PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON THEOLOGY, RELIGION, CULTURE, AND HUMANITIES
Vol. 2, No. 1, June 2025 (104-115)

Incarnation as a Sign of Divine Solidarity: A Theology of the Council of Nicaea

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.24071/tic.v1i2.12117

Abstract

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) was an important milestone in the history of Christianity that affirmed the divinity of Christ through the formulation of homoousios, namely the essential equality between Jesus Christ and the Father. In the Western theological tradition, this decision is often understood in the context of the theology of its time. However, in the perspective of Minjung theology that developed in the context of the struggle of the oppressed people in Korea, the incarnation of Christ is not merely an ontological issue, but also an act of divine solidarity with the oppressed. This study interprets the decision of the Council of Nicaea in the framework of Minjung theology, emphasizing how the incarnation of Christ can be seen as God's act that radically sides with those who suffer. This study uses a hermeneutic approach and explores how the concept of homoousios can be interpreted as a form of God's involvement in the reality of human suffering. Analysis of Minjung theological texts, especially the works of theologian Ahn Byung-Mu, is used to highlight the dimension of liberation in the event of the incarnation. The results of this study indicate that the meaning of the incarnation in the Minjung perspective emphasizes that God not only has compassion, but actively enters the history of human suffering, providing hope and transformative power for marginalized communities. Thus, the Minjung theological interpretation of the Council of Nicaea offers a more contextual and relevant understanding for Christian communities struggling in situations of injustice.

Keywords

Incarnation, Minjung Theology, Council of Nicaea, Homoousios, Divine Solidarity, Liberation

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Council of Nicaea held in 325 C.E. was an important milestone in the history of Christianity, especially in formulating the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. This council was born out of the urgent need of the early Church to respond to the divisions that arose as a result of the theological debates that emerged in the 4th century, especially regarding the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father. One of

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the main struggles was the emergence of Arianism pioneered by Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who taught that Christ was a creation and not fully divine like the Father.[1] This view was strongly opposed by the Church Fathers who later championed the orthodox view that Christ is "one thing" (homoousios) with the Father.

The Council of Nicaea not only served as a forum for doctrinal clarification, but also as an arena for the struggle for the true meaning of the Incarnation.[2] The council's affirmed definition that Christ is truly God and truly human is the foundation for Christology in the Christian tradition to this day. However, the meaning of the Incarnation is never single. In the context of contextual theology, various approaches have emerged that try to understand the reality of God becoming human from the point of view of the experience of believers, including those who experience oppression.

One relevant approach to understanding the Incarnation of Christ contextually is Minjung Theology, a theology that developed in South Korea during the authoritarian regime of the 1970s. This theology was born from the concrete struggle of the small people (minjung) who experienced structural suffering due to an oppressive system. The main focus of Minjung Theology is the liberation of the oppressed by interpreting the Gospel as good news that is in their favor.[3] In this framework, the Incarnation is understood as an act of divine solidarity that descends into the suffering of human beings, especially those who are excluded and forgotten.

Problem Formulation

The formulation of the problem in this study departs from a fundamental question: **How did the understanding of the Incarnation develop in the church tradition, particularly in the Council of Nicaea, and how is that interpretation reinterpreted in contextual theological contexts such as Minjung Theology?** This question leads us to three main focuses.

First, how did the **Council of Nicaea understand the Incarnation? The** Council of Nicaea in 325 was an important milestone in Christological history. In this council it was affirmed that Christ is *Homoousios*, in essence with the Father, and thus truly

[1] Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 194–200.
[2] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: A & C Black, 1977), 233–238.
[3] Ahn Byung-Mu, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, eds. Yong Bock Kim et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 91–102.

God. But at the same time, He is also truly human, uniting His divinity and humanity as a whole. The meaning of the Incarnation in the orthodox theological view is a saving event in which God humbles Himself into a man for the salvation of the world. This understanding had a profound influence on the development of Christological doctrine in the church throughout history.

Second, **how does Minjung Theology interpret the Incarnation as a form of divine solidarity?** In this perspective, the Incarnation is not just a theological-abstract event, but a concrete act of God on the side of the oppressed. Jesus is understood as the embodiment of God who is present in the suffering, resistance, and liberation struggle of the small people. The cross and resurrection are interpreted social-politically as a form of solidarity and God's victory over oppression. The incarnation in this context is a sign of God's active involvement in the history of mankind's struggle.

Third, **what are the implications of this interpretation of the Incarnation for today's faith and social context?** This question opens up more practical and pastoral reflection. The Incarnation has a direct relevance to the social justice and liberation movements. The Church is called to emulate divine solidarity by being a witness of love and justice in the midst of structural injustice. This contextual interpretation challenges the faith community to not only understand the Incarnation dogmatically, but also to live it in real praxis. This encourages a creative dialogue between traditional theological heritage and contextual theological approaches rooted in the reality of the people.

Research Objectives

This research aims to examine in depth the understanding of the Incarnation as formulated in the Council of Nicaea, as well as explore its relevance in the perspective of contextual theology, especially Minjung Theology. This research begins by uncovering the theological underpinnings behind the decision of the Council of Nicaea, understanding the theological polemics that developed around the mystery of the Incarnation, and explaining the impact of Nicaean Christology on Christian doctrine as a whole.

Furthermore, this study analyzes the understanding of the Incarnation in the perspective of Minjung Theology, by identifying how this concept is understood in the context of the suffering of the small people. In this section, the relationship between the Incarnation, solidarity, and liberation will be explored, as well as a comparison

between the understanding of Minjung Theology and the orthodox tradition of the Church.

Finally, this study seeks to discover the relevance of the concept of divine solidarity for the oppressed, by exploring how the mystery of the Incarnation can be an inspiration for social movements in favor of justice. In this regard, the research will also analyze the pastoral value of the concept of the Incarnation in the face of social injustice as well as develop a contextual theological model rooted in the experience of faith in God who is present and solider in human history.

Research Methods

This research uses a theological-historical approach and text analysis with the Minjung hermeneutic framework as the main method. A theological-historical approach was chosen to trace the roots and development of the theological understanding of the Incarnation. Studies were made of the official documents of the Church, especially the results of the Council of Nicaea, as well as the writings of the Church Fathers (patristic), in order to understand the early formulation of Christology in the early church tradition. In addition, this study traces the historical development of the understanding of the Incarnation from the early days of the church to contemporary times, especially in relation to the context of the struggle of the people. In addition, the documents of Minjung theology are analyzed to see how this theology interprets the Incarnation in the context of the suffering and struggles of the small people.

In the next part, this study uses the text analysis method with the Minjung hermeneutic approach. Minjung's hermeneutics is used as a reading tool for theological texts related to Christology and the Incarnation, to capture the meaning of liberation that is relevant to the oppressed.[4] In this approach, a critical study of the understanding of traditional Christology is also carried out, to see the extent to which these concepts are able to speak in the context of the people's struggle. Comparative analysis between classical theology and contextual theology is also part of this process, in order to identify differences in emphasis, as well as their respective contributions to grounded and liberating understanding.

[4] Sung Bae Jin, "Visiting Hermeneutics and Historical Jesus," *Asia Journal of Theology* 6, no. 2 (1992): 330–343.

THE CONCEPT OF INCARNATION AT THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Historical Context of the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)

The Council of Nicaea held in 325 AD was an important milestone in the history of Christianity, especially in forming the foundations of orthodox Christological doctrine. This council was convened on the initiative of Emperor Constantine to ease the divisions in the Church caused by the teachings of Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who rejected the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Arius taught that Christ was created by God and therefore impermanent and not equal to the Father. This teaching causes theological unrest because it obscures the understanding of the relationship between God and Jesus Christ.[5]

This dispute eventually culminated in the Council of Nicaea, which brought together bishops from different regions of the Roman Empire. One of the most significant results of this council was the dogmatic declaration that Christ was homoousios with the Father—that is, one essence with God the Father.[6] This statement became the basis for the rejection of Arianism and the affirmation that Jesus Christ was not a created being, but really God.

Incarnation at the Council of Nicaea

The idea of incarnation, that the Word of God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, was the center of discussion at this council. In response to the teachings of Arius, the Council Fathers declared that Christ was "begotten, not made, the essence of the Father."[7] With this formulation, the Council affirmed that Christ had a divine nature no less than the Father, while at the same time receiving a human nature in the mystery of the incarnation.

The term homoousios affirms that in Jesus Christ there is an undivided unity between divinity and humanity. Although the debate about the relationship between these two natures would not be further developed until the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), Nicaea had laid an important foundation by declaring that Christ was indeed

[5] Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 193–195.

[6] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 233–236.

[7] Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 75.

God and indeed man.[8] The Incarnation, thus, is not only an act of God's love, but also a concrete manifestation of the unity between God and humanity.

The Incarnation and Its Meaning for the Church

The orthodox understanding of the incarnation affirmed in Nicaea has far-reaching theological implications. The Church not only acknowledges that God is present in Christ, but also that in the incarnation, salvation becomes possible because God Himself entered into human history.[9] The Incarnation is not just a historical event, but the center of the entire identity of the Christian faith.

For the Church, the incarnation is at the heart of the proclamation of the Gospel: that God became man so that man might take part in the divine life.[10] In the liturgy, dogma, and spirituality of the Church, the incarnation is the basis of all the teachings on salvation, the sacraments, and the relationship of the people to God. Therefore, the decision of the Council of Nicaea continues to resonate in the Church's confession of faith, including in the *Nicaean-Constantinople Creed* that continues to be pronounced today.

THEORY AND PRINCIPLES OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

History and Background of Minjung Theology

Minjung theology was born in South Korea in the 1970s, in a socio-political context full of turmoil due to an authoritarian military regime and various forms of economic injustice. Structural poverty, human rights abuses, and exploitation by power are part of the reality experienced by many Koreans, especially the working class and peasants. It was in this context that a number of Korean theologians began to formulate a theology that favored the oppressed people what they called *minjung*.

The concept *of minjung* does not just refer to ordinary people, but deeper, referring to those who suffer oppression, marginalization, and suffering due to an unjust system. Minjung theology places *minjung* as the subject of history and revelation, not just an object of mercy. This is a response to a form of theology that is

[8] Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 90–91.

[9] Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 177–180.

[10] Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54.

too elitist and far from the real experience of the people. Theologians such as Ahn Byung-mu and Suh Nam-dong played an important role in the early formulation of this theology by raising the socio-political experience of the people as the basis for theological reflection.

Key Principles of Minjung Theology

One of the main principles of Minjung Theology is the recognition that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. This is in line with the biblical testimony, particularly in the Old Testament accounts of the Israelites' deliverance from Egyptian slavery and in Jesus' ministry on the side of the marginalized. God in Minjung Theology is not a neutral God, but a God who is actively involved in the history of the liberation of His people.[11]

The second principle is the understanding that salvation in Christ is not only spiritual or eschatological in nature, but also touches on the socio-political dimension. Salvation is understood as liberation from structural injustice and social alienation. Thus, the Christian faith is understood as an encouragement to engage in social struggles to create a more just society.

The third principle that is distinctive in Minjung Theology is the understanding of Jesus Christ as *Minjung* itself. Jesus did not only come to *the visit*, but He was part of the *visit*, He suffered with them, was silenced by power, and was crucified for His solidarity with the oppressed. In His suffering, the people find the meaning of their own suffering and the hope of the resurrection as a victory over oppression.[12]

The Relevance of Minjung Theology in a Global Context

In a global context, Minjung Theology has a strong resonance with liberation theological movements in Latin America and other marginal contexts. Minjung's perspective enriches liberation theology movements with an East Asian contextual approach, emphasizing solidarity, folk narratives, and spiritual meaning in collective suffering.[13] This theology is part of a global movement to build a theology that favors those marginalized by social, political, and economic structures.

[11] Nam-dong Suh, "Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Yong Bock Kim (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), 38.

[12] David Kwang-sun Suh, *Theology of the Pain of God* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 91.

[13] Ahn, "Jesus and the Pilgrim in the Gospel of Mark," 141.

In addition, Minjung Theology also establishes dialogue with various other Christian traditions, including feminist theology, black theology, and postcolonial theology. In this encounter, the basic principle of Minjung Theology remains relevant: God is present in the history of the suffering of the people and invites the Church to be a living solidarity for those who suffer. Thus, Minjung Theology is not only a local Korean heritage, but also an important contribution to the richness of reflection of the Christian faith around the world.

INCARNATION AS DIVINE SOLIDARITY IN MINJUNG THEOLOGY

The Incarnation of Jesus as a Manifestation of Solidarity with *Minjung*

In Minjung theology, the incarnation of Jesus is understood not just as a metaphysical or theological event far from the reality of the world, but as a manifestation of God's solidarity with the oppressed people. Jesus is seen as the *true Minjung*, a divine person who chooses to enter human history through experiences of suffering, poverty, and resistance to oppressive social structures. The Incarnation, in this context, is not only the presence of God in the form of man, but a concrete statement of God's partiality towards *the suffering* and marginalized Minjung in human history.[14]

The Incarnation is an active and historical form of God's involvement. Christ not only took on the form of men, but consciously chose to live in the midst of the lower classes, talk to them, defend them, and ultimately die as victims of structural and political violence.[15] Thus, the Incarnation is a manifestation of God's solidarity in concrete history, not just a symbol of spirituality.

Minjung's Theological Critique of the Traditional Understanding of the Incarnation

Minjung's theology criticizes traditional approaches that overemphasize the metaphysical aspects of the incarnation such as debates about the divine nature and human nature of Jesus without touching on the historical and social realities in which

[14] Ahn Byung-Mu, *Jesus and the Minjung: The Gospel in the Context of the Korean Struggle*, trans. Theodore W. Jennings Jr. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 45.

[15] Kim Yong-Bock, *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Singapore: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), 67–68.

the incarnation occurred.[16] In this perspective, the dogma of the incarnation is often caught up in theological speculation that distances Christ from the real-life context of the oppressed people. Minjung theology seeks to shift the focus from dogmatic formulation to the real experience of the suffering of the people.

The incarnation, according to Minjung's theology, is inseparable from the act of liberation. In other words, Jesus incarnate not only to atone for sins spiritually, but to free people from structural oppression, both politically, socially, and economically. The Incarnation is a manifestation of God's liberating action, not just an abstract teaching of spiritual salvation.

Interpreting the Council of Nicaea with Visitor's Glasses

The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) was indeed an important milestone in establishing Christological dogma, especially about the unity of essence between the Father and the Son. However, Minjung's theology invites us not to stop at this dogmatic formulation, but to interpret it contextually and historically. The understanding of the incarnation born of the Council of Nicaea must be translated in a concrete socio-political context, especially in the face of injustice and oppression in the present.

In Minjung's perspective, incarnation is an act of God who is on the side and committed to social change. That is, the recognition that "Jesus is the true God and the true man" should carry a pragmatic implication: that God is present and at work in human history, especially through those who suffer. The dogma of the incarnation should not be interpreted as the end of theological reflection, but as the basis for ethical commitment and liberation praxis.

IMPLICATIONS AND RELEVANCE

The Incarnation as Good News for the Oppressed

The Incarnation is not just a theological event, but an act of God that is full of solidarity with people, especially those who are oppressed. In the context of Minjung Theology, the incarnation is interpreted as an encounter with God that enters the history of the suffering of the small people (Minjung). The Incarnation is good news because God does not remain silent, but is present and struggles with the poor and

[16] Hyun Kyung Chung, "Han-pu-ri: Doing Theology from Korean Women's Perspective," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 213–214.

eliminated. The Incarnation affirms that suffering is not the end, but rather the place where God expresses His love and deliverance. This divine solidarity is particularly relevant in the context of structural poverty and social injustice that still plague many nations, including Indonesia.

The Church, as the living body of Christ, is invited to present this spirit of incarnation in pastoral and social ministry. The Church needs to come down from its "ivory tower" and live with those who are socially wounded and marginalized. Minjung's theology emphasizes that Christian spirituality is not only about personal salvation, but also social transformation. Thus, the incarnation becomes an example and a strength to bring hope and liberation in the midst of the reality of oppression.[17]

Incarnation as a Prophetic Action in the Life of the Church

The Incarnation is also a prophetic act that arouses an awareness of social justice. In the spirit of Minjung Theology, the church is called to be a prophetic voice—to speak truth, to rebuke injustice, and to defend the rights of the oppressed. Christ not only suffered with the people, but also was critical of oppressive power structures, both political and religious. This serves as a model for the church today not to compromise against a system that oppresses people.

Minjung theology sees Christ as God incarnate not in the midst of the religious elite, but in the midst of the small people of Galilee. His presence gives new meaning to the poor, who have been forgotten by history. Therefore, the church must reinterpret its prophetic task by siding with the oppressed and becoming a means of social transformation. The identity of Christ as one who is "together and for the visit" invites the church to be present in the social and political dynamics of contemporary society.[18]

Conclusion

The incarnation in the light of Minjung Theology cannot be separated from the context of the people's suffering. It is not just a doctrine of faith, but a path of liberation. In this context, the church is challenged to reinterpret its presence in the world, not as an institution of power, but as a prophetic community that sides with

[17] Byung-Mu Ahn, Jesus and the Minjung: The Christological Foundations of Minjung Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 35–40.

[18] Nam-dong Suh, "Minjung Theology: A Korean Contextual Theology," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Yong-Bock Kim (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1981), 47–52.

the weak. The spirit of the incarnation leads the church to live in solidarity, partiality, and struggle with the people.

For the church, this presents an urgent call to live the spirituality of the incarnation prophetically. It is not enough for the Church to preach the Gospel verbally, but it must also manifest it in concrete action—building social justice, fighting for the rights of the oppressed, and being a prophetic voice that dares to rebuke an unjust system. A church faithful to Christ is a church that lives and is present with the suffering people, a sign of hope and deliverance in a wounded world.

Therefore, Minjung Theology challenges the church to leave the comfort zone and be actively involved in the struggle of society. The Incarnation is not just a past event, but a way of life for the church today: to enter into the suffering of the world and to present God's love there. In that spirit, the church is called to be the living incarnation of Christ who brings light, justice, and liberation to the present age.

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