

My minjung theological journey

Yong-Bock Kim

"I became a young Christian devotee and activist who prayed ardently and participated in the activities of church school, choir, worship and prayer meetings", writes the Presbyterian theologian Yong-Bock Kim about his conversion to Christian faith. And he adds: "My faith was fused with the Korean people's deep consciousness and celebration of the liberation from Japanese colonial domination". One of the early articulators of Minjung theology, Kim has dedicated his life, marked by theological, ecumenical and political engagement, to the popular movement struggling for the transformation of Korean society. The author of Minjung and Christianity, and Messiah and Minjung: Christ's Solidarity with the People for New Life, he was the moderator of the Department of Theology of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1997-2004. "Now I am entering into my intellectual witness to justice, peace and life in the 21st century", he wrote recently. "This is centred on the integral study of life of all living beings in the cosmos."

It is customary in Minjung theology to share social biographies for theological reflection with our students. The following is a reflection on my theological journey in the context of my social biography.

My birth in Korea during the period of Japanese colonial domination provided the essential pivot of my life and my theology. That was in 1937, the year Japan invaded China, using Korea as its launching pad for war. My father and his youngest brother had been conscripted into a coal mining labour camp as truck drivers. My mother had grown up in a rural village of southwest Korea, the seedbed of historic rebellions.

When my father passed away in 1944, my mother was widowed at the young age

of 27, with two children. The following year, according to my grandmother's wish, my family moved from my birthplace (Nampo) to a village (Juksan) in the neighbouring district, where my aunt lived. It was there that I became a Christian, just before the Korean War in 1950, when I was a student in middle school. My uncle - one of my mother's brothers - was a Christian; and my aunt - my father's elder sister - was a Christian. I was led to the church by my cousin, the son of that aunt.

My faith experiences at that young age had a deep influence on my life: I deeply experienced the love of God through the church school at Juksan Presbyterian Church. I became a young Christian devotee

and activist who prayed ardently and participated in the activities of church school, choir, worship and prayer meetings. This experience became the “umbilical cord” of my faith and my life journey.

My faith was fused with the Korean people’s deep consciousness and celebration of the liberation from Japanese colonial domination. Heroic stories of Korea’s liberation and independence struggles had blossomed in my school and made a deep impression in my heart. At that young age I resolved to dedicate my life to my people, a resolve that was in essence my devotion to God, who loved me, my family and my people. In spite of dire poverty, my mother supported my younger sister and me through her labours in the local market. Her support was a manifestation of God’s love in my life. In the context of my family, my church and my school, Jesus’ sacrificial love was what moved my heart and led me to study and to dedicate my life to my people in Korea. This was the mainstream of my life journey as a youth; it led me to the study of philosophy at university, in preparation for the study of theology.

My university days sustained my growth in faith and historical consciousness. Yonsei University provided me with a context that supported vital faith, profound intellectual development and active social involvement. The chapel with its high intellectual discourses on faith, the Student Christian Movement and the University Y, the social centre that taught the children of poor refugee families, and the church of the poor

near the campus provided me with an environment of rich experiences. The culmination of my activities was my involvement in the April 19, 1960 Student Revolutionary Movement, which overthrew the dictatorship of Syngman Rhee and was followed by the university democratization movement. This experience became my anchor in the world of history and revolutionary dynamics in Korea, Asia and the world, and has had a lasting imprint on my life journey and my theological orientation.

My studies in the department of philosophy of the college of humanities at Yonsei broadened my intellectual horizons in the areas of philosophy, literature and theology of the East and the West. All these helped me prepare for my theological studies. My teachers were my greatest blessings, for they were former revolutionary leaders with clear historical consciousness, as well as Western-trained scholars and intellectuals of the highest integrity and academic calibre.

All young Korean men had to serve in the military, and I joined the ROK Air Force. I suffered an inner conflict over the question of war. Fortunately I was assigned to the military chaplain’s office, which allowed me to deal with my problems. I was a latent pacifist, with no courage to come out with an explicit stance. I avoided the military exercise of practice shooting. I have always believed in the military as an instrument of peacemaking, not as an instrument of war. This has influenced my participation in the

movement against the military dictatorship and my participation in the peace movement against war in general, not just in Korea.

My studies at Princeton Theological Seminary endowed the formative years of my intellectual and theological journey with multiple blessings. From the beginning, I was determined to do Asian theology, within the framework of “the gospel and culture”. I began with the quest for indigenization of the gospel in East Asian civilization. Princeton encouraged this, providing me with a full scholarship for six years (B Div and PhD); it granted me maximum freedom to chart my own academic studies in the context of East Asia, as well as to concentrate my studies in the broad theological horizon of the West. I studied with a high degree of concentration about the lives and theologies of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Albrecht Ritschl, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Sigmund Freud, Arnold Toynbee, Alfred North Whitehead, and others.

Princeton Seminary also allowed me to deepen my understanding of the history and philosophy of the Western world. For my BD degree I wrote a graduation thesis entitled “Hermeneutics of the Gospel in the Context of Poverty, Disease and Death”, which was an attempt to make the gospel relevant in the context of East Asian civilization, drawing on resources from the East and the West. This was the bridge to my advanced studies. I am very much

indebted to the late President James I. McCord and to the Princeton faculty, who gave me the freedom to do such study. President McCord also organized a community of young scholars from the Third World at Princeton, a group to which I belonged: the special Theological Koinonia. This community, closely associated with the University Christian Movement in the United States, was a base from which the Third World People’s Coalition, composed of Third World intellectuals studying in the United States, was formed. I realize that the members of this community of young Third World scholars are now making a major impact around the world.

Most of all, Princeton Seminary provided critically important support for my multidisciplinary programme with the Asian Studies Programme of Princeton University. My doctorate was an inter-institutional and multidisciplinary programme. This was a special blessing for my theological journey, enabling my study of the modern history of East Asia, which is the context of my theological reflection.

In the 1960s, when I was studying in Princeton, there was a strong antiwar movement in the United States against the Vietnam War. There was as well a strong feminist movement, a strong civil rights and black people’s movement, and the rise of the so-called new left movement, a progressive cultural movement that was related to the others. In the 70s there were movements of liberation theology in Latin America, movements for human rights and

democracy in Asia, movements for ecological integrity, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Some have called this the era of liberation ecumenism. It definitely had a strong influence upon my theological studies and reflection. During this period my teachers, such as Prof. Richard Shaull, influenced my theological thinking, and the United Presbyterian stance against the Vietnam War in the form of the Confession of '67 was a very important example for my own theological stance.

From the early 70s, together with my theological community, I was involved in a historical situation that made me take a theological/faith stance in Korea and in the ecumenical movement. In 1973 I was one of those who stood against the military dictatorship in Korea: I drafted the Theological Declaration of Korean Christians, which was the theological basis for an underground movement for human rights and democracy in and around Korea. This Declaration accompanied the development of Korean Minjung theology, which decisively influenced the Minjung (people's) movement aimed at liberating the Korean people from military dictatorship and development capitalism. The Minjung theology movement in Korea and Asia has been led by a community of theologians involved in the people's struggles for justice, human rights and democracy; I am a member of this community.

Personally, I have been closely associated with Urban, Industrial and Rural Mission in Korea, the United States, Asia

and the global context (WCC). I served as an ecumenical consultant to URM programmes in the United Presbyterian Church USA, the Christian Conference of Asia, and the World Council of Churches that supported grassroots movements of the people - industrial workers, urban poor, rural farmers and ethnic minorities. Thus my ecumenism has been solidly people-centred and people-oriented. This is the ecumenical horizon of my practice of Minjung theology.

In doing Minjung theology, I have taken the historical roots of people's movements of resistance for liberation - the Tonghak Peasant Revolutionary Movement of 1894 and the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919 - as historical pivots for my reflections. I have connected Asian people's movements with these historical pivots and with their counterparts in the histories of the Asian people. The Taip'ing Peasant Movement in 1850-60 and the May Fourth Movement of 1919 in China were both important historical references for my Asian theological reflection.

In the 1980s I became very active in the movement for peace in the Korean peninsula and reunification of the Korean people. I advanced the theology of Jubilee for Korea, by initiating the theological stance of the Declaration of the Korean Churches for Peace on the Korean Peninsula and Reunification of the Korean People. This became the basis of the Korean churches' participation in the movement for peace and reunification of our people in the context of the Cold War. In 1988 the Korean

ecumenical movement with this theological stance declared 1995 as the Jubilee Year for the Korean people.

This process involved a major political struggle against the ideological and political division of the Korean people by the global and national Cold War regime. It coincided with the process of the Covenant for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, initiated by the World Council of Churches. I participated actively in this ecumenical process from 1977, when drafting was begun on the theological stance of the churches for a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society; and I participated in the movement and process of mutual commitment (covenant) to Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC), as a member of the global preparatory group for the World Convocation on JPIC in Seoul in 1990.

Further, there were attempts to formulate a faith stance on economic justice. This led me to the theme of the integral study of life, which began with the ecumenical study of “theology of life”. This theme rose out of the WCC Vancouver General Assembly, whose theme was “Jesus Christ - the Life of the World”. One of my local involvements was the beginning of a Bible Study on Life with the Association of Young Christian Doctors and Nurses in Korea. The background of this was my interest in “reading the Bible with Asian eyes”, inspired in turn by “popular reading of the Bible”. I am keenly interested in the “kairotic reading” of the Bible in the context of the Asian people’s struggles, and this has

led me to do cross-textual reading of the Bible with Scriptures of the Asian religions.

My ecumenical involvement has been extensive. In the 1960s, during my studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, in Princeton, New Jersey, I served as a member of the University Christian Movement in the United States. During this period, I served one time as the NGO representative to the United Nations in New York for the World Student Christian Federation. I was the founding member of the Third World People’s Coalition in the United States, while I served as the President of the Association of Christian Korean Scholars in North America. I participated actively in international mission policy making for the United Presbyterian Church, as an international consultant to the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations and to the National Board of Missions of the UPC-USA; I also served as an international member of the Internationalization Committee of the Frontier Internship Programme of the United Methodist and United Presbyterian Churches in the United States.

After my return to Asia, I served as a WCC-CCA research consultant for the Study of Economic Justice in Asia, and as the founding director of Documentation for Asian Groups in Asia from 1973-1977. This was my work for ecumenical solidarity while I was based in Tokyo as a senior visiting scholar at the Institute of International Relations of Sophia University. My sojourn in Tokyo, Japan, was a time of exile during

which I struggled for democratic revolution against the military dictatorship in Korea. It was also an occasion to participate in similar struggles in the Philippines and India during the early 1970s. This was the beginning of my deep involvement in the ecumenical people's movement. There were opportunities to serve as a member of the Commission of Theological Concerns, and as a research staff to the Urban Industrial Mission of the Christian Conference of Asia. This provided an Asian context for my involvement in developing Minjung theology in Korea and progressive theological movements in Asia.

My Asian ecumenical involvement naturally led me to the global horizon. From 1972 I participated in the WCC meetings of the UIM advisory group and of the Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society (JPSS) workshop. Subsequently I served as a member of the JPSS Working Group on economic matters for the WCC. During this period I served as a tutor at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (1977-1978). At the same time, I was involved in the gatherings of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). In 1972 I attended the Addis Ababa General Assembly as an ecumenical observer, and participated in the European WSCF meeting in Norway. In 1976 I attended the Colombo General Assembly as a keynote speaker as well as a substitute delegate, for the student delegate from Korea could not come due to political suppression. My personal struggle and commitment to the democratic revolution

in Korea was strongly reflected in my global ecumenical involvement.

In the 1980s I became very active in the World Council of Churches. In 1983 I was selected as a delegate to the Vancouver General Assembly, where I was chosen as the Reporter of Section VI on Human Rights; this section was where the incubation of the mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC) took place. I was an active member of the preparatory group for the JPIC World Convocation in Seoul, 1990, and during this same period I served as a vice-moderator of the Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development. It has always been my belief that the issues of justice, participation, peace and the integrity of creation are local, national and continental issues as well as global ecumenical matters. Thus I was immersed in the global ecumenical debates advocating Asian and Third World perspectives.

The year 1990 was momentous, as the 1989 collapse of the Central and Eastern European socialist societies began to have a major impact on the ecumenical movement. In 1990 the World Convocation on JPIC was held in Seoul, Korea; and from then on I intensified my involvement in the Korean movement for national unification and for peace in and around the Korean peninsula. The Declaration of the Korean Churches on Reunification and Peace in the Korean Peninsula had a positive political impact on the process of the South-North Basic Agreement for the reunification of

Korea. The task of reunification was based upon people's participatory politics; therefore, the walls of division and hostility in the hearts and minds of the people, the culture and society, as well as in the geopolitics and political structures, must be overthrown.

I wanted to interpret this historic task in my theology and my leadership in Korean theological education, and consequently in the Asian and global ecumenical movements. I got involved in postgraduate educational programmes, visiting the former socialist countries in Europe and the communist societies in Asia so that our leadership could learn about new missiological tasks. My contacts and exchanges with the China Christian Council, especially Bishop K. H. Ting and his colleagues, were very important for me and my Korean colleagues. During this time, I was deeply involved in the Renewal of Theological Education at the university and graduate school levels. I established the Graduate School of Theology for church leadership, the Asia Pacific Graduate School of Theology and the Graduate School of Diakonia with the above perspective.

In 1997 I was chosen to be a delegate to the Debrecen General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, where I was elected moderator of WARC's Department of Theology. This was a sequel to my participation in the Seoul General Council held in 1989. I was under heavy pressure from the politicized "Christian" leadership in Korea, who closely related

to and supported the Korean military dictatorship. They were concerned that my global leadership would have an adverse impact on their anti-communist policy. My participation in the WARC leadership strengthened my theological passion, especially with respect to the covenanting programme on the issues of economic injustice, peace and ecological integrity. For me this was a natural movement, on the national, continental and global levels. I strongly advocated the covenanting process on these issues which led up to the Accra General Council, the theme of which was "That All may have Life in Fullness". This theme followed that of the WCC in Vancouver and of the Christian Conference of Asia.

It was in this ecumenical context that my theological thinking took a decisive turn towards the Integral Study of Life. The theology of life was the base, but it was too narrow and too isolated from the Third World and from general scientific disciplines. In the year 2000 a group of my colleagues and I began to form an alternative, multidisciplinary mode of theological study. It has three objectives: 1) to overcome the isolation of the theological discipline from other academic disciplines, 2) to overcome the lack of an integral scientific foundation, since modern science is radically fragmented and reductionist, and 3) to lay an integral foundation of science from a spiritual and religious base. This is to serve all the scientific disciplines. This integral study

draws its resources and inspiration from the Asian traditional wisdom of learning as well as from convergent multidisciplinary methods. Our study led to the organization of the Asia Pacific Graduate School for the Study of Life, an alternative way of theological education and research. We look forward to the opening of the school in 2007.

From 2002 I began to participate directly in the ecumenical movement on “Peace for Life”. I proposed the People’s Forum on Peace for Life, and the People’s Charter on

Peace for Life, in the context of the Asian and global peace movement. This led me to participate in the ecumenical efforts to discern “the signs of the times” from the comprehensive framework of global empire. I actively promoted the articulation of this ecumenical perspective at the General Council (Accra, Ghana, 2004) and joined in drafting the Manila Declaration on Global Empire Today (Manila, 2006). I am now in the midst of a wider ecumenical process to draft the People’s Charter on Peace for Life.