

Foreword

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BEGINNING in 1973 with the publication of *The Theological Declaration of Korean Christians*, minjung theology grasped the attention of the world. Its authors paid a high price for their commitment to the Korean people and especially to the exploited poor. Some of them were rejected by the Christian churches. Some lost their positions as teachers. Others were imprisoned by the military government.

The interpretation of the Bible by minjung scholars, and especially of the gospel, was impressive as scholarship and gave critical grounds for their work. Although they were part of a worldwide liberation movement, they clearly did their own thinking and carried out their own scholarship. Minjung theology employed sophisticated scholarly methods learned from Western Christians. But it was a fully contextualized form of theology able to enter into discussion with theologians from other countries as an important expression of global Christian thought.

However, by the 1990s developments in Korean theology had dropped out of sight for theologians in other countries. This was partly because of changes we should all celebrate. The improved political and economic climate in South Korea reduced the need for the real world struggle of which minjung theology was a part. The long-exploited workers at last began to benefit from the growing prosperity. Unfortunately, it was also partly because of the short attention span of readers looking for the latest novelties. It did not mean that South Koreans had stopped doing their own thinking, or that they had ceased to do so creatively and well.

It is past time now to revisit Korea and the development of Christian theology there. It is time to acknowledge the creative work of a new generation of Korean theologians. This book reacquaints us with the earlier phases of minjung theology and helps us to see how it has developed in ever changing contexts. It brings Korean voices back into the international conversation.

The heart of the book is made up of the contributions of Korean scholars. However, to add to its international character, the editors have included essays by North American and European theologians as well. Many of us are happy in this way to make any contribution we can to revitalizing discussion between progressive Korean theologians and the West.

Christianity plays a far more important role in Korea than in other nations of Northeast Asia. In Japan it is a rather stable minority with a public voice disproportionate to its membership. This is largely because of the prominence of Christian institutions such as universities. Christianity also provides a basis for some Japanese intellectuals to play a counter-cultural role. Still it remains a minor factor in Japanese society as a whole. In China it has emerged from a time of persecution with considerable vitality and is growing rapidly partly because of the spiritual vacuum left by the end of Maoist teaching. But Christianity is even more marginal in China than in Japan. It has little foothold in influential circles. In Korea, in contrast, it is a dynamic force in the culture and politically and socially important.

It is well to recognize, however, that other religious movements also play an important role in Korea. Unlike Japan and China, and European nations as well, South Korea is a religious country. What happens in the religious communities is important for the people as a whole. That gives a significance to theology there that it lacks in many parts of the world. Most of the theology taught and preached in South Korea is quite conservative and closely follows the teaching of nineteenth-century Western missionaries. Some of it is modeled on contemporary American conservative evangelicals or Fundamentalists. All the more, the work of Korean pioneers in progressive theological work is important for the future of the country.

I rejoice that in this volume there is recognition of the valuable role of Han Shin Seminary and its leader, Kim Kyoung-Jae. He has not only contributed his own creative ideas to the development of Korean theology, but he has also insured that Han Shin would offer a home for frontline thinkers. He is widely appreciated in Korea but too little known elsewhere.