

# Theology of the Multitude: Between Suffering and Hope

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## Introduction

Good and relevant questions help construct a good and relevant theology. Questions provide a key to the understanding of the subject matters of a theology. That is, in order to reach a good answer or understanding, we must ask appropriate questions. The first and foremost question is: Is the theology of minjung (the multitude) still relevant today? In other words, can the theology of minjung (the multitude) create insight into today's situation and provide corrective contribution to the ministry of the church today? Another fundamental question is: Does minjung (the multitude) exist in such a significant way that talking of minjung (the multitude) is not only meaningful but necessary? I am employing the term the multitude here, because I believe that in the current situation it most expressly shows the characteristics of minjung. Hardt and Negri correctly argue that the concept of "the people" reduces social differences into one identity, while "the multitude, by contrast, is not unified but remains plural and multiple." In the postmodern pluralistic worldview, the term multitude represents minjung more adequately than people, nation, and the proletariat, which have often been used to explain who minjung are. The multitude not only values differences and singularities, but also values solidarity before the common enemy, Empire.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Refer to Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (N.Y., N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2004) pp. 99-100.

Some derivative questions can be thought of as follows. Can we justifiably say that we witness the action of God in the experiences of minjung (the multitude)? In other words, can we detect divine elements such as "revelations of God" or "Spiritual power" in the experiences of minjung (the multitude)? Can we define the experience of minjung (the multitude) in such way that we can detect wonders and spiritual power in the experience of minjung (the multitude)? Does the experience of the suffering of minjung (the multitude) give the minjung (the multitude) a special status in the economy of God?

Are there criteria by which we can distinguish minjung (the multitude) from non-minjung (the multitude)? Who are minjung (the multitude) and who are not minjung (the multitude)? We cannot tell minjung (the multitude) by their ontological structures but by their action and experience. Again, the point is whether our questions are appropriate and thus become a key to an appropriate and meaningful understanding of the subject matter of the theology of minjung (the multitude).

The theology of minjung (the multitude) is a reflection on the experience of minjung (the multitude). Minjung (the multitude) tell who they are by their experiences and by their actions as their subjects. Minjung (the multitude) are subjects. Minjung (the multitude) become minjung (the multitude) not by their existence but by their actions and experiences. Minjung (the multitude) become subjects in history as they act in history. Then our question is this: what kind of action (or more broadly speaking, what kind of experience) makes minjung (the multitude) actors and subjects in history? Minjung (the multitude) emerged in history as actors but in different consciousness in each different historical phase, because minjung (the multitude) have acted upon and transformed their different historical and social situations in different times and places. Amidst these differences there are, however, two constant elements in the experience of minjung (the multitude). They are suffering and hope. Minjung (the multitude) uphold and inflame the torch of hope in the midst of suffering. Minjung (the multitude) maintain hope while they suffer from their social, political, economic, and cultural alienations. Minjung (the multitude) is ontologically characterized by

suffering. Minjung (the multitude) are the suffering people. The structure of the experience of minjung (the multitude) includes suffering.

Minjung (the multitude) do not suffer passively only but also actively suffer. The latter points to the struggles and movements of minjung (the multitude). As minjung (the multitude) engage in the minjung movement, their suffering may be intensified. But in their intensified suffering in their struggles for liberation, minjung (the multitude) discover illuminating rays of hope. The social movement of minjung (the multitude) creates hope in minjung (the multitude). In this sense minjung movement has a divine element in it.

The subject matter of the theology of minjung (the multitude) is connected to the questions that we raise in seeking to construct a the theology of minjung (the multitude) for today. The main convictions of the theology of minjung (the multitude) are revealed as it tries to answer those questions. I would like to explain some major convictions of the theology of minjung (the multitude). The first is related to the question of who minjung (the multitude) are. Minjung (the multitude) are suffering beings. Minjung (the multitude) are suffering human and non-human beings. They cross border lines of nation, gender, race, and species. Thus, minjung (the multitude) are not limited to Korean people. The concept of minjung (the multitude) includes all suffering people in Asia and all other continents and nations. It also includes water, air, animals, plants and all ecologically suffering beings. The theology of minjung (the multitude) is not, however, submerged into the theology of ecology, because the theology of minjung (the multitude), unlike the latter, presupposes that suffering people are the carriers of history. It puts special emphasis on the subjective and conscious power of the suffering minjung (the multitude) capable of changing the course of history. The theology of minjung (the multitude) has its basic conviction that the all-encompassing life-destructive march of current history can only be stopped and reversed by the power of awakened suffering people. The theology of minjung (the multitude) presupposes that the suffering people, while not exclusive of other groups such as elites, must play the prime role of changing the current trend of environmental and

politico-socio-economic causes destroying the life of the world.

Here we are talking of suffering, not pain. The idea of pain does not comprise the whole meaning of suffering. Pain means the sensation of discomfort caused by physical and emotional disease and wounds. Pain is a derivative idea. I am using the term suffering to refer to the feeling aroused by the endurance of discomfort which is mainly caused by political and economic oppression. Pain can be relieved by taking medicines, and the cure of pain is prescribed and carried out by outsiders (experts like doctors). Social suffering can be overcome in a genuine sense when the sufferers overcome it by their own initiatives and powers.

Suffering can be increased as the sufferers engage in actions to overcome the situation. Such suffering is called a voluntary suffering. The Kingdom of God and a society of justice demand a voluntary suffering. Suffering, especially a voluntary one, is a key experience of minjung (the multitude). Hope is another key experience for minjung (the multitude); it is derived from suffering. Suffering is a primary experience of minjung (the multitude). In this sense resurrection cannot stand by itself, but it has its meaning only as a reality after the crucifixion and suffering. I think that the Apostle Paul understood it very well when he states in Romans, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (5:3-5)

Hope seems a divine experience. It seems divine because it arises out of the impossible. It betrays our ordinary experience and common sense. Something positive arises from something negative. It is hope against hope. Also, hope has a transcendent dimension. It allows us to see beyond the present. Minjung (the multitude) theologians encounter wonder when they discover hope and life rekindled in the life of the suffering creation.

In the Bible, it is witnessed that God has a special concern and care for the suffering people. The theology of minjung (the multitude) goes further to assert that the suffering people are the carriers of history and that it is the suffering minjung (the multitude) that have received a call to

the mission of God in history. The theology of minjung (the multitude) does not regard elite groups as the genuine carriers in God's history. The theology of minjung (the multitude) believes that suffering people are the genuine subjects of God's reign and that suffering minjung (the multitude) are the proprietors of God's history. Of course, there is no division between God's history and secular history in the actual world. The two belong to the same actual history, although the two represent different meanings of the same history. Then what is the destiny of the powerful sectors of society in God's history? Don't they have any positive place in God's history? They have a positive place in God's history only when they begin to participate in God's special concern and care for the suffering people.

Minjung (the multitude), however, are "weary and burdened" (Matt. 11:28), and rely for their life on their own bodies and manual labor. They are most vulnerable to natural disasters and social upheavals, because they lack means of self-protection such as property. If their bodies grow old and weak, they become helpless. The more helpless minjung (the multitude) are, the poorer and weaker they become, and the more vulnerable they are to physical diseases and natural disasters such as drought and floods, and environmental deteriorations.

Minjung (the multitude) inherit poverty from their forebears. Minjung (the multitude) most fear that they would hand down their poor destiny to their posterity. In the situation of the neo-liberal globalization, minjung (the multitude) are the first to become helpless and the degree of despair in minjung (the multitude)' s living is getting heightened. See the protest of casually and informally employed workers and their resulting despair. Global neo-liberalism hinders them from overcoming such a perennial and persistent fate. In this situation, the search of hope for minjung (the multitude) becomes a most vital issue not only in theology but also in actual social life.

Minjung movements are attempts to overcome the systems of the scapegoating of minjung (the multitude). Many scholars agree that the global neo-liberalism creates the sacrifice of scapegoats. The hope of minjung (the multitude) is revealed in the process of minjung movements.

Theology is a discipline that aims at the knowledge of God. The doctrine of God in the theology of minjung (the multitude) is not of theism or mono-theism or polytheism, but of trinitarianism. There can be different types of trinitarianism. The theology of minjung (the multitude) believes that there is an ultimate divinity, incarnated One (Christ) and the Spirit. The traditional Eastern mode of the thought on trinity is that there are three most fundamental divine beings: heaven, the spirit and the human being. In the Eastern mode of thought, heaven is parallel to God, the spirit to the Spirit, and human beings to the Christ. In the Eastern mode of thinking of divinity, human beings are thought of so highly that they are thought to assume the role of the Christ, the Son of God. It is very natural for minjung (the multitude) theologians to assert that minjung (the multitude) are the Messiah. According to the teachings of *Donghak* (the Eastern Learning), human beings (minjung (the multitude)) are the most spiritual of the world. Human beings (minjung (the multitude)) are the Sons and Daughters of God. God is dependent on minjung (the multitude); and minjung (the multitude) on God. In the eastern mode of thought, the world is made from the spirit (*Qi, Ki*). The world is spiritual. Even stones, dust and other natural beings are spiritual and precious; they must be treated as our brothers and sisters, according to Haewol, a spiritual leader of *Donghak* (the Eastern Learning). Heaven, the earth, and the human beings are one through the spirit (*Qi, Ki*). Heaven, God, is the most supreme spiritual being.

*Donghak* taught that if minjung (the multitude) hold on to the innate "God-given" mind and do not be shaken, and keep the spirit (*Qi, Ki*) uprightly (*sooshimjongki*, literally, keeping the mind unmoved and the spirit upright), everything will be done harmoniously and spontaneously (*muuihwa*). *Sooshimjongki* is the most important element in the teachings of *Donghak*. History can be transformed when the suffering minjung (the multitude) practice *sooshimjongki*. *Sooshimjongki* upholds minjung (the multitude) to be actors upon their own destiny and history. *Sooshimjongki* is a powerful spiritual force of minjung (the multitude). Soowoon, the founder of *Donghak*, realized this. Soowoon pronounced in the late 19th century (in the age of western imperialism) that the Western Learning (the doctrines of

Catholicism) was so ritual-entered and formalistic that it was futile and unable to infuse minjung (the multitude) with divine life-giving or life-organizing energy (*kihwachishin*) (Soowoon, *Nonhakmun*).<sup>2</sup> The *Donghak* religion is not juridical like Lutheranism, nor ritualistic like Catholicism. Rather, It is experiential and practical because it presupposes the active life-giving forces that organize the world and humans into full harmony and peace. Such life-giving divine energy is *kihwachishin*.<sup>3</sup> *Kihwachishin* is equivalent to *Ruach* or *Pneuma* in Judaic and Christian thought.

Minjung (the multitude) theologians cannot imagine a liberator or a savior who does not suffer. It is the suffering people that can save the world, the suffering fellow creatures. It is through the minjung movement that suffering creatures achieve their liberation. In this sense, God depends on minjung (the multitude) and vice versa. In practice, however, the former is truer than the latter. In actual history, God depends on Jesus, and later on the churches and the peoples (minjung (the multitude)). But in the actual history of Korea, Christian churches are getting less reliable in the "eyes" of God. Minjung (the multitude) and the minjung movement emerge as more dependable divine agents to carry out God's eschatological and liberative work (the Kingdom of God) in the world than the churches. The God who encountered Soowoon said to him, "I have been futile in my work before I meet you. Now I will be great because you will work for me and your mind is my mind."<sup>4</sup> Minjung (the multitude) starts a new history and God with a great design guides and supports minjung (the multitude).

We find a prototype of the minjung (the multitude) event or movement in the movement of the Kingdom of God by Jesus and his people. Jesus and his people were the most dependable and significant agency of God.

### Categories for The theology of minjung (the multitude)

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2 Choi Jeawoo, *Nonhakmun*, in *Ch'ondokyo-kyungjon* [The Scripture of the Heavenly Way Religion] (Seoul: Central Headquarter of Ch'ondokyo, 2001), p.31.

3 I follow the interpretation of *kihwachishin* given by *Donghak* scholars such as Choi Donghee and Lee Kyungwon. Refer their book, *Donghak Understood Newly* (Seoul: Jipmundang, 2003), p.233.

4 *Ch'ondokyo-kyungjon*, p.28 (*Nonhakmun*) and p.19 (*Podokmun*).

Having discussed some important aspects of the theology of minjung (the multitude) in the above, I now would like to suggest some important categories that I may use with to construct a the theology of minjung (the multitude) for today in a more cohesive way. I understand categories as concepts or ideas that would help to explain the subject matter that I want to explore. In this context, the subject matter is the theology of minjung (the multitude) for today. I will introduce some categories that I have tested to be useful for explaining my understanding of the theology of minjung (the multitude) for today.

### **Categories for Minjung (the multitude)**

It is presupposed that there can be categories for the understanding of minjung (the multitude). Some useful categories for understanding of minjung (the multitude) are: suffering, hope, history, social movement, event, concrescence (mutual growth, mutual living), and *Sooshimjongki*. Minjung (the multitude) are suffering but hopeful. In the actual life of minjung (the multitude), suffering is predominant over hope. Suffering may increase when minjung (the multitude) engage themselves in the minjung movement; but paradoxically hope increases in the movement. Minjung (the multitude) are protagonists of history, especially when they activate social movements for the change of historical orientation. In the life experiences of minjung (the multitude) concrescence of many factors takes place

### **Categories for The theology of minjung (the multitude)**

I would like to suggest some categories that would help construct an authentic the theology of minjung (the multitude). These categories help us not to omit integral elements in the theology of minjung (the multitude) and require us to demonstrate an innate causal relationship among these categories. They will help construct a integrative and enriched the theology of minjung (the multitude). I think the following categories have proved fruitful and necessary throughout the history of the theology of minjung (the



multitude). They are: suffering, event, hope, story, God, and revelatory sources such as the Spirit of life, sacrament, salvation, the Christ/Messiah, and many other stories in the Bible. These categories constitute the general direction of our life and history and then become reasons and sources of hope and the empowerment of minjung (the multitude).

### **Derivative Categories that connect the two groups of categories**

They are confluence or concrescence, organic world view, etc.<sup>5</sup> When I talk of confluence or concrescence, I presuppose that there are two or more different elements working together in each and every life and experience.<sup>6</sup> These different bodies of elements (e.g., traditions, experiences) interact and integrate one another and end up with growth and advancement to a newer or higher stage, or end up with decay and deterioration to a lower and worse condition. In minjung (the multitude) different traditions and experiences, past and present, work together and yield positive or negative results. The theology of minjung (the multitude) seeks to produce positive, novel and creative results from such confluence and concrescence in the life of minjung (the multitude). The idea of the confluence of two stories or two traditions of Suh Namdong, a prominent first-generation minjung (the multitude) theologian, is relevant and related to the category of confluence or concrescence. When we consider that confluence and concrescence take place without ceasing in the real experience of minjung (the multitude), Suh's idea of the confluence of two stories and traditions can be defended as tenable. Furthermore, in order to avoid ending up with negative confluence, its structure must be disposed to move toward liberation and beauty.

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<sup>5</sup> I adopted the term concrescence from Alfred North Whitehead's monumental work, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978). As a thoughtful reader may have noticed, I am partly indebted to Whitehead for some categorical concepts for constructing a minjung theology with.

<sup>6</sup> I adopt the concept of confluence from the late minjung theologian Suh Namdong in his well-known article, The Confluence of Two Stories, *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Kim Yong-Bock (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

## **Some Observations of The theology of minjung (the multitude) by Some Categorical Concepts**

In the 1970's and 80's, the theology of minjung (the multitude) was a "cape of good hope" for minjung (the multitude). Minjung (the multitude) sailed through the big water of suffering, and the theology of minjung (the multitude) was a sign post of hope for minjung (the multitude). Today the theology of minjung (the multitude) no longer creates hope for minjung (the multitude). It no longer casts rays of hope for suffering people. Minjung (the multitude) theologians do not participate in the suffering of minjung (the multitude). Neither do they work with minjung (the multitude). The theology of minjung (the multitude) should overcome itself and find a new way to respond to the new situation of minjung (the multitude). The theology of minjung (the multitude) is still valid, however, because although it has been a failure during the last twenty years of time, it is still much better than West-oriented, abstract theologies. It still has more possibility of authentically responding to realities than any other type of theology. That should not, however, be understood as that the current the theology of minjung (the multitude) is good and valid.

### **The suffering of Minjung (the multitude) and the Righteous**

The Christian Bible identifies the suffering of the weak with the suffering of the righteous. Because they are powerless, the Scripture says, minjung (the multitude) are righteous. Suffering and poverty are not themselves a value and a goal. They are means to a higher goal. The poverty and helplessness of Lazarus, the beggar, was not praised as a venerable value; but, he enjoyed eternal life in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16,19ff). The higher men, because they avoided taking suffering to save the man robbed on the highway, were not accepted by Jesus Christ (Luke 10:25-37).

If the suffering minjung (the multitude) are accepted by God as righteous and the objects of God's special care and love, does this mean that suffering itself has a positive value, or is a goal? Does suffering itself

guarantee salvation and favor from God? No way! Suffering people are the objects of God's special care. They are under God's care, because their sufferings are caused by social evils. For example, the Dalits of India were born equal to other groups and castes of India. But the caste system forced dalits into severe sufferings. Dalits had been in equality in the ancient times before the caste system was introduced to India by Aryans who invaded India and became rulers. Minjung (the multitude) also had lived as equal members peacefully before the introduction of a hierarchical system. Minjung (the multitude) and dalits were sons and daughters of God who created the world with the intention of good. But the world became distorted and worse because of the wrong doings of humans and human-made structures. The current structures hinder minjung (the multitude) from becoming full humanity with dignity, and furthermore even kill or drive into death the innocent people, such as is taking place in areas like Iraq. The structures themselves are evil, satanic, and anti-Christ forces. It is a major task of the theology of minjung (the multitude) to discern, identify and attack them theoretically and practically. They increase the sufferings of all creation to the point of its total extinction and destruction. Minjung (the multitude) theologians give attention to the fact that these forces are internalized into themselves and the minjung (the multitude). The enemies are within us waging a spiritual power over us. I am using a plural noun when I talk of the enemy. The enemy cannot be a monolithic being. Empire, neo-liberalism, patriarchalism, and the caste system are among the enemies, to mention a few. They are sometimes interconnected and coalesced into a single satanic power. (This is also a kind of convergence.) This power kills and sacrifices the already suffering beings.

Facing such forces and enemies active in our lives, private and collective, the theology of minjung (the multitude) proclaims that the God of Jesus is a God of life, peace, and liberation and that the Bible must be read in this perspective, and that the stories and words of the Bible must be interpreted in such a way that they become incarnated and alive in the present life of minjung (the multitude), as Dalit theologians such as James Massey and Busi Suneel also strongly affirmed in their papers for this

conference.

Additionally, I would like to affirm or reaffirm the following basic assumptions for the theology of minjung (the multitude), which, I believe, are valid and helpful. First, the theology of minjung (the multitude) must start from minjung (the multitude)'s experience. This entails the two derivative considerations. One is that this does not mean that the theology of minjung (the multitude) does not start with a theoretical framework, or abstract theories and ideas. The other is that the theology of minjung (the multitude) starts with the ordinary experiences of minjung (the multitude) and approaches them in a common sensical way. This means that the theology of minjung (the multitude) does not impose pre-conceived assumptions upon minjung (the multitude). The theology of minjung (the multitude) values the ordinary experiences of minjung (the multitude) and therefore their stories. The theology of minjung (the multitude) does not attempt to explain and analyze them in a socio-scientific or human-scientific way. The theology of minjung (the multitude) interprets them and finds their meanings by employing hermeneutic methods. The living and incarnated words of the Bible and other Scriptures and traditions help us reach their new meanings.

Secondly, the theology of minjung (the multitude) regards highly the value of Eastern teachings such as *Donghak* and other traditions, because it believes that the Holy Spirit has worked in and left its vestige and footprints in these traditions. Among those teachings, I find the teaching of *sooshimjongki* is helpful for the life and movement of minjung (the multitude). *Sooshimjongki* allows mind and spirit to be kept clear and upright in the midst of sufferings and distractive forces. *Sooshimjongki* is a disposition of mind that allows the Spirit to work within minjung (the multitude).

Thirdly, Suffering has an ambivalent dimension. It has positive and negative sides. Suffering is to be avoided, but also to be accepted as well. Suffering has the value of being means, not that of a goal. It is a bridge to a goal, not itself a goal. That is why the Apostle Paul says that belief in Christ requires a certain extent of suffering (Phil 1,29). If faith in Jesus

Christ requires messianic suffering, it seems logical to say that the sufferings of minjung (the multitude) must be turned into messianic ones. *Sooshimjongki* enters in this phase. *Sooshimjongki* is one of the ways to change the meaning of suffering and make the suffering public. *Sooshimjongki* is not a spiritual exercise for private interest. It helps overcome the interest in our egoistic wellbeing and promote and enlarge the public dimension of the spiritual power. *Sooshimjongki* produces an inner disposition that enables the minjung (the multitude) to discern and even create the potentialities and possibilities for a new creation from their past and present experiences. Thus, *sooshimjongki* should be an integral part of the minjung movement, because movement with social and public dimensions has more spiritual sides than simply material sides. The ultimate goal of social movement is a new human being in a new world. The creation of new human beings must be emphasized.

Fourthly, suffering and hope come together in the events and movement of the minjung (the multitude). A rare but precious experience of hope in the midst of suffering takes place in the minjung movement. The practice of *sooshimjongki* helps minjung (the multitude) to experience hope. Collective efforts for a new world in the minjung movement become reasons for the hope of minjung (the multitude).

Fifthly, Jesus is the representative of minjung (the multitude). He suffers before minjung (the multitude) suffer. He overcame the Empire by his death and resurrection. His death represents the suffering of the minjung (the multitude), his resurrection their hope. He demonstrated the way of salvation in advance, salvation by way of suffering and hope. Jesus shows this and the minjung (the multitude) follow him. The theology of minjung (the multitude) rejects the doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice and atonement, because the doctrine keeps us from actively participating in transforming the structures that cause the suffering of minjung (the multitude). The doctrine falsifies the reality by falsely affirming that the sinful structures have been destroyed by the merit of Christ's sacrificial work, although they remain intact in actuality. The theology of minjung (the multitude) affirms the doctrine of salvation by discipleship and following.

## Abstract

The author attempts at demonstrating minjung theology for today in a coherent way by employing some crucial categorical concepts such as concrescence, suffering and hope. He argues that in the current postmodern times the term multitude is useful for showing the characteristics of minjung. He also argues that the teachings of *Donghak* (the Eastern Learning) such as *sooshimjongki* are also useful for minjung theology. The state of *sooshimjongki* points to the state of men and women who are collaborating with the divine life-giving energy (*kihwachishin*) to lead the world into harmony and liberation. He argues that although suffering is the most characteristic activity of minjung, it does not carry the value and aim in itself, but it can serve as a creative means to the aim of liberation and hope when minjung actively participate in the movement for their own liberation. In connection to this, the author criticizes the traditional doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice and the church's attempt to apply it to suffering minjung.

## Keywords

the multitude, minjung (the multitude), *Donghak*, concrescence, *sooshimjongki*, *kihwachishin*, Dalit, suffering, hope.