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What is Theology? An international student perspective

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This reflection is part of a collection of responses to the theme: "What is Theology?"

By Rev. Andri Purnawan with contribution from DongGun Sim

International Students have diverse perspectives about theology. This article will present a theological understanding from three different perspectives. The first comes from the personal statement of international student members; the second from South Korean Minjung theology; and the third from a theology of two prominent thinkers of Asian Liberation Theology, namely Aloysius Pieris from Sri Lanka and Banawiratma from Indonesia.

1. What is Theology? Personal opinion of International Student members

For Oscar Guana, MDiv student from Colombia:

“Theology is the attempt to know God as the source of all by studying the accounts, experiences, and legacy of people from different cultures and times. Through theology, people are looking for the knowledge and wisdom of righteous life, building wellness and peace for community and societies.”

Moreover, Brian O Pati, MTS student from Kenya states:

“Theology. It is the study of knowledge concerning all that pertains to the Divine or God. From a Swahili East African perspective, it is the elaboration of, relationship to, and conversation between people, God’s messengers (that come from, speak from and to communities), and all that exists in creation. It is *uungwana* (just relationship), *utu* (a fully realized humanity), and *ibada* (worship through service to both nature and creation).”

2. The Minjung Theology

DongGun Sim writes about The Minjung Theology. These are the collected quotations from the works of Margaret Kane and Kim Heung-Soo to give a broad idea about what Minjung theology is.

“Minjung theology is a South Korean theology that took form in the late 1970s.”[1] “Minjung means ‘common people.’ In particular, it means those who are oppressed politically or economically, who are alienated sociologically or kept uneducated in cultural or intellectual matters. Minjung is a form of liberation theology, but as Koreans are from their experience particularly aware of communist oppression, Minjung theology differs significantly from Latin American theology.

Theology, for a Minjung theologian, is the interpretation of the human story in the light of the Christian story. This indicates two reference points for theology: the social and the biblical accounts. To understand the story of the people, it is necessary to examine what has happened to the ordinary people throughout Korean history, in the external events of sufferings and revolutionary movements and their cultural and religious (especially Confucian, Buddhist, and Donghak) traditions. Political and cultural levels have been intertwined, for religion in Korea has been strongly messianic. Being seen as salvation from oppression, it has given impetus to uprisings and rebellions. This common people’s history is traced not so much through written records as through popular cultural expressions in stories, poems, songs, and dances.

It is a history of oppression either by foreign powers or by the Korean rulers. Meanwhile, Confucian laws and customs discriminate against women as such. The result is that the predominant Minjung feeling is that of *han*. *Han* is a suppressed, amassed, and condensed experience of oppressions caused by mischief or misfortune so that it forms a kind of ‘lump; in one’s spirit. It is a communal feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness, and yet it has a tenacity of will for life.”[2]

“Today, Western theology is being challenged by theologians who have suffered from political and economic unrest of their own countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Minjung theology is such a theology, though it is still in the making. It is strongly criticized in Korea by both the authoritarian government and the conservative churches as a Marxist-oriented social movement. People concerned about the relevance of the gospel in a sociopolitical context should not neglect.”[3]

3. Asian Liberation Theology

Hand in hand with DongGun, I want to appreciate Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit Priest, as one of the most prominent liberation theologians in Asia. In *An Asian Theology of Liberation*[4] Pieris expresses his concern about poverty and religious diversity. In Asia poverty is often chosen as spiritual expression, but at the same time, poverty is caused by oppression of the authorities and the capital owners. If someone wants poverty voluntarily, it will be the path of liberation; contrary to the misery caused by abuse and coercive religion. Through his theology, Pieris criticizes either authorities or religious institutions who have failed in bringing liberation to society.

In Indonesia, J.B. Banawiratma is striving for liberation theology in a multi-religious society. For Banawiratma, local Indonesian pearls of wisdom highly value diversity, harmony, tolerance, and social and gender equality. However, the superior tendency of prominent foreign religion has changed the social structure of Indonesian society. He proposes an idea about the liberation of local wisdom from the domination of prominent religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Banawiratma is aligning the dominant religions with the authoritarian ruler or capitalist who oppresses folk. Therefore, he strives in either liberation theology or theological liberation from the oppressive tendency and the clutches of Western or Arabic domination. Only liberated theology has solidarity to the hardships of people's lives. [5]

Conclusion

To conclude, theology is the liberation effort from the domination of oppressive structural power as well as absolutist systematic thinking and dominant culture in order to establish love, solidarity, and unity in diversity. Theology is not only a thought or feeling or a reflection of experience but holistic praxis. Activism is meaningless without theology; on the other hand, theology is meaningless without liberation praxis.

[1]Heung-Soo Kim, "Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History (Book Review)." *Journal of Church and State* 26, no. 3 (1984): 558.

[2]Kane, Margaret. "Minjung Theology." *Theology* 90, no. 737, (September 1987): 351.
DOI:10.1177/0040571X8709000503.

[3]Kim, Heung-Soo. "Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History (Book Review)." *Journal of Church and State* 26, no. 3 (1984): 558.

[4]Pieris, Aloysius. *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. London; New York: T & T Clark, 1988.

[5]Setio, Robert & Wibowo, S. Wahyu, *Teologi yang Membebaskan dan Membebaskan Teologi. (Liberation Theology and Theology Liberation)*, Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana Christian University Press, 2016, iv-vi.

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