

Original article

Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology
(Madang J Contextual Theol) 2026 June
Vol.45, 5-17
<https://doi.org/10.58302/Madang.2026.45.2>

Received: May 13, 2026
Revised: June 15, 2026
Accepted: June 15, 2026
Published: June 30, 2026

Two Waves of Korean Theology: Its Confluence and Divergence in Minjung Theology¹

Hiheon Kim 

Chair Professor of Minjung Theology, Hanshin Graduate School of Theology

Correspondence to Hiheon Kim, E-mail: kimhiheon@empal.com

Abstract

This paper examines the historical development of Korean contextual theology, exploring the interplay of two formative currents: enculturation theology of the 1960s and minjung theology of the mid-1970s. It posits that these two movements emerged in response to the constraints imposed by Western theology, reflecting Korea's historical experiences of colonialism, missionary activity, and ideological influences, as well as the nation's industrialization, democratization, and social transformation. While enculturation theology emphasized the indigenization of the Christian faith through dialogue with Korean religious and cultural traditions, minjung theology developed as a political theology centered on the suffering, agency and liberation of marginalized groups. The paper also demonstrates how these streams were brought together in a creative way in the 1990s by theologians such as Byun Sun-hwan and Kim Kyung-jae. These theologians sought to overcome the opposition between religion and politics, and to articulate a more holistic Korean theology. Finally, the paper argues that contemporary minjung theology must evolve from a focus on resistance and deconstruction to embrace an ecological approach capable of addressing neoliberal inequality, post-truth fragmentation, and the climate crisis.

Keywords

Brief History of the Korean Contextual Theology, Minjung Theology, Enculturation Theology, Theological Subjectivity, Post-Truth, Anthropocene.

1. Introduction

This paper is a keynote for the 12th consultation of Korean Minjung Theology and India's Dalit-Adivasi-Tribal Theologies with the issue of "Developing Contextual Theologies: Challenges and prospects," jointly hosted by The Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) & The Korean Society of Minjung Theology at SCEPTRE in Kolkata in Feb. 4~6, 2026. In this paper, I hope that the dialogues, whose history of the past 30 years has undoubtedly invigorated Asian contextual theology, will deepen mutual understandings of the history and current struggles of the contextual theologies of both countries and share the profound wisdom of Asian contextual theology in addressing today's crises.

I will begin my lecture with the following proposition: All theology is contextual theology! Having long moved beyond the discourse of postmodernism, we largely agree with the well-known idea that 'there is no universal theology based on objective and absolute truth'. All significant thought originates in a specific context, and a thought is considered 'meaningful'

¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5B5A17041099)

OPEN ACCESS

ISSN : 1738-3196

© 2025 Author(s)



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

when it sheds light on its time. However, I believe that the term ‘contextual’ theology in Asia has a more specific connotation. This is because it critiques the imperialistic nature of Western theology and the ahistorical dogmatism of so-called ‘orthodox’ theology. Asian contextual theologies emerged in response to the historical experiences of Asians, such as colonialism, war, oppression, poverty, discrimination and hatred, and the experiences of the marginalized. In this process, the focus shifted towards the experiences of the Minjung, Dalit, Adivasi and Tribal communities. Recognizing that they should be theological agents rather than mere objects of theology, minjung theology advanced the somewhat radical claim of a ‘minjung messiah’. This encompasses a politico-economic interpretation of the minjung’s suffering as well as religious reflection on their culture and spirituality.

Asian contextual theology has generally developed in two distinct areas. One is political theology, which is concerned with the historical liberation of marginalized groups. The other is religious theology, which is based on the wisdom and spirituality inherent in Asian religious and cultural traditions. These two streams have existed in a state of tension and complementarity, and eventually great theologians emerged who fused these two concerns and developed Asian contextual theology: Notable figures include Ahn Byung-mu, Suh Nam-dong, James Massey, Aloysius Pieris, C. S. Song and Mohan Larbeer. We are now following in their footsteps, taking on the challenges of our time.

In this lecture, I will examine how Korean contextual theology has evolved and explore its current critical consciousness. First, I will look at the emergence of two streams of Korean contextual theology in the 1960s and 1970s: enculturation theology and minjung theology. Then, by reviewing how these two theologies were synthesized in the 1990s, I will present an overview of Korean contextual theology as a whole. Building on this historical overview, I will outline the development of minjung theology in the 21st century, exploring its current status and the issues it raises.

2. Two Waves of Korean Contextual Theology in the 1960s-80s

Although Protestantism began to spread in Korea in the early 1880s, it was not until the 1930s that a theological movement emerged, breaking free from the fundamentalist theology mainly transmitted by American missionaries. During this period, the early pioneers suffered expulsion and excommunication at the hands of ecclesiastical authorities because of their theological convictions. However, by the 1960s, Korea’s theological landscape had developed a distinct identity. Many of these theological pioneers had obtained doctoral degrees in the United States or Germany and thus had a clear understanding of the rapidly changing framework of Western theology. The emergence of ‘secular’ theology in the 1940s and ‘death of God’ theology in the 1950s signaled the limitations of traditional Christian thought. Consequently, various forms of theological methodology began to emerge from the 1960s onwards. *Political* theology emerged simultaneously across the continents, various *theological explorations of one’s own*

tradition were undertaken to seek personal and social spirituality regarding intrinsic meanings of traditional religion and culture, and *philosophical* theology developed with the aim of reconstructing the foundation of Christian understandings.

The emergence of Korean contextual theology was rooted in two reflections on the limitations and crises of traditional western theology. The first was an *ethical reflection* on traditional Christian theology, which interpreted the wealth of western society as a blessing from God. This critique argued that the material abundance of the society was not a divine gift bestowed upon Christian civilization, but rather the result of social catastrophe experienced by the Third World. In particular, the involvement of traditional theology in imperial oppression during the struggles for the liberation of colonized peoples after the Second World War prompted an introspective examination of Christian theology, which had transformed the teachings of Jesus into an ideology representing the triumphalism of the rulers. The second reflection was a *theological critique* of traditional supernatural revelation theology. Most Korean churches, heavily influenced by the fundamentalist theology of American missionaries, maintained a mythical anthropomorphic worldview combined with biblical literalism. As these exclusive theologies isolated churches in their own ghettos, creative theologians sought to solve the conundrums of the Christian theology based on a dualistic worldview. Their aim was to nurture an inclusive spirituality in which the unique Christian belief does not conflict with the religious experiences of others, and in which God's love can unfold within diverse religious traditions. This consciousness gave rise to the search for a Korean theology.

The first radical theological movement in Korea was *enculturation theology*, which emerged among liberal Methodist theologians in the 1960s. These theologians sought to reinterpret the Christian gospel from the perspective of Korean religious and cultural traditions.² They engaged in dialogue between Asian religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) and the Christian gospel, reinterpreting theological symbols through the lens of Korean mythology and cultural characteristics. Through this, they aimed to overcome 'theological colonialism' by proclaiming not a 'god carried in on the missionary's back,' but the divine presence in the history of all peoples and all things in the universe. Until this period, theologians in the reformed tradition, who would later form the minjung theological movement, had not moved beyond the evangelical framework. The debate on enculturation theology, initially led by Methodist theologians in the 1960s, was an attempt to interpret the Christian faith through the Korean lens in order to overcome the exclusivity of fundamentalist theology and the dualism of western theology. This marked the beginning of one stream of Korean contextual theology.

Meanwhile, the conditions for the emergence of another theology were ripe. As Korean

2 · The Methodist theologians who led this movement were Yun Seong-beom and Yu Dong-sik. Yu Dong-sik initiated the discourse with "The Enculturation of the Gospel and Missionary Tasks in Korea" (Kam-sin-hak-bo, 1962) and expanded the horizon of Korean theology through works such as *Tao and Logos* (1975) and *The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism*. Yun Seong-beom made the groundbreaking proposal that "Hwan-in, Hwan-ung, and Hwan-geom (Three divine figures in Korean mythology) are indeed God" (Sa-sang-gye, 1963) and laid the foundation for enculturation theology through works such as *Christianity and Korean Thought* (1964) and *Korean Theology: A Hermeneutics of Sung* (誠, Sincerity) (1972).

society moved from the ruins of the Korean War into a certain stage of industrialization in the 1960s, the church began carrying out socially engaged missions among workers and in poor neighborhoods, based on *Missio Dei* theology. During this period, the church developed a critical awareness of the violence of the military regime in that time, culminating in the *Korean Christian Declaration* (1973) and the *Theological Statement of Korean Christians* (1974). This statement was signed by sixty-six progressive theologians and represented a significant act of resistance. Suh Nam Dong, the draft author of the *Theological Statement*, published an article in February 1975 entitled “Jesus, Church History, and the Korean Church.” In this article, he proclaimed the beginning of Korean political theology, stating that “The appearance of Jesus was the proclamation of human salvation and liberation, that is, a struggle. The appearance of Jesus itself is the work of human liberation from economic poverty, socio-cultural prejudice and ignorance, and political oppression.” This voice represented the leading theological trend in Korea at the time and, within a few years, attracted the attention of Asian theologians. In October 1979, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) convened a consultation of twenty-four Asian theologians on the theme “The People of God and the Mission of the Church.” The Korean theologians who organized this meeting named their new theological approach as ‘minjung theology.’

At that time, minjung theology emerged alongside the minjung discourse and the social movements that had arisen throughout Korean society. Grounded in various factors, these activities were ushering in a ‘Minjung Renaissance.’³ Following the April 19 revolution in 1960, anti-colonial consciousness heightened. The death of Jeon Tae-il, a young Christian worker, in November 1970 sparked social movements. Cultural movements arose on university campuses, as did an expansion of student movements. Intellectuals driven out of academia by the military regime were able to conduct research and publish the minjung discourse. Most of the first-generation Minjung theologians who actively participated in this movement—Ahn Byung-mu, Suh Nam-dong, Hyun Young-hak, Moon Ik-hwan, Suh Kwang-sun and Kim Yong-bok—were leading scholars who had studied in the West. They represented the intellectuals of Korean society beyond the church, and their voices greatly influenced the formation of Korean ‘minjung studies.’ Focusing on the experience of minjung, they developed a Korean contextual theology through rigorous theological reconstruction, aiming to overcome the limitations of the traditional western theology.

Later, Ahn Byung-mu characterized the nature of minjung theology as a “hermeneutic revolution obtained through a theological Exodus.”⁴ He summarizes the characteristics of minjung theology as follows: First, unlike traditional logos theology, it emphasizes the event-ness of all things and focuses on the dynamic movement of things and life. Second, it involves a reversal of perspective, seeking to interpret the meaning of events from below, and

3 · In-Cheol Kang, *Minjung: History*, (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan Univ. Press, 2023), 170. Also, see the review of the books, by Hiheon Kim in <https://doi.org/10.58302/Madang.2025.43.6>.

4 · Byung-mu Ahn, *Minjung and the Bible* (Seoul: Han-gil-sa, 1992), 220-28.

God's revelation not from heaven but from the site of historical suffering. Third, it reveals the interconnectedness of all things, reaffirming the collectiveness recovered in thought and practical life. Fourth, it overcomes the subject-object schema, the ideological dualism that separates nature and history from God, banishes God to the supernatural world, and thereby utilizes the divine name to justify structures of oppression.

The further strengthening of the political voices of Korean contextual theology in the 1980s was intertwined with changes in Korean society. Following the assassination of the long-ruling dictator Park Chung-hee in 1979, there was a surge in aspirations for democracy. During the period of resistance against the new military forces that seized power—from the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980 to the Democratic Movement in June 1987—student and citizen resistance movements erupted like a torrent. With this social background, various kinds of minjung discourse including minjung theology developed in conjunction with socio-political theories. This second-generation minjung discourse positioned the minjung as 'subjects' of resistance and transformation, combining with Marxist revolutionary theory. The minjung theology of this period strengthened its characteristics as 'political theology' and formed a tense relationship with cultural theology. Suh Nam-dong stated that "for cultural theology to bear fruit, it must pay attention to the substructure of revelation, the material structure that becomes the object of social scientific research" and criticized "a theology detached from the material structure of history as a fiction, a ghost, and a great risk of being absorbed into the dominant ideology, acting not as a witness to promised salvation but as an opiate."⁵

In 1980s Korean society, the minjung discourse, which was based on the minjung movement, reached its peak. Minjung theology also enjoyed its heyday, becoming known worldwide as Korea's political theology. However, this golden age of minjung theology lasted barely over a decade. From the 1990s onwards, both minjung theology and minjung discourse rapidly declined in Korean intellectual circles. This was not unique to Korea. Following the collapse of socialism, the capacity to imagine an alternative world diminished. The reorganization of the neoliberal world order led to the weakening of the transformative character of people. As radical minjung movements receded, transformative minjung discourse rapidly declined in Korean society. Minjung theology was no exception. However, it is more accurate to view this as the beginning of an exploratory period for alternative minjung discourse, rather than the end of minjung theology. From the mid-1990s onwards, a third generation of minjung theology emerged in various forms, combining with postmodernism, post-colonialism, and so on.

Before examining the flow of the third-generation minjung theology, it is necessary to consider the theological movement that focused on the 'confluence of two waves,' a fusion of enculturation theology and political theology. This movement attempted to form a comprehensive Korean contextual theology.

5 · Nam-dong Suh, "Cultural Theology, Political Theology, and Minjung Theology: Introduction and Critique of Choan-seng Song's Theology," *Theological Thought*, vol. 42 (Fall 1983), 693.

3. Confluence of the Two Waves in the 1990s: Byun Sun-hwan and Kim Kyung-jae

As we saw earlier, Korean contextual theology first emerged in the 1960s in the form of enculturation theology (cultural theology), led by Methodist theologians; secondly, from the mid-1970s, minjung theology emerged, led by Presbyterian theologians. These two groups influenced each other in a tense relationship and established a new flow that sought to synthesize both concerns to develop the Korean theology. Central to this process were Byun Sun-hwan and Kim Kyung-jae. Byun, a Methodist theologian, developed cultural theology by adopting the political ideas of minjung theology. Kim Kyung-jae, a Presbyterian theologian, expanded the minjung ideas through cultural theology. These two thinkers are not widely known outside of Korea, and their theological value has not been sufficiently discussed. So, it is important to highlight them here. For the contextual theology they elaborated played an important role in shaping the direction of minjung theology.

Byun Sun-hwan (1927–1995) studied systematic theology, earning an MA from Drew University and a PhD from the University of Basel, and then became a professor at his alma mater in 1967. Drawing on the Methodist tradition of enculturation theology, he developed a Korean theology and published numerous papers on religious pluralism to guide the Korean church in its mature life in a multi-religious context. Among these was “Buddha and Christ: An Attempt at De-westernizing Christology” (1990), which led to a heresy trial and his eventual excommunication by the reactionary group of the Methodist Church in 1992. Nonetheless, his teaching has been regarded as an important milestone in Korean theology.

In his ‘Theology of Religious Liberation,’ Byun Sun-hwan sought to develop a Korean theology by synthesizing both critical concerns of enculturation theology and minjung theology. Recognizing the value of these two ‘vanguard theologies,’ which emerged as the Korean church overcame Western theology, he sought to find a way for them to transcend their mutual exclusivity and undergo mutual transformation in order to ‘converge.’⁶ He viewed the two representative Korean theologies as different modes of ‘indigenization.’ While 1960s enculturation theology represented ‘religious indigenization,’ 1970s minjung theology represented ‘political indigenization.’ However, he criticized enculturation theology for its focus on religious interiority and cultural tradition, arguing that it was past-oriented and merely repeated ahistorical myths and heavenly monologues. This approach failed to understand *han* (collective grief and resentment) of minjung crying out on earth. He also criticized minjung theology for emphasizing future-oriented social transformation and seeking the meaning of religion not in religious experience itself but in its socio-political function. He argued that this approach neglects Korean religion and spirituality and could potentially repeat the exclusivist error of the missionary Christianity. Therefore, he warned that if these two theologies remained polarized and forced a choice between religion and politics, Korean theology could become a

6 · Sun-hwan Byun, “The Indigenization of Korean Protestantism: Past, Present, and Future” in *A Search For Korean Theology* (Cheonan: Institute of Korean Theology, 1997), 76.

“victim of western dualistic thought.”⁷ He believed that Korean theology could mature through open dialogue between religious and political theologies, and that Korean traditional religions could accompany Christianity on this journey.

This critical mind is also evident in Presbyterian theologian Kim Kyung-jae (1940–2025) who served for 35 years as a professor at Hanshin University, the birthplace of minjung theology. While the first-generation minjung theologians unfolded theological ideas in their 50s, Kim, as a young systematic theologian in his mid-30s, reinterpreted his seniors’ minjung theology in his own way. When Suh Nam-dong and Ahn Byung-mu first published papers on minjung theology in 1975 and were imprisoned next year by the military regime over the ‘Declaration for Democracy and National Salvation’ incident, Kim Kyung-jae described the significance of the emergence of minjung theology as a third way distinct from transcendentalist other-worldliness and rationalist secularism, supporting his seniors’ claims in his own language. He stated in his article that “minjung theology is a *Mahayana* Christianity” which sees individual salvation and social salvation as interdependent and organically correlated.⁸

The *Mahayana* character emerged as the Christian gospel took root in Korea. It was a key aspect of political indigenization, appearing even before cultural indigenization. Kim Kyung-jae regarded the political indigenization as “the most significant impact that Christianity had on Korean national history.”⁹ In other words, he believed that minjung theology was not just a political product of the 1970s, but that its roots lay in the significant events that occurred as the Christian gospel became indigenized in Korean history. Kim believed that the gospel should be indigenized in ‘historical reality’, not in ‘traditional culture’, and argued that cultural and political indigenization must occur simultaneously for this to happen.

Kim’s ideas become clearer in his article “Antagonism and Complementarity of Minjung Theology and Religious Theology,” published on the first anniversary of Byun Sun-hwan’s death in 1996. He identifies the “core and permanent contribution” of minjung theology as the practice of “political *diakonia*,” which he believes guides the church “back to the original message of the Bible by recontextualizing depoliticized biblical hermeneutics and salvational history within the socio-political context of human life.”¹⁰ Viewing minjung theology as ‘political indigenization’, Kim establishes a connection between minjung theology and religious theology by interpreting the religious meaning of that political practice as ‘Korean *Zen*-Christianity’. This reinterpretation of minjung theology as ‘*Zen*-Christianity’ views its theological concerns through the lens of Asian religious spirituality. For example, just as *Zen* is a practice of realizing the reality of life through direct enlightenment, so too is the methodology of minjung theology. Minjung hermeneutics seeks to reinterpret the essence of Christianity by interpreting the scripture

7 · Ibid., 94-96.

8 · Kyung-jae Kim, “The Agent of History is Minjung,” *Christian Thought*, vol. 20-3 (March 1976), 80-81.

9 · Kyung-jae Kim, “Cultural Indigenization and Political Indigenization of the Gospel,” *Christian Thought*, vol. 23-9 (Sep. 1979), 63-64.

10 · Kyung-jae Kim, “Antagonism and Complementarity of Minjung Theology and Religious Theology,” *Theological Thought*, vol. 93 (Summer 1996), 51-52.

through the experience and perspective of the minjung, rather than approaching it based on theory and doctrine. This approach seeks direct enlightenment through experience, placing the hermeneutical norm in the experience of minjung rather than in traditional teaching. This involves a holistic understanding of body(*soma, mom*) as the basis of experience, rejecting an anthropology based on the ‘mind–body dichotomy’, and proposing a holistic political theology that considers the oppression and debasement of the body to be the work of evil.

The integrative ideas of Byun Sun-hwan and Kim Kyung-jae helped Korean theology escape the shadow of western revelation theology and secure the gaze of Jesus within the Korean tradition and context. They sought a Korean theology within the creative tension between political and religious theologies. With the aid of enculturation theology, minjung theology adopted a more diverse and inclusive perspective on religious spirituality. It depicted the minjung’s self-redemption and Christ’s substitutionary atonement not as two but one reality of non-dualistic salvation. This enriched the practice of liberation by embedding political concerns within the depths of religious spirituality. Stimulated by the ideological suspicion of minjung theology, enculturation theology clarified that the task of religious spirituality and minjung liberation is not an either/or choice, establishing the contours of a holistic Korean theology. For these thinkers, the indigenization of the Christian gospel was not merely about expanding the Christian church, but about remaining faithful to the ‘origin of the gospel’. They presupposed strict conditions of thought in order to find the meaning of the Christian gospel within Korea’s religious traditions and political situation. This is a searching and yearning for God’s love, as revealed through Christ—the ‘origin of the gospel’. Indigenizing the gospel involves capturing that love within one’s own tradition and culture. Paradoxically, contextualization is fidelity to the origin of the gospel!

4. Variety of the Third Generation Minjung Theologies and Today’s Tasks

Minjung theology, which in the 1980s functioned as a form of political theology closely intertwined with theories of revolutionary transformation, generally experienced a decline in the 1990s. This shift occurred as the US-centered neoliberal world system became increasingly consolidated, ushering in what may be described as an ‘age of survival’ characterized by multilayered and intersecting crises. In this new context, the minjung could no longer be understood as the revolutionary agents presupposed by the second-generation minjung theory of the 1980s. Rather, the minjung emerged as postmodern subjects who relativized the modern unified subject, embodying diverse and plural identities. They came to be conceptualized as a complex subject marked by ontological particularities in their demands and goals. Correspondingly, minjung discourse moved beyond the binary framework of “domination vs. resistance,” instead emphasizing the duality and hybridity inherent in both categories. This shift entailed a deliberate effort to avoid essentialism—whether in the form of idealizing minjung or

of neglecting the fluidity and variability of minjung as a signifier. Consequently, greater attention to the internal heterogeneity and diversity of minjung, along with heightened sensitivity to discrimination and oppression operating within the minjung itself, rendered concerns about the marginalization of minorities central to the task of reconstructing the concept of minjung.¹¹

Over the past 30 years, the third-generation minjung discourse has engaged in dialogue with dynamic thoughts intertwined largely with postmodernism and postcolonialism, evolving in various ways. Minjung theology has also been expressed in multiple forms, including:

- an *ecumenical* theology, following the transformative tradition of the church from below;
- a *critical* theology, deconstructing ideologies of oppression;
- a *witness* theology, concerning the vulnerability and misery of entangled realities;
- a *ecclesial* theology against a glory-obsessed church in prosperity;
- a *peace* theology, seeking to overcome the division of the Korean peninsula;
- a *feminist* theology, releasing anthropocentrism and androcentrism;
- a *minority* theology, overcoming a culture stained by hatred of the other;
- a *philosophical* theology, reconstructing Christian theology with non-dual Asian philosophy;
- an *ecological* theology, transforming the modern civilization in environmental and climate crises;
- a *spiritual* theology, engaged in social suffering of the weak in compassionate faith.

As a form of contextual theology, minjung theology has provided an authentic voice in meaningful moments of our time. However, the challenges we face today are more severe, prompting us to reflect on the direction of our theological witness and practice. We are faced with so many horrible issues: increasing survival competition and extreme inequality, fandom politics and hate commercialism in expansion of right-wing extremism, the resurgence of geopolitics in post-globalization, community disintegration and regional extinction, and climate crisis. All of these issues are superimposed on one another and are likely leading to the total catastrophe. This atmosphere is sufficient to breed destructive nihilism. The contemporary world is experiencing a deepening despair not because it has lost its way, but because the path has become all too visible. Within the crevices of an anxiety-ridden ‘fatigue society,’ one frequently encounters anger and hatred lying in wait, as well as what may be called a “nihilistic revolt,” forged by misery and resentment flourishing in a space where the ideal of liberation has vanished.¹²

After the covid-19, the ecological crisis linked to socio-economic inequality is increasingly being recognized as much more urgent. This also signifies that humanity has realized that modern consumerist civilization was designed to benefit the privileged few at the expense of the poor and the natural environment. The myth of ‘unlimited progress’ achieved through the capital has revealed the illusion of its desire to transcend the limits of the Earth, which seems to

11 · Kang, *Minjung: History*, 458-67.

12 · Pankaj Mishra, “Politics in the Age of Resentment: the Dark Legacy of the Enlightenment,” in *The Great Regression*, ed. By Heinrich Geiselberger (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 115.

announce the end of modern civilization ahead of humanity's belated efforts. To be sure, market capitalism, which for the first time succeeded in uniting humanity as global citizens, will be difficult to maintain in future. What path will humanity take? At a time when reflection on our mode of existence and role is required, the topic of 'ecological civilization' is arising as of great importance. Ecological civilization has a more fundamental understanding of the problems than the 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) presented by the UN in 2015. This is because the future asks us to consider "who we are *more than* what we do."¹³

However, theology in the late postmodern era generally suffers from the fetter of thought. When post-modern culture with pluralistic value system loses a mature sense of integration, what remains is narcissism. As unbridled relativism breeds nihilism that there is no truth, so fragmented truths reinforce a camp logic, the deadlock of identity politics repeats, and the virtue of cooperation and solidarity has evaporated. In these environments 'passionate narcissism' emerges as a 'decisive factor.'¹⁴ the self-intoxicated narcissism, fueled by confirmation bias, struts around the world wearing a noble guise of autonomous subjectivity. Can our contextual theologies offer a new direction for this situation?

Until now, minjung theology has contributed to the transformation of Korean society as a *resistance* theology representing the suffering and *han* of minjung. As the neoliberal world order deepened within increasingly complex social structures, minjung theology played the role of *deconstruction* of dominant ideologies of oppression and discrimination. However, we are now being called to a great transition in the face of globally constituted crises of social inequality and ecological imbalance. In addition, from a religious perspective, today's phenomena called the post-truth era demand deeper spiritual reflection on our way of knowing and doing.

5. What Do We Do for the Future?

Let us pose a final question to ourselves. What future is Asian contextual theology envisioning? This question involved a task of nurturing the subject who will shape the future. Minjung theology expects a certain subject to grow through its discourse of liberation and salvation. According to changes of social situation over the past 50 years, the project and voice of minjung theology have changed in different stages. I would classify them as three: the *resistant* praxis, the *deconstructive* project, and the *ecological* envisagement.

As a progressive political theology in the 1970s, minjung theology concerned first with the *resistant* subject. This was a theological project to overthrow the oppressive system and to achieve historical liberation. However, this grand liberation discourse became much dissolved upon entering the 1990s, and the discourse turned to form the *deconstructive* subject sensitive to postmodern values on diversity and tolerance. But now, we face a difficult era requiring another turn. That is because postmodern thought is marked by the stagnation in nihilism and narcissism as we see above. In the face of such problem, I wish to call for a new subject with

13 · Philip Clayton and WM. Andrew Schwartz, *What is Ecological Civilization?* (Minnesota: Process Century Press, 2019), 142.

14 · Ken Wilber, *Trump and a Post-Truth World* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2017).

ecological envisagement. This subject recognizes the achievements and limitations of previous subjects and builds a new path from itself with political and religious aspirations. Let's talk more in detail.

The *resistant* subject emphasized in political theology sought to resolve the structural and mental oppressive nature of modern civilization. The subject aiming to transform the oppressive system was interested not only in interpreting the world but in transforming the world itself. Its liberation project is to overthrow the privileges granted to the state, capital, and religion in order to realize communal ideals, and to push through transformative praxis thoroughly. For this, today's conscience is indebted to them. Its preferential ethics for the oppressed represented the hope so that there is no need to negate the lessons pursued by this resistant subject.

However, after the socialist movement became largely enervated in the end of the 20th century, people began to reflect on the limitation of the resistant subject in that its absolute optimism about progress and partisan practice of one's own ideals seemed to neglect self-criticism and to engender limited consideration of the diverse concerns formed within the social organism. Philosophically, when conflict and struggle are understood in the 'dialectical' thought of the resistant subject as a prelude to a more sublime synthesis, optimism about historical progress is absolute. However, while dialectical development could be 'discovered' in history, it cannot be said that conflict and struggle generate a necessary synthesis. This is because, in conflict, one good being destroyed for another often leads to permanent loss, not sublation(*aufhebung*) as a higher synthesis. Therefore, it is correct not to say that the more a previous society is destroyed, the more perfectly a new society is rapidly built. Rather, the more a value is eradicated, the greater the risk that it becomes irrecoverable.¹⁵

Moreover, as the neoliberal system has deepened, the resistant subject faced much subtler and more complex tasks than the past class struggle. The Marxist theory of value of labor is likely expired; the idea that truth is rooted in the power of labor is largely shattered. We have entered an era of "mystification of money," and labor must now address not only resistance to exploitation but also coping with 'exclusion.'¹⁶ In Korea, voices grew saying, "We must move beyond a structural determinism that socialist systems create moral humans and reconsider what kind of being a human is."¹⁷ And the place where traditional resistance discourse based on revolutionary theory faded has been broadly occupied by postmodern discourses.

If the resistant subject was concerned with overthrowing oppressive systems, the *deconstructive* subject focused on advocating such postmodernity as 'a war against totality' or 'skepticism towards meta-narrative.' S/he must have maintained elements of liberation aimed at breaking down pathologies of the modern reason, a reason composed of objectivist scientific theory, foundationalist epistemology, and universalist moral claims for an absolute truth.

15 · John B. Cobb, Jr. *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1982), 105.

16 · Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, translated by Matteo Mandarini (Duke University, 2009), 10-11.

17 · Jung-han Kim, *The Era of Non-Revolution* (Seoul: Palgansoguem, 2021), 95.

Deconstructive discourse criticized essentialist modes of thoughts and pointed out the residues of modern violence embedded even within the previous resistant subject. It encouraged diversity and relativity, and instilled in the human spirit the virtues of solidarity against discrimination and tolerance of difference.

However, there is a growing understanding that it will be difficult to establish a common foundation for resolving the crisis humanity faces in an increasingly relativized and fragmented society through the deconstructive' discourse. In short, while the resistance discourse tends to the absolutization of one truth, the deconstruction discourse leans toward the other extremity, the relativization of all truths. Therefore, the deconstructive subject itself is being suspected: How can it overcome the solipsist obsession with self-interest? How can it prevent the fragmentation of knowledge and provide comprehensive values and ideals that transcend narcissism? These are the critical questions especially in confrontation to the post-truth era. Here, another question is lingering around us: hasn't the postmodern deconstructive subject, no less than the modern egoistic subject, shattered finely into self-interests or biases?

Here, a strong interest in a comprehensive subject with *ecological* envisagement arises. This ecological subject noted in minjung theology signifies a combined existence that creatively converges both experiences of resistance and deconstruction from earlier periods. The ecological subject is the one who realizes the error of modern civilization that led the hardship of survival competition to a gospel of hate, thinks organically about the relationship between individual and community, human and nature, and regards every relationship not as instrumental value but as intrinsic value of life. This ecological subject is the one who has been long envisioned by minjung theology, which has experienced the convergence of political theology and religious theology. It has known the tragedy of modern civilization that has stemmed from science separated from religious vision. If religion seemed to be an 'instrument' for the resistant subject and a 'preference' for the deconstructive subject, it can become a driving force for the ecological subject to cope with the crisis of modern civilization referred to as the Anthropocene. We need not merely post-anthropocentrism but a vision concerning a newly shaped role of humanity.¹⁸ The subject with that vision is called for in this paper as the ecological subject.

For this task, we can remember the confluence of the two streams flowing profoundly within Asian contextual theologies. Korean theology has been formed through the convergence of religious theology and political theology, both of which are rooted in the binding meaning of poverty. Within the Christian church, 'poverty' has always held both political and spiritual dimensions. Asian contextual theologies know this well. Moving forward, following the rhythm of the two theological waves within Asian contextual theologies, we must illuminate the future of church, history, and Earth in the image of Christ. That wisdom has long been embedded within our dialogues. The late Dr. James Massey says:

The only way [is] for the Church to enter into a process of an 'authentic imitation of Christ.' Then, with such 'authentic solidarity' with the poor, only she in real sense will be able to claim to

18 · Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 50-8.

be the New Community and Ecclesia of Justice and Peace.¹⁹

References

- Ahn, Byung-mu. *Minjung and the Bible*. Seoul: Han-gil-sa, 1992.
- Byun, Sun-hwan. "The Indigenization of Korean Protestantism: Past, Present, and Future" in *A Search for Korean Theology*. Cheonan: Institute of Korean Theology, 1997.
- Clayton, Philip and WM. Andrew Schwartz. *What is Ecological Civilization?* Minnesota: Process Century Press, 2019.
- Cobb, John B. Jr. *Process Theology as Political Theology*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1982.
- Hamilton, Clive. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.
- Kang, In-Cheol Kang. *Minjung: History*. Seoul: Sungkyunkwan Univ. Press, 2023.
- Kim, Jung-han. *The Era of Non-Revolution*. Seoul: Palgansogeum, 2021.
- Kim, Kyung-jae. "The Agent of History is Minjung." *Christian Thought*. Vol. 20-3 (March 1976), 77-86.
- Kim, Kyung-jae. "Cultural Indigenization and Political Indigenization of the Gospel," *Christian Thought*. Vol. 23-9 (Sep. 1979), 58-67.
- Kim, Kyung-jae. "Antagonism and Complementarity of Minjung Theology and Religious Theology." *Theological Thought*. Vol. 93 (Summer 1996), 43-63.
- Massey, James and Jong Sun Noh, Eds. *On Being A New Community and Ecclesia of Justice and Peace*. Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2010.
- Mishra, Pankaj. "Politics in the Age of Resentment: The Dark Legacy of the Enlightenment," in *The Great Regression*. Ed. By Heinrich Geiselberger. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.
- Negri, Antonio. *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*. Translated by Matteo Mandarin. Durham: Duke University, 2009.
- Suh, Nam-dong. "Cultural Theology, Political Theology, and Minjung Theology: Introduction and Critique of Choan-seng Song's Theology." *Theological Thought*, vol. 42 (Fall 1983), 674-93.
- Wilber, Ken. *Trump and a Post-Truth World*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2017.

¹⁹ James Massey and Jong Sun Noh, eds., *On Being A New Community and Ecclesia of Justice and Peace* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2010), 34.