

Theological Forum Issue

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Contemporary Theological Issues

Current Theological Issues in Korea

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Christianity in Korea began with the arrival of American, Canadian, and Australian missionaries in the late 19th century at a time when the dominant religion, Buddhism, was being repressed by Korea's last dynasty. Today about one-fourth of South Korea's 44 million people have become Christians. There are 60,000 Christian churches in South Korea in 1998. In spite of the rapid growth of Korean Christianity, recently the external growth of Korean churches has declined. Theology in Korea has developed in the various forms for one hundred years. In this paper I deal with current theological issues in Korea.

Minjung theology is universally recognized as a genuine Korean theology. But it did not receive the entire support from all Korean churches because it was first initiated by a few liberal theologians. It is not easy to clarify the meaning of the word 'minjung'. Generally speaking, it means "the masses or the people who are politically oppressed, economically exploited, socially alienated and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters."[1](#)

Minjung theology has grown out of the socio-political situation of Korean society in the middle of 1970s, specially the dictatorship of Jung Hee Park and his repression.[2](#)

But many evangelical theologians attacked Minjung theology because it had many problems in the interpretation of Scripture and was against Korea's orthodoxy theology. Although there has been this negative aspect, Minjung theology's influences appear in many areas. Specifically, many conservative Korean churches now pay attention to Christian ethics and society and polity. Minjung theology's influence has let Korean Christians, who had emphasized the salvation of an individual, play a greater role in Korea's society.

Minjung theologians recently announced the popularization of Minjung theology. In the commemoration of death of Bung Moo Ahn, the father of Minjung theology, they had a seminar and decided to popularize it. They concluded that the first generation of Minjung theology was that of witness, and that the second generation of Minjung theology was that of movement. They as the third generation proposed to theorize the social movement of Christianity to apply Minjung theology to Korean churches through spirituality. Lately, younger Minjung theologians are investigating the plurally actual problems in theory and *Sitz im Leben*, and rework them from the interpretation of the national horizon of the first and second generations into the whole global horizon. The main interests of the young generation are not only these points of dispute, but also the new media, the network of information, culture, sexual discrimination, and public culture. They attempt to present the new model of church, the shift of paradigm of theology, and the role of church in society.

The economic situation in the early nineteen-seventies helped Pentecostal/Charismatic churches emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit. By accepting the theology of prosperity and the charismatic works of the Holy Spirit as a standard of true Christian faith, Pentecostal churches have grown remarkably. For example, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, the world's largest church, has a congregation of 700,000 members. This movement was criticized strongly by Presbyterian Churches. Even many pastors recognized this charismatic movement of the Holy Spirit as heretical because the followers of this movement insisted on the baptism in the Holy Spirit for receiving the power and the charisma of the Holy Spirit. Many theologians pointed out that in order to receive the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, pentecostalism emphasized a human skill rather than the sovereign grace of God. However Pentecostal churches have had a great influence on the importance of prayer for all believers in Korea. This movement gave rise to debates among the conservative Presbyterian theologians and brought a few foreign scholars to Korea. In 1996 Harvey Cox, who wrote *Fire under Heaven*, visited Korea and debated about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit with a few Korean scholars and 1000 pastors. In the conference with the theme of "The Holy Spirit and Church Renewal," he said, "We are living in the times of the global movement of the Holy Spirit." He diagnosed today's religious situation as the rebirth of the Holy Spirit and the return of the repressed. He maintained, "When the Holy Spirit as the Savior and the Giver of life has an important role in the world, the Holy Spirit movement becomes sound and suitable." However, he pointed out that the Holy Spirit movement of Korean churches, including Pentecostal churches, was rooted in Shamanism. Many Korean theologians defended the fact that generally Korean theology was not Shamanistic, but biblical and sound. Most Korean theologians and congregations, although they do not hold the Pentecostal doctrine of the Holy Spirit, believe that the Holy Spirit works in their lives here and now, and can heal sickness and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They have a flexible perspective on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Indigenization theology has been developed by radical theologians of Korea. In the 1960s a movement of liberal theology has began to understand the Gospel by means of the Korean situation rather than by means of the Western tradition,^{[3](#)}

and called it indigenization theology. Methodist theologians started to develop this theology through studies of the traditional culture of Korea. One of the pioneers of indigenization theology was Sun Whan Pyun, who insisted on the need for Christian-Buddhist dialogue and religious pluralism.[4](#)

But prof. Pyun was accused of heresy by many Methodist evangelists in 1982 and was expelled from the Methodist church in 1993.[5](#)

Indigenization theology means to koreanize Western Christianity by means of the cultural soil of Korea. A few theologians point out that how far Korean churches should practice indigenization theology in the culture of Confucianism and Buddhism will be found through the unavoidable grace of God. Korean churches have as a future task doing indigenization theology.

Theology of church growth has caused Korean theologians considerable debate today. The fast growth and the mammoth size of Korean churches have impacted the pastoral consciousness of Korean theologians and some pastors. They thought that the success of ministry was related to the visible work of church rather than the invisible work of church. There are three aspects on this issue. First, the shamanistic orientation of Korean Christianity offered this wrong perspective.[6](#)

Generally speaking, Koreans have the shamanistic consciousness in the inner mind because Koreans as descendants of Altai, the father of Shamanism in Asia, have had shamanic culture for five thousand years. In Korea shamanism connects with material blessings and healing for the sick. Therefore Korean Christians who have been accustomed to this tradition have looked for visible blessings from God. Secondly, Robert Schuller's positive thinking influenced Korean pastors in their poverty. Many pastors under the influence of this thinking said, "we can do everything with having positive thinking." This thought led Korean pastors to use all the nonbiblical and secular ways for the growth of church. Thirdly, Donald A. McGavran's pragmatism of the church-growth challenged them.[7](#)

This church-growth strategy has had a great influence on Korean pastors. The result of their emphasis on the outward growth of church have made Korean churches weak.

Recently there was a big meeting on spiritualism. About 500 pastors attended it and realized the importance of spirituality in this time. Korean pastors and theologians think that in order to overcome the crisis of Korean church lately, they should recover the spiritual power of Christianity. They emphasize that Korean theology should develop spiritual theology for Korean church. But a few presbyterian theologians reject the movement of spirituality in Korea.

Feminist theology is a hot issue in Korea. The two representative Korean Presbyterian denominations oppositely expressed their strong positions on the ordination of women. One of them, the Tonghap, has supported this issue and has produced the women pastors. In this side feminist theology also has been accepted naturally and positively.

But Hapdong side rejects the ordinance of women and deals with feminist theology negatively.

Now Korean theologians start to deal with religious pluralism, New Age movement, theology of ecology, and theology of the unification of South Korea and North Korea. Korean theology will be diversified in postmodernism.

1 Jung Young Lee, "Korean Christian Thought," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1993), p. 312.

2 Heung Soo Kim, "Is Christianity a Korean Religion?: One Hundred Years of Christianity in Korea," *Theology and Field* (1997), p. 124.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid .

6 Ibid., p. 125.

7 Ibid.

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