The Future of Ecumenical Koinonia: Kim Yong Bock, Social Biography and Our Common Inheritance

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Abstract

Kim Yong Bock (1938-2022) was a pioneering Minjung theologian with a prophetic voice that embraced the world of struggle to overcome people's suffering, injustice, and the degradation of the environment. We were friends and colleagues for over five decades. He coined or redefined many terms: *messianic koinonia, zoesophia, oikozoe*, to name just a few. Above all was his transformation of the reality of *social biography* and its implications for a community of ecumenical vision. Informal ecumenical collectives or *koinonia* are the focus of this paper.

After a brief social biography of Kim Yong Bock himself (Korean roots, the "Princeton Mafia," Minjung intellectuals, Asian theologians, the prophetic oikumene), this paper will offer a preliminary exploration of its implications for our work to evoke and contribute to an ecumenical vision of pantopia on

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the level of theology. For Kim, the church was never expressed as a theological concept or a social institution, but a living reality of God's grace at work in *koinoniae* with a theology that is creative of life. He was always in search for people and issues which could trigger new beginnings and forge an ecumenism among people, and more broadly, an informal and interreligious solidarity of oikozoe.

Similarly, as we look to the future of a post-pandemic world, theology will have to inspire new initiatives that can trigger expressions of "life in all its fullness." For theologians, it can do this, I will argue, in several ways: the activation of alternative sources of historical tradition; the formation and reformation of dedicated koinoniae of life; and the creation of transforming liturgies, art and music. Throughout, I will use Kim Yong Bock's categories of understanding as a necessary first step on the way to a pantopia of life.

Many people who study Minjung theology knew Yong Bok Kim (1938-2022), and if they did not know him, they probably heard of him. Yong Bok was a pioneering Minjung theologian with a prophetic voice that embraced the world of struggle to overcome people's suffering, injustice, and the degradation of the environment, in Korea and the wider oikumene. Volker Kuester did a short oral history with him, and I am hoping that we will discover that other oral histories or extended interviews with him were done in Korea. Allow me to begin with my own narrative.

I first met Kim Yong Bok in 1970 when I was a second-year

¹ Volker Kuester, A Protestant Theology of Passion: Korean Minjung Theology Revisited (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010). Especially Chapter 7: 95-102.

M.Div. student at Princeton Theological Seminary. Yong Bok was working on his Ph.D. dissertation² under Dick Shaull, who was also my mentor, and who was the reason I went to Princeton in the first place. Dick thought Yong Bok and I should get to know each other. That first meeting was transformative, and although we were together only for a half hour or so, Yong Bok was the first Asian theologian I had met. He took my interest in China seriously. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, which continued for over 50 years.

In September 1971, we met again, this time in Tokyo. Yong Bok spent a lot of time there with Janice and me. He gave us some books and other materials to pass on to David Suh in Seoul. I remember that one of the titles was *Letters from T.K.* This was our first time in Asia and we were *en route* to Taiwan, where for the next two years we would be teaching English, doing Christian student work and studying Chinese at Tainan Theological Seminary.

Over the next five decades, there would be many more encounters, and the agenda was always about Christianity and social change. In between, we also found time to get together over food and drink, and in the process, we became very close friends. As M. M. Thomas, a senior theologian from India, once said, "the ecumenical movement is a journey among friends." Whenever Yong Bok and I met, it seemed as if we had never been apart.

Yong Bok had a kind of creative genius which served as a catalyst for change in the world. He coined or redefined many

² Kim Yong-bok, "Historical transformation: people's movement and messianic koinonia," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1976. Probably Volker Kuester is the only other person I know who has read this dissertation carefully, and in full. I read it even before it was catalogued at the seminary library.

terms: messianic koinonia, zoesophia, oikozoe, to name just a few. Above all was his use of social biography (a term he did not invent) as the foundation for the historical involvement of people in movements of social change. Koreans, Asians, and all who embraced a prophetic ecumenism, not accepting existing social, political and ecclesial arrangements as a given, but as a starting point for change.

I often took my cue from Yong Bok, even though we moved in very different directions, and often in different circles. He used to speak of the "Princeton Mafia," which included Rubem Alves, Fely Carino, K. C. Abraham and Preman Niles and others who were at Princeton Seminary during his time. I was in the younger generation of this mafia, but still a "made man." They, we, maintained contact with one another through CCA and the WCC, not to mention the home grown "Korean Mafia" and the ecumenism of change they created.

We had many encounters and conversations over the years, in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. I remember we were together at a meeting in Chicago to determine global mission priorities for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I arrived the night before and I went to see Yong Bok in his room. He was busily at work on his computer, and when I asked what he was doing, he said he was working on our final committee report. "But we have not even met yet," I said. "Yes," he replied, "and so we don't have much time." In other words, he had the report written even before the committee met. As we met over the next three days, he steered the committee in the direction that we were hoping for. The report was refined, but not rewritten

Once I stayed with Yong Bok in his apartment for two weeks at

Hanil Seminary, when he was president. It was a relaxing time, and our conversations were more leisurely than they usually were. But they still had the same intensity of purpose as we talked late into the night.

Yong Bok's great idea for the Accra Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches was the Global Institute of Theology. A group of us first gathered in Geneva, including Volker Kuester, Odair Mateus Pederoso, Priscille Djomhoue, Yong Bok and myself. We drew up the program – Yong Bok was not very good on details, but on big ideas. I became Dean of GIT, and when we met the next year, we had close to 100 students, half from different parts of Africa, and half from other parts of the world. It was a great experience. Everyone will remember that assembly for the "Accra Declaration," which Yong Bok had a great deal to do with. But the GIT and the Accra mission statement were also significant milestones in which he played a leading role.

Christianity in China became an area of concern for Yong Bok, and he used to tell me that I was his introduction to China. I did introduce him to Bishop Ting, and they had a great deal to share with one another in the few times they were together. Two visionary leaders from different generations, in different contexts, but both with an abiding concern for social change in Christianity, even if not through Christianity.

A few years ago, Yong Bok contacted my daughter Elisabeth (a human rights lawyer) for legal advice on a project to sue the US government for its bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Nagasaki in World War II. I don't think the project went anywhere, but this was yet another example of his approach to

visionary justice and social change.

The last time I saw Yong Bok was in Hong Kong. He was there with Marion, and Janice and I invited them for dinner. It was great to see the two together. They wanted a spicy Chinese meal and so we took him to our favorite Hunan restaurant. As always, we talked about new projects and who we could get to help us change the world. But for a change, we also talked about how we had been together over the years, and the important role played by Margaret Flory and Dick Shaull in the lives of each one of us. More about Margaret later.

Yong Bok was always looking beyond the horizon. "The future creates the present out of the past," one of our professors (Paul Lehman) used to say, and Yong Bok was always looking to create that which does not yet exist. He was my close friend for more than 50 years and I miss him every day. But he is now dancing in the Communion of Saints, alongside others who have gone before, where somehow, he continues to push us forward.

There is a Chinese saying, "The trees want calm, but the wind will not subside." (樹欲靜而風不止) Yong Bok was like the inexorable wind, the spirit who kept things moving. Now, rest in peace, dear friend, still and still moving, in the knowledge that your spirit continues to move among us.

I do not write this essay to memorialize Kim Yong Bok, but rather to see what we can draw from him to help create a pantopia in a post-pandemic world. I am particularly interested in what this might mean for Christians and for churches looking to the future, not the past, to create "life in all its fulness." For Yong Bok, the church was never primarily a theological concept or a social institution, but a living reality of God's grace at work in *koinoniae*. He was always in search for people and issues which could trigger new beginnings and forge ecumenism among people, or, more broadly, an informal community and interreligious solidarity of *oikozoe*.

Social biography was an important concept for Kim Yong Bok, related to his understanding of koinonia. As he said, "Well, the story of your life is not an objective account as to what happened, the story of your life is always different, when you tell it, according to the time and according to the context."3 Actually the story was more than a concept, it was a lived reality of his own identification with the people he served. The Korean Minjung. Asian peoples. The prophetic ecumenical koinonia. People are born with different biographies: race, gender, class, language, ethnicity, sexuality. But it is also possible to reject the identity to which one has been "assigned," at least in part, in favor of an identity which one chooses. There are limitations to what one chooses because we are all dealt certain cards which are ours to play with. Social biography is both an assigned and a chosen identity, and it becomes a source for political thinking, religious commitment and theological orientation.

Social biography has an historical character which transcends the local and the global. In the words of a scholar of social biography:

Social Biographies explore the connections between the dense specificity of individual lives and the larger contexts in which they are embedded. In this way social biographies

³ Kuester, A Protestant Theology of Passion, 95.

cast new light on the standard world historical narratives, with their emphasis on large scale change. Social Biography encourages us see the connections between the profoundly local and individual on the one hand, and the global and world historical on the other hand. In the process it makes world historical processes visible.⁴

We all have different, but overlapping social biographies. When we gather, we become an informal ecumenical koinonia drawn together to explore what a pantopia of life (an oikozoe) could mean, something beyond a new normal. Many of us know one another as friends. All of us know something about each other. We come together to share ideas and experiences in koinonia, because the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Not all of us are social activists, but, like Yong Bok, we all use theology and other disciplines, as well as Christian images to suggest paths which might inspire social activism and push the church, or at least part of it, forward.

Let me discuss three ways of doing this. These are not exhaustive of what we are about, but they are all important for who we are.

1. The activation of alternative sources of historical tradition

I always like to mention Eugen Rosenstock-huessy (1888-1973), the theologian sociologist, historian and polymath who has become largely unknown in his country of origin. Yong Bok also used to quote him. He has an extensive bibliography, but his

⁴ Edmund Burke III, "Social Biographies as World History," April, 2019, https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/ sites.ucsc.edu/dist/f/704/files/2019/05/Writing-Social.Biographies.pdf accessed 14 June 2022.

major work was *Out of Revolution: The Autobiography of Western Man* (1938). (Please forgive his "Western" and non-inclusive language. Like all of us he was a creature of his times.) In his two-volume *Soziologie*, he developed the principle of metaeconomics. And in *The Christian Future*, or the Modern Mind *Outrun* (1946), he outlined what he termed the "cross of reality," a theological way of looking at the state of the post-war world.

In *Out of Revolution*, he says, following Kierkegaard, that we live our lives forward, but we understand history backward. Thus, each revolution rewrites the history of the one that came before and reveals earlier revolutions inadequacies to reinterpret its own perspective on the future.

For Christianity is the embodiment of one truth throughout the ages, that death precedes life, that life is the fruit of death, and that faith is the power to turn an end into a new beginning by obeying a new name.

For Rosenstock, movements of change were the real sources of the historical. To study the history of Christianity was to study the history of movements of renewal and revolution. These were often heretical/heterodox movements and individuals, non-orthodox or non-conformist at the time, but later re-discovered and continued to push history in new directions. He paid attention to these in his writing of history. What Rosenstock was saying found a parallel with another book that was published in 1962.

One of the most important books of the twentieth century was Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962. I read this book for a class when I was a theological student, and I recently bought the 50th anniversary

edition. Kuhn's main point was that important scientific developments do not emerge incrementally, but in revolutionary ways. Something in the existing model does not work, something very small, and so a new theory is suggested, usually by someone younger and at the margins of the scientific community who does not have as much invested in the existing model. The scientific community does not pay much attention to them. But then their ideas take hold, and a revolution takes place. This was the case of Einstein's theory of relativity. Kuhn used the term "paradigm shift" to describe this, and of course today, we all use the term paradigm shift. Actually, we use the term too freely to denote any sense of change, but paradigm shifts are not so frequent. I want to suggest that when we speak of Pantopia and the New Normal, we are suggesting a real paradigm shift. Historically, this will involve drawing on alternative sources of the Christian tradition.

In Yong Bok's dissertation, he drew heavily on the importance of the Dong Hak Rebellion, which he and others called the Donghak Peasant Revolution 東學農民革命. This was an armed revolt that irrupted in Korea in 1894. It was a nationalist movement that wanted to change society and was concerned about the Japanese influence in Korea, and as we know, the Japanese subsequently occupied the Korean peninsula. Donghak was religiously inspired, and according to Yong Bok, it drew on Christian messianic symbolism, although not in the way the missionaries liked. His interpretation was criticized, but not rejected by his professor at Princeton University (Marius Jansen), and it was later dismissed by Presbyterian church historians in Korea. But for Yong Bok, the Dong Hak rebellion was not only a source for change in the history of modern Korea, but for the history of Christianity in Korea.

Since we are talking about social biography, allow me to say something about my own work from that time, to illustrate what I am saying. I wrote my senior M.Div. thesis at Princeton Theological seminary on Christianity and the revolutionary symbolism on the Taiping Revolution in mid-19th century China.⁵ In some ways, the Taiping in China foreshadowed the Donghak movement in Korea, and it drew even more directly on Christian messianic symbolism to create the largest 19th century revolutionary movement in the world. In my own very immature work, I argued that the Taiping Revolution was an alternative source of Christianity that we should pay attention to. In China, the Taiping were interpreted as a peasant revolutionary movement that foreshadowed the Communist Revolution of 1949. Yet its religious nature was downplayed. Only recently has a Chinese scholar in Beijing written a book on the Taiping as a religious movement, which goes against Chinese Communist historical orthodoxy.6

What alternative sources of the Christian tradition are important for the challenges we face today? Feminist scholars have been helping us to understand and interpret the important but neglected role of women in the history of the church from the earliest times. Marginalized groups in the history of the church are now receiving more attention. Ecological aspects of the history of Christianity have also been coming to the fore. And

⁵ This was later published in a shortened form as Philip L. Wickeri, "Christianity and the Origins of the Taiping Movement: A Study in the Social Function of Religious Symbols." Ching Feng, XIX:1 (January 1976): 5-34

⁶ Zhou Weichi (周偉馳), *Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and Revelation*, Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 2013.

in light of our recent global pandemic, the study of pandemics and society in the history of religion has gained new interest among historians. My point is not simply to highlight neglected areas in the history of Christianity, but to demonstrate that this neglect was a result of forces in the church that will always try to suppress historical interpretations that challenge their power. Even for those of us who are not historians, we can draw on marginalized individuals and groups in the development of our theologies that help move theology in new directions.

2. The formation and reformation of dedicated koinoniae of life

Kim Yong Bok believed in the power of small groups to function as catalysts for change, groups that he called koinonia. For him, these groups were his main understanding of the church, for he did not have much interest in church institutions. He saw Jesus as the organizer of a social movement.

One of the people who was an inspiration for Yong Bok's idea of koinonia was Margaret Flory (1914-2009), whom I have mentioned above. Margaret, a single woman, worked almost her entire career in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Her focus was on ecumenical student work. She never achieved a very high position, nor did she want to, and on the surface, from the view of ecclesial politics, she never had much influence. Margaret was not particularly progressive in her outlook, but she was open-minded and believed in the people she came to know. What Margaret had a genius for is bringing young people

^{7 &}quot;Flory, Margaret (1914-2009): Mission innovator and educator," https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/e-f/flory-margaret-1914-2009/accessed 27 June 2022.

together and "launching" them on their life paths. She brought people and church issues together, she would say, and then see what happens. She took a special interest in people (mostly Presbyterians), and followed them and at times helped them for decades. Yong Bok. Was one of these. So were Dick Shaull, Paul Lehman, Milan Opocensky, Feliciano Carino, Rubem Alves, K. C. Abraham, and myself, to name just a few of those I know. We were the "Flory Boys," but there were one or two "Flory Girls" as well (Alice Hageman, who defended Cuba in American courts, was the one I can think of). To use Yong Bok's language, Margaret put people together in various "koinoniae of life" and let them (us) live and breathe. I would venture to say that behind all of our koininiae, there is a Margaret Flory.

Koinoniae of life enliven and activate social biography. But social biography is not entirely something of our own choosing. At its most basic, social biography is a given, derived from race, gender, social class, ethnicity, and language. It is related to our family upbringing, our schooling, our religion, our sense of place. Social biography is the "stuff" of who we are, and defines where we come from. But there is agency in social biography as well, and koinonia of life helps to activate both individual and communal agency. As I observed above, the study of social biography explores "the connections between the dense specificity of individual lives and the larger contexts in which they are embedded." The koinoniae of life are concrete historical communities which are reformed again and again in social biographies, and help determine their direction, purpose and usefulness.

In the history of Christianity, we have seen such koinoniae

emerge again and again to trigger changes in the Church. Jesus' calling of the disciples formed the twelve into a koinoniae of life. They continued to form and reform koinoniae up until Christianity became recognized by the state in the fourth century. Then, koinoniae were formed and reformed both inside and outside the church, but the latter were far more interesting. At different points in church history from that time onward, koinoniae of life activated social biographies, and they continue to do so. It would be informative to write a history of the Christianity from this point of view, but that will have to await another time. This is part of the task of activating alternative sources of the Christian tradition.

Today in our churches we still have Bible studies, youth groups, mission societies and other similar groups movements for change. Any of these can become seeds for koinoniae of life. NGOs, student groups, interreligious dialogues, etc. can also become koinoniae. What is needed in either case are individual leaders who can become catalysts in such movements. Yong Bok played this role, in Korea, in Asia, and globally, always in an ecumenical and sometimes individual way. He was not particularly interested in organizing and sustaining what he and others called into being. That task was left to others or it was left undone. The importance was always that the koinoniae could be restarted and transformed.

3. The creation of transforming art, music and liturgy

A third way of pushing the church forward by inspiring a new approach to pantopia is through liturgy, art and music. Many of you here know a lot more about these than I do, but I want to suggest some ways in which the creative arts may be helpful for our task.

I work for the Anglican Church, and Anglicans and Episcopalians tend to pride themselves on their liturgies, perhaps too much so. Liturgy of course means service, the acting out of the Christian message in real life, to memorialize and anticipate faith in Jesus Christ. It is something theatrical, and Anglicans love the theatrical, the dressing up, the processions, the beautiful surroundings (even when they are simple), the words and the music, the falderol. I hope I will be pardoned for saying that Anglicans are more adept at the Ministry of the Sacrament than the Ministry of the Word. A Presbyterian friend once told me that in Episcopal worship, there is too much folderol before the nitty gritty. You don't find many good preachers (the Presbyterian nitty gritty) in Anglican churches. But since you don't find many good preachers in other church traditions either, at least there is the liturgy to fall back on.

Liturgy can be transformative, providing it reflects something that is also going on in the real life of the church. Liturgy is symbolic performance, and to be effective it must be a good performance, every day, week after week. The importance of liturgy is not that it is new and exciting, but that it renews and gives power to go through another week, or just another day. Not all liturgy is transformative, and our task is to find ways that it can be. It certainly does not happen by putting a representative committee together and coming up with a contemporary or trendy liturgy.

The liturgical performance involves all of our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell (thus the importance of incense).

Liturgy compels people to move beyond theological abstractions, conference papers, books and even teaching. As such, liturgy becomes an acting out of what we believe in, an embodiment of the pantopia, a refusal to accept the new normal.

Yong Bok, being a Presbyterian, did not have much time for liturgy, or for music and art either. I am not saying that he rejected these, but that his gifts lay elsewhere. In this sense he was unfinished, as we all are, in one way or another. Without a sense of liturgy, we are left with bare, ruined choirs, especially when times are bad, as they are these days. During the pandemic, and still now in many places, church services were held online. This became the new normal. It was OK, I guess, but I always got the sense it was not real. It was convenient because we could drag ourselves out of bed with our tea or coffee and sit in front of our computers. But online worship, in most cases, could not inspire. The sermon became most important, and we only watched the celebration of the Eucharist, just as they did in Medieval Europe.

My favorite Anglican theologian from the 20th century is someone whom I would wager that none of you have ever heard of, thus, an alternative source of our Christian tradition. His name was Alan Ecclestone (1904-1992).8 Ecclestone was not an academic theologian, but a working-class priest, who spent all of his life with workers. Services at his church were "high church" with a strong liturgy to enliven, challenge and comfort his parishioners. All of his books would fall into the section which we now would term spirituality, but with a bent towards

⁸ His most famous book was Yes to God (Todd, 1977). See his biography by Tim Gorringe, Alan Ecclestone: Priest as Revolutionary (Sheffield, 1994). For an interesting commonplace book with his personal commentary, see Alan Ecclestone, Gather the Fragments: A Book of Days (Cairns: Sheffield, 1993).

transformative practice. My favorite is Scaffolding of the Spirit: Reflections on the Gospel of John (1987). He was the only British clergyman who was a member of the British Communist Party, and they waved their rule on atheism to let him in. From the 1940s to the early 1990s he could be found on the front lines of all the important anti-war and justice-oriented demonstrations in the north of England. I mention him here as an example of one whose powerful sense of liturgy sustained working class Anglicans, and as one who would never settle for the new normal.

Liturgy involves art, music and poetry, but each of these could be discussed in their own right as we consider Christian resources for the creation of pantopia. The creative arts were contextualized long before theologies were, but I will set this discussion aside for another place and another time.

Let me conclude with something about Hong Kong, where I live. which people, and which is still a focus of the world's attention. I myself was not supportive of Occupy Central (2014) or the Umbrella Movement (2019) which attracted a lot of attention in theological circles. Many of my friends and colleagues in the territory were part of these movements, and I respect this.9 But I saw the protests as Anti-China and Pro-Western (especially pro-American) in their effect, if not in their intent. The protests were lauded by Anglo-American

⁹ For a theologically supportive positions on the protests, see Kwok Pui-lan and Francis Ching-wah Yip, eds. The Hong Kong Protests and Political Theology (Rowan and Littlefield, 2021). A more thoughtful study emphasizing the multi-religious dimension of the protests, especially Buddhist and Daoist, and the serious limitations of a Christian theological interpretation, has been written by Guo Ting, "Transforming the Cold War Religious Ecology in Contemporary Hong Kong," unpublished paper from the Panel "Chinese Christians, Transnationalism and the Cold War," Yale Edinburgh Conference, 29 June 2022.

conservative pundits and politicians, including Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong. This support (and the funding that went with it) turned the protests into a Cold War expression of dissent from an older era. This is not the occasion to debate the pros and cons of the protest movements, and their theological importance, but I wanted to stake out my own position.

Now we are in a new and different Hong Kong, and there are no more protests. It is a changed situation that is still unfolding after the passage of a new National Security Law (2020). Hong Kong is not only China's most international city, but it is an important part of the Greater Bay Area Development Project in South China. It is too early to assess the response of the churches and theology in this situation, but we do see that our work continues, and maybe has become more important. We are on the cusp of a new era, but we do not know what that will mean.

The recently appointed Roman Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong Stephen Chow (a Jesuit like the Pope) compares our situation to that of the beautiful flowers and lovely plants that break through the cracks of the cobblestone streets and old stone walls of our city. Life comes from the cracks.

I can feel that Hong Kong, including our Church, are becoming more like an existence within cracks. We used to enjoy much space and freedom of expression when we could express our opinions in any way we like... That spaciousness for our freedom and expression, which we had taken for granted, seems diminishing. With that narrowing of space, we start to feel like living in cracks, which makes us nervous, anxious, disappointed, upset, frustrated, and angry. Some have chosen to settle in other countries. Some are observing, while some have little choice but to stay. As for me, I made my choice when I accepted my episcopal appointment, like many in Hong Kong who have chosen to stay. I want to share with you that the love and light of God can be found in all things, even cracks.¹⁰

This is a start. He indicates the changes and transition taking place in our Hong Kong society of "One Country, Two Systems." I believe Bishop Chow's view is shared in many churches and among many Christians in Hong Kong. It is also conducive to more and deeper interaction with the mainland, especially with many mainland intellectuals who continue to inspire.

Alternative sources of Christian tradition, new *koinoniae* of life and liturgies, art and music that emphasize change and renewal can also be discovered and developed in the cracks of Hong Kong or anywhere else.

¹⁰ Stephen Chow, "Resilience through the cracks of Kong Hong," https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Stephen-Chow:-Resilience-through-the-cracks-of-Hong-Kong-56014.html accessed 29 June 2022