

Dialogue and Self-Confrontation: A Study of Ahn Byung-Mu's Minjung Theology of Religions

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Abstract

In the 1970s and 80s, Korean Minjung theology and theology of religions(Inculturation theology) were in a tense relationship due to differences in their theological priorities. However, there was also a complementary relationship between the two theological movements in the Korean situation where the theological domination of the Western church and the political oppression of the military dictatorship were inseparably combined. Especially, Minjung theology, which included the minjung religious traditions of Korea as a theological paradigm, attempted a comparison and dialogue between religions from the beginning. Ahn Byung-mu, one of the founders of Minjung theology, was born and raised in a Confucian culture, and while studying abroad in Germany, he received a doctorate degree with a dissertation that compared the *ren* of Confucius with *agape*

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of Jesus. Also, he was interested in Buddhism and often wrote articles comparing Buddhism with Christianity. Throughout his theological journey, Ahn tried to overcome the subject-object dualism and personified understanding of God in Western theology through theological dialogue with Eastern thought. More importantly, in his later years, Ahn applied the Eastern *qi* philosophy to understand the Holy Spirit. Though Ahn did not systematically theorize a theology of religions, he freely utilized the ideas of other faiths in constructing his theology in general and Minjung theology in particular. In addition, Ahn's interreligious dialogue was conducted not only externally in his relationship with the religious other but also internally within his faith and theology. Therefore, in this article, I would like to explore the possibility of a Minjung theology of religions which is necessary for today's religious pluralistic society by examining Ahn's open, existential, and liberative understandings of other faiths.

• Keywords

Interreligious Dialogue, Minjung Theology, Theology of Religions, Minjung Theology of Religions

I. Introduction: A Double Task of Korean Theologies

The post-colonial theologies of Christianity in the non-Western world in the twentieth century had a double task: liberation from the double oppression of ‘political domination’ and ‘religious domination’ of the Western colonialist system. This was related to the historical fact that modern and contemporary Western colonial invasions of the non-Western world took place simultaneously with Christian missions. The Western colonialists firmly believed that there was no *religion* in the colonies, and that even if there were, it was nothing but idolatry or superstition. For instance, in 1533, Richard Eden wrote of the natives of the Canary Island that “At Columbus first coming thither, the inhabitants went naked, without shame, religion or knowledge of God.” In the same year, Pedro Cieza de León, a conquistador historian, also described the north Andean indigenous people as “observing no religion at all, as we understand it(*no... religion alguna, a lo que entendemos*), nor is there any house of worship to be found.”¹ The colonial powers believed that converting the colonized *savages* to Christianity was a process of civilization, and it justified their economic exploitation and military destruction of the other. In this way, religio-cultural domination and politico-economic domination were combined in Western colonialism. Obviously, the two dominations were inseparable like a two-sided coin. In response to this reality, non-Western post-colonialist Christian theologians in the twentieth century, due to their different primary concerns, developed two

1 Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269.

theological movements: *liberation theologies* and *inculturation theologies*.

Korean Minjung theology² and Inculturation theology in the 1970s and 80s also showed a tense relationship with each other due to their theological priorities and goals. However, since Christianity is not the dominant religion in Korea, unlike in Europe and in the North, Central, and South Americas which are predominantly Christian continents, the two Korean radical theologies were both in tension and in correlation with each other. In addition, the personal bond between Minjung theologians and Inculturation theologians, both of whom shared antipathy to Western fundamentalist theology, created a hospitable space for their open dialogue and cooperation. More importantly, because Minjung theologians acknowledged traditional Korean religions as one of the paradigms for their Minjung theology, they actively attempted comparison and dialogue between Christianity and other religions from the beginning.

Ahn Byung-mu, one of the founders of Korean Minjung theology, is a living example of theologians who explored the interreligious or comparative theological dimension of Minjung theology. Interestingly, he was born and raised in a Confucian culture, and while studying in Germany, he received his doctorate degree with a dissertation comparing Confucius's *ren*(仁; benevolence) with Jesus' *agape*(love). He was also interested in Buddhism and wrote many articles comparing Buddhism with Christianity especially in his early

2 See the following article for a concise introduction to the history and contents of Minjung Theology. Yong Bock Kim, "The Origin, History and Future of Minjung Theology: An Outline," *Madang*, vol. 37(June 2022).

theological studies. In his later years, Ahn proposed more explicitly a theological turn to Eastern thoughts in order to overcome the subject-object dualism in Christianity and interpret the Spirit through the *qi*(氣; energy, spirit) philosophy. Though Ahn did not theorize his own theology of religions or comparative theology, he freely utilized the teachings and ideas of other religions in his theological works. In addition, Ahn's interreligious dialogue was conducted not only externally with the religious other but also internally within himself, which was a kind of inner-and-intra-religious dialogue.

It must be noted that Ahn's theological exploration of other faiths was very active from the late 1960s to the early 1970s when his theology began to form and mature. It is also important to point out that for Ahn the place and purpose of interreligious dialogue was always *Minjung event*³ in history. Therefore, in this article, I would like to examine Ahn's understanding of other faiths and his perspectives on interreligious dialogue and diapraxis, which will offer a compass and map to explore the possibility of a *Minjung theology of religions* for today's multi-faith and multi-suffering world.

II. Is the Seed the Gospel of Jesus?:

Beyond Western Christianity

One of the theological models that Inculturation theology uses to examine the relationship between the gospel and culture is the

3 According to Ahn Byung-mu and minjung theologians, "Minjung Event" is an event in and through which the *Jesus event*—the Cross and Resurrection—is represented, and minjung becomes the subject of history.

sowing model. It claims that the gospel is the *seed* and the culture the *soil*. That is to say, the seed of the one universal Christian gospel is planted in the various soils of particular cultures, and it sprouts, grows, and bears fruits as inculturated Christianities. It is certainly a new way of understanding the gospel and culture. However, Ahn Byung-mu challenges the sowing model.

Minjung theology raises questions about the seed itself. If we viewed the seed as already *established*, there will be a problem. If the seed doesn't change, the same thing will come out of it. [...] It's already Hellenized and Westernized.⁴

There are two crucial insights in Ahn's critical viewpoint about the sowing model. First, the gospel planted in Korea in the modern times is the seed or product of *Western Christianity*; second, Western Christianity is *not all but only part* of Christianity. In fact, the West is not the *world* but a *region*. Thus, Western Christianity is not a *world religion* or *world Christianity*, but a *regional Christianity*. To be sure, this regionality itself is not a problem; the problem is that Western Christianity degenerated throughout history. For the seed is not the original gospel of Jesus but a Hellenized and Westernized one. Therefore, what Korean Christians need is the *de-Westernization* of Christianity.

According to Ahn, however, there is a task to be done before the de-Westernization of Christianity. For him, the project of de-Westernization requires not simply Easternization or re-Easternization. As early as the 1970s, Ahn argued that in order to

4 Kim Kyung-jae et al., "Hankook tochakwha shinhak nnjaeng-eui pyungga-wa jeonmang (Evaluation and Prospect of the Korean Inculturation Theology Controversy)," *Kidokkyo Sasang*(Christian Thought), vol. 35, no. 7 (June 1991), 99.

bring about the de-Westernization of Korean theology, 'returning to the Bible' should precede 'Easternization' or 'Koreanization.'⁵ He also asks just what the Westernization of Christianity entails and why it is a problem. The core problems of Western thought and Christianity identified by Ahn are the concepts of *subject-object scheme and personality*.

From Ahn's point of view, these are the products of Hellenism, which have nothing to do with the Hebrew thought and the Gospel of Jesus. According to Ahn, the problem of the subject-object scheme in Western Christian theology is not simply that it is dualistic but that it leads to 'I-centered thinking' that "sees the self as the subject and the other as the object." For Ahn, the real problem is not dualism but individualism. With this subject-object scheme, the *I* either accepts or rejects the other. In the scheme of "a sharp division between I and non-I", non-Christians become "the objects of mission," and benefactors and beneficiaries are separated hierarchically.⁶

Ahn also points out that the western dualistic subject-object scheme is connected to the concept of *persona*, which is centered on *ego* or the *individuum*, and that this I-centered consciousness is eventually applied to the Christian concept of God.⁷ According to him, the problem of the western Christian concept of God is that it "exteriorizes the object of faith," which "understands God, Christ, even the Holy Spirit as *personae*."⁸ Ahn asserts that such a dualistic view of reality and such an anthropomorphic concept

5 Ahn Byung-mu, "Kidokkyhwa-wa seoguwha(Christianization and Westernization)," *Kidokkyo Sasang*, vol. 15, no. 12 (Dec. 1971), 63.

6 Ahn Byung-mu, *Yeoksa-wa Minjung*(History and Minjung) (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993), 86.

7 Ibid., 87.

8 Ahn Byung-mu, "Hangook gyohoe-eui gumi-sinhak-eui yusan-gwa hangye(The Legacy and Limitations of Western Theology in the Korean Church), *Kidokkyo Sasang*, vol. 36, no. 6 (June, 1992), 25.

of God inflicted ‘mortal wounds’ on Christianity. The cure ‘materials’ for the wounds are, says Ahn, “sufficiently stored in Eastern thoughts.”⁹ That is, according to him, the Western Christian subject-object scheme can and should be supplemented with the relational world view of the East.

First, Eastern thought transcends the individualistic view of the I. Ahn says: “In Far Eastern thinking, the *we* is more important than the *I*. ‘I and you’ are dissolved in ‘*uri*’(we) and become one. This *uri* in Korean is different from ‘*we*’ in English or ‘*wir*’ in German. *Uri* in Korean is not simply the plural form of the word *I*; it comes etymologically from the Korean word ‘*hanultari*’ meaning ‘one life-world.’ The word *uri* implies a community of destiny.”¹⁰ That is, *uri* in Korean and Eastern thought is not an opposite concept to a numerical sum of *I*, but a relational and interdependent concept.

In addition, Ahn tries to find a way of overcoming the Western Christian personification of transcendence by learning from the Buddhist idea of emptiness(*sunyata*) or Taoist idea of nothingness(*mu*). In Eastern thought, ultimate or absolute reality or transcendence can’t and shouldn’t be verbalized. A possible language in the East to express ultimate reality would be *silence*. The *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu begins with: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; the Name that can be spoken is not the eternal Name.” Ahn says, “Both Buddhism and Taoism end up in ontological silence. Yet, this silence never implies any kind passivity; it means a total trust in *something* (Etwas). It is the

9 Ibid., 27.

10 Ahn, *History and Minjung*, 87

beginning of true life in which I and all become one.”¹¹ Here, ‘total trust’ goes beyond any conditional trust or faith.

In a public lecture in 1969, Ahn said that religion must have the power of self-denial and self-transcendence in order to be a true religion. However, according to him, western individualism strengthens self-centered consciousness and ego-centered desire, which “makes God as *my* God who exists for *me* and for *my* happiness.” In this way, says Ahn, individualism has degenerated Christian prayer into a ‘struggle of greed.’¹² Here, Ahn emphasizes the necessity of learning Eastern thought: “In order to restore the true way of faith, we must humbly accept *mu* (nothingness), *huh* (voidness), and *wu-wei* (effortless action), etc., which are important in Buddhism and in the thought of Lao-Tzu and Chuang Tzu.” Indicating that this idea has always been the compass of his theological journey, in an interview in 1996, the last year of his life, Ahn says:

As Christians living in the age of plurality, the first thing we need to learn from other religions, especially Buddhism and Taoism, is *silence*. Silence is far superior to words or ideologies in that it speaks of *mu*, *huh*, and *wu-wei*. There is a world of deep truth and sincere faith within silence. Unless Christianity opens its doors to and learns respectfully about the world of silence, there will be no way out of the present impasse.¹³

11 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Dongyang-ui han sigak-eseo bon seogusinhak bipan*(Criticism of Western theology from an Eastern perspective) in *Kidokkyo gaehyeok-eul wihan shinhak*(Theology for Christian Reformation) (Cheonan: Korea Theological Institute, 1999), 90-91.

12 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Jongkyo-gobal*(Accusation of Religion) in *Theology for Christian Reformation*, 98-99.

13 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Minjungsinhak-ui abeoji Ahn Byung-mu*(Ahn Byung-mu, a Father of Minjung Theology),” *Kidokkyo Sasang*, vol. 40, no. 8 (1996, 8), 97.

Perhaps the most important comparative theological contribution of Ahn Byung-mu in his later period is his *qi*(氣)-oriented interpretation of the Holy Spirit and Minjung. First of all, Ahn argues that there is no concept of ‘personality’ in ‘*ruach*’ or ‘*nephesh*’ in Hebrew thought. Rather, the Hebrews viewed the Spirit as “the realization of a certain specific force.” Ahn says, “To translate it [*ruach* or *nephesh*] by the Eastern concept, *qi* would be more appropriate than to translate it by ‘spirit’(靈).”¹⁴ What is important here is not a naive Easternization of Western Christian pneumatology. Ahn’s *qi*-oriented understanding of the Spirit does not lose its Minjung theological or people-centered orientation. Ahn claims that minjung are the “bearers of the spirit,”¹⁵ and that the “minjung movement itself is the Spirit movement.”¹⁶ Ahn’s free and daring theological vision and adventure, however, remains incomplete, for he passed away in 1996.

III. Difference: Interreligious Learning and Challenge

Many believe that Ahn Byung-mu’s interest in other religions was deepened in his later years when he spoke a lot of *qi* philosophy and silence in Eastern thought. To be sure, as mentioned above, Ahn’s later theology shows a crucial shift to Eastern thought. However, Ahn’s interest in and references to Korean religious traditions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism,

14 Ahn Byung-mu, *Minjungsinhak-eul malhandae*(Speak of Minjung Theology) (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993), 265.

15 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Minjungsinhak-ui hoego-wa jeonmang*(Reminiscences and Prospects of Minjung Theology), *Salim*, vol. 126(July 1999), 82.

16 Ahn, *Speak of Minjung Theology*, 272.

Taoism, and Shamanism, are found much more in his early theological writings.

What Ahn attempted to achieve between Christianity and Eastern religions is not an alternative or unilateral replacement but mutual complementarity. As much as Christianity needs to be complemented by Eastern religions, so do Eastern religions by Christianity. What is interesting and important is that the mutually complementary dialogue between religions took place not only externally with people of other faiths but also internally and existentially within Ahn's heart. Here, I will briefly review Ahn's existential perceptions of—and internal dialogues with the four religious traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shamanism.

As already mentioned, Ahn was originally born and raised in a Confucian family. However, having grown tired of Confucian hierarchy and hypocrisy, he became a Christian in his adolescence. And, in his theological formation period, he began to re-read and explore the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism in order to learn the traditional way of thinking in Korea and Asia. Ahn highly admires Confucius for the saint's uncompromising and lofty attitude toward unrighteousness. Yet, Ahn does not agree with the Confucian ethos which is uncompromising with unrighteousness but does not confront the unrighteousness.¹⁷ It seems that Ahn values concrete praxis more than critical theory. In addition, Ahn criticizes Confucianism's elitism and contrasts it with the *minjung* experience in the Bible, such as *habiru* (outsider) and *ochlos* (multitude).¹⁸ For *Minjung*

17 Ahn, *History and Minjung*, 230-234.

18 Ibid., 258.

Theologians, *minjung* is the subject of liberation. Moreover, Ahn highlights a crucial difference between Confucius and Jesus as follows: “The words of Confucius speak of the way of personal self-formation of the gentleman (elite), whereas the words of Jesus can only be properly understood when grasped in terms of [social] movement.”¹⁹ According to Ahn, the difference between Confucius and Jesus is also revealed in their attitude toward power. He says: “Confucius said that if the *Tao* exists in the world, one should show up and be active, and if times are difficult, one should hide. But Jesus showed himself when the powerful pulled their swords out against the righteous.”²⁰ What matters is praxis, not theory.

Ahn recognizes Buddhism as the religion that has shown the biggest difference from Christianity. To him, Buddhism is an important but unknown other. However (or therefore), because of such difference, Buddhists and Christians have more to learn from each other. Interestingly, in Ahn’s theology, there are many references to the differences between Buddhism and Christianity that outnumber the difference between Christianity and other religions. Ahn describes the fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity as follows:

It is said that Shakyamuni regarded all the phenomena that occur in human life, such as birth, old age, sickness, and death, as suffering, and he was immersed in the question of what a human being is and how to be liberated from suffering. Therefore, Buddhist scriptures focus on

19 Ahn Byung-mu, “Job-eun mun, neolb-eun(Narrow Gate, Wide Gate),” in *Uriwa hamkke haneun yesu*(Jesus with Us) (Cheonan: Korea Theological Institute, 1997), 154.

20 Ibid., 161.

metaphysical questions about life. In contrast, the Bible begins with the [historical] event of the Exodus.²¹

It can be said that while Buddhism started from a metaphysical question about how to be liberated from ontological suffering, the Judeo-Christian tradition started from historical events—the Exodus event and the Jesus event—that dealt with how to be liberated from social suffering. In other words, Ahn concludes, Buddhism speaks of suffering from an ‘ontological point of view’ and Christianity speaks of suffering from a ‘structural point of view.’ That is, the problems to overcome are different, and so are the solutions. “Though Buddhism has always emphasized suffering, by its very nature there is virtually no suffering. When one reaches awakening, suffering disappears like a mirage.”²² In my view, this is an accurate understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha said, “I teach only one thing: suffering and the end of suffering.” The reason why suffering—and—the end of suffering are not *two* teachings but *one* teaching is because, from the Buddhist point of view, to realize and understand what suffering is and why it arises is the way to end suffering. In Buddhism, awakening *is* liberation.

On the other hand, Ahn as a Christian theologian holds that the overcoming of the power of sin and worldly powers is possible through ‘struggle’, not through awakening or change of ‘thought.’²³ “The struggle is not to overcome thoughts that cause suffering by practicing self-mortification, but to fight at the risk

21 Ahn, *Theology for Christian Reformation*, 178.

22 Ibid.

23 Ahn Byung-mu, *Yeogsawa haeseok*(History and Interpretation) (Seoul: Daehan Christian Publishing House, 1992), 203.

of one's life."²⁴ Christians struggle against the structural sin that appears as 'concrete power' in history. Ahn's core criticism for Buddhism is its lack of responsibility in history.

Religion perceives relative things as relative. In this respect, Buddhism is very thorough. However, the Buddhist assertion that the things of the world are relative gives birth to a dualistic anthropology, and therefore makes humans irresponsible beings who 'escape from reality.'²⁵

Ahn is wary of the tendencies towards de-materialization and spiritualization in the so-called higher religions, and stresses that "Buddhism shows the apogee of spiritualization."²⁶ He believes that it is because of the influence of Buddhism that the Korean religions emphasize the human mind and leaning as a means toward individual salvation. Also, Ahn criticizes the *fatalism* of Buddhism. According to him, Buddhism's fatalism makes us see today's existence as "the consequence of yesterday's cause-and-effect and *karma*", which makes us surrender to the status quo and give up on change.²⁷ Not only that, Ahn criticizes the Buddhist understanding of *karma* as a "supporting theory for the powerful."²⁸ Yet, to properly assess his criticisms of Buddhism, we must bear in mind that his experience of Buddhism was limited in that he encountered Buddhism before the formation of

24 Ibid.

25 Ahn, "Accusation of Religion," 95.

26 Ahn Byung-mu, "*Uriege ilyonghal baegoepum-eul!* (Give Us Daily Hunger!)," *Salim*, vol. 6 (May 1989), 7.

27 Ahn Byung-mu, "*Baul-ui hyeonjon ihae* (Paul's Understanding of Presence)" in *Saengmyeong-eul sallineun sinang* (Life-Saving Faith) (Cheonan: Korea Theological Institute, 1997), 222.

28 Ahn Byung-mu, "*Geuliseudo-ui ileum-eulo ileonara* (Arise in the Name of the Christ)," *Hyunjon* (Presence), vol. 50 (April, 1974), 7.

*Minjung Buddhism*²⁹ in Korea or of *Engaged Buddhism* elsewhere in Asia.

Ahn Byung-mu's attitude toward Shamanism is ambivalent. First of all, Ahn affirms Shamanism, saying that a shaman plays the 'role of Christ' in that she frees the vengeful ghost from 'han(恨; 'wounded heart'),' and that Jesus can also be called a 'shaman' because he is "the Christ as a 'priest of han.'"³⁰ Also, he highly values Shamanism because "it has become the basis of minjung art that resolves the *han* of minjung, strengthens the solidarity consciousness of community in the village festival, and criticizes and opposes social contradictions caused by the powerful." However, at the same time, he insists that the 'apolitical and ahistorical form of Shamanism' must be overcome.³¹ Here, too, Ahn is criticizing socially disengaged and indifferent Shamanism because it does not solve the socio-structural suffering but simply offers 'private *hanpuri* (resolving *han*[wounded heart]).'³²

Ahn shows a deep interest in the thoughts of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Unlike Taoism as an institutionalized religion, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's original teachings contain a free ethos that rejects the status quo. Ahn evaluates Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's thought as 'resistance against the Confucian system.'³³ Perhaps this characteristic of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's views attract Ahn, who is by nature critical of established systems and institutions. However, Ahn does not ignore the limits of Taoist

29 See the following article for a brief introduction to Minjung Buddhism in Korea: Kim Eunkyū Micah, "Minjung (the Oppressed) Buddhism in the Context of Korea." *Madang*, vol. 17(2012).

30 Ahn, *Speak of Minjung Theology*, 354.

31 Ahn, *History and Minjung*, 360.

32 Ahn, *Speak of Minjung Theology*, 146.

33 Ahn, *Theology for Christian Reformation*, 521.

teachings. Comparing Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's perspectives to Hebrew thought, Ahn say, "there is a common point of criticism [between them] of excessively enlarged power and dominance over humans." The difference, says Ahn, is that "While Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu's views were those of very relaxed and speculative individuals, who were bystanders, Hebrew perspectives came out of the field of struggle in Israel, especially in the case of Galilee in the time of Jesus, where the perspective of the oppressed was very realistically presented as a matter of life and death."³⁴

In this brief review of Ahn's thinking, it should be clear that what motivated his study and criticism of other faiths was not to carry on an apologetics for Christianity but to emphasize the historical responsibility that all religions have to take. In an article in 1969, entitled "Accusation of Religion," Ahn asserts that "If religion in any way enables humans to escape from being responsible, then it is doing what idols do."³⁵ What must be noted here is that Ahn's 'accusation of religion' includes, even more critically, Christianity. Ahn's sense of responsibility shifts the place of his interreligious encounter and dialogue to the historical reality where the suffering Minjung struggle for liberation.

IV. Minjung Event: A 'New Address' for Interreligious Encounters and Dialogues

34 Ahn, *Speak of Minjung Theology*, 290.

35 "Accusation of Religion," 96.

The efforts of Ahn Byung-mu to overcome problems of Western Christian theology such as the subject-object dualism and anthropomorphic understanding of God and the Spirit were not a matter of abstract and conceptual reasoning; rather, they arose out of the concrete encounter and solidarity with Minjung. In an article written about three months before his death, Ahn recalls: "From the 1970s to the early 80s, the process of finding an exodus from Western theology or theology itself was accompanied by participation in a series of Minjung events."³⁶ Such Minjung events were so decisive for Ahn and all Minjung theologians that called for not only an escape from Western theology, i.e., a de-Westernization of Christianity, but also an escape from theology itself.³⁷ Therefore, Ahn would have seen that interreligious encounters and dialogue must take place in and through Minjung events.

One thing to note here is that Ahn's interreligious or comparative study of other faith traditions became less active since the mid-1970s. This period coincides with the formation and development of Ahn's Minjung theology. In my view, the reason is probably because Ahn in those days gave priority to solidarity with the suffering other over dialogue with the religious other. In a conversation with Suh Nam-dong, another founder of Minjung Theology, Ahn stated:

If reflection on what it means to do theology in Korea led to the so-called inculturation theology movement, the *address* of our theology in the early 1970s became not the church

³⁶ Ahn, "Reminiscences and Prospects of Minjung Theology," 67.

³⁷ Ibid.

but the reality of Korean society. Since then, we began to see Korea's political and economic problems as our problems and became interested in human rights and structural socio-politico-economic issues. In doing so, our theological themes became alive.³⁸

That is, the *address* or primary concern of Ahn's theology changed from *church* or *religion* to political and social *reality*. Agreeing with this, Suh states that the address of modern theology is changing from Rudolf Bultmann's *existence* and Karl Barth's *church* to Wolfhart Pannenberg's and Jürgen Moltmann's 'humanity and social problems.'³⁹

However, paradoxically, this change of the focal concern in theology allowed Ahn and his fellow Minjung theologians to meet and dialogue with the religious other in a new way. For Ahn, Minjung events are the very place of true interreligious encounter and dialogue. He speaks with intense emotion about an example of a Minjung event that transcends the walls between religions:

The mother [of Kim Sejin, a student activist, who committed a protest of self-immolation], who was beating in her heart the loss of her son, went to Busan to comfort the mother of Park Jong-cheol who was tortured to death by the police on February 18th, 1987. Jong-cheol's mother is a Buddhist and Sejin's mother a Christian. Two mothers wept together hugging each other. Here, at the meeting place of the two

38 Ahn Byung-mu and Suh Nam-dong, "*Haebang-gwa Chamyeo-ui Shinhak*(Theology of Liberation and Engagement), *Monthly Joongang*, vol. 80(1974.11), 227. Italics mine.

39 Ibid., 228.

mothers who experienced the death and resurrection of their sons, the barrier between Buddhism and Christianity is torn down and Jesus and Buddha meet.⁴⁰

This awareness of and engagement in Minjung events constitute the unique way in which Christians meet and dialogue with the religious other. Ahn says that “If you look at the origin of Christianity, you can see that it is the most socially engaged religion compared to other religions.”⁴¹ What is important here is that the uniqueness that Ahn emphasizes has nothing to do with any sort of religious superiority. His principle of interreligious dialogue is mutual complementarity; both sides are to learn from each other. The Christian emphasis on historical consciousness and responsibility is not an exclusion of other faiths but a challenge and invitation to participate more responsibly and actively in Minjung events.

V. Interreligious Dialogue and ‘Self-Confrontation’

Ahn Byung-mu did not fully develop and systematize a Minjung theology of religions for interreligious dialogue and cooperation toward liberation. Yet, it is interesting that some theological issues of religious pluralism in the Western theological circles in the 1980s and Korean theological circles in the 1990s appeared in Ahn’s theological works in the late

40 Ahn, *History and Minjung*, 210-211.

41 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Deoisang jonggyo-neun chimookilsoo upda*(Religion Can No longer be Silence)” in *Hankook minjok undong-gwa tongil*(Korean National Movement and Unification) (Cheonan: Korea Theological Institute, 2001), 240.

1960s and early 70s. In my view, the reason why Ahn was not enthusiastic about the religious pluralism debate in Korea during the 1990s might be because he had already, in his early years, engaged many of the theological and religious issues related to religious pluralism.

First of all, agreeing with Western theologians who envy the theological conditions in Korea because, unlike the West where Christianity is the only major religious tradition, Korea has various religious and cultural backgrounds, Ahn says that Korea's diverse religious and cultural traditions are the 'great assets' of Korean theologies.⁴² In the same vein, he argues that, unlike the 'religiously monolithic society' in the West, the religiously diverse society in Korea is 'a good condition to present true religion to humankind living today.'⁴³ That is, religious plurality for Korean Christians is not a problem to overcome but an opportunity to utilize. Therefore, exclusivism toward other religions could not find a place in Ahn's theological work. For him, it is not pluralism but exclusivism that has to be overcome.

[Christianity] has been not only intolerant of other religions, it has also misunderstood itself. Christianity has been a religion with the most severe conflict between the mainstream and marginalized groups. When the Christian mainstream had power, intolerance in the form of the 'extermination' and 'punishment' of heretics resulted. When it was not the case, the factions of the church conflicted with

42 Ahn, "The Theology of Liberation and Engagement," 230.

43 Ahn, *Korean National Movement and Unification*, 312.

one another which brought a history of mutual hostility.⁴⁴

Ahn goes further and deeper. He takes an *existential*—not exclusive, relativistic, or agnostic—position on truth and salvation, which are the key issues in a theology of religions:

Is there really any objective truth? Even if there is, it doesn't matter to me. I call it truth when it becomes a *word* (*Anrede*) that is spoken to *me*. The Bible is neither an exposition of truth nor a textbook of truth in general. It becomes a question that demands my answer and decision. In that sense, it is true *to me*.⁴⁵

That is, for Ahn, the truth and salvation of Christianity are meaningful and real not because they are objectively or absolutely true, but because they are true and existentially saving *for him*. The theological implication of this is that everyone can have existential truth and an experience of salvation. Of course, some may argue that such a position falls into a relativism. In fact, in 1970, when Ahn gave a lecture at Hyangrin Church, participants plied him with theological questions such as: "Why is only the Bible the truth?" "Can one be saved even if s/he doesn't believe in Christianity?" "Doesn't the Bible have a monopoly on truth?" Ahn answered: "I am not saying that Christianity and the Bible have a monopoly on *truth*. However, I find the key to *my* problem in the Bible, which touches my heart."⁴⁶ This shows again his existential understanding of truth

44 Ahn, *Theology for Christian Reformation*, 100.

45 Ahn Byung-mu, "Daewha(Dialogue)," *Presence*, vol. 8 (Aug., 1970), 51. Italics mine.

46 Ibid.

and salvation.

But what does Jesus mean to Ahn? In another article written in 1972, Ahn used a parable to show his understanding of Christ and salvation.

Asking why only Jesus is the Christ seems to me like an empty question. If he is the Christ for me, that is enough. Questioning whether or not there are other Christs is a useless speculation. [...] I am asked, "Is there no salvation in Buddhism?" Such question is like asking "Is this man not happy if he does not marry that woman?" No one can answer such a question. On the other hand, it is also foolish to generalize that there is no salvation outside Christianity. Something can be true for myself, but not for others. It is like saying, "I am the only one who is happy that I married this woman!" There is a difference between saying that "I can only be happy with this woman" and saying that "I am the only one who is happy that I married this woman."⁴⁷

Ahn's perspective here is in line with Krister Stendahl and Paul Knitter's 'love language' or John Hick's 'poetic language.' That is, when one says that "Jesus is the only truth and savior," it is like a confession of love or poetic expression such as "You are the most beautiful person in the world." There is no objective evidence that the person one loves is the 'most beautiful person' in the world. But the person can be the most beautiful person to his or her lover. Likewise, it doesn't make sense to say that Jesus is objectively and universally the one and only savior to

47 Ahn Byung-mu, "Daewha(Dialogue)," *Presence*, vol. 27 (Jan., 1972), 45.

everyone. But such confessional words make sense to Christians because those words become an *Anrede* to them.

Consequently, Ahn's existential viewpoint affirms the truth and salvation in other faiths. If so, another question may arise. Though the word 'the one and only savior for me' is love language or poetic language, if it is *existentially* absolutized as the truth for oneself in each religion, is it possible to have dialogue between religions? As much as objective differences, subjective or existential differences can be a difficult barrier to overcome. However, for Ahn, differences are not a barrier but a bridge. Ahn says: "People ask: 'Then, isn't everyone falling into subjectivism?' 'If Buddhists and Christians insist on their own beliefs, is it possible to have dialogue with each other?' Well, why can't the two persons talk to each other about their own fathers?"⁴⁸ For Ahn, difference is not a barrier but a bridge.

Ahn's theology of religions was formed not from an abstract theory but from his practical and existential dialogue with the religious other. In 1969, Ahn participated in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue seminar held under the theme of "Suffering and Salvation." In the seminar, he said that the important thing in interreligious dialogue is "not to seek a common ground, but to clearly examine and understand what the difference is."⁴⁹ He said:

I think I have learned a lot from interreligious dialogue. It is to understand the religious other and at the same time to realize and reflect on one's own religion. Above all,

48 Ibid.

49 Ahn Byung-mu, "Daewha(Dialogue)," *Presence*, vol. 2 (Aug., 1969, 8), 48-49.

there is much to learn from each other in the method and attitude of interpreting scriptures. It is foolish to claim one's superiority or flaunt oneself through dialogue. However, the premise that participants can become one through dialogue is also dangerous. Most of all, I disagree that "All religions are the same in that they seek good together" because it presupposes that good itself is self-evident. The important thing is how to understand and grasp good. Dialogue is knowing the difference between each other, and true dialogue is possible only when the difference is clear. In order to do that, above all else, each of us has to be sincere in our own ground. To think that something would be created in dialogue without such different ground is foolish, I think. Whenever I have [doctrinal] dialogue with people of other religions, I feel a difference that is almost impassable. Yet, when I meet them as living persons leaving behind doctrines, I often have a warm feeling of intimacy.⁵⁰

It seems that Ahn considers the dialogue of life more important than dialogue of doctrines. What he experienced and reflected on while participating in an ecumenical event between Catholics and Protestants can also be applied as a basic principle for interreligious dialogue. Ahn stated:

Ecumenical movement is impossible if we take doctrine into account. For a true ecumenical movement, we must sacrifice our most precious *firstborn son*. Fr. Ha, the president of this meeting, read the text of Abraham offering Isaac. So,

50 Ibid.

I asked co-participants what was the *Issac* for us Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans, and said that ecumenical movement would be possible only when we are willing to sacrifice our *Isaac*.⁵¹

It means that a true ecumenical movement is possible only when the participants are able to lay down the most important and fundamental thing in their own traditions, which can and should be applied to interreligious dialogue. This open attitude became the source of *freedom* that allowed Ahn to escape from the fundamentalist theology, Christology, and pneumatology of Western Christianity; it was also a source of *humility* that enabled him to acknowledge and accept truth and salvation in other faiths. Thanks to this open attitude, Ahn believed “that we can experience divine events in other religions, philosophical books, literatures, and art works.”⁵²

Though Ahn has a great openness to other faiths, he is critical of syncretism. Referring to the typical Westerners’ image of Koreans, which is, “Koreans are Buddhists when they think, Confucians when they practice rituals, and all become shamanist in the face of life’s crises,” Ahn says that “This attitude becomes virtuous and is okay when the world is peaceful and everything is going well. But, in case of crises, one with such an attitude can’t confront anything. This kind of tolerance only creates shelters and, in the end, one easily falls into fatalism.”⁵³ What Ahn stresses here is the social responsibility of religion.

Finally, it must also be emphasized that Ahn’s existential

51 Ahn Byung-mu, “*Daewha*(Dialogue),” *Presence*, vol. 27(Jan., 1972), 47.

52 Ahn, *Speak of Minjung Theology*, 178.

53 Ahn, *Korean National Movement and Unification*, 59.

view of truth includes not only dialogue but also confrontation. However, this confrontation is not a confrontation with other religions but confrontation with one's own religion. It is a '*self-confrontation*' to discern, decide, and practice what is truth to me. Ahn critically points out that there was no such 'confrontation with one's self when Confucianism and Buddhism came to and were accepted in Korea. To be sure, Christianity is no exception to that critique.⁵⁴

For Ahn, 'to become a Christian' is not 'to become a particular religious person' but 'to become a true person' through fierce self-confrontation in search of the truth.⁵⁵ It is interesting that Ahn calls Gandhi, a great Hindu thinker and leader, 'a person who restored the image of Jesus in modern times.'⁵⁶ Moreover, he calls Gandhi 'a true disciple of Jesus.'⁵⁷ In my view, that is because Ahn highly values and admires Gandhi's *experiment with truth*, which is a form of self-confrontation. That is, Gandhi did not just believe in the truth as it is given by the tradition or culture; he existentially examined whether the truth is true to him. He believed in and followed the truth that he himself proved through his own existential experiment. Ahn tells us that only the dialogue between *true persons* who have gone through a confrontation with themselves will bring about mutual illumination and mutual transformation. As is evident, Ahn's perspectives and principles of interreligious dialogue were ahead of his time.

54 Ahn Byung-mu, "Seoyang saram, hankook salam(Western People, Korean People)", *Sasanggye(The World of Thought)*, vol. 7, no. 7 (July 1959), 231.

55 Ahn, "Daewha(Dialogue)," *Presence*, vol. 27, 45.

56 Ahn Byung-mu, *Yeoksa-ap-e minjung-gwa deobul-eo(With Minjung in the Face of History)* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1986), 350.

57 Ahn Byung-mu, "Daewha(Dialogue)," *Presence*, vol. 8 (Oct., 1969), 45.

VI. Conclusion: Minjung Theology's Address Today

From the theoretical horizon of theology of religion or comparative theology in the 21st century, Ahn Byung-mu's understanding and theological perspectives of neighboring religions will be insufficient or even problematic. He did not systematize his theology of religion like theologians of religion, nor did he cross over to neighboring religions and understand them with their eyes like comparative theologians. However, it would be unfair to evaluate Ahn's theology of the past from the theological landscape of the present. His context and ours are different. It is also necessary to respect the change of his theological address in the face of the reality of the suffering minjung. His and Minjung theologians' *primary theological address* was people's struggles for democracy and human rights. For them, the top priority was not *dialogue* but *liberation*.

Yet, it does not mean that they were not interested in interreligious dialogue. Most importantly, they embraced Korean Minjung religious traditions as a paradigm for their theological projects. In addition, those Minjung theologians met, dialogued, and acted with the religious other in the places of Minjung events during the 1970s and 80s. Besides, it must be noted that several Minjung theologians did explore other faiths. For instance, Hyun Yeong-hak attempted to theologize Shamanism as a tradition that exists at the root of Minjung's heart and religiosity. Suh Nam-dong also actively included Minjung religious traditions as one of the paradigms for Minjung theology. For them, religious plurality of Korean society and Minjung was not a theological project to systematize but an existential condition to engage.

The next generation of Minjung theologians in the 1980s and 90s also did not have strong interests in interreligious dialogue and theologies of religions because their priority was to serve and participate in the democratization of the wider society. Yet, some of them have explored other faiths and theologies of religions more deeply. Examples include Kim Kyung-jae's "The Confrontation and Complementarity between Minjung Theology and Theology of Religions" and Kim Myung-su's "Ahn Byung-mu's Minjung Theology and Eastern Thoughts," and Kwon Jin-kwan's "Searching for Ethics of Justice in the Age of Empire: Focusing on the Views of Justice of Jesus and the Choi Je-woo[the founder of *Dong-hak* (Eastern Study) movement in the late nineteenth century Korea]." More recently, younger theologians of the Korean Society of Minjung Theology are crossing over the boundaries between Minjung theology and theology of religions. For example, Shin Ik-sang, who belongs to both an inculturation theology group and a minjung theology group, wrote *Byun Seon-whan's Theology Research: Towards a Nondualistic Liberation Theology of Religions*. I also co-authored *Studies on Critical Buddhism* and have written several articles on socially engaged Buddhist-Christian dialogue and interreligious issues. It is promising that there are many Minjung theologians who are directly or indirectly involved in interreligious and liberative dialogue and cooperation. Choi Hyung-mook describes these attempts as a '*Minjung theology of religions*' which is one of '*various Minjung theologies*.'⁵⁸

Ahn Byung-mu's pioneering interreligious and comparative

58 Choi Hyung-mook, "Minjungshinhak-eun jinhwahago iteunga?(Is Minjung Theology Evolving?)." *Nongchon-gwa Mokhoe*(Farming Area and Ministry), vol. 66 (Summer 2015), 192.

theological works were in a way incomplete. Yet, a theological movement is a continuous journey of theological explorers. Our theological address today is more interreligious and interconnected; the religious other and suffering other are merging. Thus, interreligious dialogue and diapraxis is not an option but a must for liberation. Today's Minjung theologians need to develop a minjung theology of religions actively and creatively as Ahn did existentially in his time. We begin our journey from where Ahn arrived.

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