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Doing Theology in the Context of Korea

Aart van Beek succinctly lists what he calls „seven Asian critical principles“ as follows: 1. Challenge of development and modernization, 2. the legacy of colonialism, 3. cultural and religious pluralism, 4. struggle for authentic identity, 5. the presence of the world's major religions, 6. the search for a type of sozial order in the face of poverty and 7. the challenge of being a minority. Yeow Choo Lak, another Asian theologian, „interprets these principles as a single, multi-situational, hermeneutical, missiological and educational principle and calls Asian theologians to put this principle into practice.“ Undoubtedly, the seven Asian principles point to a common tragedy and destiny shared by all the Asian nations except Japan as they have struggled for survival in the midst of the terrifying de-construction and the uncertain re-construction process of their national destinies.

In essence, Korea is not exempt from the Asian principles but its unique geo-political environment has long shaped its destiny. The two major threats which constituted the geopolitical environment of Korea have come from China and Japan and have placed Korea's existence and survival constantly at risk for more than 2000 years. There is a saying that in dealing with China Koreans tended to be more 'continental' and in dealing with Japan they tended to behave more like 'islanders' in their bifurcated character building.

The political infra-structure of Korean society has long been based on three main ideologies stemming from three major factions in Korean society. The first stems from the 'Soo Gu Pa', a radically conservative group whose political ideology has been shaped by 'Sung Lee Hak', Confucian philosophy and practice. Historically, for example, 'Soo Gu Pa' placed the Roman Catholic mission under severe persecution and jeopardy 200 years ago. The second group is called Kae Hyuk Pa', meaning reform group. Their ideology is derived from 'Sil Hak', or pragmatism. Historically, Kae Hyuk Pa accepted Protestant Christianity and boldly assimilated Christian teaching as their political ideology for the reformation of Korean society 100 years ago. The third is called 'Hyuk Myung Pa', a radically revolutionary group shaped by 'Dong Hak' philosophy. Dong Hak became a point of reference for 'Minjung Theology' a later theological development in the Korean context.

According to Koo Jong-Suh, a Korean soziologist, a lack of cohesiveness among these three ideologies pushed Korean society into internal conflicts, antagonism and hostility. The divisiveness became an unfortunate reality and experience not only for Korean society but also for the Korean churches as well. This is the initial background to which theology must speak.

I The Experience and context of Korea and Theological Contextualization

The last 100 years of Korean history has compacted the total 4000 years of Korea's existence in terms of qualitative transformation and its impact upon the Korean political scene. This 100 year period, synonymous with the history of Protestant Christianity in Korea, has demythologized the long standing cosmological and mythical world views created by Buddhism and Confucianism. It has also 'secularized' the absolute political power of an autocratic king and state. Positively, it 'historicized' the destiny of Korea by awakening the nation and pointing it to a new future.

To understand the last 100 years is to know the quality of change and the depth of experience Koreans encountered. Rhim Hee-sup, another Korean sociologist defines five stages, distinct yet sequential within the last 10 decades.

The first stage (1850-1910) saw national independence and even racial survival threatened by an intensified power struggle on the Korean peninsula between China, Japan and Russia. The long standing homogeneity of cultural and political identity was at stake. For the first time, a critical awareness of national crisis prevailed in the minds of the Korean people but it was too late to build a foundation from which to counter-challenge international pressure. This stage marked the beginning of Korean suffering and awakening.

Soo Gu Pa, the conservative group, tried to save the nation by strengthening the king's rule. Kae Hyuk Pa, the reform group, attempted to redeem the nation by accepting Western technology and political systems. Hyuk Myung Pa, the revolutionary group, sought salvation of the nation through physical force. But none of these attempts succeeded. Ultimately, Japan, victorious in both the 'China-Japan War' and the 'Russia-Japan War' brutally invaded Korea and unilaterally announced its merger with Japan in 1910. It seemed to be the end of the line for Korea.

During this time of crisis, the international community completely ignored Korea's strong cry for help and this, in turn, served to legitimize Japan's aggression. The arrival of two American missionaries in 1885 opened the first encounter between Christianity (or, for that matter, Western civilization) and Korea. At the time, no one realized this encounter was to ignite a rapid cultural transformation that became historical reality in a torn apart land like Korea.

The second stage (1910-1945) was characterized by an intense awakening zeal and spirit for national independence. It can be called the period of resistance. Japan's ultimate goal was to build a great Asian Kingdom by invading Korea, Manchuria, China and all the rest of Asia. The modest land reform, monetary reform and industrialization that Japan initiated in Korea were strategic steps to further exploit and oppress the nation. This form of colonization came to be called 'starvation export'.

As the exploitation heightened, the Korean people became encompassed by a strong anti-Japanese spirit which immediately gave birth to a strong anti-colonial nationalism. The uprising of March 1, 1919, was an outburst of the nation's anger and hatred against Japan. The Christian faith of this period has often been identified with anti-colonial nationalism. Korea is still characterized by prevailing anti-Japanese sentiments and Christians are not exempt from this.

Significantly, Korean Christianity has found its theological context in this tragic existence. Theological contextualization branched out into three paths in this period providing sources for three distinct theologies. The first path saw Christianity as providing an ideological basis for resistance against such evil powers as Japan through non-violence. This ultimately formed the basis for Minjung Theology. The second path of theological contextualization understood Christianity as providing spiritual comfort to the politically disillusioned through revivalistic gatherings and emotional stimulation. Interestingly, this is the source of main-stream Korean spirituality today and has revealed itself in the 'Church Growth' movement.

The third path of theological contextualization, which I value highly, was a serious attempt to cultivate a strong ability to discern the meaning of history and God's providence through Sunday Schools, Christian schools, adult Bible studies and even house churches. This was the path taken by church leaders and theologians from mainly Methodist and Presbyterian churches in Korea. It may be called 'historical conscientization', differing somewhat from Paulo Freire's political and cultural praxis. These three paths constituted the nexus of contemporary Korean theological streams.

The third stage (1945-1960) is marked by the paradoxical experience of both heaven and hell. Independence from Japan brought the promise of great hope for the future but this quickly gave way to disillusionment because of the failure to develop democracy. A great opportunity to build democracy in Korea for the first time in its 4000 year history failed. This failure was a precursor for the forthcoming political chaos and struggle. Before any other issues could be settled, political or otherwise, an international conspiracy pressured Korea increasingly into two hostile camps. Finally, north Korea's invasion of the south, assisted by The Soviet and Red China, devastated the nation and the land. The Christian Church was challenged to address this experience of nothingness but instead of developing an affirmative theology the church developed a stance that was essentially pessimistic, other worldly and militant toward history, society and mankind. Only fundamentalism gained strong support from the people. The failures in both the political and ecclesiastical realms, invited the student revolution of 1960 which brought down both the regime of Syngman Rhee and the church's influence in society. The Constantinian era faded away even before it blossomed.

The fourth stage, according to my own interpretation, runs rather long; from 1960 to 1990. Military rule and rapid economic growth were the dominating ideologies of this stage. A political vacuum, created by ineffective leadership following the student revolution, immediately became the target of a militar junta in 1962. The military leaders quickly abandoned democratic possibilities in favor of dictatorial rule and adopted a new ideological instrument, namely economic growth. This eventuated rapid industrialization and urbanization. Economic growth promised utopia for the Korean people who had suffered poverty for so long. Ironically this economic growth syndrome became synonymous with the church growth syndrome which evolved in this period.

The formation of Korean theologies in this context of dictatorial rule and economic growth have again followed three distinct streams. The first stream, advocated by the radically conservative camp and focusing heavily on 'revival', 'conversion', 'blessing' and 'church growth' has been labeled 'evangelization'. This theology always tends to be non-historical if not antihistorical. The majority of Christians in Korea have been greatly influenced by this theology so that they are inclined to be non-contextual in their faith.

The second stream of Korean theology emerging from this period can be called 'indigenization'. It seeks a point of contact between the Christian Gospel and such cultural legacies as the Dan Gun Myth (the

founding of the nation) and Poong Ryu. Indigenization theology evoked strong academic interest as well as controversy during the late 60's and 70's, the active period of urbanization and industrialization under Western influence. Unfortunately, this theology has been confined to classroom debate by a few scholars in spite of its serious mindedness.

A third stream, a theology of contextualization', was influenced by the Roman Catholic Church's Vatican Council II in 1963, 'Missio Dei' theology proclaimed at Uppsala in 1968. Liberation Theology from Latin America and the Theology of Hope of Jurgen Moltmann of Germany. Contextualization theology is represented mainly by the so called liberal and progressive theologians who were trained either in the United States or Germany. The most outspoken form of contextualization theology is known as 'Minjung theology'. It stands radically against the dictatorial rule of the military government and appeals strongly for democratization. Minjung theology has received strong support from radical students and young people although it is not a majority.

II The Rise of New Era since 1990 – New Context for New Paradigm

In 1990, the tide of Korea's historical movement turned around both symbolically and realistically. An entirely new era of Korean history in general began to emerge in the form of an irresistible stream of democratization, especially highlighted by the election of a civilian president in 1993. The political proclamation of a so called 'New Korea', not only terminated 20 years of military rule, but also promised new political agendas such as political freedom, human rights and social welfare. A new breath, new hope and new social climate swept the nation.

In addition dramas being played out on the international stage escalated the movement of Korea from its long period of introversion and self sustained consciousness to a stance which is more open and sensitive to the radical changes of world history. 'Perestroika' in the Soviet Union not only contributed significantly to the coming of post-ideological world order but also helped Korea significantly in minimizing the hostile tensions between south and north, in principle if not yet in reality. Korea, like other nations is now sharply challenged by the speedy process of globalization which demands drastic change of Korean society in the areas of language, education and production, to name only a few.

At this point of change, Koreans experience two major problems. The first has to do with the shift of international order from South Korea-United States-Japan versus North Korea-Soviet Union-Red China during the cold war to United States-Japan-Russia-China-Korea in the post cold war era. This means that, in a geo-political sense, Korea is surrounded by the four major international super powers. Once again, Korea has to fight for its destiny and even survival in this new competitive situation. Another problem is related to ever increasing pollution and crime rates in this particular area of the world where literally a billion and a half people reside (China alone has a population of 1.2 billion) and high speed industrialization and urbanization are occurring. For that matter, Korea's problems are increasingly the human and global problems of survival as a whole. This current global and communal context is the new challenge to the Christian Church in Korea.

As the historical process has evolved in Korea during the past ten years, especially in the political arena. Korean Christianity has had to face a shocking reality. The myth of 'church growth' slowly crumbled, the ideological basis of 'minjung theology' disappeared and 'indigenization theology' appeared increasingly invalid. Existing forms of Korean theologies are rapidly losing their basis for further articulation. The shock has not yet proved fatal but the growth of the GNP seems to have lured many Christians away from the church. The improvement of human rights has also taken many people away from the church where they once found political refuge and a community of solidarity. The Korean Church is no longer a Mecca for church growth pilgrims.

It seems to me that these forces of social change challenge the Korean Church to shift its theological paradigms away from emphases on church growth, the minjung or indigenization to something radically new. In spite of its substantial contributions to the formation of Korean spirituality, the evangelical-conservative theology which currently prevails seems to be losing its battle field because its strict 'textualism' leaves it ill equipped to challenge the radical social change which is occurring.

In spite of indigenization theology's creative effort to develop a point of contact between the Christian Gospel and traditional religions and cultures (Confucian, Buddhistic and Shammanistic legacies), its weakness lies in its method of accepting culture 'apriori' as a pre-determining norm for the Christian Gospel. According to Professor Kwang Sik Kim, a leading theologian, indigenization theology minimizes Christology, substitutes cultural activity for the Holy Spirit and confuses the relationship between mission and indigenization. It is

generally agreed that indigenization theology is also incapable of dealing with the socio-political realities of contemporary Korea.

Minjung theology, a dynamic and creative form of Korean theology, deserves a high appraisal. It provided a strong ideological basis for the human rights struggle, the labor movement student power and the fight for democratization that took place against the oppressive regimes of the 70's and 80's. But the weakness of Minjung theology lies in its mistake in identifying Jesus as purely a revolutionary figure whose ministry was nothing but a revolutionary program. It understands the minjung rather than God's rule as the subject of the messianic coming kingdom. In contrast to the 'textualism' of evangelical-conservative theology, minjung theology falls into 'contextualism' by absolutizing the context. Minjung theology seems to have lost the concept of transcendental ontology and even Christian eschatology altogether.

A final question needs to be raised here. Is it possible to develop a new theological paradigm relevant to this new context of Korea? One thing seems to be clear to me. Any new paradigm cannot properly result from a synthesis of or dialectic among the three existing evangelical, indigenization and minjung theologies.

A hermeneutical clue and suggestion made by Peter C. Hodgson of Vanderbilt seems to throw some light on finding a new theological paradigm. Hodgson refers to 'Basileia Tou Theou', God's reign. The experience and discernment of the presence of God's reign in history is called a 'pre-text', or root experience. 'Text', that is the Bible, is the expression of the pre-text. Con-text is the existential and immediate experience.

While we engage in our debate, we seem to employ only two dimensions, 'text and context' in a rather dichotomous way so that we often have overlooked 'pre-text', the root experience in our theologizing. If we focus on the experience and discernment of Basileia Tou Theou, the pre-text process, the text becomes the living witness. The ecclesiastical community, the church, becomes the community of those who discerned and experienced the presence of God's reign (pre-text) in history (con-text) through the witness of the Bible (text). Hodgson suggests that the discernment and the experience of God's reign in history can be termed 'emancipatory', 'reconciliatory', 'ecological', and 'dialogical'.

In conclusion, a new theological paradigm in the Korean context must relate to the discernment of God's reign in Jesus Christ, the witness of the divine gestalt, the ecclesiastical community, and the foretaste and

witness of God's reign in history as the historical-eschatological community.

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