

STORIES OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

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STORIES OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

The Theological Journey of
Ahn Byung-Mu in His Own Words

Translated by Hanna In. Edited by Wongi Park

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Note from the Translator

The main text of this volume is a translation of the second edition of *Minjung Shinhak Iyagi*, by Ahn Byung-Mu (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1988). The profile written by Rev. Jin-ho Kim, the introduction written by R. S. Sugirtharajah, and the footnotes supplied by the translators are not part of the original Korean text.

With the names of the translator and editor, “Hanna” and “Wongi” are first (given) names, and “In” and “Park” are last (family) names. This differs from the way names in the translation are represented. For example, with “Ahn Byung-Mu,” “Ahn” is the last (family) name, and “Byung-Mu” is the first (given) name.

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A Profile of Ahn Byung-Mu

Rev. Jin-ho Kim

Ahn Byung-Mu (1922–1996) was a person of faith and an intellectual who fought against injustice.

He started three churches, established four journals, and successfully ran one of the most prominent institutes of theological study in Korea. These churches, journals, and institutes made a significant contribution in the advancement of Korean democracy and human rights.

Since 1975, Ahn led the minjung theology movement together with Suh Nam-dong and others. Minjung theology was at the forefront of the progressive movement of liberal intellectuals. In 1980, after being expelled from his university post for the second time, he organized a minjung studies workshop with other professors who were also dismissed from their position. This workshop invigorated minjung studies in economics, history, sociology, literature, and education.

Ahn started teaching at Hanshin University in 1970 and retired in 1987. Due to his resistance, however, he was expelled from his university position two times for a total of nine years, which included a period of imprisonment. While in prison between 1976 and 1977, he developed a heart condition. In 1985 his health deteriorated and became life-threatening. This made him unable to write. Out of approximately one thousand of his writings, several hundred were dictated orally to his students. The texts produced by his pupils were reviewed by Ahn before publication.

Stories of Minjung Theology is a book based on Ahn's conversations with his students when his health was very poor. However, in this book, more than any other writing before or after, his original and provocative minjung theological insights shine. In this respect, despite its humble origins, this book represents one of Ahn's most important writings on minjung theology.

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Introduction

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Stories of Minjung Theology is an unusual volume. It is a rare autobiography that combines the personal story of Ahn Byung-Mu (one of the leading biblical scholars of his time), his hermeneutical awakening, the Korean nation's history as it went through political upheavals in the 1980s, and the birth of the minjung movement that Ahn helped to shape as it struggled to define its theological purpose and political vision. Such autobiographical reminiscences suffused with profound theological and exegetical reflections are rare in Asian Christian discourse. Readers might find anger, pain, and disappointment in Ahn's recollections, but his message was ultimately rooted in love for the minjung.

Stories of Minjung Theology narrates how a Western-trained academic scholar was forced to rethink his hermeneutical presuppositions in the light of the dramatic social, political, and cultural upheavals that Korea went through in the 1970s. What is clear from reading this volume is that Ahn loved his Bible, Bultmann, Jesus, and minjung—but not necessarily in that order.

I see this book not only as a valuable record of minjung theology, one of the vigorous theologies to emerge in Asia, but also as an excellent testimony and introduction for twenty-first-century readers about the life and theological legacy of Ahn and the resistance movement he helped to shape and develop.

This fascinating story is not told through the conventional method of straight-forward narrative but through several conversations that Ahn had with his students. As he says in the introduction, it was a “product of the collaboration” between him and his young colleagues. The process took nearly two years to complete, and the book came out in 1987. The volume was published at a time when minjung theology was at its peak, and there was a serious lack of a substantial book on its basic theological orientation.

It provided for the first time, in an orderly way, the key elements of minjung theology and a reinterpretation of stock Christian doctrines such as God, creation, the fall, redemption, and salvation from a minjung perspective. One could call it a minjung dogmatics based on a traditional Christian framework.

A number of Korean theologians have considered *Stories of Minjung Theology* to be one of the best works in minjung theological thinking. The Korean version of the book sold more than ten thousand copies. Granted, these figures are not in *The Da Vinci Code* league, but considering the Christian population of that country, it is an enormous achievement. This was one of the rare Christian books that had a wider appeal outside the church, especially among Korean intellectuals. Now, for the first time, the book is available to the English-speaking world, thanks largely to the efforts of the Ahn Byung-Mu Foundation who financed the translation project.

This book devotedly conveys the spirit and the core of minjung theology as a witness to the minjung way of doing theology. It manifestly shows the critical perspectives of Ahn and his students who were living through the exciting and at the same time frustrating years of the minjung movement. It provides answers to questions that Ahn himself, his junior colleagues, and Korean Christians were struggling with and looking for. It adopts an animated form of storytelling, the very method adopted by the minjung to convey the truth and reality of both their wretchedness and their hopes.

This Korean version came out at the height of contextual theologies. This was the golden age of liberation theologies and emancipatory movements. The Americas had the Latin American liberation theologies in the South and the Black theology of liberation in the North. The Caribbean created the theology of emancipation. The Filipinos worked out their theology of struggle, and the Taiwanese, yearning for a homeland, came up with their homeland theology. South Africa produced the Kairos Document, which offered a stringent theological critique of the Apartheid regime. This was the time when identity hermeneutics burst upon the scene. Feminists, Indian Dalits, the Japanese burakumins, and indigenous peoples were engaged in articulating their identities, which were denied and debased. This was also the time when doing theology was seen as a dangerous business, and theologians were jailed, tortured, and even killed. Liberation theologians like Camilo Torres of Columbia and Michael Rodrigo of Sri Lanka were murdered by government forces.

Then there was the brutal killing of six Jesuit scholars and nuns in El Salvador. Their crime was helping the Salvadorian peasants. Ahn himself was imprisoned and psychologically tortured.

These resistance theologies questioned the hegemonic and universalistic tendencies of Western discourse and power politics of the time. Some of them were thinly disguised Marxist influenced discourses. In almost all these writings, Karl Marx's famous words were quoted as a kind of rousing hermeneutical exhortation: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." But minjung theology was different in that it was not only political but also an intensely cultural discourse. Minjung are not the proletariat in the Marxian sense but much more than this socioeconomic description allows. They are cultural bearers. Korean minjung theologians, especially Ahn, who were consistently adamant in refusing to define who the minjung were, have come up with hazy descriptions, such as minjung as "politically oppressed," "economically exploited," "socially alienated," "culturally and intellectually uneducated," but crucially as agents who change society and history. They are, essentially, subjects of history—a phrase that minjung theology made famous. Minjung theology had another noble cause—the unification of Korea. The minjung was the rallying power for those who were manipulated by the small elite in the name of proletariat dictatorship and for those who were deprived by the capitalist system in both North and South Korea. As Ahn told his interviewees, his concern was how to "overcome the reality of the minjung groaning in a divided country? This question has brought minjung theology into being." For Ahn, the minjung was the rallying power to unite the Korean peninsula.

This volume has three parts. In the first, Ahn narrates how his passion for the historical Jesus led him to Germany to study under Rudolf Bultmann, how on his return he quickly realized that Western learning was totally inappropriate for Korea, which was suffocating under military rule, and how he discovered the minjung. The pivotal event that changed Ahn was the self-immolation of Jeon Tae-Il, who died for the cause of workers' rights. The second part consists of the conversations between Ahn and his students, in which they discuss wide ranging issues from the birth of the minjung movement to how Ahn's readings of the Bible were shaped by the minjung experience. The third part contains lectures Ahn gave in Japan, which further explicate Ahn's understanding of the minjung and the refinement of his theological thinking.

There are three things that are fascinating about this volume. First, the level of theological literacy of the Korean readership. The fact that the names of dead Western philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher and theologians like Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann, who reigned supreme at the time when Ahn was pursuing his studies, were introduced without patronizing readers shows a high standard of theological proficiency among Korean Christians. I cannot think of any comparable Asian vernacular theological writings that have references to Karl Barth and Bultmann in one paragraph, at least not in Tamil, my mother tongue. Reading about these theologians gives a retro feel for a generation like mine who were raised on their writings and are now considered and condemned as “male,” “pale,” and “stale.”

Second, we come to know the human side of these very Western masters whom we normally encounter largely through their often dense writings. We see Bultmann, the initiator of demythologization, who spurned anything supernatural, joining in prayers, and how he took it unflappably when he was rebuffed by a pastor who took issue with the German's view on resurrection. We see how Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm urged their colleague Herbert Braun to answer seminar questions that he tried to avoid.

Third, the sensitive side of Ahn, who in his courteous and gracious way, points out where he both aligns with and distances himself from his fellow minjung theologians and from Western theologians, especially his mentor, Bultmann, and those who espoused kerygmatic theology.

The nature of this volume does not permit a lengthy evaluation of Ahn's theological contribution. Moreover, it should be undertaken by a person who is more competent than me, who has access to all his Korean writings. It suffices to say that Ahn will be remembered for two hermeneutical achievements: his exegetical work on the *ochlos* and his search for the historical Jesus. For Ahn, the gospels were about people. While biblical scholars at that time were strenuously arguing about the apocalyptic components of the gospels or about the imminent arrival of or postponement of the kingdom, or were engaged in prophetic predictions fulfilled in Jesus, Ahn reminded them that the gospels were about the people—the minjung. For him, reading the New Testament is to read the lives of the ordinary people. Ultimately, you have to care about the people you encounter daily. He took ordinary, everyday people as the center of the gospels and to the life of Jesus.

The second contribution is his relentless search for the historical Jesus.¹ He undertook this pursuit at a time when the quest for the historical Jesus came to a dead end, especially in Germany where he went to do his research. As he said, the search for the historical Jesus for him was a life-long ambition and task. His search was distinguished in three ways. First, he retrieved Jesus from the kerygmatic language in which he was couched. Ahn's constant mantra had been that "in the beginning there was the event, not the kerygma."² This event was, of course, the actual suffering and resurrection of Jesus. Ahn even blamed the neoliberal theologians for putting blocks to such a search and for making historical events related to Jesus into an abstract idea. Second, Ahn's distinction lay in his rescuing of Jesus from the single savior narrative and making him a collective *persona* whose identity was inseverable from and entwined with that of the minjung. While Bultmann argued for an "existential solidarity with Jesus," Ahn insisted on experiencing Jesus "socially" and "collectively."³ Ahn asserted firmly that such a collective concept or what he called the "sociability" of Jesus, was found in christological titles such as the "Son of Man" and "Son of God." The search for the historical Jesus is part of the social biography of the minjung. His repeated refrain had been: "Where there is Jesus, there is the minjung. And where there is the minjung, there is Jesus."⁴ In other words, Jesus needed the minjung as much as minjung needed him. Third, for Ahn one encountered Jesus only in and through minjung events and not through preaching as the existentialist and individualistic theology of the Word of the time insisted. What was encountered was not the Word demanding existential decision, as the German theologians advocated, but the historical and material life experience of the minjung. He disputed Bultmann's claim that one experienced Jesus through the proclamation in the pulpit.

1. For a detailed analysis of how Ahn's quest for the historical Jesus differed from those of the Western endeavors, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Jesus in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 198–223.

2. Ahn Byung-Mu, "Minjung Theology from the Perspective of the Gospel of Mark," in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Selected Writings by Ahn Byung-Mu and Modern Critical Responses*, ed. Yung Suk Kim and Jin-ho Kim (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 85.

3. Ahn Byung-Mu, "Jesus and People (Minjung)" [Korean], *CTC Bulletin* 7.3 (1987): 10.

4. Yong-Yeon Hwang, "'The Person Attacked by the Robbers Is Christ': An Exploration of Subjectivity from the Perspective of Minjung Theology," in Kim and Kim, *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 224.

The context out of which Ahn's exegesis emerged does not exist any longer. Current Korean theologians do not have the experiential advantage of living through harsh political and economic realities. The agitated, confrontational, and campaigning environment that enabled Ahn to work out his hermeneutics is sadly no more. The present Korean exegetes suddenly find themselves in the wealthier, prosperous, and neoliberal phase of Korea. They fail to grasp or relate to what it feels like on the underside of history. After the democratization of Korea, the new crop of theologians talk not about *minjung* but about "national people" or "citizens" who compliantly incorporate national aspiration for the realization of their own ambitions. This post*minjung*, postapartheid, and postliberation-struggle exegesis looks tame and stale by comparison. Suffering and wretchedness do not inherently yield better exegesis, but the political force and vigor that marked these earlier expositions are woefully missing in the current expositions.

Some of the exegetical insights that sounded stimulating and gripping and made Ahn an inspiring and an important biblical scholar may not have the same invigorating purchase now. His views on Galilee and the *ochlos* will come under heavy scrutiny. His blatantly one-dimensional reading of Galilee as the land of poverty and protest may not have the same fascinating appeal. Current scholarship views the region with far more skepticism and in complex terms. Similarly, the *ochlos* would be seen as a wide-ranging collection of people composed of both oppressed and oppressors liable to be lured by the enticements of the empire and not as a single group consisting of victims and the poor, as Ahn would have liked to portray. Recently, showing solidarity with Ahn's work, a new generation of Korean interpreters have offered internal criticism with a view to strengthening his ideas. Jin-Ho Kim has remarked that the sufferings and powerlessness of the *minjung* have to be better nuanced than Ahn conceived and envisaged.⁵ Approaching from a feminist perspective, Keun-Joo Christine Pae has shown how gender analysis would further elevate and enhance Ahn's understanding of the *ochlos*.⁶ Postcolonial critics would find that the kingdom of God that Ahn comes

5. Jin-ho Kim, "The Hermeneutics of Ahn Byung-Mu: Focusing on the Concepts of 'Discovery of Internality' and 'Otherness of Minjung,'" in Kim and Kim, *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 13–26.

6. Keun-joo Christine Pae, "Minjung Theology and Global Peace Making: From Galilee to the U.S. Military Camp town (Kijich'on) in South Korea," in Kim and Kim, *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 164–83.

up with ignores numerous biblical passages that reinscribe the colonial impulses of the kingdom. They point to clear signs of power and dominance associated with and exercised by the kingdom (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:29–30). What Ahn fails to notice is that buried behind the anticolonial oratory of Jesus there lurks an imperial thinking which speaks the language of control, supremacy, and judgment. Ahn's insistence that any recurrence of a liberating movement is a *minjung* event and in these emancipatory occurrences one finds the presence of Jesus is condescending and insulting to people who are not within the paradigm of the Christian faith.

Postcolonial criticism was at its infancy when Ahn was engaged in his theological activities. David Sánchez, in his study of Ahn, has shown that Ahn's deliberate liberation hermeneutic was couched in postcolonial impulses and tendencies.⁷ In the first part of the book, Ahn describes vividly the horrors of Japanese colonialism and its impact on the nation and on his own family. Had he had the postcolonial tools at that time, he would have used it profitably. Ahn himself gives examples of how the Bible was used to read against the Japanese occupation. Another clue is found in the way he articulated who the *minjung* were. Ahn, who was reluctant to define who a *minjung* was, came up with the following description, which bears potential hallmarks of postcolonial tendencies: "Indeed, the phrase 'minjung-like people' refers to the *minjung* and people who were grief-stricken under the colonial rule, are exploited by the foreign powers, and are oppressed and deprived by the ruling class of their own country; and in this regard, the word *minjung* comprehends all three ideas."⁸

At least one of Ahn's hermeneutical aspirations has come true. He was tireless in his attempt to reunite both Koreas. As he remarked in this volume, "Minjung theology was born for the unification of the people, and the ultimate purpose of this theology must be nothing but the unification of the people." Although the meeting of the two heads of Korea would have delighted him, he would have preferred that this unification be led by the *minjung*.

Ahn would be the first one to admit the changing nature of the situation, and, as he says in the volume, the *minjung* could not "ever be stagnant within a certain form." He would be as keen as ever to find out

7. David Arthur Sánchez, "Ambivalence, Mimicry, and the *Ochlos* in the Gospel of Mark: Assessing the *Minjung* Theology of Ahn Byung-Mu," in Kim and Kim, *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, 134–47.

8. See further p. 28, below.

the latest progressive developments in biblical scholarship and if it could be harnessed to repurpose the cause of the minjung. He would be more than happy to rectify some of his exegetical conclusions. More importantly, he would be searching for the new minjung who were made outcast and powerless by the new liberal economy and newer forms of colonialism. Ahn was not helping to find the voices of the minjung. He was aware that it would be arrogant on his part to say that he was in the business of raising the consciousness of the minjung. His conviction was that the minjung already had a voice, which was purposely unheard or intentionally silenced. They need to feel empowered to use it, and others around them need to be encouraged to listen. Reading his story confirms my view that Ahn has a lot to say. I hope this volume will introduce him to a new generation of readers and allow them to hear his voice again, and more pertinently, as Ahn would have wished, to look out and hear again the voices of the minjung in their midst.

Ideally, this introduction should have been written by a Korean scholar. I undertook to do this after persistent requests from Ahn Byung-Mu Memorial Foundation.

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Preface: An Apology

By now, minjung theology has gained an international stature. Many European universities, especially in Germany, are offering seminars in minjung theology. Korean students studying there frequently ask minjung theologians back home for assistance. Also, some professors and students from the United States are studying minjung theology in Korea, and some of them frequently visit Korea Theological Study Institute. Already several PhD dissertations have been written on minjung theology, and a fair number of theses are in progress at the moment. The authors of these dissertations include both Koreans and foreigners. The demand of minjung theology is increasing. But regrettably, Korean minjung theologians do not seem to be meeting the need properly.

In this context, some of my younger colleagues, who have been working hard for the progress of minjung theology, came up with a plan to interview me with a number of questions raised in the process. They set out on, in their language, “the squeezing-out information operation.” They forced me to answer questions they jointly prepared based on a critical and clearly defined agenda.

The questions were scrupulously prepared, but the answers were given off the cuff. The dialogues were recorded and transcribed, and I reluctantly revised the text. Additionally, there are the four lectures I gave on minjung theology in Japan in a storytelling format last year. The Japanese organizers recorded the lectures and sent me a booklet of their transcriptions. After translating it into Korean and revising the translation, I have included the lectures in this book. This accounts for the format of the book.

Minjung theology is the work of theologically examining the minjung event. For this reason, it marches together with the minjung event but cannot ever be stagnant within a certain form. Therefore, imposing a system or frame turns it into a stuffed animal or an antique, namely, another golden tiara on the head of Jesus. So I had no intention at all to

publish anything like a textbook in the first place. Could this be an apology from a person who puts out a *story theology* like this?

The main participants in this project were Park Seong-jun, Yi Jeong-hee, and Kang Won-don; and other participants include Park Jae-sun, Kang Mak-sil, Park Gyeong-mi, Yi Jae-won, Yi Gang-sil, Kim Seung-hwan, and Choi Hyeong-muk. We originally intended to identify the person asking each question but decided against it for editorial reasons.

Therefore, the texts in this book are not my sole authorship but a product of the collaboration between me and my younger colleagues and former students. I offer my sincere appreciation to them.

May 5, 1987
Ahn Byung-Mu

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