

# The need for contextual theology in the modern world: An exploration of Minjung Theology

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## Abstract

This paper examines Minjung Theology as an essential form of contextual theology, highlighting its significance in today's globalized society. Founded on the trials faced by the Korean minjung, individuals sidelined by war, poverty, and oppression, Minjung Theology reframes Christian orthodoxy through the perspectives of liberation, solidarity, and the shared experience of Han (한), the profound anguish of the oppressed. This theology claims that Christ resonates with the Minjung, sharing in their pain and providing liberation not only as atonement but as a dynamic, experiential reality. It also argues that faith should encompass orthodoxy (correct belief), orthopraxy (correct action), and orthopathy (correct feeling), encouraging the church to partake in the fight for justice. Viewed through the framework of Minjung Theology, the paper contends that theology should be dynamic, incarnational, and based on the actual experiences of individuals. It confronts Eurocentric theological supremacy, advocating for a wider acceptance of varied, contextually rooted theologies that testify to God's continual action throughout history

## Introduction

Doing theology is a personal and a political activity. As a Korean woman, I do theology in search of what it means to be fully human in my struggle for wholeness and in my people's concrete historical fight for freedom.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Dr. Chung Hyun Kyung, a South Korean theologian that captures the beauty and the need for the wider church to engage with contextual theologies if we want to take the theology of the church seriously. Contextual theology is an approach to theology that focuses on the context in which theology is taking place. This context is not only “all that is implied in indigenization or inculturation, but also seeks to include the realities of contemporary, secularity,

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<sup>1</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Woman's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 12.

technology, and the struggle for human justice."<sup>2</sup> Contextual theology is dynamic and invites us to engage with real people, in real places, in real time while acknowledging that Christianity is not static, but the living story of God incarnating in the stories of individuals and communities in time and space. "Theology needs to interact and dialogue not only with traditional culture value, but with social change, new ethnic identities, and the conflicts that are present as the contemporary phenomenon of globalization encounters the various peoples of the world."<sup>3</sup> We could say that theology cannot exclusively be about orthodoxy (right belief) but also needs to include orthopraxy (right action) and orthopathy (right feeling) in lived contexts. Where this has taken place, we have seen contextual theologies such as Liberation Theology, Minjung Theology, Queer Theology, Feminist Theology, and African Theology grow and advance the Kingdom of God. We, in the larger church, need to engage with these theologies if we want to take the global theology of the church seriously.

One of these Theologies that I have encountered over the last 15 years living in Korea is Minjung Theology (민중신학) meaning "the people's theology." This is a theology that arose out of the struggle of the Korean people, primarily in the 1970's "committed to the promotion of justice and the stoppage of economic exploitation and political oppression"<sup>4</sup> in Korea while rooted in a long history of oppression, occupation, and exploitation. Two key concepts in Minjung theology are the terms Minjung (민중), literally meaning "the mass of people"<sup>5</sup> but carries the meaning of "those who are found in the middle of war, poverty, the desert, and any other form of suffering."<sup>6</sup> The second term is Han (한/恨) that "refers to a sentiment in which anger, bitterness and resentment accumulate and are internalized in the face of continuing hardship and injustice: it is the collective feeling of the oppressed in the face of their social fate and the social contradictions they experience."<sup>7</sup> These two concepts are at the heart of Minjung Theology to the extent that it is described as the Theology of Han and those who work to relief this Han are called Priests of Han.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Van Engen, "Toward a Contextually Appropriate Methodology in Mission Theology," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 194.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim and Jongman Kim, "Minjung Theology," Society for Asian and Eastern Theologies, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MinjungTheology#section1>.

<sup>5</sup> Choi Hee An, "Minjung Theology," in *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 199

<sup>6</sup> An, "Minjung Theology," 199

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim and Jongman Kim, "Minjung Theology," Society for Asian and Eastern Theologies, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MinjungTheology#section4>.

In this paper I wish to examine Minjung Theology as an illustration of the spirit of contextual theology by looking at how it reinterprets orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy while rooting itself in the lived experiences of the Korean Minjung while reflecting on its importance to the church in today's globalized world.

### **Orthodoxy: the same gospel in a new setting**

We do not believe in an invalid God who was carried piggy-back to Korea by the first missionary. He was here working in our history before the missionaries came.<sup>8</sup>

While Minjung Theology affirms Christian orthodoxy when it comes to the Trinity, Christology, Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and the authority of Scriptures, it does so from the perspective of the minjung and the presence of God as one of the minjung from before missionaries came. At an early stage, Korean Christians struggled with the theology given to them as wrapped up in the doctrines of the west, "they liked the Bible much better than the doctrinal teaching of Christianity."<sup>9</sup> It was in these stories that they saw themselves reflected and God connecting with their lived experiences. The most significant reinterpretation of orthodoxy comes in how God, and especially Christ is seen.

The word used for God is, Hanunim (하느님), drawing directly from the indigenous concepts of the traditional Sky-god found in various Korean context. "The concept of *han* in *Hanunim* implies nonboundedness, transcendence, immanence, the one and the many simultaneously"<sup>10</sup> The Christian God is made synonymous with this idea because it means that God is not new to the Korean context, but "has lived and worked with the Korean people from the beginning of the Koreans' existence."<sup>11</sup> The God of the Bible is the God who is transcendent and boundless and thus not bound exclusively by the time, space and the experiences of what happened long ago in Isreal or in the west, but what has been happening in Korea and more importantly with the minjung, now and here, thus immanent to their setting. This view of God becomes especially important when it comes to Jesus, who is God incarnating and stepping into the lived realities of the minjung.

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<sup>8</sup> D. Preman Niles, "Introduction," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Kim Yong Bock (Singapore: The Commission on Theological Concerns, 1981), 11 quoted in YoungHak Hyun, A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea.

<sup>9</sup> Kim Yong Bock, "Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement of the People," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Kim Yong Bock (Singapore: The Commission on Theological Concerns, 1981), 82

<sup>10</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 206.

<sup>11</sup> De La Torre, *The Hope of Liberation*, 206.

The view of Jesus, in Minjung Theology, is still the orthodox view of God incarnating as the promised Messiah. Yet salvation is interpreted through the lens of liberation rather than atonement theories of dealing with original sin. Salvation, as liberation, is achieved by Jesus becoming one of the minjung, one of the oppressed and by virtue of being oppressed and standing against the oppressors goes to the cross. The cross becomes the ultimate symbol of God siding with the oppressed and enabling them to resist and so becoming co-workers of salvation. Minjung Theology turns the story of the Good Samaritan on its head and asks the question, "Who plays the role of Savior? It is the person who is robbed, naked, thirsty, hungry, and abandoned. The act of saving this person is the act of being saved by God. This is the meaning of Jesus' suffering, cross, and death."<sup>12</sup> Christ's salvific work is still kenotic and cruciform but seen as God becoming a suffering minjung and as that minjung the saviour of all minjung. It is through our interaction, helping all suffering minjung, that we allow God to save us while we are partaking in the suffering of the minjung around us.

The function of *minjung* is to play the role of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus is transformed into this type of person, a *minjung*, who is naked, thirsty, and hungry. While *minjung* individuals suffer, the *minjung* also wills God's liberation. Because Jesus is with *minjung*, s/he appears as a *minjung* and asks the people to practice love. This person, the Messiah, *minjung*, gives the people a way of salvation. Therefore, *minjung* become the Messiah.<sup>13</sup>

It has to be noted that the view is not that the minjung are equated to God or Christ, it is rather that the focus is less on how God saved us through Christ, as how we are invited into acting with God in salvation through liberating the suffering of others. The Minjung become liberators themselves. This is perfectly expressed by Dr. Chung Hyun Kyung when she says, "So I need Christ. I need Jesus. So in our tradition, we call ourselves Little Jesus. .... It is not just worshipping Jesus. It is embodying Jesus. You become Little Christ. You become Little Jesus and walk the same way. This is the cost of discipleship, what Bonhoeffer talked about. Not just worshipping Jesus, but you embody Jesus."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, while Minjung Theology is still orthodox in its theology, it views God as transcending culture, active in the liberation of all humanity, all minjung, everywhere at all times while inviting us to

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<sup>12</sup> De La Torre, *The Hope of Liberation*, 207.

<sup>13</sup> Song, Ki-Duk, *Minjung Messiahism*, quoted in De La Torre, Miguel A., *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 207.

<sup>14</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, "The Good News Now – Evolving with the Gospel of Jesus," transcript of talk at Trinity Institute, Trinity Church, November 22, 2013. Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://trinitychurchnyc.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/KyungGoodNewsTranscript.pdf>.

partake in this salvation process by interacting with the suffering masses and so sharing salvation through His suffering in others.

### **Orthopraxy: An action of orthopathy (Compassion)**

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you, my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. (James 2:17-18 NSRVCE)

As we have seen, although Minjung Theology holds to orthodoxy, it encultures God and makes Him part of the context of the Korean minjung from the very start. It is from here then that God is sought not in trying to understand Him dogmatically, but rather practically. "Minjung theology is not an 'ideal theology' asking who God is, but a 'theology of action' that focuses on what God does."<sup>15</sup> The heart of Minjung Theology is therefore not a focus on strict orthodoxy, but on orthopraxy. Just like St. James when he declares that he will show you his faith by his works. This understanding of God, focusing on orthopraxy as an expression of orthodoxy, is therefore centered in the community and in the community of the faithful, the ecclesia or church.

To be able to appreciate how Minjung Theology understands the role of the church it is important to once again look at the concept of Han (한/恨). This deeply imbedded mixture of anger, bitterness, persecution, grief, frustration, and individual as well as shared trauma is part of the Korean collective expression. The relief of Han is such a big part of Korean culture that it is the root for Pansori (판소리) (Traditional Korean Storytelling), the mask dance (Talchum/탈춤), and the core of Korean shamanism (Musok/무속). Minjung Theology again, in an enculturation, draws from these concepts with a "special emphasis of collective han"<sup>16</sup> and the relief of this han. Rather than focusing on how the cross deals with individual sin, Minjung Theology looks at how the cross and the actions of Christ that led Him to the cross, deals with the effects of evil, such as oppression, persecution, hate, and grief, or in essence,

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim and Jongman Kim, "Minjung Theology," *Society for the Study of Theology*, accessed December 5, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MinjungTheology#section3>.

<sup>16</sup> Kang Won Don, "The Priests of Han as a Theme in Christian Shamanist Interfaith Dialogue," *Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia* 16 (December 2011): 85

Han. What God did was to come and relieve the collective Han of the people, by taking all of that Han on Himself as a minjung and cutting it off. This relief of the Han is called Dan (단/斷).

Dan means literally cutting off. In the personal dimension dan is expressed as a resolute self-denial, which leads to restraints from comfort and easy life and so on. In the collective dimension dan means cutting the chain of the circulation of han. Dan is necessary for the transformation of the secular world and secular attachments. Han is fearful because it can explode as a destructive energy to create a vicious circle of evil. Therefore, the more han is accumulated, the more necessary dan is.<sup>17</sup>

As Christians seek to imitate Christ in His actions, the role of the church becomes the relief of the han of the people. Minjung Theology is seen as a Theology of Han and the proponents of this is seen as Priests of Han; much like the traditional shamans help to relieve the han of the individual, Minjung Theology looks at how the church helps release the collective Han, that Christ cut off (Dan) at the cross. This is faith in action or orthodoxy as orthopraxy.

In the Korean context, with a long history of slavery (1500 years unbroken)<sup>18</sup>, Japanese occupation, the brutal Korean war, and dictatorship we then have to ask "In what kind of religious or cultural soil were the Christian seeds sown? And what kind of Christian fruits are we bearing? What kind of Christianity do we have now? How is Korean Christianity different from Western Christianity?"<sup>19</sup> The answer is that the fruit that grew from the gospel in Korean soil was that of social and political liberation. The "people in Korea responded to the Christian message as embodying a social and political hope for liberation."<sup>20</sup> If Christ came to relieve the Han of the minjung, then taking up the message of Dan is the call of the church proclaiming liberation in an embodied manner. If orthodoxy is interpreted as God coming as a liberator to bring salvation to the minjung, then orthopraxy is a call to take up that salvation in action as an expression of social and political liberation. This liberational message, although it might sound politicized, was not a conscious process. "The nature of the Gospel interacting with people in a

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<sup>17</sup> Kang, "Priests of Han," 86.

<sup>18</sup> Mark A. Peterson and Phillip Margulies, *A Brief History of Korea* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 47

<sup>19</sup> David Kwang-Sun Suh, "Minjung and Theology in Korea: A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Kim Yong Bock (Singapore: The Commission on Theological Concerns, 1981), 20

<sup>20</sup> Suh, "Minjung and Theology in Korea", 22

particular situation produced this result. Perhaps it was indeed a result of the Holy Spirit working in our history.”<sup>21</sup>

This orthopraxy is also not a cold mechanical movement based on a mere academic sense of right and wrong, and also not on a strictly moral sense of right and wrong. It is born out of solidarity with the minjung, a co-suffering attitude. Due to the fact that orthopraxy is seen as engaging the Han of the minjung, orthopraxy takes on a tone of solidarity through feeling compassion or orthopathy. “If one does not hear the sighs of the han of the minjung, one cannot hear the voice of Christ knocking at the door.”<sup>22</sup> . Minjung orthopraxy or liberation thus draws from the orthopathy of solidarity with the suffering of the minjung.

The orthopraxy of Minjung Theology flows out of its interpretation of the orthodoxy of God as liberator. God came to set us free, free from all the accumulated suffering, grief, pain, and bitterness (Han) of this world through becoming one of the sufferings (Minjung) in the solidarity or in a sense of orthopathy. On the cross he came to relieve (Dan) this suppression and now invites us into a message that is not just words, but actions of solidarity, cutting off injustice and oppression. It is an orthopraxy as an action of orthopathy that declares, “For me, cross is that power, say no, this is not right. Torture, no. Oppression, no. This exploitation, no. This kind of greedy hateful lifestyle, no. This is cross for me.”<sup>23</sup> It is not about the politics of this world, but how the fruit of liberation grows out of the Gospel sown amongst oppressed people.

## Conclusion

Some have criticized Minjung Theology for being synchronist, and unorthodox. Yet, it is because the church has forgotten how much we have encultured the Gospel in a Eurocentric and Anglo-American expression. Dr. Chung Hyun Kyung here asks a pertinent question, “Why is it okay for you to interpret Christian theology from Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical view and make it orthodox theology and if I interpret gospel from Taoist, Buddhist, Confucian, shamanist philosophy, why it become syncretistic and heretical?”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Suh, “Minjung and Theology in Korea,” 23

<sup>22</sup> Suh Nam Dong, “Towards a Theology of Han,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Kim Yong Bock (Singapore: The Commission on Theological Concerns, 1981), 65

<sup>23</sup> Chung, “The Good News Now,” transcript, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Trinity Institute 2013: Chung Hyun Kyung*, Trinity Church Wall Street, video, 2013, accessed December 7, 2024, <https://trinitychurchnyc.org/videos/trinity-institute-2013-chung-hyun-kyung>.

Minjung Theology shows how, when the Gospel seed, the same seed we have, is sown the Holy Spirit will let it grow in a contextual and incarnational manner. In Minjung Theology we saw God becoming ever present with the people, interested in all of humanity in all times and places. We saw a God that incarnated and suffered with them in solidarity to bring liberation that is not just spiritual, but practical. In other theologies, this same Gospel carries other fruit. Feminist theology finds the Gospel where women are suppressed. Queer theology looks at how the gospel becomes inclusive to the LGBTQ community. African Theology expresses Christ incarnate in the history of the African peoples and continent. It is the same Gospel, incarnate in every tribe, nation, people, and places. Some might say that the fruits are not the same, yet the fruit of the orange tree is oranges, and the rose bush is roses. We cannot compare what the Gospel brings to our society and say that in other societies it has to look the same; this is, in my opinion, the heresy of uniformity. The Kingdom is not a neatly mowed green lawn that is uniform, it is a cottage garden that is wild and alive, but we all have the same gardener. By engaging with theologies that are encultured and contextual we might just discover more of the Kingdom of God, and we might see more of the message, especially the part of that message, like suffering, relief of that suffering, and our ability to help establish that relief as expressed in Minjung theology, that we have forgotten in our own theology.

In today's world that is more connected and where we are more exposed to other cultures, both internally and externally, where subcultures become more relevant through technology and internationalization and globalization is the norm, we need to learn to think contextually about our theology. We do not need to abandon orthodoxy but learn to have a generous orthodoxy that embraces orthopraxy and most importantly in my opinion, orthopathy to it. Minjung theology becomes a powerful means to explore this contextualization, especially in times and places where oppression reigns. It helps us to understand the practical application of Christian orthodoxy through a compassionate orthopathy expressed in orthopraxy.

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