A Quest for Intercultural Theology: Converging Faith and Culture in Minjung Theology

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Abstract

This paper aims to define the principles of converging faith and culture in *minjung* theology as a quest for intercultural theology. To do this, the paper raises the question of how faith and culture can meet each other without violating each other's identity. To address this question, I will use the experience of the United Church of Canada's global partner, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and Suh Nam-dong's *minjung* theology as a theological approach to the process of converging faith and culture. To begin, I will identify two major theological paradigm shifts from the experience of Korean Protestantism, specifically the PROK's birth and the development of *minjung* theology. Then, I will present and critique Suh Nam-dong's model of converging faith and culture. Finally, I will propose Suh's model as a contribution to the quest

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for intercultural theology. In the convergence, there is no attempt to violate each other's identity; both traditions are maintained and mutually enriched.

Keywords

intercultural theology, *minjung* theology, *Han* (恨), Kim Chai-choon, Suh Nam-dong, *missio Dei*

I. Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing the church today is how the Christian faith creates and maintains just relationships with other cultures in this richly diverse world. How do Christians respect and celebrate the world's different faiths and cultures? These questions invite me to engage in the quest for intercultural theology. However, according to Volker Küster, intercultural theology is one of the emerging theologies, along with postcolonial, migration, pentecostal and diaspora mission theologies and its neologism indicates it is relatively new.[1] Even though it has been discussed since the mid-1970s in the book series "Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity" published by Peter Lang and in the form of contextual theology, it is a new theology to us, especially in the contexts of Korea and Canada.[2]

In Canada, the United Church of Canada (UCC) declared that the "church must be intercultural" in its 39th General Council (2006). Yet, we are still in the early stage of developing intercultural theology. When the vision of an intercultural church was presented during the General Council meeting, one of the presenters used the metaphor of a "salad bowl" to describe its intercultural vision of the church. "There is a mixing up or a gathering of various and diverse cultures, each retaining its own colour and striving for unity and harmony like a rainbow in the sky."[3]

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1 Volker Küster, "Intercultural Theology," in *Emerging Theologies from Global South*, ed. Mitri Rehab and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 52-65.

2 Werner Ustorf, "The Cultural Origins of 'Intercultural' Theology," in *Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes*, eds. Mark J. Cartledge and David Cheetham (London: SCM Press, 2011), 12.

The image of a salad bowl is similar to that of the "Canadian mosaic," which has been a key metaphor for Canadian multiculturalism since the 1970s. The metaphor of a salad bowl has the attraction that, since each culture keeps its distinct values, there is no forced merger into a "metropolitan centre."[4] However, the salad bowl metaphor sounds static and does not suggest what happens with the mix: Is it only for show and then to be devoured? The salad bowl metaphor seems inadequate and may be misleading when used as an image of an "intercultural church" where participants would be invited to open up their boundaries and be freed of power differences to fulfil the church's vision.

According to Robert Schreiter, "intercultural" means "across cultural boundary."[5] This definition suggests that an intercultural church is a church that crosses cultural boundaries. The daring proposal made by the Ethnic Ministry Council (EMC) of the UCC is all the more meaningful because ethnic minorities are often considered powerless in Canadian society. In fact, in federal and provincial elections in Canada, there were a fair number of ethnic minority candidates, but few were elected. Out of their sense of the vulnerability of ethnic minorities, the EMC challenged not only the church as a whole but, in particular, culturally Anglo-European congregations to open themselves up to those of other cultures and to cross traditional cultural boundaries to achieve the vi-

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3 Jeff Cook, "Church Must Be Intercultural," the 39th General Council News (August 15, 2006).

4 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 9.

5 Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 29.

sion of an intercultural church.

In the context of emerging theology in general and the UCC's vision of becoming an intercultural church in particular, the question addressed in this paper is, when the Christian faith crosses boundaries to meet other faiths and cultures, how can cultures meet without violating one or the other's identity? My purpose here is to contribute to the development of intercultural theology to serve the vision of becoming an intercultural church where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all people, regardless of racial and cultural differences, in the church's total life, mission and practice of ministry. To do this, I will employ the experience of the UCC's global partner, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) and Suh Nam-dong's *minjung* theology as a theological approach to the process of converging faith and culture.

To begin with, I will identify two major theological paradigm shifts from the experience of Korean Protestantism, namely the birth of the PROK and the development of *minjung* theology. Then, I will present and critique Suh's model of converging faith and culture. Finally, I will propose Suh's model as a contribution to the quest for intercultural theology.

II. Theological Paradigm Shifts in Korean Protestantism

Both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches began in Korea

through the faith and work of Korean people. The Catholic Church in Korea marks its beginning in 1784 CE, the year of the baptism of Lee Seng-hoon. Lee went to Beijing in China and learned about the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church through the Jesuit scholars there and was baptized in 1784.[6] The Protestant Church in Korea marks 1876 CE as its beginning. In that year, four young Koreans were baptized in Manchuria and they began translating the Bible from Chinese into Korean. The Korean language translation of the Gospel of Luke was widely distributed by Korean laypeople as a part of their evangelical work.[7] Thus, the beginning of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches had Korean roots since Christianity in Korea was introduced by Korean people. But in the case of the Protestant Church, soon after its indigenous beginning, American missionaries came to Korea and started to spread their own conservative theologies, establishing the hierarchal relationships common to their churches at the time and thus, generally, an American church colonial culture.[8] I will describe how the Korean church responded to this imperialistic approach to the Korean culture in what I define as the first and second paradigm shifts in Korean Protestantism.

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6 Kim Young-bock, *Messiah and Minjung: Christ's Solidarity with the People for New Life* (Kowloon: Christian Conference of Asia, 1992), 164.

7 PROK, *Key Documents of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea* (Seoul: PROK, 1987), 7.

8 Lee Man-youl, "Early 19th Century the Formation of the National Consciousness in Christians," in *Korean Christianity and National Movement* (Seoul: Bosung, 1986), 45.

1. The First Paradigm Shift in Korean Protestantism: The Birth of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (1950s~1960s)

The Protestant theologian Kim Chai-choon (1901~1987)[9] tried hard "to break the rigidity, exclusivism and sectarianism of Protestantism [in Korea], which had been greatly influenced by the fundamentalist conservative missionaries from America, in order to create freedom for both the church and theology."[10] Kim was especially concerned about the imperialistic approach of the mission called the "Nevius method" introduced to Korea in the early 1890s because the "missionaries wanted to control church leadership and hold power over theological education for church leaders. They did not allow Korean leaders to be educated to the same level as the missionaries."[11]

Against this background, Chosun Theological Seminary was established in Seoul in 1939 by Kim Chai-choon and others who shared his vision to educate Korean church leaders for Korean churches. Kim states the principles of the seminary as: "To educate students to be world leaders, … to employ critical methods in biblical studies, … to do theology

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9 Kim Chai-choon studied Old Testament at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey (1928) and the Western Seminary of Pittsburgh (1929-1932) and taught at *Chosun Theological Seminary* (1939-1965). He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Union College in British Columbia in 1958.

10 Kim Kyoung-jae, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions: Method of Correlation, Fusion of Horizons and Paradigm Shifts in the Korean Grafting Process* (Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1994), 128.

11 Kim Chai-choon, "On Open Letter" (1948), in *The Life and Theology of Changgong, Kim Chai Choon*, ed. Hwang, Sung Kyu (Seoul: Hanshin University Press, 2005), 52.

that would constructively reflect upon the reality of Korean churches and to vitalize faith and Christian virtues."[12] We hear his passion for educating Korean church leaders and developing a Korean theology based on biblical criticism and Korean culture.

However, disputes arose over Kim's teaching, especially of his new scholarly understanding of the Bible and biblical criticism. When he taught, for example, about the stories of the birth of Jesus in the Bible, he criticized the traditional understanding of a "prediction-fulfilment formula" taught by the missionaries. At the 36th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Korea held in 1951 during the Korean War(1950~1953), Chosun Theological Seminary lost its recognition as a theological school governed by the General Assembly and Kim and William Scott[13] were both expelled from the General Assembly.

Kim did not submit to the decision and action of the General Assembly. Furthermore, other ministers and lay leaders who believed that there was truth in what he was teaching joined him in rejecting the discipline of the church. On 10 June 1953, the dissenting ministers and supportive laity met in the auditorium of the former Chosun Theological Seminary and held the 38th General Assembly in Defence of the Constitution. This marks the birth of the PROK. I define this birth of the PROK as the first theological paradigm shift in Korean Protestantism be-

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12 Kim Chai-choon, "On Open Letter" (1948), 54.

13 See my articles for William Scott's theological background and ministry in Korea. Hyuk Cho, "Partnership in Mission: William Scott's Ministry in Korea," *Touchstone* vol. 31, no. 1 (February 2013): 57-66 and Hyuk Cho, "O Korea, You will be a Shining Light To All the East": A Study of William Scott's Theological Background and His Ministry in Korea," *Theological Studies* 83 (2023): 327-362.

cause, after this incident, the Korean Protestant church began to develop its own theology based on the Korean context.

Based on its founding principles, Chosun Theological Seminary and Kim Chai-choon set out to develop a Korean theology and the missiological concept of participation in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) at the very time when Korean society was suffering from the aftereffects of the Korean War and the beginnings of a series of military dictatorships and American imperialism. In the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, the new seminary, now named Hanshin (韓神), meaning Korean faith, produced many leaders in progressive theology and, in particular, *minjung* theology. In this first theological paradigm shift, there was already an embryo of the second theological paradigm shift, which, I suggest, happened about 20 years later.

The first theological paradigm shift began in 1953 with the birth of the PROK. Kim, who was deeply influenced by Richard Niebuhr, translated his *Christ and Culture* into Korean and took Niebuhr's "transforming Christ" as a model for his theology in the context of Korean culture.[14] In 1956, Kim stated his new thinking and his view of Korean history and culture in an article titled "The Historical Significance of the PROK."

> Now, we are given Korea as our material. God has assigned us the task of transforming salvation history within Korea and changing it into the history of Christ's heaven. … Therefore, we must do our best and be responsible for reflecting the spirit of Christ in Korean politics, economics,

14 Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture* in 1951 and Kim Chai-choon translated it into Korean in 1958.

education and culture.[15]

Kim saw Korean culture positively, not as a culture needing to be destroyed by the Gospel, as was the general notion taught by the missionaries, but as the locus of transformation into God's Kingdom. Kim's vision for the PROK reminds me of Peter Schineller's images of inculturation.[16] If we apply Schineller's images of inculturation to Kim's vision for the new church, the gospel acts as "salt" to preserve Korean culture, a "leaven" to transform Korean culture, being "plant[ed]" by Korean people and the "seed" to grow on Korean soil. Thus, the role of the PROK would be to inculturate Korean theology to transform every part of Korean society.

About 10 years after the article referred to above, Kim expressed his perspective on other religions in Korea. In 1965, Kim wrote an important article called "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions," the same year the Roman Catholic Church made a paradigm shift in its attitudes toward other religions through the Second Vatican Council (1962~1965). In his article, Kim sees Korean culture as God's word (logos, 語), not the devil's. He says,

> It has been 1500 years since we adopted foreign religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity into Korea. Whether we like it or not, these religions have had a profound influence in forming our

15 Kim Chai-choon, "The Historical Significance of the PROK" (1956), 95.

16 Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990), 24-27.

> characters and overall social life.... It is more reasonable to see other religions as the fragmentary word [*logos*] of God, created by the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than as the devil's product.[17]

Kim affirms Korean culture as it is and respects other religions as they are. Here, I see Kim's position on other religions as very similar to Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian."[18] Rahner believes if one follows one's religion, one attains salvation and lives in the grace of God regardless of knowing Jesus Christ. As Rahner affirms other religions, Kim also affirms other religions rooted in Korean culture.

When Kim puts a positive perspective on other religions, he takes aim at the prevailing American conservative Protestant perspective on Korean culture, which is deeply shaped by the historical cultures of ancient religions and the other religions themselves. For Kim, religious and cultural imperialism is very problematic in building God's Kingdom in the midst of Korean culture. He says in the same article:

> The early [American] missionaries ... thought that Korean culture had no value but was a product of the devil. They attempted to destroy it as a whole. They considered Buddhist statues on the Buddhist altars as idols and the practice of Confucian rituals of "ancestor worship" as forms of idolatry and tried to destroy them. They did not realize that

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17 Kim Chai-choon, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions" (1965), 248-250.

18 Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religion," in *Theological Investigation*, translated by Karl-H. Kruger, volume V (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 131.

> "worship- ing" the ancestors was an expression of respect for them and consistent with a holistic view of all life and a respect derived from "filial devotion," the foundation of Confucian ethics. This attitude became a stumbling block on the road toward evangelizing Korea.[19]

Kim contends that the American missionaries' imperialistic approach to Korean culture and other religions is wrong. Kim strongly opposes not only the cultural imperialism of the missionary conquering spirit but also the non-democratic dictatorships by successive Korean governments upheld by the established conservative denominations in Korea and the U.S. military policies.

The first paradigm shift in Korean Protestant theology challenged conservative theologies' understanding of Korean culture as inferior. Kim Chai-choon was a critic of conservative theologies and their attitude towards Korean culture. With this new theological paradigm, Kim began to do theology from the eyes and hearts of Korean culture and became deeply involved in the democratic movement of Korea, even in Canada, in the 70s and 80s.[20]

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19 Kim Chai-choon, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions" (1965), 249.

20 In Korea, Kim participated in the pro-democracy movement against President Park Chung-hee and encouraged Christians to participate in the campaign against Park's dictatorship. After settling in Toronto, Canada, in 1974, he founded the Toronto Korean Council for the Construction of a Democratic Society with his son-in-law, the Rev. Dr. Lee Sang-cheol, then the minister of Toronto Korean United Church, to oppose the military dictatorship and struggle for democracy in Korea.

2. The Second Paradigm Shift of Korean Protestantism: The Birth of *Minjung* Theology (1970s~1980s)

Minjung theology grew out of Korean Christians' theological reflections on the resistance to the unjust military dictatorships of the 1970s and 80s. Under these dictatorships, Christians sought to witness the people's suffering and respond faithfully to the oppression in the Korean political milieu. The reality of their experience challenged them to read the Bible critically, to study their Christian history and to enter into Korean culture through the eyes of the oppressed *minjung*. The definition of *minjung* (民衆) varies according to scholars, but here, the *minjung* are the people who are politically oppressed, culturally alienated and economically exploited. Through this struggle, Korean Christians came to know the "*minjung*" as the subject of history and also of theology.[21] The approach of *minjung* theology differs from that of orthodox theology. Korean Christians did *minjung* theology, not from above, but from below, from the experience of the oppressed *minjung*.

In this second Korean Protestant paradigm shift, I present Suh Nam-dong's (1918~1984) *minjung* theology in the light of faith and culture.[22] In Korean theological circles, his nickname was "the antenna

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21 Suh Nam-dong, *A Study of Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1983), 53; The Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subject of History*, revised ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 160.

22 Suh Nam-dong studied at Doshisha University, Japan (1941) and Emmanuel College, Canada (1956). Between studies, he served Korean Presbyterian churches in Korea for ten years. He taught at *Hanshin University* (1952~1962) and Yonsei University (1962~1975). He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Victoria

of the Korean theological world."[23] In his first book, *Theology at a Turning Point*, he wrestled with the theology he encountered in Bonhoeffer's secular theology(1965), Altizer's death of God theology(1966) and Moltmann's theology of hope(1968). From 1969 to 1974, he immersed himself in studying the theology of science, especially Ecotheology.[24]

Next, Suh set out to radicalize his theology in *minjung* theology.[25] He believed a genuine attitude toward doing theology required that the theology echo the suffering of the *minjung*. When he was involved in the Korean *minjung* movement, he was dismissed from his professorship at Yonsei University and, in 1975, imprisoned because he defied the military dictatorship. Suh developed his theology in prison and on the street, not in the library or classrooms.

Suh understands that traditional Christian theologies have treated "sin" as the major obstacle to human salvation. However, in the Korean context, Suh believes that the "*han*" of the *minjung* is the major problem. Suh says, "*Han* (恨) is an accumulation of suppressed and condensed experiences of oppression. Thus, accumulated *han* is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people."[26] *Han* is the experience of the Korean *minjung* individually and collectively. In the history of

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University of the University of Toronto in 1984 and died two months later in Korea.

23 Ryu Tong-shik, *The Vein of the Korean Theology: Introduction to the History of the Korean Theological Thought* (Seoul: Chunmangsa, 1982), 317-321.

24 During this time, Suh published seven articles on Ecotheology.

25 Suh Nam-dong, *Theology at a Turning Point* (Seoul: Korea Theological Institute, 1974), 8.

26 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 100; *Minjung Theology*, 64.

Korea, sin was often used by the rulers to accuse and control the poor and the powerless. In Jesus' time, the religious rulers labelled the people as sinners and crucified Jesus as a sinner. "The condemnation of sin, in the perspective of sociology, is often applied by the rulers to the powerless and the opponent, but applying sin without social analysis is against the intention of the Bible."[27] Thus, Suh refuses to interpret the concept of sin primarily from a religious perspective. He does not say that human beings are without sin in their relationship with God. His point is that we need to focus on the socio-economic and political dimensions lying behind the concept of sin. Therefore, Suh says that, before we mention sin, we first should speak about *han*. Sin is the language of the rulers and *han* is the language of the *minjung*.[28] He concludes that the subject of *minjung* theology is to resolve the *han* of the *minjung* rather than the problem of sin.[29]

How does Suh's *minjung* theology resolve the problem of *han*? Since the resolution of *han* is different from the concepts of forgiveness of sin or salvation in western theologies, *han* cannot be resolved without justice. As long as injustice exists, *han* cannot be resolved. Further, the unjust system creates han; without changing the system, *han* cannot be eradicated from the wounded heart of the *minjung*. Suh says, "*dan* (斷)" —cutting off— is how to resolve *han*. There are two dimensions of achieving *dan*: self-denial or casting out the temptation of selfishness and comfort at a personal level and curtailing the vicious circle of revenge at

27 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 106-107.

28 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 106-107, 243-244.

29 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 243.

a communal level.[30] Suh learned about the dialectic of *han* and *dan* from the poet Kim Chi-ha's story of "Chang Il-dam": "People's *han* and rage ought to be liberated from its masochistic exercise to be a great and fervent clamour asking for God's justice."[31] In Kim's Catholic faith and his story of "Chang Il-dam," Suh identified a model of converging faith and culture and applied Kim's way of resolving *han* to his own *minjung* theology. To achieve God's justice, Suh dialogues with the Korean religion, *Chon-do-kyo* (天道教), meaning Heavenly Way, which was the basis of Kim's thought.[32] According to *Chon-do-kyo*, *han* is resolved in four stages: "The first stage is *Shi-chun-ju*(侍天主): worshiping God in the heart. The second stage is *Yang-chun-ju*(養天主): nurturing God to grow in being. The third stage is *Haeng-chun-ju*(行天主): practising God's will. and the last stage is *Sang-chon-ju*(生天主): transcending death and living as a resurrected, enlightened, humble being."[33] Suh applied the concept and practice of *Chon-do-kyo* to his *minjung* theology. He believes justice is achieved in the process of experiencing God and living out God's vision for justice – the resolution of *han*.

What, then, is the role of the church in *minjung* theology? As Suh Nam-dong defines it, "The church ought to be the comforter to resolve the *han* of the *minjung* and to break the vicious circle of violence and

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30 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 103; *Minjung Theology*, 66.

31 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 103; *Minjung Theology*, 65.

32 *Chon-do-kyo* is a traditional religion of Korea in the early 20th century. The original name was "*Tonghak*"–the literal meaning is Eastern Learning and it was founded by Choi Jae-woo (1824~1964) and the name was changed to *Chon-do-kyo* in 1905 by Sohn Byung-hee, the third leader.

33 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 103.

to change it into a progressive movement."[34] The church's role is to embrace the *minjung*, listen to their *han*-ridden stories and act for them.

As mentioned above, Suh was dismissed from his professorship by the military government in 1975. After his release from prison in 1978, the PROK asked him to be the director of the Institute for Mission and Education of the PROK. It was not officially recognized as a seminary but became a place for the education of students expelled from Hanshin Theological College and other universities by the military government. It was there Suh developed his *minjung* theology. At the graduation ceremony of the Institute in the spring of 1979, Suh preached a sermon to the students who were about to go out to serve the church. The title was "The Priest of *Han*."

> We take on the best role of the priest in the *missio Dei*. This role is not blessing the violence of the ruling, rich class and anesthetizing the resistance for the survival of the oppressed. I hope you will be the "priest of *han* (恨)" … embracing the wounds of the [*minjung*] and being with them to recover from their bent self-identity, responding to their historical yearning, resolving the multi-layered *han* in their hearts and comforting them.[35]

Suh's image of the priest was not a traditional western one but that of the *mudang*. In Korea, the *mudang* is usually a woman, a priestess who

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34 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 101; *Minjung Theology*, 65.

35 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 43.

presides over rituals and practises shamanic dance. In Korean society, shamanism has been a folk religion of the *minjung* for more than two thousand years. Although the incoming western Christian missions condemned shamanism as superstition, it has been a traditional religion of the Korean *minjung* for more than two thousand years. Korean culture reflects shamanism because it is situated in the unconsciousness of the Korean *minjung*. Suh expresses his hope that future church leaders would live the 'role' of the "priest of *han*" in a particular situation of oppressive contexts against *minjung*. In other words, the church leaders are to be the *mudang* who resolve the *han* of the *minjung*.

Even though the PROK has been ordaining women since 1974, males still dominate the church and cultural systems. Women's roles in the church and society are still limited. However, as I reflect on Suh's *minjung* theology, I see that his role model of church leadership is not a priest but a priestess, the *mudang*. Suh challenges not only a male-dominated church but also the male-dominated cultural systems of his homeland.

The second paradigm shift in Korean Protestantism was from a theology of salvation from sin to a resolution of *han* as a way of liberating the *minjung*. Suh dialogued with native Korean religions, learned from them and developed *minjung* theology based on that understanding. Even though shamanism is considered a mere superstition, especially by many Korean Christians influenced by western Christianity, Suh developed his ecclesiology and the role of church leaders as the priests of *han* from shamanism. We find that Suh respected Korean culture and sought solutions within it; he did *minjung* theology from within Korean culture.

III. The Principles of Converging Faith and Culture in *Minjung* Theology

What lessons have we learned from these two paradigm shifts in the history of Korean Protestantism? Even though faith and culture sometimes sit against each other, in his *minjung* theology, Suh Nam-dong converged the Christian faith with Korean culture to resolve *han*. At this point, we revisit our initial questions: how does the Christian faith create and maintain just relationships with other cultures in this richly diverse world? How can faith and culture meet without violating each other's identity? How do Christians respect and celebrate different cultures throughout the world? To address these questions, I present and critique Suh's model of converging faith and culture.

In 1979, Suh published an important article, "Converging Two Stories,"[36] in which he developed his hermeneutics of *minjung* theology. The article is filled with inspirations from *minjung* theology, a model of the convergence of faith and culture. I hope this model will contribute to the development of intercultural theology.

Let us first listen to Suh's vision of the convergence of faith and culture.

> The task for Korean *minjung* theology is to testify that in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) in Korea, there is a 'convergence' of the *minjung* tradi-

36 The original title in 1979 was "*Minjung* Theology," but he changed the title to "Converging Two Stories" as he expanded it in 1983.

> tion in Christianity and the Korean *minjung* tradition. It is to participate and interpret theologically the events which we consider to be 'God's intervention' in history and the work of the Holy Spirit. To participate in and interpret these events, we need to maintain both traditions.[37]

The word 'convergence' is my translation of the Korean "합류 *hablyu*." I use the word and concept of convergence rather than confluence. When two things converge, they approach each other to come together while 'maintaining both traditions,' whereas when things are confluent, they merge to blend into one. In this understanding, the concept of convergence is more appropriate in our discussion of intercultural theology.

1. The First Principle: To be Rooted in the *Minjung* Traditions

Suh states that the task of *minjung* theology is to witness the convergence of faith (the Christian *minjung* tradition) and culture (the Korean *minjung* tradition). It seems like a large task to converge the two traditions. However, Suh finds common ground in the *minjung* traditions. For example, the Galilean and Korean people may meet beyond time and place in their *minjung* traditions. Transcending their differences in faith and culture, they meet in *missio Dei* for the liberation of the *minjung*.

Suh gives two examples of the *minjung* tradition in the Bible; the Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' Crucifixion in the New

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37 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 78; *Minjung Theology*, 177.

Testament are the two key events in the liberation of the *minjung*. First, Suh says, "The event of the Exodus… is one paradigm for the theology of *minjung*."[38] According to Suh, the Korean church marks the March First Independence Movement of 1919 and the Liberation on 15 August 1945 from Japanese colonialism as events of God's liberation of the people, their exoduses, or in Korean, their *haebang* (解放), meaning liberation. However, Suh says the event of the Exodus has been spiritualized by the religious leaders as an ideology to maintain the status quo.[39] "[For] two thousand years, the Christian church has viewed the event of the Exodus as in the realm of religious ideas, thus ridding the event of its historical nucleus."[40]

The second example of *minjung* tradition in the Bible is Suh finds it in Jesus. Unlike Moses, Suh says, "Jesus was the very cry (aspiration) of the *minjung* themselves. In this sense, Jesus was truly one of the *minjung*, not just for the *minjung*. Therefore, Jesus was the personification of the *minjung* and their symbol."[41] Suh notes in particular that Jesus sought out the Galilee *minjung* (*ochlos*), called "sinners" by the ruling religious leaders of the time. He believes Jesus lived a life of "companion-in-resistance," and therefore the cross became unavoidable.[42] He un-

38 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 50; *Minjung Theology*, 158.

39 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 51; *Minjung Theology*, 158. The postcolonial feminist theologian Musa Dube also argues that the story of Exodus empowers the rulers to justify their imperialism. Dube says "The Exodus-Joshua story is an imperializing rhetoric because it is expressly focused on taking and maintaining power over foreign and inhabited lands." Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louise: Chalice Press, 2000), 70.

40 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 50; *Minjung Theology*, 158.

41 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 51, 187; *Minjung Theology*, 159.

derstands that Jesus was executed as a political offender. "The crucifixion is the peak in the process of struggle in which the *minjung* become the protagonists of their own history and destiny."[43] However, the cross lost its meaning and became understood as a religious symbol. Thus, Suh laments that the cross lost its historical nucleus in liberation.

Next, Suh explores the Korean *minjung* tradition in Korean history. Using the perspective of Korean *minjung* historians, he says,

> The *minjung* gradually liberate themselves from the position of being a historical object and become a historical subject. *Minjung* history and theology testify to the fact that the *minjung* overcome with their own power the external conditions which determine and confine them and become the subjects who determine their own social situation and destiny.[44]

Based on this understanding, Suh traces the genealogy of the *minjung* movement in Korea. He explains how *minjung* literature, art forms such as Korean opera (*pansori*) and mask dance and Maitreya Buddhism were developed to convey the corporate spirit of the *minjung* in the course of Korean history.[45] Suh concludes that all "bear witness to the inner power which made the *minjung* survive throughout history."[46]

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42 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 54; *Minjung Theology*, 161.

43 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 54; *Minjung Theology*, 161.

44 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 66; *Minjung Theology*, 169.

45 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 69-77; *Minjung Theology*, 172-177.

46 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 77; *Minjung Theology*, 177.

Uncovering the *minjung* traditions, for Suh, is a prerequisite for converging faith and culture. Suh understands that when faith meets culture, the faith *should* be founded on the "*minjung* tradition in Christianity." Faith founded on the *minjung* tradition moves forward to meet another culture. Why is it important that faith be founded on the *minjung* tradition? I will give two examples. In the first, Kim Chai-choon reminds us that when American conservative Christianity met Korean culture, that faith considered Korean culture of no value but a product of the devil.[47] Thus, when imperialistic Christian faith meets other cultures, that faith causes *han* to the people of that culture. In the second, Carl F. Starkloff tells a story he heard from an Indigenous person on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

> [The aboriginal man] pointed to the Wind River mountains and reminded me that Wind River and the Little Wind River flow from two different forks in the mountains, meandering separately across some thirty miles of the reservation land until they meet the town of Riverton and become simply the Wind River. "This is what I believe will happen with the Indian's religion [Little Wind River] and the white man's religion [Wind River]," [the aboriginal man said.][48]

This story reminds me that when western Christianity meets other cultures, it absorbs them; Western Christianity puts the other cultures in

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47 Kim Chai-choon, "An Understanding of Non-Christian Religions(1965)," 249.

48 Carl F. Starkloff, "The Problem of Syncretism in the Search for Inculturation," *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies* 1/1(1994), 83.

its substructure and swallows them up. When the church moves forward to become an "intercultural church," we must remember who we are as a faith community. We must reflect on our history to find the "*minjung* traditions" in our church and society. Only then can we meet other cultures. Otherwise, the church might cause "*han*" to the other when it crosses boundaries. This is the very harsh lesson we are learning from our experience of the "Indian residential schools"[49] in Canada.

Suh warns that faith *should not* add further to the *han* of the *minjung* of other cultures. The power of western Christianity is historically based on the colonial culture and the profit motive. In the UCC, Anglo-European congregations still retain power from the inherited colonial culture. Thus, when faith attempts to cross boundaries to meet other cultures, we should be aware of whether our faith tradition is rooted in

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49 In Canada, by the end of the nineteenth century, the churches' mission work provided an education for many Indigenous children, preparing them for Christian citizenship. Canada was a very young country at the time, not becoming a country until 1867 and politicians and church leaders wanted to build a new country like the ones they had left. In 1892, the government decided to support residential schools through a per capita grant for Indigenous students. The government fund supported 45 church–run residential schools across Canada in 1896. Owing to this relationship between church and government, church leaders supported the government's policy of assimilation and civilization of Indigenous children until the late 1960s. The government policy was designed to "move communities and eventually all Indigenous peoples, from their helpless 'savage' state to one of self-reliant 'civilization.'" To achieve this goal, the government thought that residential schools would make Indigenous people self-supporting members of the state and eventually citizens in good standing. The goals of Christianity and good citizenship called for close collaboration between church and state. The government was responsible for providing buildings, equipment and salaries for all forms of educational work. The churches were responsible for the maintenance of missionaries to give religious instruction. This close relationship enabled the long-term survival of the residential schools. As a result of the residential school system, the Indigenous peoples suffered the loss of their culture.

the *minjung* tradition or whether our attitude is still one of colonialism. The first principle for the convergence of faith and culture is to be rooted in the *minjung* tradition.

2. The Second Principle: To Participate in the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*)

Faith and culture converge in the participation of *missio Dei*. Here, we observe that the purpose of Suh's second principle is to prevent an imperialistic approach to the convergence of faith and culture. Even before he developed *minjung* theology, he was concerned that the theology of *missio Dei* was not practised in the Christianity brought to Korea. In 1968, he wrote an article called "Secularization of Christianity and Christian Faith," where he says, "Today Christianity means ritual(祭儀), system(制度) and ecclesiastical authority(教權). However, participation in *missio Dei*, which renews history and humanity, has disappeared in Korean Christianity."[50] He laments that Korean missiology and mission practice have lost their centre in *missio Dei*.

The concept of *missio Dei* was adopted in 1952 at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC), where the delegates affirmed that "mission … [is] derived from the very nature of God."[51] In the later development of the concept of *missio Dei*, it brought a paradigm shift in missiology, a theological change from a church-cen-

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50 Suh, *Theology at a Turning Point*, 242.

51 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

tred to a God-centred mission.[52] This paradigm shift, of course, was intended to influence the practice of the church's mission. Missiologist David Bosch says, "The primary purpose of the missionary activities of the church can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or saving of souls; rather, it has to be service to *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world."[53]

With the understanding that God's concern is for the entire world and God cares for all people in all aspects of their existence and cultures, Suh adopted the concept of *missio Dei* into his *minjung* theology. The theology of *missio Dei* plays the role of respecting other cultures as God's gifts and preventing the church's imperialist approach to other cultures. The second principle is to participate in the mission of God. In *missio Dei*, faith and culture meet without violating one or the other's identity.

3. Chun Tae-Il: An Embodiment of the Convergence of Faith and Culture

Suh claimed that the convergence of faith and culture had already happened on two occasions in the 1970s in Korea, once in the person of Chun Tae-il and again in the story of "Chang Il-dam."[54] Here is the

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52 WCC, *The Church of Others and The Church for the World* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967). For the evolution of the concept of *missio Dei*, see my article "Never-Ending Mission of God: The Evolution of the Concept of *Missio Dei* in Our Ever-Changing Landscape," *International Review of Mission* 113, no 1 (May 2024): 173-190.

53 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

54 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 78; *Minjung Theology*, 177.

story of Chun Tae-il. Chun worked in a garment sweatshop in the Peace Market in Seoul.[55] He immolated himself on 13 November 1970 at the age of 22 after witnessing the horrific treatment of young female co-workers who were forced to work for 15-16 hours a day with only two days off a month and on meagre wages. Chun assisted them fight for their rights, which was written into but not observed in the Labour Standards Law. He tried to fight the cold indifference of the state and the employers in an effort to improve the lives of all the exploited and oppressed *minjung*. However, the labourers' lives were not improved. He went to a church retreat centre on a mountain to wrestle with God and he stayed there for six months to pray and work. After four months at the centre and three months before his death, he wrote his affirmation of faith in his diary.[56]

> I have hesitated and agonized for a long time over this, but at this moment I have come to an absolute decision. I must go back, to be alongside my poor brothers and sisters to the heaven of my heart, to the young hearts at the Peace Market who are my whole life. The vow I have made in these long hours of contemplation: I have to protect those fragile lives. I will throw myself away. I will die for you. Be patient, wait only a little bit more. I will sacrifice myself so as not to leave you. You are the home of my heart. … God, have mercy on me. I am struggling to be the dew for countless withering innocent lives.[57]

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55 Suh, *A Study of Minjung Theology*, 78 and 223-224.

56 Cho Young-rae, *A Single Spark: The Biography of Chun Tae-il*, trans. Chun Soon-ok (Seoul: Dolbegae Publishers, 2004), 30.

Suh sees the *minjung* tradition in Christianity and the Korean *minjung* tradition converged in the person, life and work of Chun, a Christian *minjung* and a bearer of the Korean *minjung* tradition. This convergence became a spark for the *minjung* movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Out of this convergence, the Korean church began its industrial mission and theologians started to develop *minjung* theology. The Korean labour and democratic movements were organized and many people became involved in them. In the convergence, faith (the Christian *minjung* tradition) and culture (the Korean *minjung* tradition) experienced a deepening and widening of their horizons. The awakening life of Chun Tai-il mutually enriched the church and others. The church moved beyond its traditional boundaries to work with other faith communities and organizations and they, in turn, also realized that the church could be a companion in the Korean democratic movement. Through these two principles of being rooted in the *minjung* traditions and participating in *missio Dei*, faith and culture converged in action to liberate the *minjung* in Korea.

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57 Cho, *A Single Spark*, 253-254.

IV. A Quest for Intercultural Theology

How could this Korean model contribute to developing intercultural theology and the vision of becoming an "intercultural church"? Both Kim Chai-choon and Suh Nam-dong respected Korean culture as God's gift and did their theology within that culture, thus opposing the colonial and colonized churches' imperialistic faith and culture. I have come to realize that their theologies addressed the 'process of decolonizing' Korean faith and culture. This process created and nourished just relationships with other cultures in Korea.[58]

In the context of the colonizing process of the successive military governments supported by American imperialism, Suh declared that the goal of *minjung* theology was to liberate the *minjung* from *han*; his model is that of the convergence of faith and culture in the Christian and Korean *minjung* traditions. In doing so, he celebrated the different cultures found in Korean traditional and indigenous religions. He learned from them and located them in the centre of his *minjung* theology. Within the two principles of the *minjung* traditions and *missio Dei*, faith and culture meet without violating one another's identity or adding *han* to the other. I propose that this model of converging faith and culture be useful for developing intercultural theology. I hope this model will also contribute to interfaith dialogue.

In this endeavour, let us explore Suh Nam-dong's model of converging faith and culture and see the implications it has for becoming an in-

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58 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 219.

tercultural church. The first step is to discover the *minjung* in our society. Toward this discovery, Douglas John Hall offers a useful tool in his "Guidelines for Discerning the Times."[59]

> (a) Who are the victims of our society? (b) How is our society perceived and depicted by its own most reflective members? (c) How do the pursuits and values of our society compare with images of the human in our authoritative sources? (d) Within the corporate dialogue of the disciple community, what emerges as the problematic of our culture? [original italics]

The guidelines will reveal a cultural map of the *minjung* in our society and how they are depicted individually and collectively. Finding the *minjung* is the most important process in the convergence since the *minjung* perspective acts as a lens through which to see the *minjung* traditions.

The second step in Suh's model is to discern the *minjung* traditions in the faith and culture. Each community is invited to discover the reality of the biblical *minjung* in the context of their culture. This process means to read the Bible from the perspective of the *minjung*. In this process, the community may find the images, symbols, events and/ or stories in the Bible that reflect their *minjung* perspective. There will be continuity and similarity in socio-economic relations between the *minjung* in the Bible and each community. and then, each community is in-

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59 Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 134-141.

vited to trace the *minjung* traditions in its culture. This process means examining its history, literature and arts to identify its *minjung* traditions. Then, each community will be able to look at another community's culture from *minjung*'s perspective.

Once the community discovers and identifies the *minjung* traditions, Christian communities can meet other cultures by participating in *missio Dei*. When all the communities share their *minjung* traditions and participate in the mission of God for Christians, in that very action, faith and culture converge. When all people in this richly diverse society share their *minjung* traditions, all are enriched by each other. As a faith community, the UCC also needs to discern the history of its own tradition from the perspective of the *minjung*; is it a *minjung* tradition, an imperialistic tradition or some complex in-between? As a result of this process, the vision of an intercultural church reflecting intercultural theology will emerge.

V. Conclusion

I have explored how faith and culture may meet without violating each other's identity. My purpose is to contribute to the development of intercultural theology. I have drawn from the experience of the UCC's global partner, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea. The two theological paradigm shifts identified from the PROK's experience are: 1) affirming Korean culture as the logos instead of demonizing it from an American conservative Protestant perspective and 2) resolving

han as a means to liberate the *minjung* from a theology centered on salvation from sin.

Suh Nam-dong's model of converging faith and culture has been proposed as a contribution to the UCC's vision of becoming an intercultural church. The two principles of the convergence of faith and culture are 1) to be rooted in the *minjung* traditions and 2) to participate in missio Dei. In the convergence, there is no attempt to violate one another's identity, but both traditions are maintained and mutually enriched. Implications were drawn for a quest for intercultural theology. In my future studies, I will apply the model of convergence of faith and culture in the lives of the marginalized in Canada, especially in the areas of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and interfaith dialogue.

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