

Social Movement as the Ground for Minjung Theology

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I was still in my 20's during the 1970's when a theology called minjung theology began to spread among young and progressive Christians. I remember that minjung theology was a leading socio-political thought and cast a great influence upon the society as a whole. Thus, we could say that minjung theology was not only a theology that cast impact just on Christian churches and Christians, but also a socio-political thought that guided the whole nation and the whole society. Minjung theology during the 1970's was not fully accepted by society as a whole. It was rejected by the powerful sectors of Korean society – especially by the military dictatorship governments who regarded minjung theology as pro-communist. Minjung theology was a liberating ideology of, and for, the people who yearned for a real democracy with freedom and social equality.

Minjung theology contributed to a new reading and writing of history, and to a new understanding of history. Minjung theology viewed history through the eyes of the lower people. If there were not the perspective of minjung theology, history would have been understood as the record of the work and accomplishments of the elite in society. But minjung theology changed that, viewing history as the work and accomplishments of the oppressed and the weak. The minjung theology that emerged in the midst of the struggles of the minjung for their own liberation in the 1970's was the voice of the suffering people. It carried within itself their *han* (a unresolved sentiment that is the result of long-term suffering) and aspiration for their new future.¹ Minjung theology is a theology that attempts to unfold the history of a nation or a society with the minjung as its heroes and heroines, that is, the subjects of history and society.

I. Is the minjung still relevant?

Now, we have to define who the minjung are. The first generation minjung theologians were extremely cautious not to define who the minjung were. They state that by being defined

□ Han can be defined as “a feeling of helpless suffering and oppression.” It can be translated as “a feeling of unresolved resentment against unjustifiable suffering.” Or, it is “a deep awareness of the contradictions in a situation and of the unjust treatment meted out to the people or a person by the powerful. And this feeling of han is not just a one-time psychological response to a situation but is an accumulation of such feelings and experiences.” Suh Kwang-sun David, “A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation” *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983), 24-25.

by theologians and intellectuals, the minjung are distorted, manipulated and dictated to by them. However, we must try to make the meaning of the minjung clear as much as possible. The term minjung is a relative term. I would claim that some terms that could help explicate the meaning of the minjung are the proletariat, the citizen, the nation, and others or minorities.

1. The Proletariat: The proletariat is a term to designate people as the working class. The minjung includes the lower working classes. But the meaning of the minjung cannot be consumed by the term “the proletariat”. The minjung is not a strictly economic term. It is rather a political term. It emphasizes the minjung as the actor of the society and history. Also, it is a cultural and historical term. When we talk about the minjung, we are talking about the minjung as cultural, historical, political and economic beings. Karl Marx and other socialists tend to use the term proletariat to designate industrial workers as the sole historical agents who are to revolutionize the entire society into socialism or communism. But, in reality Marxists consider the elite socialists (e.g. intelligentsia and party leaders) as leaders of the proletariat and give them a status superior to industrial workers. That is the reason why many socialist movements end up being authoritarian and hierarchical.

Minjung theology does not see the minjung as the proletariat. Nor does minjung theology consider the path of Marxist socialism and communism as the best and inevitable path the minjung must take in history. The minjung seek their liberation in their concrete historical context. The minjung are the actors who create their own stories, histories and destinies. They have potential power and capacity to make a new history. Minjung theology believes that the minjung are the bearers of the progress of society and history. The minjung theologian seeks to put the perspective of the minjung as the actors and protagonists in history immersed in his/her doing theology.

2. The Citizens: The citizen is similar to the minjung. In connotation, the citizen is distinct from the minjung. While the minjung do not enjoy at present time the full and substantial participatory membership in the society, the citizen by definition enjoys full membership of the society and country. The minjung may be citizens, but they are at most nominal citizens. They are citizens only by name, not in a substantial sense. So minjung are struggling to achieve a full and substantial membership of the society. We may cautiously say that minjung are still in a process of becoming full citizens in a society and in a country. Minjung is a loaded term; it has a long history to it. The concept of citizen is relatively new to us. The minjung emerge as citizens, as Korea has become a more democratic society. In 21st century Korea the minjung tend to show the characteristic of the citizen; however, the idea of citizen does not exhaust the meaning of the minjung.

When it comes to the citizens' movement in Korea, it shows its differences from the minjung movement. In the citizens' movement, the most active members and leaders are composed mostly of intellectuals and middle class people. Here we have to be aware that the term "minjung" goes mostly with the term "movement", and together both become "minjung movement". In Korean history, minjung emerge as the protagonists of history in the minjung movement. Minjung theology views minjung not in a static way, but in a dynamic way. Minjung are seen as active protagonists in history. Minjung have been most active in various minjung movements in Korean history. In those minjung movements the minjung have created and practiced lofty cultural and religious ideals and values. The *Donghak* religion in the late 19th century is an example. The minjung art movement in the 1970's until the 1990's is another recent example. Much literature has been produced by the minjung in their struggles.

Here I need to emphasize that the minjung are relational entities. The minjung create history in cooperation with others, especially with intellectuals. The minjung align themselves with others for the common good. Minjung theology, however, views the minjung, not the intellectuals or any other sector of the society, as the protagonists in history. Is it a historical fact or just a religious belief? Many people argue that the minjung have never been the subjects and protagonists of history and that minjung theology's claim that the minjung are the subjects of history is false. I think the argument is correct. It appears that the minjung have never achieved the status of the master and protagonist in history. As I wrote above, the minjung have not been citizens in substantial terms. The minjung have been excluded from full participation in society. In their everyday life, the minjung are so immersed in the efforts for their survival that they cannot afford to participate in social issues with citizens' organizations. Minjung theology believes that the minjung must be the subjects of history. It is not a descriptive statement. It is an ought-to statement. The language of theology does not always present important aspects of reality according to their appearances. Rather, it often constructs a new reality. In a new society, the minjung together with others become the subjects of history. Otherwise, it is not new in a true sense. Thus, when minjung theologians consider the minjung as the subjects of history, as is shown in the subtitle of *Minjung Theology* published by Orbis Books, they do not mean that minjung are the subjects of history, in an exact meaning of the sentence. In history and society the minjung are isolated and oppressed. They could not be considered as the subjects of history. But, minjung theologians announce that the minjung are the subjects of history. To designate the minjung as the subjects of history is to speak of them in a futuristic perspective. Likewise, the minjung has been metaphorically referred to as "messiah" and suffering servant of God. Subjects of history, messiah, and suffering servant of God are metaphors for the minjung. Minjung theology uses metaphors in order to understand the minjung in a futuristic way. These metaphors allow the minjung to go over their present situation. I believe that the employment of

those metaphors for the minjung-talk is a more responsible way to account the most basic aspects of the reality of the minjung.²

3. The Nation: Now, I would like to introduce another important concept in relation to the minjung. That is the nation. As a small nation within the region of North-East Asia, the Korean nation has been invaded and occupied by neighboring powerful nations such as Japan and China. The division of the Korean Peninsula was decided by the superpowers after World War II and the Korean War. Although the Korean nation has suffered for a long time, within the nation the minjung have suffered more from both external (foreign) and internal rulers. Thus, minjung theologians like Ahn Byung-Mu stated that in Korean history there had not been the minjung but for the nation, and that the minjung had been veiled and overshadowed by the nation. He argued that the minjung, the suffering lower classes, are the core of the nation. Then, the destiny has to be decided and carried out by the minjung, not the national elite. In the history of the Korean nation, the destiny of the nation has been controlled and decided by the collaboration of external powers and internal elites.

Minjung theology must take up the problem of the nation as one of its core tasks. The nation faces ever growing military conflicts and nuclear crises in the Korean Peninsula. The modern empire, the U.S.A., tries to control both North and South Korea on its own terms. In such a situation, the issues and problems of the nation are directly connected to those of the minjung. Peace and the resolution of all conflicts surrounding the Korean Peninsula is most urgent. Minjung theology must promote peace and security in the Korean Peninsula, see to it that the past history of dependence on powerful neighbors cannot be repeated, and open up the age of peace and life in North East Asia. The commandment of Jesus for his disciples to become peace-makers also applies to the minjung.

4. The Others and Minorities: Current comparative terms for minjung are such terms as the “others” and “minorities”. The term “others” is being used among post-modernism thinkers in Korea for discussion on issues such as alienation and suffering in the modern world. Under the heavy influence of French and Western philosophy of post-modernism, whose political philosophy tends to emphasize a “radicalization of democracy.” The post-modern thinkers look into the problems of modern, liberal democracy that draws lines between normal and abnormal,

□I believe that one of tasks of theology is to aim at socially and intellectually “responsible accounts of the most basic and general aspects of reality.” I made use of a statement from an encyclopedia of philosophy, in which it is stated: “Philosophy aims at intellectually responsible accounts of the most basic and general aspects of reality.” Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 5, General Editor Edward Craig, (Longdon and New York: Routledge, 1998), 409.

legitimate and illegitimate, rational and irrational, inside and outside, and its problem of hardening the boundaries along the lines of classes, races, ethnicity, sexes, etc. In this way, the others and minorities are created. This way of looking at the problems of modernity helps sensitize us to the problem of otherness. The political goal of quite a number of postmodern thinkers is “to highlight continually various modes by which the cognitive machinery and institutions of existing democracy spawn otherness.”³ They are less concrete and less practical in their conception of the alternative society. All they want to do is to simply disrupt the present conditions of modern, liberal democracy. In most of the cases, they do not provide ideas for alternative structures. Furthermore, they are suspicious of any well-intended alternatives because they believe they also end up being oppressive and alienating. This sometimes makes them turn to socio-political conservatism.

As post-modernists argue, there have always been minorities, others, or strangers in society. But these terms do not help identify who they are. These minorities may be migrant workers from other countries, Korean Chinese in Korea, women, children, and other social groups with different backgrounds. But it seems hard to identify the minorities or the others with the minjung. The minjung denotes the multitudes and ordinary people who are in a position of being governed and sometimes being oppressed by the powerful. Minorities are mostly governed and oppressed, too. But, whereas minorities, by the meaning of the term, remain playing minor roles in society, the minjung are to play the major role in society and history. At least we minjung theologians cannot but think the minjung must be seen as the subjects of history, and view the whole reality from the perspective of the minjung being the subjects of history and society. Also, when it comes to the others and minorities, they by their literal meanings are rather inactive in history and society. By employing the terms of minorities and others, I am afraid that we may lose the progressiveness and pro-activeness of the minjung in history. We may, however, be able to imagine by employing these terms a society where these minorities and others are the subjects and protagonists. But that is at best just imagination. What I want to emphasize is that we cannot talk about history and society in a transformative and progressive way only with the terms of the minorities and others. We need more a historically and culturally loaded term which also has utopian vision in its meaning and helps easily identify them in our times. For the Korean context, the minjung are more suitable and of service to our purpose than nation, proletariat, citizens, minorities, and the others. In this sense, the idea of minjung and the theology of minjung are not obsolete and out-dated. They are viable and usable today.

³Here, I employ the idea of postmodernism introduced in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 7, General Editor Edward Craig, (Longdon and New York: Routledge, 1998), 591.

II. The Goals and Basic Strategies of Minjung Theology

Minjung theology has the goal of contributing to the minjung in their efforts at becoming the subjects of history. So then, minjung theology participates in the liberating actions of the minjung. In reality, however, the minjung are mostly inactive and kept in the bondage of everyday survival games. The minjung are kept under surveillance and controlled in a very subtle but inhuman manner by the institutions of liberal democracy. Minjung theology contributes to their liberation from such oppressive conditions and help them become the subjects of history and the carriers of substantial democracy where the minjung are participatory actors and decide on both the destiny of their own lives and that of the society as a whole. Minjung theology is a practical theory that reflects on and promotes minjung movement. Minjung theology is a practical theology that reflects on the minjung movement in the tradition of the movement of the historical Jesus. If the minjung theologian would employ the movement of the historical Jesus, which is told in the New Testament especially in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, as a prototype of the minjung movement and review the current minjung movement from the viewpoint of the will, activities and faith of Jesus, what is the role of the rest of the Bible for minjung theology? Jesus inherited the liberating aspects of the Old Testament tradition and furthered them to be more humane and liberating, but rejected or corrected misunderstandings of the Old Testament writings regarding the God of Jesus. We may well say that Jesus had inherited the God of his forefathers and foremothers of the Old Testament and transformed it into a God of love, justice and peace in a radical way. There have been innumerable theologically solid statements about the love, justice and peace in and of God. So it is at most a repetition, if I discuss again about the God of Jesus.

But as a practical theologian, I need to be more specific about our situation and justify the need for theological answers to that. In fact, we live in a time when the serious dilemmas and queries of our situation provoke us to search for theological answers or even Christian answers. In our world and times science and technologies are highly advanced and developed. The material and physical development advances far faster than spiritual and mental development. Humanity needs to be newly spiritualized, reawakened and newly conscientized. Otherwise, humanity cannot intervene and prevent the violent nature of the global capitalism. It is a world of violence. Ever more dangerous instruments are now in the hands of the human being. The global powers compete with one another and roam around to snare victims, impose all blame on them, and to destroy them. North Korea and also South Korea may become the victims of the competition among the powerful empires and nations. In a world where the search for scapegoats goes on in order to maintain peace and prosperity which are always

vulnerable to competitions and rivalries among the powerful nations and groups, the weak nation like Korea can be in danger of becoming a scapegoat.⁴ The survival and self-reliance of the nation emerges as a top priority today.

The Learning Process of the Minjung. This violent situation of the world intensifies when it comes to the Korean Peninsula. As is mentioned above, the Korean Peninsula is surrounded by very powerful nations such as the U.S.A., Japan, China, and Russia. Now, it is again the minjung who are to emerge as the messiah or the subjects of history. The most realistic way for overcoming the powers that seek to sacrifice the weak nation and people is taught in the Gospel of Mark: “Prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight” (Mk 1:3). The minjung would not automatically assume the role of the messiah. The minjung go through the learning process. In history we can see that an authentic minjung movement always has gone through a learning process. The *Donghak* Religion in the late 19th century, a late period of the Korean Dynasty, for example, provided this process for the *Donghak* peasants. The minjung must be awakened to the new historical mission, and then they can become the subjects of history. The awakening of the intellectual elite is not enough. The paths of the history dictated by the powerful can be changed by the power of the minjung, the multitude of the people. It was the *Donghak* minjung who struggled for the liberation of the nation from foreign domination and for the change of the corrupt and inert late Korean Dynasty. The *Donghak* thought, (literally Eastern Learning), was a minjung theology that integrates into itself Korean traditional religions and thoughts such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism in a way that corresponds to its times and social-political context. If minjung theology is to initiate the learning process for the minjung, it must be a theology that articulates and discerns signs and tasks of our times from the perspective of the Biblical tradition and the minjung traditions.

Now, as for the learning process of the minjung, I would like to explore more into the historical experience of the minjung during the 1970’s and the 1980’s. The minjung theology emerged at a time when Korea was dictated by the military governments. The authoritarian military governments carried out economic development plans at the expense of intolerable sufferings of the minjung. The labor movement by industrial workers took its root within the society; it became an insurmountable phenomenon and the political powers oppressed it but in the long run it failed. The labor movement at that time was supported by the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM).

Hundreds of thousand of young men and women, boys and girls, were drawn from poor rural families into urban industrial areas by the government economic policies. They were simply country boys and girls who had been more accustomed to rural life. Gradually they

⁴About the victimization process, refer to Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

began to realize the miserable conditions of labor and living in industrial areas. The UIM invited these young people to group activities such as sing-along, classes for labor laws, worship, and Bible studies. Those who participated in those activities became more critical of the conditions they were in. These workers became heroines and heroes in history through voluntarily taking the risk of enormous suffering for their struggles for justice and democracy.

After two decades of the labor movement, they often say that the industrial workers' movement including the UIM was a learning process. The minjung movement of the 1970's and the 1980's provided a significant context of learning process for the ordinary workers and the poor who could not otherwise have gone through the process of learning how to construct and live out democracy and participation in society as a whole. The minjung movement of that period transformed inert masses into active subjects of history and society. The minjung movement contributed to the construction of democracy; it transformed the underclass people into active citizens. In fact, there are many stories about the former industrial worker activists who are still participating and playing important roles in many different areas of concerns in the society. The minjung movement has the educational element as the most crucial. Through the learning process a new minjung emerge and a new person is created.

The Source of the Learning Process. The minjung theology is closely connected with the minjung movement and must contribute to the learning process of the minjung. Then, what is the ultimate source of the learning process of the minjung? If the minjung do not experience the learning process, a process of learning a different authentic way of life for justice, peace and life, they simply remain as passive masses submerging in, and following this capitalistic and competitive society. The ultimate source for the learning, we minjung theologians believe, comes from Jesus, who embodied the mind and will of God. In fact, Jesus represents a most strong alternative to this capitalistic, violent, life-negating world. Also, we, minjung theologians believe that there have been rich sources for learning in Asian and Korean traditions and religions, much of which may well be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit that apparently had come and worked in Asia long before Christianity was introduced to Asia by Western missionaries.

A theology must not be like other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and other human sciences. It must have its distinct feature. Otherwise, it can be submerged into other disciplinary discourses and finally disappear. Minjung theology employs many other disciplines. It is distinct in that it draws upon the deep wisdom in Jesus and the Bible and the Asian spiritual sources, and creates a critical dialogue between these sources and our current social-political-spiritual problems. Also, among the sources, Biblical and Asian, we need to create dialogue in order to reach a new understanding of these spiritual sources. "Beyond Dialogue to Learning from Each Other" is our catchword in this regard. Because of Asian traditions and religions,

minjung theology has an aspect of a theology of culture.

However, it does not remain a theology of culture. It aspires to be a political theology. It draws upon our culture in order to critique the current world. It does not remain simply a political theology, which analyzes and brings into light political functions of theological discourses. It aspires to be a direct social and political thought for our society. This idea came out when I came to a dialogue with the Juche Thought of North Korea. The most impressive aspect of the Juche Thought is that it maintains depth and width as a political thought to lead the North Korean society. The Thought of Juche, whose literal meaning is self-reliance, is a political ideology that guides the people who aspire to independence from the intervention and invasion from outside powers and to the construction of self-reliant and developed political-economic systems in North Korea. It is, to a great extent, a holistic political thought. One of the recent phenomena in minjung theology is that the latter stays away from being involved in politics, ironically focusing more on cultural matters.

In the 1970's and the 1980's, the minjung theology was a social-political thought that led the people in the direction toward a realization of democracy and human rights. It was a leading social and political thought that affects other intellectual and cultural disciplines and thoughts as well as the society as a whole. Minjung theology seems to have become a small talk and a narrow discourse. We have to make every effort to recover the comprehensive and holistic aspect of minjung theology.

However, our world has become more complex and complicated. It seems not possible to think out a unifying and comprehensive social-political thought. But the minjung theology aspires to become an open-ended political ideology or thought that may be possibly able to lead the people and the society as a whole. If these requirements are to be satisfied, the minjung theology has to be a name that incorporates a bunch of different theologies. In this sense, minjung theology is a theological movement. It incorporates and brings into solidarity different theologies. These theologies may be different in their particular emphasis and areas. One may be more cultural and traditional, and the other may be more political and social. But, these theologies have the same goal: the restoration of the subject-hood or subjectivity of the ordinary people in history, culture, and society. Minjung theology, therefore, demands those theologies that regard themselves within the boundary of the minjung theology to be more aware of their direct task: the liberation and subject-hood of the minjung in today's social and political situation.

III. Concluding Remarks

I would like to make some concluding statements that I hope may well bring into light what I have discussed in the above. The minjung are historical entities; they cannot be identified

by a certain definition. But the term minjung is closely related to such terms as the proletariat, nation, citizen, minorities, and the others. In fact, it is not wrong to say that minjung is proletariat, nation, citizen, minorities, and the others. Minjung may be all these. But each of these terms by itself is not able to cover the whole meaning of the minjung. They express certain aspects of the minjung, but do not cover the whole meaning that the minjung could carry. In various phases of history, the minjung emerge as historical entities that reveal, in each of the historical phases, more predominantly the characteristic of the proletariat, the nation, the citizens, the minorities, or simply the others.⁵ The minjung are those who have demonstrated as historical actors themselves by carrying out historical missions in different phases of history. Thus, the minjung can be understood in connection with historical circumstances. The constant factor is that the minjung have been always powerless and suffering, and at the same time, they have the historical mission to become historical subjects. In this sense, the minjung is an eschatological being. They are not yet the subjects of history, but have already become the subjects of history. Eschatology is an important element in minjung theology as much as in the message of Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Another suggestion this paper is making is that minjung theology can be seen as an overarching theological movement that incorporates different theological efforts and works into a certain direction and solidarity. There cannot be one minjung theology. There cannot be the minjung theology. Or, there is no such thing as an orthodox (the doctrinally right) minjung theology. But minjung theology cannot be without some integral elements, without which it would be difficult to call it minjung theology. What are these elements that may give the epithet minjung to a theology? We may innumerate many. In this paper, I tried to be minimal in defining minjung theology. I suggest in this paper that contributing to the increase of the subject-hood of the minjung in history and society be the most integral element for a minjung theology. This element is intrinsically political and makes the project of minjung theology political. In this sense, minjung theology is a political theology and must be a political theology.

As mentioned above, minjung theology should not have a narrow perspective. Its analysis should reach the social-political-economic-cultural reality of society. It is also a historical and public theology. It has impacted on the transforming process of the society. It must continue to do it, as a leading political thought in our society.

⁵ I discussed before the different characteristics the minjung assumed in different phases in the Korea history. Refer to Kwon, Jin Kwan, "A Survey on the History of Minjung Theology—Centered on Its Main Characteristics" *A Historical Survey of Korean Theology* (Ewha Women's University Press, 2003).