

THREE TALKS ON MINJUNG THEOLOGY

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The three talks on Minjung Theology that follow below were submitted to INTER-RELIGIO for publication by Paul Sye, former Director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Theology in Seoul (see NEWS AND COMMUNICATIONS), and are reproduced here with the author's permission. They were originally delivered on April 13, April 20, and November 4, 1982, at the James Memorial Chapel of the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

After several frustrating attempts to edit the pieces independently of consultation with the author, it was decided to print them here just as they appeared in the original text. We think you will agree that the unpolished edge of Dr. Hyun's language reflects the sense of immediacy as well as the sense of distance that minjung theologians feel in attempting to reach a western audience. Although the context is clearly Christian and missionary, the problems it raises suggest an altogether different base for interreligious dialogue with the Korean minjung than the ones traditionally generated from within academic circles.

Lecture 1: MINJUNG: THE SUFFERING SERVANT AND HOPE

PROLOGUE

As I was preparing the lectures to be delivered at Union Theological Seminary as a Henry W. Luce Visiting Professor of World Christianity, and now as I stand in my Sunday best in front of *you* to deliver one of the lectures, I am overwhelmed by a feeling of myself being ridiculous and also looking ridiculous. There are three reasons for this:

1. The chair of this particular professorship appears so big and high that I have a feeling that my feet are dangling over the seat.

Incidentally, this is a sneaky way of saying thank you very much, the way I learned from the minjung, the underdogs in Korea, to you who have given me the honor of sitting on the chair.

2. This occasion reminds me of a story told me by a young clergy friend of mine. When released from the prison where he had free room and board for his work on behalf of young industrial workers, Rev. In Myung-Jin went directly to his industrial mission's office. A young worker friend of his, after an initial greeting, asked him, "Reverend, are you still intending to make a living by 'selling us'?" "Selling" here means making a profession out of talking about the workers. "Yes, of course!" was Rev. In's answer. And they hugged each other. As I stand here this evening in the James Chapel trying to address a respectable audience, I have the feeling that the same question is being addressed to me, making an honorable living "at the expense of" the minjung in Korea.

3. At one of his lecture sessions, Reinhold Niebuhr once told us a story in a classroom. A clergy man was trying to convert a labor organizer by describing all the beautiful things and wonderful things about heaven. After listening a while, the organizer turned around, looked up at the clergy and said, "What da hell are you talking about?" I get some sneaking suspicion that I may get the same response afterwards.

(Now I have to give you a bit of warning. While associating with the minjung in Korea we have come to learn to take preliminary or casual remarks just as seriously as, and sometimes more seriously than, the statements made formally. We kept getting surprised by their slyness, cleverness and wisdom.)

WHAT IS "MINJUNG"?

The expression "minjung theology" was born sometime during the first half of 1979 in Korea. The term "minjung" and the reality the term represents had been the focal point of concern among the intellectuals. There was a group of Christian and Non-christian intellectuals who had come together to study and discuss the common concern. Early in 1979 the Protestant members of the study group were asked by both the Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian conference of Asia and the Korea National Council of Churches to organize an "Asian Theological Conference." Presentations were to be made by Koreans on the latest development in theological thinking, with responses by other Asian participants. In the course of meetings and discussions for the preparation of the conference, the term

minjung-theology (one word in Korean) began to be used, and no one remembers how it came into being and who started to prefix “minjung” to the word “theology.” It just happened. A new word was born.

What do we mean by “minjung?” It means something like “underdogs” with strong historico-political connotations. However, we minjung theologians could not agree on any kind of definition and decided that it is not definable. All we could do was to reach a broad consensus. It was much easier in agreeing on what the term did not mean. It does not mean “Paiksung (subjects in monarchy).” It does not mean “Daejung” (mass) which implies impersonal and non-political nature. “Inmin” (meaning people in the sense when used in the People’s Republic of) does not fit because it is too narrowly ideological and political. “Proletariat” is no good either because again it is too narrowly ideological and economic. The term minjung has more personal as well as broader historical connotations in the Korean usage.

Han Wan-sang, a sociologist who used to teach at the Seoul National University, attempted at a definition of the term in his book, *Minjung and Society*. According to him the minjung are those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters. In a situation where political power plays the dominant role the politically oppressed ones are the minjung.

At an informal bull session Dr. Han asserted that he considered himself to be one of the minjung. According to his theory he was right because he was harassed, arrested, tried, imprisoned, and fired from his teaching job for political reasons. And yet his assertion sounded so haughty and condescending. All of his friends in the room pounded on him. How could you be one of the minjung? The minjung will laugh at you when they hear this. You still maintain the average standard of living in Korea, your social status is much higher than the average, and, worst of all, your educational and intellectual achievement, which can hardly be erased, put you in the top class of the society. You may be a minjung in terms of political category but not in other three categories. Therefore you cannot be a minjung. And we all laughed together.

And yet with such a danger of reductionism we keep using the term minjung synonymously with expressions such as “the oppressed,” “the poor,” “the alienated,” or “the marginalized.” Whichever term we may use we always associate it with the other three categories. By minjung we think of the poor peasants who are squeezed out of the farm, young industrial workers who are forced to work under inhuman conditions, the inner city poor who are struggling to survive in squatters’ areas under the ever present threat of eviction: day

day laborers, peddlers, hawkers, swindlers, junk collectors, rag and waste paper collectors, hoodlums, prostitutes, pimps, sorcerers, shamans, fortune-tellers, cheap wine sellers, bar girls, etc. The kind of people we call minjung are referred to in the Bible as sojourners, widows, orphans, sinners, tax-collectors, lepers, and so on.

The minjung originally intended by God in Creation were not such according to Kim Chi Ha the poet, who has exerted tremendous influence on the minjung theologians. In answer to a question at the Seoul District Court he said:

In Genesis god says to them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." The minjung are those who have increased and occupied the ends of the earth, revolutionized the world, built societies, and advanced the course of human history. They physically make up the substance of what we call humanity. In other words, the minjung are those who eat the food produced by their own labor, who till and cultivate the soil, and protect their country and its culture not just with words but with their very lives. I think of the minjung in these concrete terms.

The concept of the minjung should be contrasted with the concept of the regime or the ruling authority, and differentiated from the intellectuals who take a middle position between the minjung and the rulers. Authority or power originally comes from the minjung. But when they are institutionalized they become a tool to suppress the minjung in whom its roots lie.¹

The minjung are the very partners of the original covenant with God, and they themselves are the subjects of history.

The Exodus demonstrated what God did and could do for the minjung. The prophets became the mouthpiece of the minjung and fought for them. Jesus became "the friend of sinners and tax-collectors" in recognition of their God-given status and rights, for the purpose of restoring to the full their original status and rights, and with conviction that the restoration has been experienced and promised and would be realized in full. It cost him his life.

MINJUNG: THE SUFFERING SERVANT

In early 1970's Rev. Park Hung-Kyu and several others organized a "Committee for Metropolitan Missions" to help and work with the residents of a squatters area. Their houses were built with broken pieces of wooden crates with flattened food cans as the roof. They

were terribly crowded. We rented a small room for our station where we would hold worship services and discussion meetings. It was scary to enter the area even during the day time.

One evening after dark, as I was approaching the area I saw two teen-aged girls, about 14 or 15 years old, fighting each other, pulling each other by the hair and cursing each other profusely. The obscenities and curses they were exchanging were the ones you never heard before. I could easily see that they were both prostitutes. They were fighting because one of them pulled the other girl's customer into her room to entertain. The charge was no more than a couple of dollars for the entertainment.

It was terrible and ugly. It was shocking and damnable. I felt my intestines twist and form a lump. I felt pain and nausea. The scene haunted me for several days. I began to remember the things I learned about the young girls, coming to the cities from their rural homes, looking for better livelihood and education, getting cheated, exploited, and ending up in prostitution. Some of their diaries and letters were in circulation. You could hear them tell their stories in church gatherings in the form of personal witness. Scholarly as well as literary writing on the problems related to their hardships were available. With the help of these resources you try to reconstruct what's happening to these girls with your gutsy imagination.

When the business is not very good they would lie down on their mattress and reminisce. They would visualize their parents, especially their mother, brothers and sisters, friends, the village, the field, the brook, the mountain, etc. They would begin to sob, and soon writhe and wriggle their bodies for the pain of loneliness, sorrow, and helplessness. They would cry for their mother. "Mother, I want to see you, I want to come home to you. Oh, no, but I can't come home now. Maybe, never! Oh, no, how could I, with this dirtied, disease-ridden body? Oh mother, why, why?" Before long they would fall asleep with exhaustion. It sounds quite melodramatic, doesn't it?

Let us expand the scope of our imagination (a "prophetic imagination"?) a little further. These girls were born into some peasant homes. For generations their families suffered under the feudalistic Yangban (aristocratic) system and at the hands of the corrupt local bureaucrats. They were exploited by the Japanese, had their sons and daughters conscripted as "Korean voluntary soldiers" or as laborers and in case of girls as "special sacrificial task force" (entertainers for the Japanese soldiers on the front lines). Few of them ever came back home after the war. They got the worst beating during the Korean war, and then they had to be squeezed for modernization policies for the purpose of producing cheaper labor force and cheaper food stuff.

Now their children's turn has come to be squeezed out of their homes before reaching even mid-teens.

The weight of the whole history, the network of the social structure that is built upon such a historical tradition, and the burden of the social policy of modernization and development exert insurmountably heavy pressure on them. Such a burden creates what we Koreans call "han" in them. "Han" is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of the total abandonedness ("Why hast thou forsaken me?"), a feeling of acute pain of sorrow in one's guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wriggle, and an obstinate urge to take "revenge" and to right the wrong—all these combined. We Koreans often think of ourselves as a "han-ridden" people. This reminds me of a song sung by Peter Seeger in the '60's called "Who killed Norma Jean?". The han-ridden death of Marilyn Monroe.

It is the sins of the whole human history, the sins of the total social structure and the culture and the sins of the social policy that produce and impose "han-ridden" life on the minjung. The minjung therefore are the ones who are carrying on their shoulders the sins of the world. They are the scapegoat, the Lamb of God, and the Suffering Servant. When I was being haunted by the scene of the girls fighting, I often felt that I was seeing a ghost, not just a spirit or an image, but a ghost of Jesus on the cross dripping with blood, superimposed on the scene. This may sound superstitious and silly, but this is the only way I can express my witness to the identification of Jesus with the minjung, "the least of these" (Mt. 25:40). "Spirit" is too abstract and metaphysical, "image" too aesthetic and dispassionate. "Ghost" is more material and concrete in expressing the "han."

But please do not take this as a peculiarly personal experience of mine alone. It is a kind of experience most of my friends doing minjung theology went through in one way or the other in the course of their involvement in missionary work.

MIN JUNG: THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF HUMANITY

As we kept on participating in all kinds of missionary work, we drank, ate, chatted, played, worshipped, and prayed with the people in the area. We gradually began to be able to acquiesce, accept, and then even like their language which was obscene, their food which was terrible, their lavatory which you would be scared to step in, their lying, stealing, robbing, cheating, quarreling, superstitious practices,

even prostituting: almost everything we used to call ignorant, dirty, ugly, and immoral. We could chuckle and laugh at these things. Only then we began to feel that we were being accepted, though just a tiny bit. I smile at the graffiti on the subway trains in New York City. The graffiti painters may not be any worse than those top-dogs who paint graffiti on newspapers in extremely grand scale and call them advertisement. People seem to have been used to calling the same thing when done in large scale good and respectable and when done in small scale bad and low grade.

One day a man died in the squatters' area. He had no family, but many "enemies" in the community. We wondered how the funeral expenses were to be met. Surprisingly the neighbors including his enemies began to bring in money and food. It is Korean custom to offer food to the people who come for the funeral in addition to cooking for the bereaved. The poor neighbors who literally had to worry about the next meal would bring with them whatever they had. An old lady scraped the bottom of the jar to offer the last precious little of her soy sauce. She reminded us of the "poor widow" who "put in two copper coins" (Lk. 21:1-4) as her offering.

Such things would also happen at celebrative occasions such as weddings and birthdays, especially at someone's 60th birthday which is supposed to be the happiest day of a person's life signifying longevity in old days. They would give almost everything they have when needed in "making and keeping" the life and death of their neighbors including those of their enemies "human." It is not that they are any more charitable in nature than the wealthier ones but that that was the only way for them to be able to survive with dignity and to maintain their humanity.

You see the beauty of "sacrificial" giving in the life of the people in the bottom-most part of the society rather than in that of top-most part. You see their obstinacy in hanging on to life, their desperate and continuing struggle to maintain their humanity in the most hellish situations, and their capacity to celebrate life and death under such impossible conditions. It is a strange feeling to see not only the truth, the goodness, and the beauty, but also the robustness, the potency of life, and the holiness and the dignity of humanity shining through the facades of ugliness, obscenity, selfishness and immorality of the minjung. You begin to respect the minjung as much as the ruling elites or more than latter in reaction to the past one-sidedness and in the excitement of your new discovery. Here you remember passages such as Lk. 6:20:

Blessed are you poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

or the stories such as that of Lazarus being in the bosom of Abraham whereas the wealthy in hell, or the women followers who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus ahead of other notable disciples. Also you begin to understand why Jesus did not choose the bright ones like us but the fishermen from the Galilee.

Then a strange thing happened. In place of the ghost of Jesus on the cross dripping with blood, you begin to see Jesus the “Dokaebi” or rather hear the sound of the Dokaebi’s hearty laugh. Dokaebi is another supernatural being like the ghost. But unlike the ghost who resembles real han-ridden people the Kodaebi has his own features. He is tall, has horns on top of his head, and the whole body is painted red. Usually he plays havoc on people, mostly jokes, is the dark of night. By the time you discover that you have been cheated and misled during the confusion of the night, the Dokaebi is already gone, but you can hear his chuckles and laughter. Jesus, during the confusion of the night of involvement, has taken you and placed you at a wrong side, that is, the underdogs’ side instead of the top-dogs’ side. Jesus the Dokaebi seems to enjoy watching the surprised faces of the missionaries and the theologians. He laughs heartily and you begin to laugh with him. Then you come to realize that you have been conscientized and “saved” by the minjung rather than conscientizing and saving them. Of course you are never 100% sure whether this Dokaebi is Mephistopheles who got Faust into trouble or Jesus Christ, but your guts force you to believe that it is Jesus the Christ.

MINJUNG: THE REVOLUTIONARY

While we were engaged in the missionary work as theologians among the minjung, we studied seriously Korean history for the first time as theologians (we used to be more interested in the western history because of its close ties with the history of the churches and dogmas), “the social biography” of the minjung and the munjung culture. We learned the method of socio-economic interpretation of Korean history from the younger Korean historians, and then were encouraged to apply it to our theological thinking by the Latin American theologians of liberation. We began to develop a certain knack of reading all kinds of literature including the Scriptures from sociological perspectives, and when Theissen’s book, *The Sociology of the Jesus Movement* and Gottwald’s *The Tribes of Jahweh* were introduced we felt we had been pretty smart even without them.

The minjung did not just passively suffer whatever that was coming to them, as the ruling elites usually suppose. When foreign armies such

as the Mongolians (1231), the Japanese (1592), and the Chinese (1636) invaded Korea, the king, the aristocratic elites, and even the generals escaped to safe places. It was always the minjung who organized guerilla forces, harassed the invading forces, and made their occupation unbearable. When the wars were over it was always the elites who divided the medals among themselves and forced the nation to remember them, leaving the minjung in oblivion as the Israelites almost did with the daughter of Jephthah. There is a saying in Korea, "Only a widow knows another widow's sorrow." So did the women of Israel and after many centuries another woman, Dr. Tribble.² When the ruling elites became too oppressive, too exploitative, and too corrupt, the minjung revolted and fought against the unjust rulers, and were called "robbers," "rebels," or "traitors.Y" (When the rulers behave like traitors they rationalize it as diplomacy for the sake of national security.) I would like to give you a few examples.

1. *Manjuk Rebellion*. This is one of the innumerable slave rebellions that happened in the 12th and 13th centuries. A slave boy called Manjuk schemed and organized a revolution. He had three objectives:

(1) to kill those in power, (2) to burn the slave registration records, and (3) to take over the government.³ Unfortunately he was caught beforehand and was executed along with his conspirator.

2. *Hwalbin-Dang (The Poor People's Party)*. Early in the 16th century were groups of robbers in the country. They would rob the wealthy, corrupt bureaucrats or even the wealthy temples, and distribute the harvests to the poor. They were called Hwanbin-Dang (The Poor People's Party), or Robbers for Justice. With such a Korean style Robin Hood in mind a Korean scholar-novelist of the 16th century, Huh Kyoon wrote a novel called *Story of Hong Kil-Dong*. There are two significant features about this novel. One is the fact that it was written in Korean vernacular using Korean Hangul, the language and letters of the minjung, the oppressed and alienated. Huh was famous for his literary ability in Chinese for which he was favored by the king. Korean Hangul was looked down upon by the literati as letters for the unlearned and women folk. Yet Huh wrote the novel in Hangul. Another significant feature is the fact that he had his hero take his followers to an island called Yuldo and establish a new society where there is no discrimination by birth or inequalities in terms of wealth and power. It was an Utopian novel. The writer, because of his writings and of his involvement with and defense of the lower class of people, got into trouble with the authorities and was indicted and executed.

3. *Tonghak Peasant Revolution*. The fateful 19th century was ridden with peasant revolts and rebellions because of the exploitation

and corruption of the officialdom. The bureaucracy was also incompetent in dealing with foreign powers and their influences. A Choi Jei-woo initiated a religion called Tonghak, literally meaning eastern learning over against the western learning. His religious motto was “man is heaven.” He proclaimed the dignity and equality of human beings including women. His social slogan was “support for the nation, peace (shalom) for the people.” Because of his immense popularity among the peasants, he was accused of agitating the people and was executed in 1864.

When the situation got worse the Tonghak peasants under the leadership of Chun Bong joon rose up and headed toward Seoul the Capital city in 1894. Protestant missionaries came to Korea in 1884. The revolutionary forces were victorious and occupied nearly half of South Korea. They established offices for public administration in large towns. They made public their demand in 12 articles.

1. Leave behind the hatred between the people of Tanghak and government, and cooperate in public administration.
2. Investigate corruption in government employees and punish severely those found guilty.
3. Punish the wealthy who exploited the poor.
4. Reprimand the literati and the aristocrats who were unjust.
5. Burn the slave registration records.
6. Improve the treatment of the outcaste and remove the headpiece from the head of the butchers.
7. Allow the young widows to remarry.
8. Do not collect miscellaneous taxes that have no names.
9. Do not consider family and geographic ties but only the competence and personal character in selecting government officers.
10. Prosecute severely those who are secretly in collusion with the Japanese.
11. Write off all the debts, public and private.
12. Divide the land equally for those who cultivate the land.⁴

The government was too incompetent and corrupt to deal with the evolution. Japan was more than willing to help, and they sent their marines or the armed forces “at the invitation of the Korean government.” The Japanese army with modern weapons and superior discipline easily crushed the revolutionary forces of the peasants. Before long they annexed Korea as a Japanese colony.

Lee Gi-baik, a Korean historian, concludes his book, *Korean History: A New Study*, with the following words:

The minjung, making up the majority of population, have been the foundational forces of the society throughout history.

Without the minjung the society could not have existed, for they were the producers of things. The dominant forces depended on the minjung for the maintenance of their existence.

And yet the minjung have not been allowed to participate in the dominant forces. In spite of the fact that they were foundational forces of the society, they have not been able to exert their rights as the master of their destiny. All they could do was to make known their dissatisfactions, either by negatively escaping from the system or by positively rebelling against the rulers. Such rebellions often became occasions for compelling the dominant forces to regroup, but never helped the minjung themselves to be the dominant forces.

Nevertheless, through such an historical process the minjung has been paving the road for themselves to be the dominant forces. It was from the end of the 19th century that the minjung began to emerge as the dominant forces. The most outstanding at this period is the Tonghak Movement. This revolutionary movement that was centered around the peasants grew to such a degree that it once established administrative offices in many parts of Korea and participated in the public administration. One can also think of the Independents Association Movement, which was centered around the urban intellectuals and business people who pushed for a democratic nation-building. The March 1st Independence Movement is the outcome of these two traditions, the Tonghak Movement and the Independents Association Movement, supported by the minjung. It occasioned the establishment of the democratic government in exile. With their growing power the minjung became the moving forces of the nationalist movement against the Japanese colonial rule. With the liberation of the country (1945) the minjung became able to participate directly in the national politics. Such a trend is developing ever further as one can see in the April 19 (Student) Revolution.⁵

MINJUNG: THE CLOWN

The minjung were revolutionaries, but no simple revolutionaries. If they were, after repeatedly getting beaten up, imprisoned, and killed, they would soon fall into despair and give up. They did not give up. In the process of repeated beating they rather developed a wisdom to survive in the most adverse conditions with human dignity. They

developed a capacity to laugh and to play clown, a way for the victim to become the victor.

In the process the minjung developed the culture of their own over against that of the court and the aristocratic rulers. Among others they created puppet show, *pansori* (one-man opera) and mask dance.⁶ In the mask dance the minjung make fun of people. First, they ridicule an old Buddhist monk who represents Buddhism, the so called “higher religion,” senile and idealistic, impotent to procreate or provide anything concrete for the life of the peasants. Secondly, they play jokes on the ruling aristocratic literati who pretend to be learned and respectable but do not understand what is happening in reality and therefore incompetent and yet beat up the minjung. Lastly, they enact the rottenness of their own lot in this world with tears and laughter. A couple who were separated in their youth, after years of hardship looking for each other, finally come together. But finding that the old man has a young concubine the old woman gets into fight and gets killed. A shaman performs a funeral ritual so that her soul may go to heaven. Of course, the narrative, the responses and the dance are full of jokes, jeers, and laughter. In all you can hear the minjung saying, “What da hell is this? Afer getting the worst deal in this god–dammed world, still what you get in death is only a shaman’s prayer?” You can see the tears on their face and hear their laughter at the same time.

They laugh not only at the leaders and oppressors but also at themselves and at the shamanistic religion to which they obstinately cling to in every day life. It means they experience transcendence not only over the world controlled by their enemies but over the total history including their own religion. They seem even to put their own lot and the religion “under the judgment of God.” They seem to be overcoming the danger of self-righteousness. They seem to be aware of “original sin.” They seem to be forgiving even their enemies, “reconciling with them.” In the celebration of the mask dance, it seems, the minjung are already enjoying the experience of the escha–tological reality, the Kingdom of God. They seem to be confident that the day will come when the Kingdom will be realized in full. They do not have to hurry, they can wait, laughing and joking even about themselves and their own ridiculousness, for they are confident. They know how to laugh at and celebrate what they are and what they do as we saw the inner city poor were doing their birth, wedding and death.

It is interesting to notice that the area where the peasant revolts and revolutions were frequent are the very same areas where the mask dance kind of minjung culture were highly developed. The revolutionary peasants and the clownish minjung are not different people. They

are the very same people. The tragic hero of the revolution is at the same time the clownish comic figure. A famous Korean writer, Lee Kwang-soo posed a question to the Christians in 1920's, "Is it impossible for the religious people to be revolutionary?" Kim Chi Ha the poet is searching for a "unity of God and revolution."⁷ Someone in this country (a black?) talked about a "revolutionary Saint." Maybe the minjung can be the model, for they might be able to humanize revolution with their tears and laughter. As such the minjung are moving slow but steady. They are no 55 miles an hour plus elites. They are "3 miles an hour" people. They are slow but like the turtle, get to the destination ahead of others. That is why we find hope in them. We see the ghost with tears and the Dokaebi with laughter of Jesus and his God in the Minjung of Korea. (Please try to read the song on the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52: 13-53:12, not only with a sense of tragic, as we usually do, but also with a sense of comic at the same time.)

EPILOGUE

Coming to the conclusion of the lecture, again I get hit by a sense of being ridiculous. Someone once asked us minjung theologians after a long heated discussion, "Would minjung themselves understand and like what you were saying about them?" We could not answer the question to the questioner's satisfaction. Finally we just blushed and laughed stupidly. On my part I just wanted to hide behind the picture of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, probably smiling and even waving his hands at the people, which seemed to me so tragic and comic.

Lecture 2: THEOLOGY AS RUMOR-MONGERING

PROLOGUE

In 1965-66 I worked as a "foreign national in residence" at the Missionary Orientation Center at Stony Point, N.Y. The role I assumed was to play a gadfly to the missionary candidates. When I was coming to Union Theological Seminary as a visiting professor this time, I considered my role to be a rumor-monger. Such a role is not very fitting for an elderly, respectable, theology professor like me. But I can't help it. The minjung I have known and the "han-ridden" ghost of

Jesus keep pressuring me to assume the role.

It is said that when E.E. Cummings was delivering a series of lectures at Harvard University, he referred to the series as “six nonlectures on poetry,” which his critics called “six nonlectures on nonpoetry.” My lecture this evening may turn out to be “a nontheological nonlecture,” or “an anti-theological anti-lecture.”

There are two Keorean words fo the English word “rumor.” One is *somoon*. It means rumor in the ordinary sense, stories created with hearsay and hunches and exchanged by ordinary folks, considered to be innocent. When the rulers take one or more of such stories as politically insidious and subversive, they call them *yoo-un bi-u*, a political rumor. Therefore, making up and spreading such stories, the “yoo-un-bi-u,” becomes a serious crime. You get severely punished for such a crime.

It is also said that T.S. Eliot described a poet as the one who lives with Reality and gazes at the Reality. In my college days in Japan before the Second World War, Goethe’s autobiographical book called *Poetry and Truth* was widely read among the students. Poetry is living with and singing the Truth. But when Kim Chi Ha the famous jail-bird Korean poet was asked by a Japanese reporter what he thought poetry was, his answer was, “Oh, it’s something like a rumor.” Kim Chi-Ha wrote a long poem called “Rumors.” In it he describes how a rumor happens and what it does to people. I would like to read a few passages from it presently, because the poem is more eloquent than the best I could do in explaining all about rumor-mongering.

But before doing that I want to remind you of a cute little book called *A Rumor of Angels* by Peter Berger. He describes the nature of the transcendental dimensions in modern technological one-dimensional culture, the supernatural which is reflected in play, humor, hope, order, and damnation. I love it. And yet I am struck by the tremendous difference between Peter Berger’s rumor and Kim ChiHa’s. In the case of Berger, a cultured respecter of the supernatural, sitting in a comfortable armchair, probably puffing a pipe, talks smoothly and logically to a cultured despiser of the supernatural, who too is sitting in a comfortable armchair, probably smoking a cigar. On the other hand, in Kim Chi- Ha’s case, an agonized body in and out of prison dungeons speaks with the guts and body to the minjung, the underdogs in suffering. This is a difference you could see when you apply “sociology of communication”: who tells what, how, to whom, when and where. To a man starving, a man in a Cadillac comes along and tells him, “Man does not live by bread alone.” Another hungry neighbor comes along, shares the last cigarette butt he picked up on the way with the man. The starving man was offended terribly by the

former but heard the message from the latter, “Man does not live by bread alone.

RUMORS

Now I come to Kim Chi-Ha’s long Poem “Rumors.” The long poem is divided into three sections. The first section is titled “A Story of a Sound,”⁸ from which I am going to recite a few passages. The second section is called “High Ranking Government Bureaucrats.” The Chinese characters the author used for the title literally means “a view from the ass.” The third section is called “Six-Shooter Worship.” It reminds you of Herod getting so angry on hearing the rumor of the birth of Jesus and going mad killing innocent babies.

“A Story of Sound”

For some time now, in the heart of Seoul
They have heard the strangest sound.
Some people quake like aspen leaves
and sweat freezing streams at this sound...
A strange business; and stranger still,
these are guys with money, the real
big-load operators.

K’UNG.

—There, that sound.

K’UNG

...
(Living in a shack in a squatter’s area)
And worked like an ox,
but was timid as a mouse, simple
as a sheep—the harmless sort
who doesn’t need laws to live right.
But some strange twist of fate,
some lousy inheritance from a previous life
made whatever he tried
go bad.

...
Back and forth, right and left, helter skelter, in his frenzied race,
puffing and panting, north south east west,
harried, exhausted, starving and sick, until crazed

one evening as the sun was going down
he planted his two feet down on the ground,
rolled his eyes back in his head and yelled
“Agh! What a dog’s life this is!”
No sooner were the words out of his mouth than
CLAKETY-CLANK, heavy handcuffs were snapped on his wrists
and Ando was dragged straight off to court.
BANG, BANG, BANG . . .

“State the charge.”

“The crime, your honor, of standing on the ground with his two
feet and spitting out groundless rumors.”

“Oho! That’s a big one!”

“The defendant, ... your honor, is guilty of

. . .

the crime of thinking up GROUNDLESS RUMORS that would
BEWITCH THE PEOPLE

and CONFUSE THE WORLD:
the intent to pronounce said rumors;
the pronouncing of same;
the intent to propagate said rumors;
the propagation of same;

. . .

“Therefore, in accordance with the law, it is the solemn judgment
of this court, that immediately upon adjournment

one head be removed from the defendant

to prevent further thinking or pronouncing of such groundless
rumors;

two feet be cut off

to forestall the recurrence of inflammatory standing on the
ground;

and to prevent the breeding of future seditious types such as the
defendant, that

one reproductive organ and two testicles be removed.

And finally and furthermore, whereas there is the clear and present danger
that defendant may resist, his two hands are to be bound behind his back;
he is to be wrapped in an water-soaked leather straight-jacket;
and the opening of his throat is to be jammed shut with a hard, thick, and
long-lasting voice-blocking tool; after which he is to be put in solitary
confinement for five hundred years.” (after the execution)

. . .

Roll, then, roll your body, beating with it
K'UNG
Again, and yet again
he slammed into the wall:

K'UNG.
K'UNG, K'UNG

There were those who couldn't sleep at all when they heard that
sound rising up,
people with money, the ones who could really
blow the wind right by. They sent out their strict orders to have
that fellow executed, and yet

K'UNG

It's a strange business, how that sound seems to drive some
people mad.

K'UNG K'UNG:

 You can hear it now, night and day, never ceasing.
There are some who call it the work of a ghost;
others will tell you it is Ando, somewhere still living,
and ceaselessly hurling himself against the walls.
They say this stealthily, whispering from ear to ear,
while a strange light flashes from their eyes.

The rumor oozed out of the guts of Ando the poor, Ando was telling the truth
which top-dogs called rumor, and they executed him. And yet the sound of his
body bumping into the wall kept driving the top-dogs mad.

MINJUNG: RUMOR-MONGERING WITH BODY

In the remainder of this nonlecture I would like to give you some samples of the
rumor-mongering of the Christians in Korea.

Japan the "rising sun" crushed the Tonghak Peasant Revolution in Korea in
1894 "at the invitation of the Korean government;" beat the Chinese out of Korea
in the same year, defeated the Russians in 1905, and made Korea her protectorate
in the same year. The people organized voluntary armies to fight the Japanese.
Hundreds of people committed suicide in protest. The whole nation was in
turmoil. The colonial government arrested hundreds of Korean civilian leaders
and intellectuals on a trumped up charge that they plotted against the Japanese.
105 persons were indicted and imprisoned. Most of them

were Christian intellectuals. The whole nation, especially the Christians, were radically politicized.

The missionaries, not only because of their nonpolitical theological orientation but also because of their vested interests in the missionary enterprise in Korea under the Japanese rule, tried to depoliticize the Korean Christians. A certain W.N. Blair wrote:

We (missionaries) felt that the Korean Church needed not only to repent of hating the Japanese, but a clear vision of all sin against God, that many had come into the church sincerely believing in Jesus as their Savior and anxious to do God's will.... We felt...that embittered souls needed to have their thoughts taken away from the national situation to their own personal relation with the Master.⁹

The Korean Christians had psychological reasons for apparently trying to divert their sense of political frustration to something spiritual. Korean church historian, Kim Yangsun writes:

When their prayers were not fulfilled (for national liberation), they confessed their own sins first, because they felt that the absence of God's blessings was not due to God, but due to their faults.¹⁰

Revival meetings came into full swing. According to a description of a missionary:

The meetings began at seven p.m. Last night's meeting closed at two a.m. One after another arose and confessed his sins—many of them suffering agony in fighting with the devil. We could see the fight going on and we could see victories won. "Awful" is the only word that will express the feeling we had as we witnessed the struggle between God and His arch enemy yesterday evening.¹¹

Another Korean church historian interprets the significance of the revival meetings that came to climax in 1907 as follows:

The great awakening marks the spiritual rebirth of the Korean Church. The religious experience of the people gave to the Christian Church in Korea a character which is its own. Following the revival, the new religious experience was severely tested, but it has survived as a moral and spiritual force. Korean Christians of today look back on the movement as the source of their spiritual life.¹²

"The Great Awakening" was truly "the source of their spiritual life," but not the source of mere "spiritual" life.

Missionaries were happy, for they thought their attempt to depoliticize the Korean Christians was successful. However, the Christians kept quoting the Exodus story, preached on it, and prayed for an

appearance of a Moses for their salvation. When the preachers visited the homes of the faithful, which was quite frequent, and prayed for the family members, they would pray that the children might become great leaders like Moses. Still the missionaries thought that the Korean Christians were spiritualizing the Biblical story. In addition to the hymns they learned, which were in western classical tunes, the Koreans discovered and began to sing the spirituals of the black people such as “Go Down, Moses,” “Deep River,” “Were You There?” The Missionaries thought that their Korean converts were not only obedient to their depoliticization instructions but also very smart in learning the spirituals on their own. They were proud of their Korean proteges. The Korean Christians said “yes” to the missionaries but just kept on referring to the Exodus. It is possible that many of them were not aware of the contradiction they were involved in. It does not matter. What matters is the fact that they were spiritual in their consciousness and at the same time were political in their subconsciousness and bodily behavior. “Go Down, Moses” was their revolutionary song, and “Deep River” and “Were You There?” were expressive of the deep undercurrent in their guts, the undercurrent that made them keep and maintain confidence in the final victory, gave them the capacity for “revolutionary patience,” and enabled them to celebrate even their revolutionary frustrations. They were rumor-mongering with their bodies while giving lip service with their mouths. The body had its own agenda at the expense of the agenda imposed by the brain.

The missionaries did not know what was happening and Korean church historians either did not know how to interpret it or did not have guts to express what they saw. The children of darkness were smarter than the children of light. The Japanese colonial government noticed what was happening and banned the use of the Old Testament during the Second World War.

In 1970’s when we began to be able to hear the voices of the minjung from the bottom of the society, when we began to see the fact that under the given conditions there was no other way available of expressing our gut feeling and thinking than through our bodies, only then were we able to see what was happening to our spiritual forefathers. They were expressing political faith in spiritual and apocalyptic forms. Or maybe they did not see any dichotomy between the political and the spiritual. We love James Cone for his book entitled *Spirituals and Blues*. The book helped us confirm and clarify what we were thinking theologically on the meaning of the picture we had of our forefathers. At the same time we hate him for that. He beat us to it and put the thing into print while we were still mumbling about it.

THEOLOGIANS RUMOR-MONGERING ON JESUS

Korean theologians tried very hard to learn theology from the western mentors. We had our share of orthodox Calvinists and Methodists. We had a few "liberal" theologians in 1930's. In 1940's we began to have Barthians and then Niebubrians, Tillichians, and Bultmanians. In the '60's there was an influx of a variety of theologies. Secularization theology, political theology, theology of revolution, theology of ecology, theology of play, etc. The Korean theologians were elites of the society, not only in the area of theology but also in some other specialized areas. Suh Nam-dong, a foremost minjung theologian in Korea, for instance, was an acknowledged expert on ecology and was much in demand as a lecturer on the subject. Through theological publications from the west they learned about theological interpretations of many problems contemporary society is facing which Korean society in general did not take up as problems yet.

Then from the latter part of the '60's they began to be invited as lecturers and resource persons by various mission organizations such as rural, urban and industrial missions and also by student organizations, both Christian and non-Christian. Some of them turned down the invitation because they felt their place of work was in the academy. Others refused to comply because it already looked risky to associate with such groups. A few foolish ones went along.

While frequenting the mission frontiers and associating with various kinds of people, they began to realize how little they knew about the reality of Korea, especially the reality of the poor and the downtrodden in spite of their bookish and statistical knowledge. They began to see the oppressed and "han"-ridden life of the minjung, and then the power and beauty of their humanity shining behind the facades of ugliness and immorality. They got converted or conscientized by the minjung instead of conscientizing them. They came to be acclimatized there. They became minjung theologians.

In the eyes of the authority and the elites of the society, they were no longer the forerunners or elites of the society but rather the dregs and the trouble makers for "modernization and development." They got themselves into trouble not only with the authorities but also with the conservative wings of the church, which comprises the absolute majority. They were called "nonsensical people," "spoiled brats," "rumormongers," even worse, "communists." For the reason of rumor-mongering most of them had to submit resignation from their teaching posts. Their rumors had to do not only with politics but also and more with theology. Among the theological rumors those related to

the earthly life of Jesus were the worst in the eyes of the conservative church leaders.

RUMOR 1: "JESUS THE CURSER"

They spread a rumor that Jesus was a terrible curser and user of vulgar and obscene language. They did not announce it in public but people were smart enough to hear it whispered. The minjung theologians had a hunch that Jesus must have used dirty words quite often. Otherwise how could you understand some of the expressions he used when angry. He called Herod "that fox." When he called the Pharisees and scribes "whitewashed tombs," or "you brood of vipers," it was ugly and vicious. What did he mean when he addressed to them as "evil and adulterous generations?" How would he have said it if he had been a contemporary American? Please don't answer. I can hear you loud and clear. Worse still. In a religiously oriented society, what did he mean when he said "woe to you!?" The meaning must have been much stronger than "God damn!" for Americans are not as religious as the Jews were in Jesus' days. To the minjung theologians Jesus was a terrible curser when angry at the top-dogs.

When the minjung theologians asked the New Testament scholars in Korea whether their hunch about Jesus as a curser was right or not, they would not answer. Most of them said that they never studied obscene expressions in the Biblical language. Even if the Biblical scholars knew that Jesus was a curser when terribly angry, they still would not admit it in public, for to do so would be very unedifying.

To deny that Jesus was a curser is to deprive him of his guts, his humanity, and his authority. Obscene and curse words are the language of the guts spit out of the twisted guts, the han-ridden guts of the oppressed and the exploited. They are spit out before they are ever whitewashed by the brains. They are the language most truthful to their bodies, and therefore most frank and honest. Jesus taught with authority unlike the scribes (Mk. 1:22). His authority did not seem to have come from his quotation of God or his reference to the Law, but from the power and the beauty of his humanity shining through his gutsy language, his gutsy life, and his gutsy death.

Besides, Jesus the Son of God, Jesus the divine, Jesus the Revealer of God, Jesus the prototype of humanity, Jesus the respectable yet sometimes condescending, would not mean anything for those in the squatters' area. Jesus meant real man to them only when he drank, ate, chatted with them using their own lingo, and when he was gutsy in his language, life, and death.

RUMOR 2: "SEXUALITY OF JESUS"

Many years ago I saw a title of a theological essay called "Sexuality of Jesus," if I am not mistaken in one of the issues of the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*. I was shocked at the time. It was not that the content was sacriligious but that the author had the nerve to refer to such a thing as the sexuality of Jesus in public. The author was Tom Driver. Years later, Mary Magdalene was singing a beautiful and yet agonizing love song in the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar." She did not know what to do with him. Jesus was a man. Not man in general, humanity or a human being. He was a man from the Galilee, about 30 years old, a robust male with flesh and blood, a man of guts. This must be the way Mary saw Jesus and the way the people in the squatters' area could accept him as their "friend."

I had better stop talking on this topic, for my tongue may slip. But there is something I would like to remind you of. Sexual violence hurts the victim more than any other kind of violence such as political, economic, social, and cultural, because it penetrates into the bottom—most and innermost part of the body. For the same reason racial discrimination is worse than anything else. It hurts your body. It all means that people become so sensitive about these things that one has to be extremely careful.

RUMOR 3: "LAUGHING JESUS"

Some years ago an architect-artist friend of mine told me that from his childhood he had been wondering why Jesus in the pictures hanging on the church walls was always either stern or sad, but never smiling or laughing like the Korean Dokaebi.¹³ I had seen a short feature film called "Parable" portraying Jesus as a clown, presented at the New York's World Fair by the American Protestant churches. I had known of the portraits of Jesus as a clown in both paintings and writings. But I had never been able to picture him laughing heartily, with the underdogs.

The picture of the scene of Jesus being entertained by Martha and Mary bega to dawn on me in a new light. Jesus was not really rebuking Martha sternly. He was not really praising Mary at the expense of Martha either. He was enjoying himself talking, joking, and laughing with the girls and also scenting the flavor of the food being prepared. They were all having a jolly good time laughing heartily.

Mr. Zo, the architect-artist friend of mine had collected a large

number of minjung arts. He showed me paintings of a laughing tiger by minjung painters. According to him the minjung's tigers always laugh and look harmless or even silly. On the other hand, the professional classical painters' tigers are always ferocious and threatening. The Korean minjung have the capacity to laugh and to make people laugh. Jesus must have laughed a great deal and is got to laugh if he has anything to do with the minjung, the poor. For a long time, it seems, the church has lost sight of a laughing Jesus and thereby lost the minjung from the church.

Incidentally, a Latin American theologian, Jon Sobrino, in his book, *Christology at the Crossroads*, brought down the Christological argument to the level of historico-socio-political level. It was beautifully done. My only regret is that it might have been more powerful and meaningful in depth if he had brought it even further down to the level of the bottom of the hell as some early Christians did, so that we could really laugh heartily, enjoying and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus the Christ as well as his crucifixion.

RUMOR ON DEVELOPMENTALISM

A few months after the military coup of 1961 in Korea, the government announced the First Five Year Economic Development Plan (1962–1966). At an annual conference of the Christian Faculty Fellowship of Korea early in the following year, we dealt with the problem of planning for development with one of the planners from the government participating in the discussion. The main criticism at the time was that in spite of the fact that a solution to poverty was the most acute problem in Korea, the one-sided economic development plan, without reference to the total view of the national life, especially in the pattern of the “advanced nations,” might produce negative effects not only in other areas of life but also in that very economic area.

Before long we began to see the ill effects. We are still suffering from the political effects of “the economic development plan” and policy. We have become so dependent on the foreign capital and the overseas market that we have become over-sensitive to every little word and gesture of foreign dignitaries at the expense of the welfare of the minjung. We have polarized the people in terms of haves and have-nots. We have created a spirit or a religion of mammon and force (violence worship). In the middle of the Fourth Economic Development Plan period, according to the August 26, 1978 issue of the *Tong-A Daily*:

76.7% of the workers (7,093,000) had income so low that they were not taxable.

43% of the GNP was being controlled by the top 0.3% of the population.

47.4% of the GNP was in the hands of 18 big corporations.

The government admitted this and said that the problem will be solved when we increase the size of the pie (GNP) to that of Japan or U.S.A.

Now, I have just concocted a rumor to whisper on the basis of my experience in New York City, when I go back home to Korea. Since we came to New York City last January, most of the people we met warned us against carrying cash with us because of mugging. So with a letter of introduction from the Seminary we went to the bank to open a checking account and to apply for a credit card.

I was surprised to see a long queue in a bank with nearly half of the desks not being attended. Before long a man, who looked like a Hispanic, began to yell at the tellers. The manager came out and asked him what was wrong. The customer said, "What da hell is this? Every time I come here you make me wait in the line for a long time and then ask for identifications. What kind of a bank is this? I shouldn't be dealing with such a lousy bank!" The manager gently but firmly responded, saying, "Oh, I am sorry to hear that. We wouldn't like to have business with your kind of customer either!" I couldn't believe my ears.

Then my turn came. The scene had made me very unhappy and unpleasant. It also made me a bit "scared." "Scared" at a bank! After filling the application forms, I received my check book and was told that I would have to wait for over a month before I get the credit card. The teller seldom looked at me. He was dealing merely with the papers and figures. We discovered in hard ways that few places would accept our personal checks with our passports as identification. I asked my friends whether there were any other ways to solve the problem. A bank cash machine card was suggested. I called up the bank and asked how I could get a card. The answer was that I would have to wait for six months from the date I opened my checking account. In the mean time I received a letter from the credit card office refusing me a card on the ground that I had no previous records of credit. I was disappointed and felt anger in my guts. But in order to survive a bit comfortably in New York City I asked the Seminary Controller's Office for help. With the Controller's help I finally received both the cash machine card and the credit card.

I cannot erase the scene I witnessed in the bank from my memory. What happens to the poor Black and Hispanic people I see everyday in my neighborhood? Do they have institutional connections or backup as

I do? If not, what happens to them? It would be extremely difficult for anyone excluded from the system to survive in this city. The exclusion from the system is not visible. A few will notice it. Worse still! Once excluded it would be very difficult for anyone to change it, because the system is controlled mostly by computer rather than by human beings. There is a “mathematical mercilessness here. Such a society cannot be a model for our country and especially for the minjung in Korea.

RUMOR ON THEOLOGY

When I was looking back and reminiscing on the theological enterprise that we had inherited in the light of what we learned from the life of the poor and the oppressed in the squatters’ area, a few thoughts were dawning on me.

Moses was a rumor-monger, spreading the rumor that the Israelites would be able to break away from slavery, when it looked quite impossible. Prophets such as Micaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Amos were the terrible rumor-mongers, announcing doom on the nation when business seemed to be thriving and GNP was soaring high to a “miraculous” degree. They got into trouble with the authorities as trouble makers. Jesus was the worst and the most notorious rumor-monger, telling the people that the sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath; that the Kingdom belongs to the poor rather than to the wealthy; and that he would rise up from the dead. He drank, ate, and chatted with the sinners and prostitutes and became the source of insidious rumors. He himself was the rumor. He had to pay for it with his life. Early Christians followed him and spread the rumor about him. When Constantine made a concrete statue of Jesus and put a gold crown on top of his head, the dynamic rumor began to become immobile, dead, and turned into a mummy.¹⁴ The Reformation did not help much. The rumor was kept alive largely by the help of people such as monastics, mystics, St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Muenzer, etc.

With the advance of the spirit of Enlightenment we gave up the idea of sin and hell. We despised our body and lost our guts and tears. We came to lose sight of the dimension of depth, the belly of the big fish, the sheol. With the arrival of the “post-Christian era,” on the other hand, we have tended to lose sight of the heaven and the dimension of height and spirit. We lost our laughter. In destroying the three storied cosmos we threw out the baby, the human at the same time. We have lost not only the capacity to experience pain and “han”

and to weep with guts and bowels, but also the capacity to experience joy and to laugh heartily. We along with our theology became so unhuman.

We conceptualized and categorized the reality or the experience of the reality. We quantified and codified our conceptions and categories. And then we put them into the computer. The computer became our history and cosmos. In result the computer became the Procrustean bed which cuts off any part of the reality that does not fit into the bed. It cuts off both hell and heaven and anything that is related to them or smacks of them. The reality became one-dimensional and flat.

The computer system belongs to the top-dogs. We theologians want to stay in the system and compete with other specialists as elites in the system. We work hard. "Publish or perish." Like machines we keep running producing knowledge, for we are a part of "the knowledge industry" of the system. There is not time for tears or laughter. We serve the master of the computer system and become a part or a servant of the system. As such we have to keep up with the best magisterial mentality and the most efficient managerial skill. It does not matter whether we are the capitalist theologian or the socialist theologian. We have to be elites and the leaders. How strange? We are still hung up on the Christendom mentality, and that even within this flat one-dimensional system!

RUMORS TO BE KEPT ALIVE

In place of a conclusion, I would like to present to you a few solgans for rumor-mongering.

1. "The minjung were powerful and beautiful in their rumormongering. Learn from the minjung."
2. "Jesus was the worst rumor-monger."
3. "Jesus was not of the system, but was killed by the system." Therefore, until the Day of the Lord, the Rumor has to be whispered, sung and danced in order for us humans and, especially for the minjung to become and remain human with both tears and laughter.

EPILOGUE

After a day of hard work, a group of Christian students working in an inner city slum area got together in a cheap wine house. They exchanged their successes and failures of the day fuming and laughing. One of them began to whisper, "Hey, I have the latest." Everyone

became quiet to hear the latest “rumor.” “According to the latest discovery of the Biblical scholarship,

Three days after the Crucifixion, the resurrected Jesus appeared in front of the disciples and said to Peter, “Surprised?” Peter looked up at Jesus and answered, “Don’t make me laugh!”

The students called the rumormonger “s.o.b.,” laughed heartily, and said good-bye to each other.

Lecture 3: THEOLOGY WITH SWEAT, TEARS, AND LAUGHTER

Rev. Chang-Geun Song was a theologian-pastor-sage, popular among the young Christian students in the 1930s through the 1940s in Korea. There were always a large number of young disciples gathered around him.

One day, one of the disciples came to him with tears in his eyes. “What’s the matter?” asked the guru. After collecting himself the young man answered, “You see, that girlfriend of mine has betrayed me and is engaged to another man. I am so mad. I don’t know what to do. Oh, I hate her, I really do. I want to kill her.” He began to cry. “You bastard” thundered the voice of Rev. Song with anger, “you bastard! If you really hate her that much why don’t you kill her? If you are a man, don’t you ever appear in front of me again without killing her, you bastard. Get the hell out of here.” He literally kicked the boy out of his house.

A couple of weeks later the boy came back to him with a smile on his face. “Did you kill her?” asked the master. The boy’s answer was “No, sir, I have realized how much I loved her and I still do love her very much. I couldn’t kill her.” “Hm, that’s good,” the master nodded his head smiling.

This is one of the Korean sage’s ways of communicating and counselling.

THEOLOGY TASTES LIKE “CHEWING SAND”

After the first semester of my theological schooling in Japan, I made a visit to Rev. Song to pay my respect. “What does it taste like to study theology, young man?” he asked me. I did not know how to answer the question without knowing whether he was serious or joking.

Noticing my hesitation he answered his own question, “Hm, it tastes like chewing sand, doesn’t it?” I just smiled.

In retrospect both my theological studies and my professional life as a theologian tasted like “chewing sand” for many years to come. There was not much excitement or fun in them. This evening I would like to relate to you how I have come to discover excitement and fun in a theological career.

When I was in high school I was preparing for an entrance examination at a medical school in Seoul. In the meantime my minister father died. Several days later my mother told me that my father expressed his wish before his death that one of his sons would follow his father’s footsteps. I was the eldest of the sons. According to the traditional filial piety, I was supposed to inherit my father’s profession. Being a faithful son, without thinking any further, I said, “Yes, mother, I will do it’ I switched my preparation from pre-med to theology. The switching involved some political and personal risks. The Christian churches were the promoters and the channels of nationalist sentiments and activities against the Japanese colonial rule. No worship service, prayer meeting, or revival meeting would go without some reference to Exodus and Moses. The churches were put under surveillance and were being harassed by the Japanese colonial government. On the other hand, the medical profession was a guarantee for a good income without any risk of getting involved in the nationalist movement. My filial piety made me decide on the spot to take up theological training as a career.

Again, out of my filial piety, I entered Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan for my theological education; it was the Methodist institution from which my father graduated. At the time the seminary was dominated by theological liberalism with a very strong pietistic atmosphere. Theological subjects and the course contents sounded beautiful. Everything in the world was going to be fine eventually. When the best elements of Western culture are further developed and spread universally the Kingdom will come. But the learning I was getting at the seminary would not jibe with the realities I was experiencing and observing. I thought of the Korean situation under the colonial rule of the Japanese empire which had become “westernized” most recently. I regularly visited Korean churches in Japan which were located in ghettos. These were not ghettos because of the Korean communities there but because they were the areas where the Japanese outcasts called *burakumin* had been living. The ghettos were the only place where the Koreans were allowed to take up residence. Once in a while I went to see the settlement houses built by Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese Christian socialist, for homeless bums and drunkards. I even

made a few visits with other students to red-light districts. The seminary teaching was far removed from all these realities I was experiencing and observing. Yet, in spite of the contradictions, I remained a dutiful student trying to follow my father's footsteps.

In the early 1950s I came to Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr was here. He seemed to be a roaring lion, thundering from the mountain top at the power holders and intellectual ideologues for their sins of hybris. His theological realism and his style of lecturing and preaching were exciting. I felt for the first time that theology had something to do with the reality we lived in. And that made me excited. And yet, after a while I began to have a sneaking suspicion that the prophetic message and attitude of this Niebuhrian neoorthodoxy had some element of pride of its own. It did not matter. I still remained a faithful student. Upon my return home from Union I was making a professional living, selling mainly Niebuhr's ideas. The *Moral Man and Immoral Society* seemed to be powerful and exciting, and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* enlightening sources for the democratic nation-building of Korea. My theological business was quite profitable.

In the middle of the 1960s I came back to Union, in order to pursue "continuing education" and to look for some new merchandise, as a fellow of the Program of Advanced Religious Studies. In one of the seminar classes led by George Webber I had to make a book report on Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. At the first reading my response was how could one remain a Christian with such a theology. At the second reading, my feeling was "hm, maybe?" After the third reading I decided that this was it. The reason was not the theological content but the way he approached the problem, starting from the analysis of the secular city, "starting from the other end," and trying to relate it to the Biblical message. I went home with a vague idea of starting anew not from the American secular city, but from the historical reality of Korea. Back at home I began to sell secularization theology, with *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox and *Honest to God* by J.A.T. Robinson as the main texts for the students in churches and at universities.

One day I was casually watching a performance of Korean folk dances by a group of women students at the auditorium of the university where I was teaching. From the early days of my life I was trained by missionary teachers, the church, and my faithful Christian parents to despise traditional Korean folk songs and dances, for they were supposedly not only inferior in quality compared with classic western music but also immoral because they have something to do with sex and wine-drinking. I was also warned against them by the

Japanese colonial education, for they were subversive against the Japanese imperial policy of “integration.” We learned only classical Western music and dance in both churches and schools. Even now I know how to appreciate Western classical music. I enjoy listening to it. But I was left completely ignorant of traditional Korean music and dance, especially the folk songs. That was why I was just casually watching the performance. Suddenly I realized that my shoulders and hips were moving in response to the rhythm of the music and dance. I was shocked. But soon I felt happy, for I began to realize that I was still really a Korean in my body, although my brain might have been Westernized. For the first time in my life I discovered the contradiction in me between my body and my Western theological thinking.

SWEAT

In 1961 a military coup occurred. The military, being the most technologized segment of Korea due to the Korean War, put their “modernization” program into effect. The primary objective was economic development through industrialization. To realize the objective, cheap labor and cheap food stuffs were needed. In order to obtain them the agricultural sector had to be sacrificed. The one-sided U.S. aid such as surplus food obviously contributed to such a policy. The squeezed-out farmers and peasants began to move into the urban and the industrial areas as job seekers, especially young people in their teens. The rural population was reduced from about 70% to 30% in 20 years’ time. The social dislocation was beyond imagination. The cities began to be dotted with slums and squatters’ areas, with people always under the threat of eviction. Industrial areas began to be ridden with new problems: inhuman working conditions, long working hours, occupational diseases, sub-subsistence wages, etc. Gaps between the haves and the have-nots grew bigger and bigger as fast as the GNP grew. With protest demonstrations, sabotage, and strikes, the unrest spread. The political control became severer. Dissenting opinions and voices were crushed by tighter control over the opposition political activities, including the protest movements of the students and the poor workers, and the mass media.

Some Christians began to respond to the rapidly deteriorating situations. One form of response was the creation of urban missions, industrial missions, and rural missions. These missions switched their strategy from traditional evangelization methods to new action-oriented organizational movements. Community organizations in slum areas and labor organizations in industrial areas began to be formed.

Through these organizations, young mission workers, with the help of outside specialists and voluntary workers, taught the people constitutional rights, labor laws, labor history, labor-management relations, economics, and other cultural topics, with Bible studies, worship services, and prayer meetings added to the program when requested by the workers.

The young mission workers felt that their projects were not working as well as they had expected. For instance, in the case of community-organization movements, they adopted Alinsky methods which were considered to be the best of all available models at the time in Korea. They did not work and could not work in Korean setting, however, because the Minsky methods presupposed American-style democracy, the democratic system, laws, regulation, and an atmosphere which were lacking in Korea. As soon as one begins to try to harass the landlords or the employers, he or she is liable to be apprehended immediately as a public nuisance or a violator of public peace and order. There was another problem, a problem of communication. The western terminology (translated into Korean) which these young mission workers were using, and the Western way of organizing, did not make much sense to the poor workers who had just come from the rural areas. The mission workers began to ask theologians and other Christian intellectuals for help. Their request consisted of three parts. One was to provide them with theologico-critical rationale and support for what they were doing. The second was to provide them with a better means of communication that would make sense to the poor working people. The third was for the theologians to come and get involved, experience the reality and learn, and teach, and talk with the people directly instead of keeping a respectable distance.

Another form of response on the part of the Christians to the situation was the activities of the Korea Student Christian Federation. The Federation organized a Student Social Service Corps. the members, both boys and girls, went into inner city slums or industrial squatters' areas in groups of three or four and lived there like any other poor young people for a month or so during vacation periods. They were not to evangelize, not to teach nor even to serve, but only to experience and observe while living with the poor like any other poor ones. They came back "conscientized." In 1970, a young worker in a garment district committed suicide by burning himself to death in public. His own income was not too bad, but the teenage girls who were working under him were too poorly paid to subsist and their working conditions were inhuman. He had tried to help these girls. He had gone to the employer, to the trade union office, to the government labor office, and to the police, asking for enforcement of at

least the existing labor laws and regulations. He was not only unable to find any sympathetic ears but was mistreated everywhere as a trouble-maker. He killed himself in frustration and in protest. Attitudes of university students became inflamed. They were hit by a guilty conscience, especially when they read his diary which narrates with agonizing sadness how he wanted to go to a university for further education, how he envied those students enjoying the life of academic learning, etc. The students began to demand social justice in addition to the political freedom they were asking for, combining their movement with the trade union movement. The government became more apprehensive. The students too, especially those related to the Korea Student Christian Federation, were asking theologians to provide them with theological rationale and moral support for what they were doing.

Thirdly, a Human Rights Commission was set up in the Korean National Christian Council. Not only the urban-industrial-rural mission workers, students, and Christian intellectuals including theologians, but also the inner city poor and the industrial workers who were protesting, began to be put under surveillance as potential subversives. They began to be accused of being disturbers of peace and order, of being subversive with an intent to overthrow the government and of being communistic, communist sympathizers, or even communists. The last two crimes could bring one to death. They began to be harassed, arrested, put on trial, put in prison, and/or expelled from their jobs. The Human Rights commission defended the movements for freedom and justice of all kinds, appealed for democratic reform of government, and aided those harassed and arrested, those on trial and in prison, and those expelled from jobs. The Commission too asked the theologians to participate actively in their work.

Partly moved by the front-line mission workers and the students, some of us theologians, though scared, lectured and wrote articles as we used to do from an intellectual-theological plateau. The knowledge we garnered from limited reading of various theologies-political theology, theology of revolution, liberation theology of Latin America, black theology of North America, feminist theology, theologies of play and of ecology, in addition to the Niebuhrian neo-orthodox social ethics-was utilized. These books on progressive theologies were not easily available, due to both the politico-ideological control and the foreign exchange regulation. We had to be content with books available at the time, passed from hand to hand. We dealt with current issues, too, such as human rights, political freedom, social justice, polarization between haves and have-nots, discrimination against women, multi-national corporations, the neo-colonialist invasion of business by Japan, the East-West conflict in relation to the unification of

the nation, etc.

At the same time, a small informal study group was organized. It was composed of political scientists, economists, sociologists, literary writers and critics and theologians, both Catholic and Protestant. The study group's concern was centered around minjung, the underdogs in Korea, who and what they were and are in our history as well as in the current reality, what their problems are under present socio-politico-economic conditions, what their place and role are to be in the future of Korean history. Bits of learning we picked up in the study group were also utilized in our activities. We acted as lecturers, writers, consultants, counsellors, advisors, observers, evaluators, and workers for the poor, for the young workers, for the students, for the mission workers, and for the human rights workers. Each of us became a jack-of-all-trades. Before long we found ourselves deeply involved. It was scary.

The mainline churches and academic colleagues began to maintain a certain distance from us. The students were complaining that we were still too scared and cowardly and conservative. The mission workers told us that our ideas were still foreign and abstract, not concrete enough. The response of the inner-city poor and the young workers was difficult to read. They would often profusely thank us for our work and help, smiling and making deep bows. Yet once in a while we would catch a certain coolness or blandness in the deep of their eyes or in some corner of their facial expressions. We could even sense some anger and distrust behind their smiles. It was disturbing and discouraging, especially in the light of the fact that we had been risking our necks for them. For me, it was driving me crazy.

Chung-Joon Lee, a Korean novelist, described such a predicament of "elites" beautifully in his novel, *Your Kingdom (Not Ours)*. A newly appointed director of a leper colony proposes a project through which the lepers' living standard would be radically improved. The lepers don't respond. After a long process of threats and persuasions he wins their cooperation. He overcomes a lot of hurdles. Yet something always goes wrong between him and the lepers. Finally he resigns from his post and later comes back to the colony as an ordinary resident. He is invited to give a congratulatory speech at a wedding between a healthy girl and a cured leper, symbolizing a union or solidarity being achieved among the people themselves between the healthy and the cured sick, the outcaste. The hero misses the wedding while practicing his speech and ends up becoming really crazy. In the novel, the readers are told that the lepers remember that all the directors who put through "constructive" projects to completion with the labor of the lepers, ended up having their own statues built with little contribution

to the welfare of the lepers themselves.

The underdog minjung's distrust of the intellectuals, divine or secular, was not mere "hermeneutical suspicion." It was an existential distrust enfolded in their bodies, accumulated over many generations. It was deeper than any kind of theological realism. It made us wonder if that is why Jesus' sharpest diatribes and curses were directed against the Pharisees and scribes, the religious and intellectual elites who were supposedly closest to the people, and not against the Roman rulers, the Herodeans, or the priests.

Their distrust was humiliating, hurting and painful. It even made me angry. We had to sweat trying to do something for the minjung people. We had to sweat under the surveillance and pressures from outside. Worst of all, we had to sweat because of the painful humiliation.

TEARS

Most of these theologians, the "minjung Theologians," have been either imprisoned or expelled from their professional positions. While on the job they were too busy "selling" their "theological learning" professionally. They had little time for other things. But once fired or imprisoned, several of us delved into Korean history and culture. When we were students under the Japanese colonial rule we were not allowed to study Korean history. When in the seminary, we were too busy learning European history in order to understand church history better.

We studied Korean history, especially from the writings of those specialists who applied socio-economic analytical methods to their subjects. We tried to see the history not merely as that of kings, generals, aristocrats, and intellectual elites but more as the story of minjung, the people who composed the majority of the population throughout history, that is, as a social biography of minjung. We tried to read the history from the bottom up, from the perspective of the underdogs rather than from that of the top-dogs.

To our surprise, we discovered that minjung the underdogs in Korean history were not as docile and quiet as respectable genteel people tended to think and tell us. They kept fighting back in order to remain as human as anyone else. The history was a story of minjung people engaged in incessant revolts, rebellions, banditries, and revolutions. Some of the bandits were called "righteous bandits." They were Robin Hood type highway-men who robbed the wealthy and the corrupt and distributed the harvest to the poor. The slaves and peasants

attacked not only the despotic rulers and corrupt officials but also the unjust structures and policies, asking for drastic changes. Their movements were full of utopian visions and messianic expectations. They were not powerless or stupid.

When not involved in fighting, the minjung were not a “silent majority” either. Through their paintings, songs, stories, *pansori* (oneman opera), and mask dances, they were lamenting over their miserable lot and expressing their hopes and wishes. They were singing, narrating, and dancing the incongruities of reality. They were laughing at and ridiculing not only the religious and secular establishment but also their own ludicrousness under the system. They were even laughing at their own religion, shamanism, as a cheat. They were critical and, at the same time, they were able to celebrate their life.

We read some of the diaries and letters and some of the compositions made by young workers as a part of their homework for the night schools they were attending. We also listened to their testimonies made in prayer meetings and special worship services. They were stories about how they were squeezed out of their homes in the villages, how they were cheated and sold by employment brokers (in the case of some girls), how they were being mistreated and exploited, stories of how they have been “sinned against” by the society. One could feel their *han* being communicated. “Han” means

a sense of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against a feeling of the total abandonedness (“Why hast thou forsaken me?”), a feeling of acute pain of sorrow in one’s guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wriggle, and an obstinate urge to take “revenge” and to right the wrong—all these combined.

We were forced to realize the historical sins of Korean society weighing heavily on these young boys and girls. We began to see the image of the Suffering Servant superimposed on them.

We kept frequenting the slum areas. Every time we approached the areas we began to smell the stench. The dirty toilet was unbearable. It made us almost vomit and turn sick. The food we wished they wouldn’t offer us. Yet we had to bear with all these. The mission offices were established in rented rooms of small shacks made of used crates and tins. People would crowd in and squeeze into the rooms, exchange information, mostly rumors and gossip, jokes and curses, discuss and argue problems and issues, and occasionally pray and worship together.

Once in a while we would observe or participate in their celebrations of birth, wedding, or death. Yes, even death. They were people

who would have to worry about their next meal, yet they would chip in whatever they had left. They would eat, drink, make jokes, and sing together and help make the occasion celebrative. It was very human and beautiful. There was a strong sense of common destiny and fellowship.

We shed tears and even wept sometimes. We began to feel quite sad when confronted with the extreme poverty and misery and the unimaginable hardship and suffering of the people on the bottom of society. We shed tears when we witnessed a revelation, a revelation of the true humanity, the power, the wisdom and the liberty of the humanity of the Suffering Servant behind the masks of the “powerless, foolish and ugly” faces of the people. We were witnessing “the treasure in earthen vessels 2’ There were also tears that came out of our guilty consciences, the guilt, if not of our own commission, then of non– commission in the sense that we had been the beneficiaries for generations of the historical reality of unjust structures and policies which crushed them, and that we had been acquiescent. They were tears of repentance. Best of all, we could not help shedding tears when some of the poor and the young students tried to comfort us in our own misfortunes of being harassed, imprisoned, or expelled. We wept holding each other’s hands and trying very hard not to show any tears, commiserating with each other’s misfortune mixed with one’s own.

Shedding tears together had some miraculous effects on us. Please allow me to illustrate such effects with my personal experience. My father passed away, when I was 15 with four younger brothers and a sister. People came to express their condolences. Some well–meaning church members were saying, “Mrs. Hyun, accept it as the will of God, and be comforted. And try to make plans for a new life with the children 2’ “Yes, of course, thank you,” meekly responded my mother with a vague and cool smile. I felt terribly angry. Others came, held my mother’s hands and wept without saying anything. My mother burst out crying. She poured out her tears and everything in her system. So did I. In later years I came to realize what the tears shed together then and there did to my mother. They helped her clean the pain and sorrow out of her system. They deepened her fellowship with those who wept with her. The tears were koinonia building. They enabled her to start a new life with her children.

LAUGHER

Shedding tears together was immediately followed by smiling and

laughing together. It just happened. It is hard to explain how. The minjung people seemed to keep on doing what they had been doing for generations, discussing ways and means of combatting oppressive and exploitative structures and policies in order to regain their basic rights as human beings granted them by God. They once in while even utilized the words and ideas that we had been using in our lectures and discussions. We began to realize that our sweating was not useless after all and that we were being accepted by them, at least that much if not in full. At least we felt we saw a thaw in their distrust, or a vision of a thaw. Such a realization or a feeling made us less stiff and less worried regarding our roles as theological intellectuals at a certain distance. We could relax quite a bit. We began to laugh.

We went in with prophetic intentions, though with fearful and trembling hearts, but came out having been comforted and warmed by the priestly role of the minjung people through tears. We went in in order to do something to or for them, but came out having felt something done to us. We went in to conscientize them, but came out having been conscientized by them. We went in for the purpose of bringing them back to human community, but came out having been accepted into their koinonia. We looked like fools and began to enjoy the status of being fools. It was a conversion experience. It was an experience of the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, a “realized eschatology” I suppose that is why we began to laugh.

Of course, we knew that this was not the end. It was not yet perfect and full. It was a vision of perfection and fulfillment. A day would come when it would be consummated. It provided something for us to hope for concretely in the future in spite of the seemingly hopeless situation. It was a promise. The promise did not come from the future, but oozed out of historical engagement and happenings. It enabled us to make up our minds anew. Until that last day comes we would try our best to keep on joyfully weating, shedding tears, and laughing.

At this juncture I would like to insert a couple of notes. One is that sweating, shedding tears, and laughing were not sequential stages but synchronous most of the time. Quite often we did not know whether we were weeping or laughing. Probably we were doing both at the same time. Second, I seemed to have melodramatized the story a bit. In the process of being converted by the minjung, I have come to appreciate the significance of melodrama. The underdog people in Korea love to weep and shed tears. They have too much “han,” accumulated pains, sorrows, and resentments, and too many pent-up tears in their systems. They have to release them as much and as often as possible to maintain their health. It is the same with women

as underdogs everywhere. The victims carry the wound in their bodies and can never forget the pain. But the inflictors enjoy their conquests momentarily and forget what has happened right and left. A rapist would be a good example. Through education I was trained to ignore and despise my body, the feeling, the emotion, and the passion. Melodrama was something for sissies or sentimental fools. Maybe that is why the idea of “the theatre of cruelty”—the idea of physically hurting and shocking the insensible modern audience into their senses—came into being. It has not been the intellectual discussion of body but the poor oppressed people and women that taught me the importance of body and even to appreciate the meaning of melodrama.

THEOLOGY TASTES LIKE BITTER-SWEET WINE

When I saw the image of the Suffering Servant as pictured by a collage of biblical passages being superimposed on the minjung people we had come to know, the biblical passages became meaningful and alive. The theological idea of “promise” remained wishful thinking, even a superstition, until I experienced sweat, tears, and laughter. It was the “praxis” that made both the biblical passages and the theological statements alive. For us the “praxis” meant not only the prophetic sweating but also the priestly shedding tears and the royal laughter. Theology has become not mere intellectual speculation or an esthetic appreciation of the workings of God in history but an artistic creation. Theology tastes like bitter-sweet wine to me today. It makes one a bit drunk and spiritually possessed. It loosens your muscles and makes you mingle with other bodies. It makes you a fool, a fool for Christ. Theology is exciting and fun. I only regret that it took me so long to be able to come out with a positive answer to the question raised by Rev. Song. I often feel that I must be quite retarded as a theological student.

Notes

1. Kim Yong Bok, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, Singapore, Commission on Theological Concern of the Christian Conference of Asia, 1981, p.155.
2. Tribble, Phyllis, “A Meditation in Mourning: The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 36, 1981.
3. Pyun Tai Sup, “Manjuknan Balsaning-ui Sahwaejuk Soji” (Social

- Background of Manjuk Rebellion), Pulbit Editors, ed., *Juntong Sidae-ui Minjung Undong* (Minjung Movement in the Traditional Society), Seoul, Pulbit, 1981, Vol. I.
4. Lee Gi-Baik, *Hankuksa Shinlon* (Korean History: A New Study), Seoul, Ilchokak, 1976, p.341.
 5. *Ibid.*, pp. 455,456.
 6. See Hyun, Younghak, "A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea," in Kim Yong Bok, *Ibid.*
 7. Kim Chi Ha, *The Gold-Crowned Jesus & Other Writings*, trans. Kim Chong Sun and Killen, Shelly, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1978, p.25.
 8. Kim Chi Ha, *The Middle Hour: Selected Poems of Kim Chi Ha*, trans. by David R. McCann, Stanfordville, N.Y., Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980. pp.33ff.
 9. Kim Yong Bock, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, p.87
 10. *Ibid.*, p.88.
 11. *Ibid.*, pp.87,88.
 12. *Ibid.*, p.89.
 13. "Dokaebi" is another supernatural being like the ghost. But unlike the ghost who resembles real people, Dokaebi has his own features. He is tall, has horns on top of his head, and the whole body is painted red. Usually he plays havoc on people, mostly jokes, in the dark of night. By the time you discover that you have been cheated and misled during the confusion of the night, the Dokaebi is already gone, but you can hear his chuckles and laughter.
 14. See Kim Chi Ha, "The Gold-Crowned Jesus," *The Gold-Crowned Jesus And Other Writings*, trans. by Kim Chong Sun and Killen, Shelly, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1978.