
“Minjung theology is” what a renowned German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1926-), a cordial friend of some Minjung theologians, including Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996) called “the first liberation theology to come from Asia, with critical questions put to the First World.” By now, Minjung theology has gained its international stature, representing a paradigm of Asian political theology of liberation. Some Western universities, especially in Germany are offering some seminars on minjung theology. Some Ph.D dissertations have been written on minjung theology. The authors of these dissertations include Korean and non-Korean theologians from the West and Asia (xix). Why is minjung theology so significant? Who does play a key role in developing minjung theology? Ahn is the answer for both questions. Ahn was not only one of the fathers of Minjung theology, but he was also one of the first proper professional New Testament scholars in Asia. After completing his doctorate in 1965 at Heidelberg University in Germany under the supervision of Günter Bornkamm, a former student of the famed German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, Ahn returned to South Korea to lead the minjung theology movement together with Suh Nam-dong and other pioneer minjung theologians since 1975 (ix). This was the golden age of contextual liberation theologies in the Third World in general and Asia in particular. Ahn developed a liberative reading of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Mark in the suffering context of minjung (suffering masses). Ahn was a professor of Hanshin University, scholar, a pastor, and an activist. Due to his prophetic resistance against the dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee, Ahn was imprisoned twice and expelled from his university position.

This volume is a fine autobiography that combines the story of Ahn and the birth of the minjung movement that Ahn helped to develop hermeneutically. This is the first English translation of Ahn’s autobiography, considered one of the best works in minjung theology and contextual biblical interpretation. This volume is based on Ahn’s conversations with his students when his heath became poor (ix). It begins with a short profile of Ahn written by Rev. Jin-ho Kim and an introduction penned by today’s best known New Testament trained Asian postcolonial scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah of Sri Lanka followed by a preface by Ahn himself written on May 5, 1987 before his death. The book has three parts.

Part one begins by describing Ahn’s early life and his awakening discovery of minjung theology as a movement of the minjung (people praxis) and as a theological reflection on that movement (reflection). Using sociopolitical suffering of the minjung as a theme, Jesus’s solidarity with the ochlos in the Gospel of Mark (Mk. 2:15-17) as a source, Ahn made an important interpretation of minjung contextual political theology of liberation (32). His proposal for the tasks of Korean Christians is to rethink theology that is liberated from the Western doctrinal captivity and is relevant for the suffering masses. Having said this, Ahn expressed a story of how he debated with a Western theologian Molttmann over the relationship between Jesus and minjung. While Ahn believed that Jesus is minjung and minjung is Jesus based on their common identity of suffering, Moltmann accepted that Jesus is minjung, but rejects the fact that minjung is Jesus based on regarding minjung as the object of salvation by Jesus (24).

Part two discusses some major contents and contextual forms of minjung theology. While some major contents tend to focus on describing some major themes of minjung theology, some contextual forms tend to focus on prescribing how minjung theology should be developed as a
contextually relevant theology. Ahn is faithful to both the descriptive and prescriptive hermeneutics of minjung theology. The major themes and contextual forms include reading the Bible as the public book of minjung, Jesus as minjung, God as the liberating God of minjung, sin as structural system that causes han or suffering of minjung, the church as the community of minjung, minjung liberation movement as the event of the Holy Spirit, and the prophetic role of the church in witnessing the kingdom of God as the kingdom of minjung (35-197).

In order to develop those major themes as the foundations for the contextual forms of minjung theology, Ahn criticized both some conservative Korean Christians and some Western theologians whose interpretations are irrelevant for the suffering contexts of minjung. Arguing against some conservative Korean Christians who read the Bible for their private affairs of spirituality and Bultmann who treated “the OT merely as a secondary material” (35-69), Ahn proposed to read the whole Bible as the public book for the sociopolitical issues of minjung. He drew upon the stories of God’s involvement in the lives of the Israel and of Jesus’s solidarity with the ochlos (crowd) in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark, as the sources for developing minjung theology. He paid particular attention to Christology and its cosmic reign of love and justice for the suffering masses as a unified theme of the Bible. He criticized Western Christology for its focus on the person of Christ without focusing on the life of Christ and proposed to reemphasize the actual life and work of Jesus for the liberation of minjung.

Part three further develops what has been said in parts one and two. What is fascinating about this part is a particular way Ahn explored the Markan concept of the relationship between Jesus and ochlos and its implication for Jesus’s solidarity with minjung. This is arguably a distinctive area where Ahn achieved his creative hermeneutics. In order to accomplish his goal, Ahn came up with two questions: who are minjung? How is Jesus’s identity related to minjung? Ahn defined minjung into two ways: one is that minjung are the people who are politically oppressed and economically exploited. The other is that minjung are the object of everyday exploitation (221). He then related the identity of minjung to the Markan’s use of ochlos (outcasts). Central to Ahn’s hermeneutics is the relationship between the collective identities of ochlos and of minjung and Jesus’s collective solidarity with them. Ahn retrieved Jesus from the kerygmatic language and prioritized the messianic event language of Jesus’s actual suffering and resurrection. At a time when New Testament scholars read the Gospels from the perspective of the imminent arrival of or postponement of the kingdom, Ahn argued that the gospels were about the people or minjung. For Ahn, one should read the NT from the eyes of the common people.

I have two observations. First, how is Ahn’s proposal for reading the NT from the perspectives of the ordinary people or minjung representative for the voices of the grassroots people? It is not clear how he integrated the voices of grassroots minjung into his academic reflections on minjung theology. Second, how is Ahn’s hermeneutics of Jesus’s relationship with minjung normative for the suffering Asian context today? While his exegetical work on ochlos and Jesus’s solidarity with them is creative and relevant for minjung in the homogeneous Korean context, the implication of minjung theology as a model for Asian political theology is questionable in the multi-ethnic context. For instance, in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the minority ethnic Christians are marginalized by the ochlos of the majority elite Buddhist and grassroots Buddhist nationalists. Minority ethnic Christians are margins of the political margins who represent religious majority. Focusing on the political oppression of the homogeneous minjung, Ahn failed to integrate the concerns of the ethnic margins. In other words, in those two Asian nations, some politically oppressed people are another oppressor of the minority ethnic Christians. In Asia, we need to recognize the plurality of oppression and marginalization.
Despite these two aspects of limitation, this volume is a creative contribution to the body of *minjung* theology. For those who think *minjung* theology is dying today in the context of Korea’s socio-economic growth, this book serves as a living source. It helps the readers with a fresh understanding of the relationship between the historical Jesus’s relationship with the common people in the first century and Jesus’s continued solidarity with the suffering masses in the twenty-first century global contexts. One of Ahn’s helpful proposals was not just to particularize *minjung* as Koreans, but to universalize *minjung* as politically oppressed and economically exploited people. Since this volume was rooted in Ahn’s personal experiences of sociopolitical oppression and imprisonment and in his verbal expressions, it is an original source for understanding *minjung* theology. No readers will agree with Ahn on every point he argued, but such disagreements should be dialogued, discussed, and debated through the appreciative and critical engagement with this original work of—the father and founder of *minjung* theology.

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