

## Article

# Minjung Theology in Contemporary Korea: Liberation Theology and a Reconsideration of Secularization Theory

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**Abstract:** The Sewol Ferry tragedy in April 2014 has drawn a renewed attention to the role of religion in South Korea. Theologians and religiously-motivated NGOs in Korea at the time and thereafter have called for the need for religion, and religious organizations, to become more actively involved with societal needs, especially after disasters, to help alleviate their pain by providing relief aid and counselling. Such calls for the greater involvement of religion in relief efforts have coincided with Pope Francis' repeated calls for the Catholic Church's greater involvement in social affairs on behalf of the poor and the underprivileged. This paper contends that these developments in and outside of Korea provide an opportune time to renew discussion on oft-misunderstood liberation theology. This is because the latter's advocacy of an interpretation of the teachings of Jesus Christ from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized for the purpose of alleviating unjust economic, social, or political conditions is as compelling today as it was some 60 years ago when it first arose. The paper offers a reassessment of the role of religion in light of liberation theology, arguing that religion can make itself more relevant to people's lives today by engaging more actively with social issues. The paper will pay special attention to liberation theology in the Korean context, namely *minjungshinhak* or "people's theology." The paper also discusses the implications of liberation theology for secularization theory, arguing, among others, that the former refutes the "decline of religion" thesis of the latter, since liberation theology manifests a different role of religion in contemporary society rather than its diminishing significance.

**Keywords:** liberation theology; *minjung* theology; *minjungshinhak*; *minjung*; han; integral mission; secularization; secularization theory; critical theory; metaphysical pathos; ecclesiastical social responsibility

## 1. Introduction

*... with human suffering you can't be neutral*

Pope Francis

The sinking of the Sewol Ferry on 16 April 2014, which resulted in the deaths of more than 300 people, most of whom were high school students, has prompted the country as a whole to reflect on what went wrong and what should be done to change for the better (see [Suh and Kim 2017](#); [Woo et al. 2015](#)). The ferry tragedy impacted many spheres of Korean society and the religious sector was no exception. In response to the tragedy, some churches and religiously-motivated NGOs did provide medical assistance and daily meals as well as relief aid to the victims' family members staying at the memorial altar set up at the nearest port from where the ferry sank. These groups also provided similar volunteer services at the "tent village," a row of tents set up by the victims' family members on

a street in central Seoul near the Blue House, the executive office and official residence of the President. Also, various religiously-motivated NGOs have been actively participating in a coalition of NGOs which called on the government to pass a special bill to empower a special fact-finding commission that will investigate and indict those responsible for the ferry tragedy. More importantly perhaps, Korean theologians and religiously-motivated NGOs have called for churches to get more actively involved in responding to societal affairs, including disasters. Such a call for churches' greater involvement in societal affairs in Korea is noteworthy, as church's active involvement in socio-political issues was once a hallmark of Korean Christianity from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, during which the church had been, along with labour unions and student unions, the strongest force for the democratization movement. This means that the call for a greater engagement of religion with societal affairs has been renewed in Korea in earnest for the first time in nearly 30 years.

It was during this post-traumatic period that Pope Francis visited the country in August 2014. For the whole duration of his stay in Korea, the pontiff, who has been an outspoken advocate on behalf of the poor and the underprivileged since becoming the leader of the 1.2 billion-member Catholic community in 2013, wore a yellow-ribbon pin, a commemorative pin for more than 300 people who drowned. On his return flight to Rome, the pope reflected on the incident: "I took [the pin] out of solidarity with them, and after a day, somebody came up to me and said, 'You should take it off; you need to be neutral.'" I answered this way: "Listen, *with human suffering you can't be neutral.*" His comments and actions in Korea and elsewhere at the time and thereafter have been interpreted by some as amounting to an advocacy of liberation theology. The affinity between Pope Francis and the theology of liberation has been proposed, as he, more than any other of his predecessors, has developed a reputation for showing deep concern for the plight of the poor, for criticizing the economic system that is worsening economic inequality, and for calling on major organizations of society, particularly the Church and the government, to do more to help the poor (Catholic News Service 2013).

Liberation theology, which is a theological movement that began in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, advocates an interpretation of the Gospel from the standpoint of the poor and the oppressed, and emphasizes the role of religion in the fight against poverty, injustice, and oppression. Despite criticisms from mainstream theologians for its overly "political interpretation" of the Bible, liberation theology has inspired the rise of other forms of liberation theology, including those fighting for feminist, black, African, and Asian causes, as well as those with specific ethnic focuses. *Minjungshinhak*, literally meaning "people's theology," was developed by Korean theologians in the 1970s, and its emergence was prompted by awareness of the historical and contemporary suffering of the masses (Ahn 1993; Lee 1988a; Suh 1991; Suh 1983b). Historically, Koreans' collective memory, real or imagined, of continual foreign invasions and occupations, particularly the atrocities committed by the Japanese during the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), have instilled a strong sense of suffering in the minds of Koreans. More importantly perhaps, the rise of *minjung* theology is owed to the suffering of the masses during the country's industrialization drive from the early 1960s. During this period of rapid industrialization, Korean workers were subjected to artificially low wages and long hours of work, with many laborers working upwards of 70 h a week, under poor working conditions. Any attempt to fight against workers' exploitation was met with harsh punishment, including imprisonment. *Minjung* theology first arose under these circumstances. In the 1980s, *minjung* theology shifted its focus to political issues, lending support to the democratic movement against a succession of authoritarian regimes. In the 1990s and 2000s, theological interests in *minjung* theology relatively waned as the country became more industrialized and democratic. In the face of the changing socio-political reality, *minjung* theology has turned its attention to more contemporary issues, such as socioeconomic polarization and the human rights of foreign migrant workers and marriage migrants (Yoo 2009). It is worth noting that *minjung* theology has inspired many religiously-motivated NGOs, Christian or Buddhist, to collectively serve as a major force in the fight for various causes in Korea (Ro and Park 2010).

*Minjung* theology and other forms of liberation theology entail, among others, a significant change in Christianity, as religious ideas and knowledge are now being interpreted on behalf of the underprivileged in the realm of the non-sacred. Parallel interpretations found in other world religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, further manifest a new meaning and role of religion in the contemporary world (De la Torre 2008). Liberation theology thus has important implications for secularization theory, particularly the decline of religion thesis of the latter. Liberation theology has rarely been examined in relation to secularization theory, but the ideas extant in liberation theology, for example the use of religious messages in the fight for justice, rejects the decline of religion thesis of secularization theory. By lending religious support to various socio-political causes, liberation theology demonstrates a greater involvement of religion in this-worldly matters on the side of the underprivileged. Such development, of course, does not in any way indicate diminishing significance of religion, but rather the changing role of religion that is more socially concerned and involved.

In view of these observations, this paper first examines the nature of liberation theology, followed by a discussion of Korean liberation theology or *minjungshinhak* (*minjung* theology), both of which warrant a renewed discussion on the role of religion in contemporary settings. The paper also reflects on the implications of liberation theology for secularization theory. The paper closes by examining the implications of liberation theology, particularly its potential role in enhancing the relevance of religion in the contemporary world marked by, despite the overall improvement in living standards, the continuity of poverty, inequality, injustice, and violation of human rights.

## 2. Rethinking Liberation Theology: A Reassessment of the Role of Religion in Contemporary Settings

Liberation theology is a theological movement that began in the 1950s and 1960s among priests and theologians in Latin America in reaction to abject poverty and social injustice in the region (Gutierrez 1973; Nunez 1985; Segundo 1976; Cone 1975). The theology advocates “an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor’s suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor” (Berryman 1987, p. 4). Liberation theology challenges the passive stance of Christian theology in relation to such issues as poverty, social injustice, and violation of human rights, arguing that Jesus Christ’s mission in this world was to fight against injustice and against oppression. Accordingly, liberation theology has criticized economic and social structures which bring about conditions that engender poverty and cause human suffering and indignity. It further argues that religion can be a force for attaining liberation from unjust economic, social, or political conditions, and that salvation should be realized not only in the next world but also in this world as well, so that people are free from suffering.

Liberation theology, as a term that covers various theological movements which interpret the Christian gospel in terms of current needs for promoting justice and human emancipation, thus represents a new system of religion that is conspicuously concerned with political and social problems. In particular, four areas of oppression are especially considered paramount: poverty or economic exploitation of the poor, violation of human rights, racism, and sexual prejudice against women. All liberation theologies—Latin American, feminist, black, African, Asian—represent struggles, the struggles which seek to justify their movements with the revelation of biblical messages. Latin American liberation theology, for example, manifests an understanding of Christian gospel from the experience of the poor (Gutierrez 1973; Nunez 1985; Segundo 1976). It is a critique of economic structures and ideologies that perpetuate conspicuous inequality in Latin America. Feminist theology, including that of “Third World” women, looks for biblical themes that support gender equality, arguing that churches have ignored women’s needs and aspirations, taking up on issues such as the “maleness” of deity, the rights of women over their bodies, the role of women in church governance and ministry, and the place of the feminine in worship (Fiorenza 1996; Welch 1985; Isherwood 2004). Black theology in the United States uses the basic biblical theme of liberation to better understand the history of slavery and to protest against the institutionalization and systematization of racism and its cultural impact (Cone 1970, 1975; Hopkins 1989). They rely upon the central message of Exodus and the figure

of Jesus in raising “black-consciousness” and its integrative power. African theology is concerned with the interpretation of Christian faith from the perspective of African people and their culture (See [Martey 1993](#); [Bujo 1992](#); [Hood 1990](#)). Similarly, Asian theologians incorporate into Christianity various aspects of their traditions that reflect Asian concerns as well as Asian worldview and way of life (See [Sugirtharajah 1994](#); [Pieris 1988](#); [Fabella 1988](#)). Also, there are liberation theologies which have a specific ethnic focus, such as Chicano ([Guerrero 1986](#)), Jewish ([Ellis 1987](#)), Palestinian ([Ateek 2017](#)), Caribbean ([Erskine 1981](#)), Hispanic ([Elizondo 1983](#)), and Korean, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Scholarly attention to liberation theology relatively waned in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War, as many theologians and scholars assumed that the theology was no longer necessary. It is also true that liberation theology has had its share of criticism. Critics argue that liberation theology “over-politicizes” liberation, making the spiritual or evangelical aspect secondary to socio-political causes ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1990](#)). Liberation theology is also criticized for making use of various ideas in social sciences without critical caution ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1990](#)). A related problem is that liberation theology relies too heavily on atheistic Marxist analysis, leading to an unnecessary anti-capitalistic view and an overt emphasis on class struggle. These negative views can be said to have limited the theological and social influence of the theology in many parts of the world. Irrespective of these criticisms, and as many recent works on liberation theology demonstrate, the very conditions that gave rise to liberation theology have persisted in the twenty-first century under democratic capitalism and under the neoliberal economic system ([Cooper 2013](#); [Floyd-Thomas and Pinn 2010](#); [Sung 2007](#)). These studies also show the enduring relevance of liberation theology in the struggle against oppression and injustice, be it economic inequality, gender inequality, racial inequality, or sexual inequality, which continues largely unabated in many parts of the world.

It is interesting to note that there is a movement in Protestantism called “integral mission” or “holistic mission”, which is similar to liberation theology but is much less known. Integral mission began among Evangelicals in the mid-1960s, and like liberation theology, it rejects conceptions of Christian mission based on dualistic views on evangelism and social involvement ([Padilla 2002, 2010](#); [Kirkpatrick 2016](#)).

God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression . . . .we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concerns as mutually exclusive. ([Stott 1996](#), p. 24)

Integral mission understands Christian mission as embracing both evangelism and social responsibility, arguing that they are “inseparable” ([Nicholls 1986](#), p. 81). Like liberation theology, integral mission is committed to improving the life of those living in poverty and to pursuing justice. In achieving these objectives, integral mission calls for greater social involvement on the part of the Church. Since the First International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 (aka the Lausanne Congress or Lausanne ’74), integral mission has been embraced by a large number of evangelicals all across the globe ([Kirkpatrick 2016](#)).

What both liberation theology and integral mission represent is, therefore, a “new” interpretation of Christianity that calls for the latter’s greater involvement with social issues on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Another common element is their sensitivity to flagrant social problems and their commitment to active engagement in social reform. The ends may be diverse, for example economic justice or protection of human rights, however, the uniform aim is to rectify secular societal problems through sacred justification and means.

### 3. Korean Liberation Theology: *Minjungshinhak* (“People’s Theology”)

As noted above, liberation theology inspired the development of similar theological movements outside the continent. Korean theologians developed their own theology of liberation called *minjungshinhak* or *minjung* theology, literally meaning “people’s theology” in the 1970s (Ahn 1993; Lee 1988a; Suh 1991; Suh 1983b; NCC shinhakyeonguwihonhoe 1982; Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia 1981). Like its counterparts elsewhere, the Korean liberation theology emerged in awareness of the suffering of the masses and in reflection of the role of the church and Christians in alleviating their pains (Kim 1987, pp. 211–21; Suh 1983b, p. 29). As Suh (1991, p. 17) puts it, *minjungshinhak* represents not only “a development of the political hermeneutics of the Gospel in terms of the Korean reality”, but also a demand for justice and a more compassionate society.

What is happening here and now is recognized as ‘God’s intervention into human history, the work of the Holy Spirit, similar to the event of the Exodus, and we participate in God’s work in history and theologize it. This is the work and role of doing *Minjung* theology. (Suh 1983a, p. 3; cited from Kwon and Küster 2018, p. 21)

Central to *minjung* theology are the concepts of *minjung* and *han*. While the term *minjung* can be literally translated as “people,” it refers to “those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters” (Moon 1985, p. 1). As Suh (1983b, pp. 188–89) argues, the “historical Jesus” was also *minjung*, who identified himself as a poor and oppressed person who underwent great ordeals, much like Korean *minjung*. While there is no English equivalent, *han* is often translated as sadness, sorrow, resentment, bitterness, grief, or regret. The term expresses both personal sorrow, such as hunger, poverty, discrimination, or serious illness, and “shared suffering” felt collectively as Koreans throughout history, for example from continual foreign invasions and occupations, including the exceptionally atrocious Japanese occupation (1910–1945) (Kim 2017). Indeed, “the history of the Korean people is a history of oppression, of sadness and frustration, which has given rise to a unique mind-set called *han*”, which is a pent-up resentment and despair about the unfairness and injustice of life (Clark 1986, p. 44). And it is the shared suffering of the Korean people to which *minjung* theology pays more attention, especially the *han* felt by Koreans from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, the period during which Koreans were subjected to the harsh reality of rapid industrialization and urbanization, as well as a succession of authoritarian regimes. *Minjung* theology, which was developed during this period, is thus “the theology of *han*, the inner dynamics of the oppressed Korean *minjung*” (Moon 1982, p. 13). The theology represents an ideology and act of protest against *han*, as it has served to legitimize political struggle and social action as a “biblical act.” As Suh (1983b, p. 243) argues, until now, Christian theology has been preoccupied with the problem of sin; however, the task of *minjung* theology is to “resolve the *han* of the people,” because it is “more meaningful than being forgiven for committing sins.” The leading *minjung* theologians, often considered the first generation, or “fathers” of *minjung* theology, including Nam-dong Suh, Byungmu Ahn,<sup>1</sup> David Kwangsun Suh, Yong-bock Kim, and Young-Hak Han, all shared these views on the concepts of *minjung* and *han*.<sup>2</sup>

It can be said that there are three periods of development for *minjung* theology: (1) the developmental period in the 1970s during which theological reflections on current issues were made, with a particular attention focused on the economic suffering of the masses (workers); (2)

<sup>1</sup> Ahn is particularly known for having tried to advance *minjung* theology as not only uniquely Korean (and Asian) but also as a genuine alternative to Western theology.

<sup>2</sup> These theologians, who laid the foundation for the rise of *minjung* theology in Korea, all studied abroad, especially the United States or Germany, being exposed to liberal and progressive theologies. They rejected, and were markedly different from, the overwhelmingly conservative faith and theology that marked mainstream Korean Christianity at the time, and to a large degree, still does.



the 1980s, during which *minjung* theology shifted its focus to the democratization movement; and (3) the 1990s, when *minjung* theology formed an “alliance” with the JPIC Movement after the latter’s world convention was held in Seoul, Korea, in March 1990<sup>3</sup> (Lee 2001, p. 44). Byungmu Ahn (Ahn et al. 1993, pp. 9–19) further argues that *minjung* theology comprises of three starting points. The first starting point is *minjung* theology’s resistance against the fundamentalism of Korean Christianity, particularly Protestantism; the second is a resistance against dictatorship; and the third is an attempt to “bring together” both Korean and Christian traditions, facilitating a “cultural indigenization” or “Koreanization” of Christianity, as Nam-dong Suh advocated (see Kim 2013).

As noted above, the period during which *minjung* theology first arose in the 1970s was when Korea was undergoing rapid industrialization. The Korean government imposed artificially low wages on workers to attract foreign investment and to maintain price competitiveness in the international market. That meant subjecting workers to long hours of work under poor, grueling working conditions. It was not uncommon for workers to work upwards of 70 hours a week, typically with no or very little overtime pay. What made the lives of the workers even more difficult was the fact that most of them were uprooted from the comfort of the close-knit rural way of life and were new to the impersonal and harsh lifestyle of urban settings. Economic inequality between those who were reaping the early success of the country’s industrialization and the working poor was also widespread. Additionally, any type of labour or student activism which attempted to intervene on behalf of the workers was banned and harshly punished. Under these circumstances, *minjung* theology arose as a new form of theology committed to the promotion of justice and to the stoppage of the exploitation and oppression of workers. For example, *minjung* theology in the 1970s provided a theological foundation for the expansion of urban industrial mission (UIM), which began in earnest in the late 1960s (Lee 2001, p. 41). Appalled by both the poor working conditions and violation of human rights taking place at workplaces, those involved in the UIM were progressive pastors and preachers who actually worked at factories among the workers. They were inspired by the theology of “solidarity in suffering,” as they shared, and reflected on, the “suffering experience” of those oppressed. *Minjung* theology in the 1970s thus served as a rallying force against the economic exploitation of Korean workers. No wonder then that *minjung* theology became closely associated with both the labor movement and the democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The new theology at the time redefined the role of Christianity in Korea by articulating and sympathizing with the economic and social sufferings of the underprivileged and by championing their rights for better treatment (see Suh 1991; Küster 2010).

*Minjung* theology in the 1980s shifted its focus to political issues, as the country was, as noted above, under a succession of authoritarian regimes, highlighted by indirect presidential elections in which an electoral college elected presidents (this system was implemented since the 1972 enforcement of the Yushin Constitution by then president Park Chung-hee and continued until 1987, when a direct presidential election was reintroduced). The 1980s was a particularly difficult time politically for the country, as after nearly two decades of authoritarian rule, Park was assassinated in October 1979. But the then army general Chun Doo-hwan carried out a coup d’état in December the same year, prompting more intense pro-democracy rallies in Seoul and other cities. The country’s democratic movement culminated in the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980 which, following a military intervention, resulted in a large number of casualties. Chun’s presidency was not much different from that of Park Chung-hee, as political opposition was ruthlessly crushed and media censorship continued unabated. It was in this political milieu that a second generation of *minjung* theologians, including

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<sup>3</sup> JPIC stands for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation and is a “movement” adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) at its Vancouver assembly in 1983. The movement began with the understanding that humanity was faced with a crisis and that the church’s involvement in worldly affairs was a concern of Christian ethics. The movement called for its member churches to coordinate efforts for justice (taking issues with economic inequality, racism, sexism, and violation of human rights), peace, and integrity of creation (being concerned with environmental protections) (Beyer 1994, pp. 214–16). The movement later expanded to include churches which are not members of the WCC.

Park (1990, 1995), put more effort into finding ways to facilitate the practicality and applicability of *minjung* theology to rapidly changing Korean society. They took issues with not only democratic movements, but also the feminist movement and anti-Americanism, trying to offer theological explanations and, to a certain extent, justifications for these movements. In addition, in spite of the oppressive political milieu, proponents of *minjung* theology, along with “progressive” South Korean theologians, focused on the issue of reunification with North Korea, in the belief that ordinary North Koreans were also suffering from oppression (Kim and Kim 2014, pp. 263–89; Lee 1988b; Han and Kim 2006; Chung 2003). Their engagement with the reunification issue was partly prompted by the realization that the Korean government’s monopoly of the issue of reunification had been a major drawback in bringing about peace on the peninsula, and that the whole Korean people, not just the government, are responsible for achieving reunification (Yeon 2000). Inspired by liberation theology, Korean Christianity played an important role in opening the way for non-governmental sectors to provide input to the reunification discussion, which until then had been monopolized by the government.

In the 1990s, as the country’s living standard markedly improved and political stability was secured through democracy, it can be said that scholarly and theological interests in *minjung* theology relatively waned. More importantly, the theology experienced a turning point. As Koreans began to enjoy greater material abundance and political freedom, the meanings inherent in the concept of *minjung* became less cogent or relevant, as the Korean people as a whole were now less poor, less exploited, and less oppressed. Faced with this changing socio-political reality, *minjung* theology turned its attention to issues championed by various civic movements, including the human rights of foreign migrant workers and marriage migrants (Yoo 2009). Also, *minjung* theologians realized that in spite of the rapid economic development of the country, there was still a considerable number of Koreans who were economically disadvantaged, many of whom had been victims of the negative impacts of globalization and neoliberalism. In particular, neoliberal economic policies which became prevalent in the wake of the financial crisis in Korea in 1998 led to labor flexibility, producing a large number of irregular workers. This new reality spawned, and still continues to engender, a great economic inequality between regular and irregular workers. And it is this socioeconomic polarization and an intense sense of relative deprivation, which has worsened over the years, to which twenty-first century *minjung* theology has turned its attention (Lee 2018; Kim 2011; Kwon and Küster 2018). The leading research organizations concerned with these issues have been the Korean Minjung Theology Association, the Christian Institute for the 3rd Era, and the Institute of Minjung Theology. The latter two institutes even published scholarly journals solely devoted to the study of *minjung* theology, namely *Sidaewa Minjungshinhak* (Epoch and Minjung Theology) and *Minjunggwashinhak* (Minjung and Theology), which were published between 1994–2009 and 2000–2005, respectively. It is also noteworthy that *minjung* theology in recent years has expanded its focus to issues such as the environment, gender inequality, and inter-religious tensions (Moon 2000; Kang et al. 2010; Kim 2011). Moreover, over the years, *minjung* theology has inspired the rise of not only *minjungbulgyo*, literally meaning people’s Buddhism (Han 1986; Beop 1989), but also many religiously-motivated NGOs, Christian or Buddhist, to collectively serve as a major force in the fight for various causes in Korea (Ro and Park 2010). The most prominent ones include, just to name a few, the Catholic Human Rights Committee, Catholic Women Groups Alliance, Christian Alliance for Justice and Peace, Korean Christian Environmental Movement Solidarity, Christian Alliance for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, Buddhist Coalition for Economic Justice, Buddhists Alliance for Activism, Buddhist Coalition for Human Rights, and Buddhist Coalition for Environment. As the names of these groups suggest, they are concerned with wide-ranging issues and believe that religion can be, and should be, a force of reform and change in society.

#### 4. Rethinking Secularization Theory: Implications of Liberation Theology

What *minjung* theology and all other liberation theologies entail is what can be called a “sacralization” of various social movements for a more humane and just world, meaning that religious ideas and knowledge are now being interpreted on behalf of the underprivileged in the realm of the non-sacred.<sup>4</sup> Parallel interpretations found in Buddhism (Queen and King 1996; Jones 1989), Zen Buddhism (Habito 2008), Hinduism (Rambachan 2015; Thomas 1988), and even Islam (Dabashi 2008; Engineer 1990), as well as the rise of various religiously-motivated NGOs, further manifest a new meaning and role of religion in the contemporary world (see also De la Torre 2008). Despite many of its compelling arguments, however, liberation theology had failed to make a greater impact when it first arose as it had the misfortune of having arisen at the height of the Cold War and was unjustly branded as Marxist, although the former’s analysis of economic and social conditions shares many commonalities with that of the latter. It can be said that liberation theology was simply ahead of its time. However, liberation theology is perhaps even more pertinent today, as hundreds of millions of people all over the world are still suffering from various forms of social ills, including starvation, malnutrition, and lack of safe drinking water, just to name the most basic human needs. Other problems, such as discrimination against women and violation of human rights, still persist in many parts of the world today. The ideas found in liberation theology can be used today to legitimize religion’s greater involvement with these issues, thereby allowing religion to make greater contributions to the making of a more humane, more caring, and more hopeful society.

Such socio-political articulations of liberation theology necessitate, as the paper argues, a reflection on secularization theory. There have been many important studies done on secularization theory, including the works by Wilson (1966, 1976), Martin (1969, 2005), Fenn (1978), Dobbelaere (1981), Casanova (1994, 2006, 2009), Stark (1999), Bruce (2002, 2011), Asad (2003), Norris and Inglehart (2004), Hurd (2004), Taylor (2007), and Warner (2010). As Dobbelaere (1981) argues, the concept of secularization is multidimensional, entailing many different meanings (Shiner 1967). Also, as Glasner (1977) notes, how we define secularization and how we define religion largely determine how we conceptualize the process of secularization. A more recent attempt at clarifying the concept of secularization led to the so-called “neo-secularization theory,” which narrows the focus of secularization to only the declining authority of religion (Chaves 1994; Yamane 1997). For example, Yamane (1997, p. 116) describes secularization as occurring when “religious authority structures decline in their ability to control societal level institutions, meso-level organizations, and individual level beliefs and behaviors.” Chaves (1994, p. 757) writes:

Secularization at the societal level may be defined as the declining capacity of religious elites to exercise control over the other institutional spheres. Secularization at the organizational level may be understood as religious authority’s declining control over organizational resources within the religious sphere. And secularization at the individual level may be understood as the decrease in the extent to which individual actions are subject to religious control.

Of all the different meanings of secularization, five points are most representative: decline of religion; social change; institutional differentiation; rationalization; and privatization (see Shiner 1967; Dobbelaere 1981; Sommerville 1998).<sup>5</sup> The most familiar notion of secularization is the decline of religion. Also expressed as “disengagement of society from religion,” “desacralization of the world,” or people’s declining religious involvement. The decline of religion means that previously accepted

<sup>4</sup> It is not argued here that religion was never a force of liberation in the past. Although the protest element of religion was evident, the underprivileged used it primarily as a means of escape from reality rather than as a challenge to the existing social order. For a full explication of this issue, see Cohn (1970) and Lanternari (1963).

<sup>5</sup> Using the phrase “secularization paradigm,” Tschannen (1991) argues that secularization also refer to “worldliness,” “autonomization,” “generalization,” “pluralization,” and “scientization,” and “sociologization,” among others.



religious doctrines, symbols, and institutions lose their prestige and influence, of which the culminating effect would be an irreligious society. As Bruce (2002, p. 3) puts it, secularization refers to:

- (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.

Secularization as a process of social change refers to a shift from “sacred” to “secular” society. It is an inevitable process where the change in social structure, i.e., from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, results in less religiosity. In this sense, secularization is seen as the decline of community and as the shift in social control from moral or religious to bureaucratic or technical control. Similarly, the perspective of differentiation views secularization as a part of general social change in which religious ideas, organizations, and activities are separated from other social institutions (i.e., cultural, legal, economic, and political institutions of society become increasingly specialized and grow more distinct from one another). A fourth meaning of secularization can be described as a process of rationalization. Science as a secular force undermines the impact of the theological outlook on the world and modifies the philosophical one. These changes completely reorient other social institutions, including education, politics, and law, and allow morals to become private matters. Rationalization also refers to a process in which the religious group or the religiously oriented society becomes more absorbed in this world. All of these different meanings of secularization culminate in the fifth meaning—the privatization of religion—which refers to the process of regarding religion as a personal phenomenon that is not shared with others (Luckmann 1967). Secularization, according to Luckmann, is the process in which church-oriented religion or public spheres of religion diminish in importance and in which religion increasingly becomes “privatised” and “invisible.” The private sphere is consumer-oriented, and an individual can choose his or her own subjective preferences from the variety of ultimate meanings, the same way one chooses hobbies, services, goods, and friends (Luckmann 1967, p. 99). Thus the individual selects certain religious themes from the available menu of ultimate meanings and builds them into a private system of ultimate significance.

Inherent in these meanings of secularization, of course, are many problematic assumptions. First, is the assumption that there was once a golden age of faith. Martin (1969, p. 30) calls it “Catholic utopianism”—the most common view of secularization lies in a Utopian conception of feudal Christianity. Glasner (1977, p. 8) agrees that the concept of secularization involves “idealization” of the past periods where empirical data are scarce. Similarly, in refuting a religious-secular or sacred-profane polarity, Douglas (1970, p. 36) rejects the idea that primitive people were deeply religious by nature, for all varieties of spiritual scepticism were also found in tribal societies. As Greeley (1973, p. 7) argues: “The sacred and the secular, the religious and the profane, are not opposite poles of an evolutionary model, but alternative dimensions of reality, which interrelate to one another, and interpenetrate each other in complex periodicity.” A related problem is the assumption of a linear religion-in-decline theorem. According to Martin (1969), for example, the process of secularization is not invariable and is subject to various cultural influences. He argues that the seemingly universal process of secularization operates in a variety of ways, according to the nature of a particular socio-cultural complex. Subject to historical and cultural variations, these processes result in different patterns of religious changes. Similarly, Fenn (1978, p. 39) five-step theory of secularization demonstrates that the process of secularization involves overlapping stages that are reversible. Another problem with the concept of secularization is its preoccupation with the institutionalized aspects of religiosity. The decline in religious affiliation does not necessarily imply that individual consciousness also has become irreligious. A further problem of secularization theory is the tendency to confuse the analytic and

the evaluative, that is, they fail to distinguish between secularization (description of a process) and secularism (rejection of religion) (Cox 1965).<sup>6</sup>

As for an explanation for the primacy of secularization theory, despite its many problematic assumptions, an insightful explanation is offered by Smith (2003), who argues that the reason for dominance of secularization theory is that those championing the ideology of the decline of religion had something to gain from it. In repudiating secularization as an inevitable by-product of “modernization” in the American context, Smith (2003, p. 1) argues that the secularization of American institutions was “much more like a contested revolutionary struggle than a natural evolutionary progression.” In what Smith calls a “secular revolution,” she contends that secularization of American public life did not happen by accident but was the result of “the political accomplishment” of American scientific and cultural elites who deliberately sought to displace a Protestant establishment that “stood in the path of upwardly mobile academic and literary intellectuals, blocking their bids for increased group status, autonomy, authority, and income” (Smith 2003, p. 39). Smith’s explanation is consistent with Collins (2000, p. 595) suggestion that “secularization is not a zeitgeist but a process of conflict.”

As the above discussion amply demonstrates, the main problem with secularization theory is its many unwarranted assumptions, particularly that of relating the concept with the decline of religion. Liberation theology has rarely been mentioned or examined as a phenomenon which may have implications for secularization theory, but the ideas extant in liberation theology are consistent with the view which rejects the decline of religion thesis of secularization theory. By lending theological support to various socio-political causes and by becoming more socially involved in the fight for justice, liberation theology demonstrates a greater involvement of Christianity in this-worldly matters on the side of the underprivileged. Such development, of course, does not indicate diminishing significance of religion. Rather, it is the opposite: liberation theology manifests the changing role of religion that is more socially concerned and involved. Liberation theology shows that religion can actually become more socio-politically meaningful and still be spiritually important for the adherents than it has been in the past.

The meanings of secularization expressed by “disengagement of society from religion” and “desacralization of the world,” both of which assume dualistic views on religion and society, also largely miss the implication of liberation theology. That is because the latter reinforces the values of both spiritual and social needs, rejecting the view that religious or spiritual needs and social needs can be neatly separated. Liberation theology views “liberation” as somehow grounded in the human context, thereby allowing human beings themselves to overcome obstacles in the realization of full emancipation. It thus eliminates the dialectic between things of eternity and universality on the one hand, and things of immediacy and historicity on the other. In this sense, salvation on earth becomes no less important than salvation in heaven. The breakdown of the barrier between what is supernatural and what is human allows liberation theology to bridge the gap between the two spheres. In view of the arguments above, it can be cautiously argued that liberation theology necessitates the addition of a new dimension to the concept of secularization: *secularization as referring to the increased use of sacred institution—belief and practice—for secular purposes*. Such understanding of religion, as inspired by liberation theology, directly disputes the decline of religion thesis: as underprivileged groups fight for justice in the name of God or gods, religion can be said to have become actually more important for many people in contemporary society. Additionally, an understanding of theology as being immersed in a historico-cultural situation not only marks a significant departure of liberation theology from the conventional or classical theology, but also reflects significant changes within the religious institution itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Other problems with traditional secularization theory include “(1) far too much abstraction; (2) a lack of human agency; (3) a sense of over-deterministic inevitability; (4) an orientation (primarily among historians) of idealist intellectual history; (5) an over-romanticization of the religious past; (6) an overemphasis on religious self-destruction; and (7) an under-specification of the causal mechanisms of secularization” (Smith 2003, p. 14; see also Smith 2003, pp. 14–25).

## 5. Over-Secularized Conception of Society: Implications of Liberation Theology for the Sociology of Religion

The new interpretation of religion in light of liberation theology negates an “over-secularized” conception of the world. That is because the accepted meanings of secularization are more readily relevant to industrialized countries. For a significantly large number of the world’s population living in developing countries, religious beliefs are still central to their lives, as their lives and communities, as well as their worldviews and behaviours, continue to be shaped by the religious values they hold. The enduring vibrancy of religion in these countries indicates people’s continuing need for religion in this increasingly inhumane, “disenchanted” society. In spite of the centrality of religion in people’s lives in many parts of the world, the “over-secularized” conception of society has been established in the mainstream sociology of religion as a consequence of what may be called the “metaphysical pathos” of the theory of secularization. The term, coined by [Lovejoy \(1948\)](#), refers to the notion that every theory generates, or is associated with, a set of feelings and sentiments, which those embracing the theory can only dimly sense. According to [Lovejoy \(1948, p. 11\)](#), the metaphysical pathos of ideas is “exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, evoke through their associations and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feelings.” A commitment to a theory, therefore, often occurs because the theory is consistent with the deep-lying sentiments or the mood of its proponents, rather than because it has been found valid. Also, a theory bound in metaphysical pathos comes packaged, meaning that it allows little room for new ideas, and contains an underlying mood of pessimism. Ultimately, a theory induces or reinforces in the adherent a subtle modification in the structure of thoughts through which he or she views the world.

Such is the case with the theory of secularization. Instead of making more intelligible the processes of social change, some of the meanings of secularization are instilled with a metaphysical pathos which portray a gloomy future of religion. Many theories of secularization adopt the framework of decline thesis and uncritically accept it as an incontestable truth. Such blind faith in the decline of religion thesis has led to many generalizations and oversimplifications about various social changes. As a result, human beings are seen as fully rational, having no need for religion, and religion itself is seen as no longer significant for the survival and functioning of society. Instead of explaining how religion in contemporary society can be utilized to ameliorate people’s lives, these theories of secularization proclaim the death of God. They emphasize the process of secularization as inevitable and as being hospitable to rationality, instead of offering ideas which may mitigate the harshness of contemporary society. Martin’s declaration that “secularization is less a scientific concept than a tool of counter-religious ideologies”, and his call for the elimination of the concept have much in common with the above discussion of the metaphysical pathos of the theory of secularization ([Martin 1969, p. 9](#)).

Besides its implications for the rethinking secularization theory, liberation theology has important implications for a number of theoretical issues in the study of religion, especially the sociology of religion. One area is the scrutiny of how religion continues to be a powerful legitimating and ideological force. Stimulated by Antonio Gramsci’s rethinking ([Gramsci 1976](#)) of the functions of ideology, liberation theology holds that religion has long defended the interests of the ruling groups, thereby serving as an instrument of class domination. The notion that religion can be a force of liberation is also pertinent here; liberation theology takes Gramsci’s analysis one step further by championing a form of religion that is free from the interest of the dominant classes and by providing a theological justification for reforms aimed at eliminating injustice.

Liberation theology also entails concerns akin to the critical theory of religion, including the use of materialist definition, emancipatory theme, and an emphasis on critical reflection and praxis.<sup>7</sup> They

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<sup>7</sup> For the present purpose, the critical theory of religion here refers to relevant ideas found in the thought of its central figures, namely Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Erich Fromm (see [Kim 1996](#); [Siebert 1974, 1985](#)).

both point out that religion is a social product and that Christianity and other world religions have not been critical enough of oppressive societies. They generally view religion as having served as an influential ideology, which legitimizes the unjust state and society, thereby failing to perform its role of promoting justice and goodness. Furthermore, critical theory and liberation theology both have played crucial roles in developing the modern encounters of Marxism and Christianity. In view of this, some political theologians and critical theologians scrutinized the organization, political involvement, and ideological interests of the Church to evaluate their findings in comparison with the emancipatory potential of religion as suggested by liberation theology (See Metz 1973; Moltmann 1970).

By considering the aforementioned issues that are raised by liberation theology, the sociology of religion can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of religious phenomena in contemporary society. Not only does liberation theology contain fresh insights into religious phenomena, but also raises many important sociological questions and theories of religion. We need to consider these new ideas, as they indicate that religion is, and can become, more integral part of life in this world that is increasingly becoming inhumane.

#### *The Future of Religion: Towards an “Ecclesiastical Social Responsibility” (ESR)?*

As a way of musing about the implications of liberation theology—and the integral mission and JPIC Movement—for the future of religion, the paper suggests that religious organizations may have something to gain from reflecting on the ideas extant in the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). While CSR can be defined in many different ways, the following definition captures the essence of the concept: “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by the law” (McWilliams and Siegel 2001, p. 117). Also pertinent to the concept is the firm’s “pyramid of responsibilities” towards the community in which it operates, including ethical, environmental, and philanthropic responsibilities (Sheehy 2005). When CSR first began as an organizational policy, it was rejected by many firms, citing the fact that it is incongruent with the firm’s profit motives. CSR is now established as an important feature that cannot be ignored by firms, as the latter have embraced the view that while profits are important, being socially responsible is also meaningful.

Therefore, would it be too far-fetched to think about something similar for world religions in general and Christianity in particular? For example, can there be what can be termed “ecclesiastical social responsibility” (ESR), which can be defined as something akin to “actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the church and that which is required by the doctrines”? At this point, it is worth asking questions inspired by a central viewpoint of liberation theology: How can religious organizations remain silent about the state of the world in which so many people of the world population, including children, are still being starved and undernourished and so many people’s human rights are being violated? Isn’t life in this world that is less afflicted by hunger, poverty, injustice, and oppression just as important as salvation in the next world? In the case of Christianity, isn’t that what Jesus Christ would have wanted? Instead of asking “why should religion be involved with social issues?” as most conservative theologians have argued, we should ask “why shouldn’t religion be more actively involved with socio-economic and political affairs, so that life on earth is more liveable and hopeful?” After all, religious organizations as a whole are perhaps the most powerful non-governmental organizations in the world, complete with enormous financial resources, strong organizational structure, and a large number of devotees who can easily be swayed for socio-political actions. Religious organizations have the power to change society for the better, but they have not had the will to do so and have willingly supported the existing socio-economic system that has privileged only some, while disadvantaging many. Those people living under unforgiving conditions are not living in countries where there are no churches, temples, or other places of worship. One could name a developing country and there is typically a dominant religion. It is definitely not a problem of too little religion. Rather, it is a problem of indifferent religion. With ESR, religion can have a more real impact on the people, spiritual or material, and can become even more relevant to their lives in contemporary

society. After all, if even mundane organizations like corporations are doing it, why not religious organizations?<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

The central theme of this paper has been the need to rethink both the role of religion in contemporary settings and the theory of secularization in light of liberation theology, including *minjung* theology. Like its counterparts elsewhere, *minjung* theology has redefined the role of Christianity in the country by articulating and sympathizing with the economic and social concerns of the underprivileged. It also served as a powerful voice in the country's democratic movement. More recently, *minjung* theology has taken issues with other causes, including reunification, gender equality, and environmental protection, as well as economic polarization between the haves and the have-nots. *Minjung* theology has also inspired Buddhism to follow in its footsteps, as there are now numerous religiously-motivated NGOs which are of Buddhist origin.

Liberation theology thus shows how religious beliefs can be newly interpreted to understand and challenge injustice in today's world. This new understanding of religion can make faith or religion become less distant from reality. Such development within religion does not indicate its diminishing significance, but rather manifests a different role of religion in contemporary society. Because liberation theology represents a new way of understanding human existence, of interpreting the Bible, and of formulating theological reflections, it is a new way of thinking about and "doing" religion. This new conception of theology sees religion as a historical, as well as a social product which should benefit various needs of societies in relation to geographical, political, or socio-economic differences. Such contextualization of religion indicates changes that are taking place within religion and in its relation to society. Liberation theology thus rejects both oversimplified conceptualization of secularization and over-secularized conception of society.

The paper has also suggested that liberation theology, by redefining the role of religion, may add a new dimension to the concept of secularization. That is, *secularization as referring to the increased use of sacred institution—belief and practice—for secular purposes*. Liberation theology shows that individuals in the modern world will continue to need religion, particularly as a means of challenging injustice and oppression that persist in today's world. Now, instead of absorbing ourselves with the question of the future of religion, it is time that we ask, "what is the future of secularization?"

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<sup>8</sup> The arguments above are not intended in any way to regard religion as an instrument or tool for specific purposes. The paper does argue that ideas like "ecclesiastical social responsibility," if accepted by religious organizations, can make religions become more socially responsible, without being disrespectful or "violating" the religious tradition itself. Being devout to one's faith and being involved with socio-political issues do not need to be mutually exclusive, as in a zero-sum game. For example, those involved in religiously-oriented NGOs for various causes cannot be said to be more socially involved because of their weak faith or lack of faith. In fact, their faith may actually have inspired them to be more socially engaged.



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