Contextual Biblical Interpretation
Utilizing Cross-textual and Cross-cultural Readings as a Hermeneutical Tool for Asian Women
SungAe Ha

From the Asian reality of having multi-faith traditions and multiple and pluralistic scriptures and classics, which form the backbone of Asian cultures, a methodological question arises: how to relate the Bible to other scriptures in Asian religious and cultural traditions. The multi-scriptural reality of Asian cultures and religions has presented both a challenge to and new possibilities for the reading of the Bible by Asian Christians. During the colonial era, when the Christian missionary movement was part of the Western colonial project, the living traditions of Asian religions and their scriptures were condemned as pagan and uncivilized by Christian missionaries. In this context of the suppression of the native, the Asian Christian converts had to undergo the conflict between their new identity as Christians and their Asian religio-cultural identity. Analyzing the colonial context of the relation between the Bible and Asian cultures and religions, Sugirtharaja demonstrates how the Bible has been utilized to serve the Western colonial project in Asia and suggests postcolonial criticism as an alternative mode of relating the Bible to Asian cultures and religions.¹

However, the multi-faith and multi-scriptural traditions in Asia also has opened new possibilities for biblical interpretations and since the Bible and the Christian faith were introduced in Asia the biblical texts have been read alongside Asian religious, cultural, and sociopolitical texts as a way of appropriating the Bible.² The term “texts” here includes not only

² For more details on how the Bible was received and appropriated in Asia, see the following articles: Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, "Asian Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Haralson Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 70-77. Archie C. C. Lee, "Engaging the Bible and Asian Resources:
written texts like scriptures but also oral traditions and political or social events that raise fundamental faith questions. Cross-textual or cross-cultural readings of the Bible have been one of the most prevalent approaches in Asian and Asian American contextual interpretations of the Bible. For example, two major streams of Korean theology that represent contextual interpretations of the Bible and Christian faith in South Korea, which are called Indigenization Theology and Minjung Theology, have been formed based on the methodology of cross-textual and cross-cultural hermeneutics.

Indigenization Theology reads the Bible alongside Korean cultural elements, such as myths, legends, and folktales, which reflect Korean people’s history and experiences and hence are rooted in their group consciousness, as well as scriptures and faiths of other Korean traditional religions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. On the other hand, Minjung Theology reads the Bible alongside Korean sociopolitical and historical (con)texts, focusing on social suffering of the Minjung, that is, the underclass who have been marginalized from mainstream society. In particular, Minjung theologians used the method of confluence between the Minjung movements and tradition in the Bible and the Korean Minjung movements and tradition, namely, ‘confluence of the two stories.’ The central task of this cross-textual reading in Minjung Theology is to testify the Minjung’s salvation events in which the Korean Minjung experience liberation from their suffering, which occur at the confluence of “the two stories” that constructs

---


a new narrative of salvation in the current Minjung events/movements. Here, “the two stories” participate in constructing a new narrative of the Minjung movement on an equal stance with no qualitative differences between them.

These two Korean contextual theologies that engage cross-textual or cross-cultural interpretations of the Bible and Christian faith reflect the colonial and the post-colonial context in which the Bible and Christianity were introduced and have been utilized in Korea. In the context in which Western Christian missionaries condemned Korean religious and cultural traditions as pagan and uncivilized, many Korean Christians experienced deep conflict between their two identities – “Korean” and “Christian” which means “Western.” Hence, in order to resolve the conflict, Indigenization theologians tried to discover something in the Bible and Christian theology, which can find its origin in Korean authentic thought or culture, and to construct “Korean-Christian” as a replacement of “Western-Christian.” For example, Yun Sung-Bum, one of the pioneers of Indigenization Theology tried to find Christian trinity in the three divine characters of Hwanin-Hwanung-Dangun in the Korean myth of Dangun. He considers Korea as a central location for the “Christian gospel” and insists that Korean Christians can embrace the Christian gospel more fully when they recognize Korean identity more clearly.

5 Ibid., 169-71.
6 Ryu Dong-Shik, a pioneer of Korean Indigenization theology, confesses the alienated feeling as a non-Western Christian as follows: “Although it is said that God is the father of all people of the world, I just cannot deny a feeling that Western people take the place of the subject and we only borrow the religion from the West. Especially when I read God’s words in Confucianism or Buddhism, furthermore, certainly even in Korean traditional culture, I cannot but confess that God is really our Korean God. Otherwise, I cannot deny a feeling that we only borrow the religion from the West although I am a third-generation Christian.” 주재용 Chai-Yong Chou and 서광선 David Kwang-Sun Suh, ed. 역사와 신학 History and Theology (서울: 한국신학연구소 Seoul: Theological Study Institute, 1986), 252-53.
7 In his view, Hwanin is equivalent to God the Holy Father, Hwanung to the Holy Spirit, and Dangun to the Holy Son. 윤성범 Sung-Bum Yun, 기독교와 한국사상 Christianity and Korean Thought (서울: 대한기독교서회 Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1964), 61.
8 Ibid., 25.
9 Ibid., 13.
In their efforts to pursue grafting Christianity on Korean cultural elements, however, Indigenization theologians tend to draw too many hypotheses from a few clues and to produce arbitrary interpretations to fit Korean cultural elements into Christian theology or doctrine. This tendency of Indigenization theologians’ cross-cultural readings has the risk of mimicking Christian doctrine and proving the universality of Christianity through utilizing Korean cultural resources rather than indigenizing Christianity. While Indigenization theologians tried to overcome the colonial influence of Western Christianity on Korean society and culture, their hermeneutical experiments preoccupied with the essence of “Korean-ness,” which can be understood as a nationalist response to the colonial utilization of the Bible and Christianity, ironically can end up with serving Christian colonialism.

While Indigenization theologians explore Korean cultural elements to discover their similarity with the biblical and Christian elements, Minjung theologians have no interest in making Christian interpretations of Korean culture and history according to the biblical and Christian pre-understandings but try to find new Christian meanings in the places where Korean sociopolitical and cultural (con)texts join together equally with Christian (con)texts. Furthermore, Minjung Theology tends to regard the Bible as being simply “references” and “stories,” so the uniqueness of Christianity is not the concern of Minjung Theology. This hermeneutical approach tries to reread the Bible from Minjung social events or folktales reflecting such events which can be understood as important “living texts” that provide Minjung theologians with “references” through which to find new Christian meanings for the Minjung’s liberation. Simultaneously, it tries to reread the Minjung social events as living “texts” from the biblical Minjung events, as represented by the Exodus story and the Jesus movement, which provide them “references”

through which to find the ways for the Minjung’s liberation. Therefore, the correlation between the two stories/texts in Minjung Theology is mutually interactive.

In the hermeneutical circle of Minjung Theology where “texts” become “references” and then the “references” become “texts,” the hermeneutical preconception that understands the Bible as “the text” and sociopolitical events as “the context” breaks down. For example, Suh Nam-Dong, a pioneer of Minjung Theology, uses Korean folktales and various stories of Minjung experiences as material in his theology in order to deconstruct existing theological narratives, as he calls it “De-theological Exploration of Folktales.”11 After reading the folktales from the perspective of Minjung, he says that Jesus’ stories need “de-theology” to be read in a similar way:

*We need a moratorium of theological discourses (Christology, soteriology, predestination, etc.) to restore Jesus’ stories (good news) at least methodologically. To restore Jesus’ stories, we should replace the theological words with Jesus’ life, that is, Jesus’ story; replace Jesus’ Atonement death with Jesus’ being killed; replace Jesus’ cross with Jesus’ crucifixion; and in the case of Jesus’ resurrection, replace a resuscitation of the corpse with a resurrection of the body.*12

Suh’s method of “de-theology” is rooted in Minjung theological emphasis on the priority of “Minjung events.” In other words, when new “Minjung events” happen, the events stimulate Minjung theologians to deconstruct theological (pre)conceptions and to reconstruct new theological meanings.

Minjung Theology also has a nationalist tendency in its resistance against the Western colonial influence on the Korean nation, as well as in its emphasis on the Korean Minjung tradition. According to Ahn Byung-Mu, another pioneer of Minjung theology, “Minjung is a Korean authentic word. Western people cannot say easily that we are also the Minjung.” Ahn’s statement recognizes that the word “Minjung” reflects the reality that the underclass has been

---

12 Ibid., 298.
suppressed both by the national dominant class and by foreign invaders, so Minjung theologians should consider “Minjung” in the particular context of the Korean nation. A nationalist tendency is also found in Suh’s proposal of “confluence of the two stories” as he uses a nationalistic narrative of Korean history as a foundation of his discourse in order to confirm the existence of “the Minjung tradition of Korea.” However, while the resistance tradition of “Minjung” is in part connected with nationalism, Minjung Theology pays due attention to the post-colonial contradictions between the national dominant class and the underclass within the Korean nation, which Indigenization Theology lacks. In that sense, Minjung theological approaches to the Bible and Christian faith has the possibility for postcolonial hermeneutics.

These two hermeneutical approaches which represent Korean contextual interpretations of the Bible and Christian faith can be positioned in the broader colonial and postcolonial context of Christian theology and biblical hermeneutics in Asia. As briefly mentioned earlier, critically analyzing the role of the Bible in the Indian colonial context, Sugirtharaja classifies three different modes of relating the Bible to Asian cultures and religions – the Orientalist mode, the Anglicist mode, and the Nativist mode – and suggests postcolonial criticism as an alternative mode. While the Orientalist and the Nativist modes represent hermeneutical struggles in their attempts at resisting against the Western colonial projects, Anglicist mode represents the Western colonial utilization of the Bible as it was a strategic attempt to integrate the colonial into the culture of the colonizer through importing Western reading techniques of historical criticism and replacing indigenous texts and learning with Western science and Western modes of

---

thinking.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, Anglicist mode that devalues India’s religious, cultural, and textual heritage is on the opposite side of the contextual hermeneutical endeavors of cross-textual or cross-cultural interpretations of the Bible.

On the other hand, the Orientalist cultural policy was advocated by colonialists as a way of promoting and reviving India’s ancient heritage in order to acquaint rulers with the native way of life and control the Indian people effectively.\textsuperscript{17} The Orientalist mode constructed local history and civilization as a preparation for biblical faith and served to re-express Christianity in an Indian form while it enabled the early Indian coverts to counter missionaries’ and colonialists’ negative assertions for India as it paved way for the growth of pan-Indian identity and nationalism.\textsuperscript{18} The orientalists’ attempt to recover and document India’s past privileged Sanskrit texts over vernacular and negated the Indian native and folk traditions. In addition, the orientalists’ nationalistic tendency perpetuated an image of a spiritual India contrasted with a materialist West, which contributed to a new form of Orientalism, while disregarding the specific form of inequality of gender and discriminations on the tribal peoples and the dalits.\textsuperscript{19}

The Nativist mode arose among those suffocating under the double burden of Western and Sanskritic theories and attempted to recover vernacular traditions, calling into question the hegemonic status of Sanskrit and opening up multiple performance and textual traditions.\textsuperscript{20} The Nativist biblical interpretations borrow largely from the Indian religious storytellers’ tradition, drawing on ancient and contemporary Indian tales, retelling and connecting them both with lived experience and with the Christian Scriptures, and recasting vocabulary and concepts borrowed

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 8-12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 4-8.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 12-13
from the vernacular traditions to describe biblical ideas.\(^{21}\) However, the Nativist mode also reveals some problem as it has a tendency to idealize the indigenous tradition, privileging it as a pure, static and uncontaminated entity.\(^{22}\)

Now, we can find some parallels between the Orientalist and the Nativist modes, on the one hand, and Korean Indigenization theological hermeneutics and Minjung theological hermeneutics, on the other. Indigenization Theology shares some characteristics found in the Orientalist mode as its nationalist tendency tries to promote and revive Korean history and cultural heritage and to seek the essence of “Korean-ness” in confrontation with the colonial influence of Western Christianity and missionaries’ negative assertions for Korean religious and cultural traditions, but these efforts for the recovery of Korean heritage serve to prepare for biblical faith and to re-express Christianity in a Korean form. Like Orientalist mode, it also has less concern for the problem of gender inequality or social injustice within Korean religious and cultural heritage that it promotes. While Indigenization Theology does not privilege a particular tradition over vernacular, it draws more on classical or textual sources than on folk traditions.

On the other hand, Minjung Theology pays more attention to folk traditions than to mainstream or classical traditions in its endeavors for seeking Korean Minjung traditions. In that sense, Minjung Theology appears to have some affinity with Nativist mode as it connects folktales both with contemporary Minjung events in Korea and with the Minjung events in the Bible. However, unlike Nativist mode, Minjung Theology has less interest in recasting vocabulary and concepts borrowed from Korean religious and cultural traditions to describe biblical ideas while such endeavors are often found in Indigenization Theology. Furthermore, Indigenization Theology appears to share with Nativist mode the tendency to idealize the

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 14.
indigenous tradition and privilege it as a pure, static and uncontaminated entity while Minjung Theology appears to be relatively free from such a tendency. In a broad sense, it appears that Indigenization Theology is located between the Orientalist and the Nativist mode while Minjung Theology is located between the Nativist mode and postcolonial interpretation.

Minjung Theology also shares a nationalist tendency, but it focuses more on (post)colonial economic policies than on cultural colonialism as its primary concern is the promotion of social justice and the liberation of the underclass. So it has the potential to serve the liberation of women and other marginalized, disadvantaged, and displaced people. Most of all, the Minjung theological hermeneutics, which breaks the distinction between “text” and “context” and deconstructs theological (pre)conceptions through its emphasis on the priority of “Minjung events,” paves way for postcolonial hermeneutics as suggested by Sugirtharajah as an alternative mode of biblical interpretation. The Minjung events both in the Bible and in the social biography of the Minjung are no longer conceived simply as “context” but they function as “text.” This cross-(con)textual approach of Minjung theological hermeneutics, which contextualize both “texts” in the Bible and “texts” in the Korean Minjung traditions, is emancipatory as long as it relativizes any claims of the absoluteness of “the text” in order to testify and stimulate the continuous occurrences of salvation/liberation in the current Minjung events.

Minjung theological emphasis on the priority of “Minjung events” can be used as a way of interrogating both the biblical narratives and the Western colonial interpretations which legitimize and re-inscribe colonial interests, as well as of engaging in an emancipatory reading of the texts. In spite of some limitations found in Minjung Theological hermeneutics, such as the tendency to idealize the poor and to neglect critiquing oppressive elements within the Bible while focusing on emancipatory interpretations, its priority of “Minjung events” points to
postcolonial criticism, which brings marginal elements to the front, re-memorializes the stories and voices which have been subjected to institutional and exegetical forgetting, and thus subverts the traditional meaning in the process. Therefore, this cross-(con)textual approach of Minjung theological hermeneutics can be utilized as a hermeneutical tool for Asian women’s liberation. Any “text” that justifies or commands women’s subordination cannot claim its absolute authority in this cross-(con)textual approach to the Bible as women’s Minjung events experienced in their daily lives are also the “texts” that interact with the biblical texts on an equal stance.

On the other hand, adopting the cross-textual/cross-cultural approaches of Indigenization Theology as a hermeneutical tool for Asian women requires some caution due to the risk of its serving a new form of Orientalism and Christian colonialism through Christian interpretations of Korean culture and history as well as its lack of critical interrogations of both (con)texts engaged in the cross-textual/cross-cultural endeavors. The problem of the risk of serving Christian colonialism in cross-textual/cross-cultural endeavors for biblical interpretation appears to take place more broadly in Asian biblical reading practices, as represented by the Orientalist and the Nativist modes as well as Korean Indigenization Theology.

Reading the Bible alongside the living texts of Asian resources can evolve around three ways of reading practices: reading the texts of Asian resources in light of the biblical texts and their (Western) Christian interpretations; reading the biblical texts and their Christian interpretations in light of the texts of Asian resources; reading that incorporates both ways. The problem is that many cross-textual/cross-cultural endeavors mainly engage the first way of reading practice, that is, Christian interpretations of local history and cultures, regardless whether they are aware of it or not. Many Asian contextual interpretations try to find historical, religious, and cultural elements fitting in Christian and biblical frame of faith in order to claim and prove
the presence of (Christian) God and divine revelation in their native cultures and history. However, Asian “texts” of spiritual and cultural traditions, whether written or not, were not the Sleeping Beauty who was waiting for the Christian light to wake up her into real life. Rather, these Asian resources are ‘living’ texts which not only have shaped and affected but also have been shaped and affected by the communities of Asian people. Therefore, Asian religious, cultural, and sociopolitical “texts” should be able to “address questions to the biblical texts and provide religious/theological messages that have to be addressed.”

Given Eurocentric bias in biblical studies and in the Western Christian tradition as well as the history of the colonial use of the Bible, the second approach of re-reading the biblical texts from the perspective of Asian resources contribute to challenging Christian colonialism, where Asian resources are utilized in the service of the claim of Christian superiority over other religions and cultures: the Asian resources are only fashioned as an Asian form or garment for the assumed ‘eternal and universal gospel’ of the Bible, as represented in the phrase “to fit local histories into the global design of Christianity.” However, there is a danger in this way of reading practice because not only the biblical and the Western Christian tradition but also Asian religious, cultural, and scriptural traditions contain patriarchal elements and can be utilized to reinforce patriarchal traditions. Hence, it is essential to reread first Asian resources from Asian women’s experiences and struggles for liberation and to depatriarchalize them before utilizing the second and the third ways of reading practices.

It is problematic for Asian feminist cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics to idealize Asian religious and cultural traditions as an alternative to the Western Christian theological.

---

23 Niles: 28.
systems without critiquing their patriarchal structures. Hence, it is important to critically examine both patriarchal and emancipatory aspects both in the biblical/Christian tradition and in Asian religious and cultural traditions through cross-textual/cross-cultural readings. For example, in the context of the Korean church, the combination of Confucian patriarchal culture and Western Christian patriarchal elements contributed to the creation of more conservative and patriarchal church structure that intensified women’s subordination and oppression. On the other hand, it is necessary for Asian feminist hermeneutics to search and uncover emancipatory voices for women and the marginalized in both “texts” through engaging cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics that stimulates the mutual exposition of new meanings. In other words, Asian women should be able to claim those rich resources within their religious and cultural traditions, such as Shamanism, Daoism, Buddhism, folk traditions, goddess traditions, etc., as theirs and to utilize them for their liberation in their cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics.

Here, Minjung theological cross-(con)textual hermeneutics provides methodological insights for Asian feminist cross-textual/cross-cultural readings. As Minjung Theology regards the Bible as being “references” and “stories” and rereads it from Minjung social events, Asian feminist hermeneutics can reread the Bible from Asian women’s Minjung events and experiences, which can be understood as living “texts,” or from folktales reflecting such events or women’s life situations, and vice versa. In this interactive hermeneutical circle, the Bible becomes “references” to women’s living “text,” and vice versa. Like Minjung Theology, Asian feminist cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics can use folktales and various stories of women’s experiences as material in its theological endeavors to deconstruct existing patriarchal narratives and to restore emancipatory stories in the biblical and Christian tradition.
In this hermeneutical approach, women’s Minjung events and experiences are no longer conceived simply as “context” but function as “text”; both biblical “texts” and women’s living “texts” are contextualized in Asian feminist cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics; the priority of women’s “Minjung events” can be used as a way of interrogating both the biblical narratives and the Western colonial interpretations which legitimize and re-inscribe patriarchal/colonial interests, bringing marginal elements to the front, and re-memorializing the stories and voices which have been subjected to institutional and exegetical forgetting.

Furthermore, Suh’s Minjung theological methodology of “confluence of two stories” can be utilized for Asian feminist hermeneutical method of the confluence between women’s stories in the Bible and Asian Minjung women’s stories, in which “the two stories” participate in constructing new stories of women’s emancipation on equal terms.

In the hermeneutical process of the confluence, “women’s Minjung events” should be prioritized. For example, Asian feminist cross-textual/cross-cultural hermeneutics rereads women’s Minjung events/experiences in folktales or other Asian resources from women’s current Minjung events/experiences, and then rereads women’s Minjung events/experiences in the Bible from women’s Minjung events/experiences in folktales or other Asian resources, and vice versa, through analogical comparison, which can provide emancipatory messages for women’s current Minjung events/experiences. In this hermeneutical circle, where interpretation starts and ends with women’s current Minjung events/experiences, “the two stories” are read through bilateral interactions and mutual exposition. The implication is that Asian resources, textual or oral, cultural or sociopolitical, scriptural or folkloric, should be read from Asian women’s current experiences and be depatriarchalized in preparation for the confluence of “the
two stories”; the outcome of interpretation should be able to provide meaningful messages for women’s current struggles for liberation.

In conclusion, given that the authority to appropriate texts and resources has been claimed and exercised through history, either in the East or in the West, by established scholars’ guilds composed mainly of male elite groups to serve the status quo, depatriarchalizing both Asian resources and biblical texts through cross-textual and cross-cultural readings is a legitimate strategy to challenge Western, modern, traditional, and/or male-centered interpretations of scriptures that have prevailed both in the East and in the West and have had much influence on Asian women’s lives as well as Christian churches all over the world.