there was an event!"²⁴ He described this change as "the hermeneutical revolution [obtained] in the exodus process."²⁵ This hermeneutic revolution could be characterized as following: First, "revision of perspective" to see the meaning of incidents from below and to interpret God's revelation in and through historical events. Second, "emphasis on the event-ness" of all things underlying the dynamic movement of things and life as a counter idea to the western Logos theology. Third, overcoming the "subject-object scheme," the root of schematization that separates nature and history from God, banishes God to the supernatural side, and justifies the oppressive structure of history. Fourth, the "exclusion of all dualism" rooted in theological reasoning. Fifth, "reaffirmation of the collective nature" in thought and practical life by revealing the relationship

23 Byung-mu Ahn, *Bul-ti*(Fire-flake) (Cheonan: The Institute of Korean Theology, 1998), 97; *Jesus with Us* (Cheonan: The Institute of Korean Theology, 1997), pp. 214, 219. He says, "the incident of Paul's imprisonment brought about the progress of the gospel, this is a change in direction from 'theology of the word' to 'theology of the event', and the experience of God's mission. "I came to propose a 'theology of events' based on this."

24 Ahn, *Stories of Minjung Theology*, 31, 54; Minjung and the Bible, 222.

25 Ahn, *Minjung and the Bible*, 220.

between all things.²⁶

The theology of event criticizes idealized faith and pays attention to historical events. It is to reveal the original ideas of life and peace in the Gospel by restoring the Jesus' events prior to the formulation of kerygma. Also, it is an attempt to restore the biblical faith by reinterpreting the 'divine incarnation' as 'Jesus-event', which must be the origin of the Christian faith. The theology of event finds God's activity in 'events' as Ahn says that "the cross of Christ is an event, the whole life of Paul is a series of events, the resurrection is an event, and the Pentecost is an event."²⁷ Christian history is also made through events, and the place of suffering minjung as the deepest valley of history is the scene where God participates most deeply in and the locus where the Jesus in history appears. On the contrary, in the institutionalized Christian faith, "the belief that Christ is still present in minjung events has been completely abandoned."²⁸ For Ahn, seeing the 'minjung event' as 'Jesus event' becomes a fundamental change for reinterpreting the bible and the Christian faith.

Ahn's theology of event not only provides freshness to theological interpretation but also helps believers to realize the integrity of life. This is because 'event' itself is holistic. An event arises from the comprehensive practice of confrontation to the divided world by faith. Personal salvation must be combined with social salvation, and external practices should be with internal regeneration. It is a holistic 'theology of life' that harmonizes belief in faith and mystical experiences, work

26 Ibid., 221-28.

27 Byung-mu Ahn, "Theology of Event," *Hyun-jon* 72 (June 1976), 9.

28 Ahn, *Stories of Minjung Theology*, 108.

and prayer, life and transcendence, and conscious self and unconscious selflessness.²⁹

V. *Salim* (life-making)

When the journal *Hyun-jon* was about to be relaunched in 1988 eight years after the forced discontinuance by the military government, Ahn renamed it '*Salim*', which literally means 'life-making'. The name expresses the goal and vitality of Jesus movement that is to cope with the culture of death in various social and spiritual problems of that time, the economical polarization with corrupted politics, the destruction of the ecosystem in the industrial civilization, the male-centered patriarchal system, and the oppressive social structure in the militarized culture. *Salim* is not just a matter of living, but includes struggle against forces of death. It is not only the 'discourse' of life, but also the 'production of life-style'. The goal is "to make every effort for Jesus' *salim* movement happen in every corner of our lives."³⁰ Then, who is the agent of this movement?

Previously, Ahn postponed any precise definition of the basic concept of 'minjung' despite its long use. It is because he wanted to avoid any identification of the historical agency of the Jesus-event with a specific social group like proletariat in Marxism. However, he came to understand a serious situation in the 1990s in which the liberate meaning and value of the concept

29 Byung-mu Ahn, "A Search for the Korean Christian Image," *Theological Thoughts* 52 (January 1986), 363.

30 Byung-mu Ahn, "Inception: '*Salim*' movement," *Salim* 1 (December 1988), 3-5.

of 'minjung' tended to diminish in the neo-liberalized world. The number of the new poor was rather expanded due to the transnational exploitation of the neoliberal world capital, and the procedural democracy created through the democratization movement in the 1980s became much weakened. The so-called democracy degenerated into an quasi-ideology that justifies the unequaled system while having removed the sense of liberation which was brilliant in the past. Meanwhile, the poor and oppressed people gradually lost their leading force to revitalize history and were considered as the object of pity captured in the globalized system. The concept of minjung was almost dismantled not because of the actual disappearance of the social group, but because of the deprived ideals. So, minjung theology met a more serious time than ever to be equipped with not only theological clarity but also spiritual depth.

Ahn had an important personal experience at this time that decisively influenced on the conceptualization of the term of minjung, whose definition had so far withheld. In 1989, he was invited by Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley for a series of lectures, which later came out as the book titled *Jesus of Galilee*. The trip was expectedly jeopardized because of his health, and at last he underwent a seven-hour heart surgery after barely having finished the lecture for a semester. In the surgical process, he took a strange out-of-body experience that his 'another I' is separated from the anesthetized body and consciously watched it. That experience, says Ahn, was a repeated one he had once as a boy. When he was poor and couldn't go straight to middle school, he made vest jackets in a small factory and sold them to the market. While running in the snow, he fell into a big pit with

his bicycle and got in danger of freezing to death. At that time, he heard his mother's voice calling him, saying, "Byung-mu, get up and come out quickly." Such an experience was repeated in the United States after 57 years.

With a vivid experience of coming back alive from the death again, Ahn began to say that minjung could be translated as 'life'. Minjung is the agent of *salim* as the historical being that reveals today's Jesus as the 'life of history'. As Paul confessed that "the life of Jesus is made visible in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:11), minjung would be the 'reincarnated Jesus' in history.³¹ It is for Ahn not an abstraction but about the being as 'the true bearer of history' who are 'not far away and but breathing right next to you'.³² One of his last testimonies in *Seon-cheon-daek* is a story about his mother in which we listen to his voice that minjung is the 'cradle' of life, 'embrace' of historical lives.

What kind of *salim* did Ahn himself live and dream for? He did his best in his time, and lived a life of 'being not complacent even after achievements' (功成以不居). To be sure, the critical matter of his time is not the same as that of ours today. However, the way he pushed himself through life throws light on the problems of our time that we still have to face today such as feminist issue, the divided Korean peninsula, ecological crisis and so on. Ahn is one of the pioneering theologians who suggested a 'revolutionary perspective'. It is still relevant today. He proposed a feminist idea in his study of women with Jesus in the Bible, criticized anthropocentrism that generated ecological problems and capitalist consumption, and advised a new way of

31 Byung-mu Ahn, "Minjung As the Reincarnated Jesus," *Salim* 20 (July 1990), 12.

32 Byung-mu Ahn, *Seon-cheon-daek* (Seoul: Beom-woo-sa, 1996), 7-8, 208.

life that would overcome the oil-based civilization and draw the reunification of the peninsula.³³

All the words he left is not a closed answer but an open question today. We cannot have direct answers from Ahn's idea to the task of what we are facing today. Human participation in the divine existence would be inevitably in total openness to the future. As he understood the life of Abraham, Jesus, and Paul as the exemplaries of the '*tal-hyang*', we also find our way of life in our own efforts. According to Ahn, it is an everlasting history in which minjung fights to live tenaciously with "struggle and reconciliation in toil and rest" so that there must be one's own path to carve through "determination and resistance."³⁴ Always, we have our own tasks for life.

"If the event of Jesus is minjung event, then God came to be minjung in the place of the *salim* movement. If so, the path is preordained. It is the way to be killed by those who kill. Just like minjung was until now. 'To participate in his resurrection' means 'to participate in *salim* movement' and also 'to fight against the forces of death'. It is to stand on the right awareness when we do not forget that it is always a fight 'within us'."³⁵

33 Byung-mu Ahn, "Missionary Tasks of Church in the 1980s," *Gi-jang Newsletter* 210 (April 1980); "The Way of Life Movement," *Salim* 21 (August 1990).

34 Byung-mu Ahn, "Human History of *Tal-Hyang*," *Salim* 14 (January 1990), 8.

35 Byung-mu Ahn, "*Salim* Movement as Struggle Against the Forces of Death," *Salim* 34 (Sep. 1991), 14.

VI. Conclusion

The world is said to be all connected while the world we experience is fragmented. The root of the division seems to be attachment, and all attachments may contain not only obsession but also the desire for salvation. Ahn passed through an era of anguish and barbarism, predicament and destruction, and division and oppression. His life was not separated from the suffering of his time, and his search for Jesus in history is deeply linked with the embodiment of minjung's longing for salvation. The search began from the reality of minjung and appeared as a practical way of living to participate in God's events.

Today, we live in a different context from Ahn's time. Minjung theology faces a delicate task in a much more complex society. The resistant idea that truth is in the solidarity with labors has faded. As most of the societies adores and mystifies money, people have to deal with the problem of exclusion from having as well as resistance to exploitation. What about the reality in which so-called postmodern senses slip into an individualist taste rather than the passion for truth? The air of the post-truth era, in which discourses are easily dwarfed as an alibi for self-assertion, seems too heavy to sympathize the pains of neighbors and nature. Our age demands 'deep justice', and we are longing for 'deep peace' to find light in darkness.

Can we continue the adventurous march in pursuit of the 'Jesus in history' by participating in the suffering of creatures? At the time when concepts of minjung theology almost developed, Ahn says that "the kingdom of God is coming; therefore, the kingdom of God is primarily 'God's future' and not the human

utopia.”³⁶ This tells us where our theological imagination must come from. To be critical and creative, minjung theology should testify to the existence of God who is ever ahead in our search of Jesus in history. Minjung theology have been not only to witness to the plights of those who lived miserably but also to stimulate the end of the oppressive system. As the adventure of faith takes place in time, the adventure of theology should go on in order to overcome any ‘hegemonic fantasy’ of this world that anesthetizes the belief in the coming kingdom. May the ‘Jesus in history’, whom Ahn Byung-mu searched in his entire life, reveal his face in every corner of our struggle!

36 Byung-mu Ahn, “The Subject of New History,” *Hyun-jon* 91 (May 1978), 10.

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