

Doing Mission from the Underside: A Challenge to Doing Theology

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Mission has biblical roots in Jesus' Great Commandment (Matthew 28:18-20): "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, ..." It is God's design to bring all creation including human beings under the Lordship of Christ, placing them into communion with each other. Mission shapes the notion of the Church's nature and purpose. The Church is a "stage in the process that leads from creation through reconciliation to consummation".¹ This biblical and ecclesiological commandment for mission was, unfortunately, misused for ecclesiastical expansion and some even more malevolent purposes. John Macquarrie rightly reflects on the false equation of mission and expansion of the Church: "The abiding motive of mission is love ... But perhaps this fundamental motive has too often been combined with other motives ... There has been too much thought of *gaining* converts, of *winning* the world, of *expanding* the Church."²

Asia, the cradle of the world's greatest religions, has suffered western colonialist missionary interventions, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Historically, many missionaries were bound up with imperialist impulses and consequently became agents of colonialism. Most western missionaries with this colonialist mindset failed to recognise 'the other, as other': regarding Asian cultures as something to be conquered and 'europeanised'. The churches of western missionaries were often the vehicles for expanding the culture of the colonising power. As Asian countries were liberated from colonialism, new understandings of Christian mission were shaped, and long-suppressed local cultures began to be recognised as indispensable and, more positively speaking, enriching partners in dialogue. Missionary activities illustrate the complex interactions of the gospel and cultures, churches and contexts.

Wesley Ariarajah emphasises that "Christian mission in Asia has been a dismal failure"³ due to its unproductive theology of religions and missiology. He concludes: "We come into the context with ready-made theological positions and find that the context has to be rejected or changed because it does not 'fit' our theology. But, if we put the context first, and take it seriously, then we would find that it is our theological concepts that are inadequate and need to be re-thought in and for the context."⁴

It is often raised by Asian theologians at the Congress of Asian Theologians' meetings that "ready-made theologies" and western orthodoxy have little to do with their struggle for justice in the midst of the abiding poverty of the poor under socio-political oppressive regimes. Not without reason, then, these Asian theologians justify the swing of the theological pendulum in favour of those people who suffer severe marginalisation. In

¹ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1977), 441.

² *Ibid.*, 444.

³ Wesley Ariarajah, "Asian Christian Theological Task in the Midst of Other Religious Traditions" (distributed paper at *Third Congress of Asian Theologians*), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17

particular, those theologians who embrace the Korean Minjung Theology claim that the subject of theology is *the poor*, the *minjung*. The perspective of the *minjung* functions as a criterion of all acceptable theological assertions. By locating the *minjung* in the centre of theological reflection, minjung theology sets in motion a process of dismantling the 'traditional' theological paradigm and changing 'the Church in Korea' to 'the Church of the *minjung*'. Hans Ucko rightly points out that "Kim Yong-Bock, David Suh and Nam-Dong Suh identify the *Minjung*, the eternal reality in history, to become also the people of the messianic kingdom. The *Minjung* are thus not only receivers of the messianic kingdom, they are in a way its co-creators and designers. Negatively one could argue that there is a 'völkisch' (glorifying the people) aspect in this form of *Minjung* theology."⁵

The *Minjung* Theology's 'völkisch' tendency and *minjung*-centred theological reflections have caused hermeneutical problems. Minjung theologians are emphatic about the perspective of the *minjung* as 'the entry point' for understanding the Bible. Their conscious and unconscious attempts to absolutise the *minjung*'s perspective threaten the identity of theology as theology. Kwang-Shik Kim, a Korean theologian of indigenisation, comments aptly on the *minjung* hermeneutics: it "meets the *minjung* instead of Christ".⁶ The dogmatised *minjung*'s perspective in reading the Bible is the most fundamental cause for the restriction of the richness of the interpretation of the Bible. It refuses to allow interpreter's presuppositions to be corrected in the process of understanding.

The title for CATS VI, "Doing Mission from *the Underside*", explicitly provides us with an entry point, viz., 'from the underside', to explore the concept of mission. It implicitly employs the expression of "God's preferential option for the poor". In expounding the subject, we should not repeat the hermeneutical shortcomings found in the theologies with a 'völkisch' tendency, such as *minjung* theology. The implied 'poor versus non-poor' dichotomy may risk absolutising 'the poor' as the messianic subject of doing mission. This kind of dichotomy may also tend to describe the 'non-poor' as a group of people beyond God's love. To press the shortcomings of any theologies ponderously based on the 'poor versus non-poor' dichotomy, the foreseeable failures of 'doing mission from the underside' can be two-fold. First, it may be entrapped in the pitfall of subjectivity-centred hermeneutics. Secondly, it may lose the capacity to speak across contexts.

The interpreter already has a relation to the subject-matter (Sache) which bonds the interpreter and the text. The interpreter's presuppositions, which are brought to the text, arise out of his or her experience of the subject-matter. For Byung-Moo Ahn, arguably the foremost *minjung* hermeneutist, the life-relation between the Bible and the interpreter is the passion for the *minjung*'s suffering and their liberation. Ahn interprets the scriptures in the light of a presupposed understanding of the *minjung*-events happening both in the present and in the Bible. In his hermeneutics, the Bible is brought to an already presupposed understanding of *minjung* rather than pre-understanding being brought to the text and modified through the reading of the text. Theologians with a 'völkisch' tendency are often

⁵ Hans Ucko, *The People and the People of God* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 87. See Yangrae Son, "A Hermeneutical Critique of Minjung Theology," in *CTC Bulletin*, vol. XV, no. 1 (June 1998), 87-97.

⁶ See Kwang-Shik Kim, *Indigenisation and Hermeneutics* (Seoul: Korean Christian Literature Society, 1987), 107.

criticised because their interpretation is subjectivist in the sense that their presuppositions about a particular group are dominant and refuse to be corrected in the process of understanding.

Theologies undergirded by the 'poor versus non-poor' dichotomy often have questionable metaphysics of individuality, viz. *minjung* is a universal manifestation of life. It is presupposed that something universal is expressed in the individuality of the author and submerged also in the interpreter. This assumption leads *minjung* theologians to be quite optimistic that the interpreter can overcome the historical barriers between the past author of 'minjung events' and the present interpreter, and can grasp the author's individuality by putting him/her into the mental processes of the author's consciousness. The hermeneutical circle in Minjung Theology spirals inward to the self, i.e. the interpreter's self-consciousness, and thus results in absolutising the interpreter's pre-understanding about *minjung*. *Minjung* Theology's subjectivity-centred interpretation is due in particular to its inductive methodology; it seeks to find something universal by distinguishing what the individualities of the authors have in common. *Minjung* Theology and some of the other Asian contextual theologies believe that it is possible to arrive at something universal by digging down deeply to something in particular. This naïve optimism can be found in their emphasis on the 'sameness' of the *minjung* tradition in Christianity and the Korean folk tradition of *minjung*. W. Pannenberg criticises such an inductive methodology for its tendency to lead to historical relativism, since it has no adequate concept of the whole in whose light the parts are understood. The historian who does not have a concept of the "whole of history" finds him/herself in the "impasse of relativism".⁷

This relativist and subjectivity-centred hermeneutics exemplified in *Minjung* Theology brings us to our next criticism of the theologies with a 'völkisch' tendency; they have no concept of the 'whole' and lose the capacity to speak across contexts. Many Asian theologians emphatically express their opposition to the concept of 'universality'. At the Third Congress of Asian Theologians held in Indonesia, Felix Wilfred expressed it thus:

The arrogance of missionary Christianity, its intolerance of tolerance, its notion of universality, which denied the possibility of Asian pluralism, meant that it was very difficult for our neighbours to understand us. It is no longer ontologically sustainable to universalise a past so that the future is closed.⁸

To the contrary, Pannenberg explains that it is of hermeneutical necessity to have something universal for understanding: "After the interpreter becomes aware of the temporal distance between the text and the horizon he has brought with him, he builds up a new, comprehensive horizon, and thereby succeeds in moving beyond the limits of his original preconception and formulation of the question."⁹ According to Pannenberg, to build up

⁷ W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 164.

⁸ G. Lilburne, "Breaking New Ground: CATS III in Indonesia", *CTC Bulletin*, vol. XVIII, no. 1 (April 2002), 3. Regarding 'universality', Felix Wilfred notes: "The construction of universals in general could be part of the ideological means for legitimisation, domination and control. ... When the universal is imposed as the right representation of reality it serves as a means to mortify the subject and its experiential relation with the reality." *Quest*, vol. 5, no. 1 (June 2006), 19.

⁹ W. Pannenberg, 119.

a comprehensive horizon requires the interpreter to project “a total understanding of reality”, i.e. universal history.¹⁰ Without something comprehensively universal, and without some viewpoint outside the context, the interpreter is bound to be totally immersed in his/her own context, and consequently to lose the capacity to speak across contexts.

Christiaan Mostert warns that context-specific theologies risk the danger of provincialisation, and argues for doing theology ‘trans-contextually’:

despite every theology’s ‘situatedness’ (an implication of its insurmountable finitude), there are theologies which intend not to be as context-specific as others. They aim to speak trans-contextually more than locally, nationally or intra-culturally. The legitimacy of such theologies can, I think, not convincingly be denied. Indeed, any theology which may wish to attach to itself the epithet ‘catholic’ arguably has obligation in this direction.¹¹

Theology must have a universalizing function, by which it speaks across contexts and is open to hear voices from beyond its own context. When theology loses its function of ‘transcending of particularity’, it is confined to its surroundings and becomes a product of its context. Theologians are to articulate the presence of God in every culture and understand the divine activities in the local. The nature of understanding is “the application of something universal to a particular situation” (H-G Gadamer). Each local entity has its meaning only in relation to the universal to which it belongs.

Balancing between the local and the universal has hermeneutical as well as theological significance. Denial of the *local* can prevent ongoing dialogue. The experience of the differences between contextual interpretations of the Bible makes this dialogue ongoing and leads to a fuller understanding of Christian faith. However, it is hermeneutically impossible to interpret parts of the text without a clear grasp of its whole theme. Denial of the *universal* can promote a situation where the integrity of Christian theology is threatened. There should be something universally identifiable as Christian theology across various contexts though doing theology is intrinsically contextual.

The theme, “Doing Mission from the Underside”, is a good reminder of European missionaries’ imperialistic activities so destructive of cultures in Asia. It provides us with an entry point, ‘from the Underside’, to be drawn into the mission of God, holding up ‘God’s preferential option for the poor’. That divine preferential option should continue to guide our theological reflections and the church’s activities. However, if it becomes the sole paradigm of doing theology, then it is not surprising to find us absolutising the *minjung* and replacing *theology* with *minjungology*, and being reduced to a crude contextualism. ‘Doing mission’ should not stop at standing in solidarity with the poor. The mission of God is, in the broadest sense, about reconciliation of all things to God and to one another through Christ.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹¹ Christiaan Mostert, “Is a Non-contextual Theology Viable?” *Mapping the Landscape*, S. Emilsen & W. Emilsen, eds. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 130-131.

¹² *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 25.

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