Ahn Byung-Mu was born on June 23, 1922 in Shinanju, a city in South-Pyungan province that now belongs to North Korea. He was the first son of the traditional doctor Ahn Bong-Shik and his wife Chung Won-Sik. When Byung-Mu was one year old, his family moved into Manchuria. In those years, many Koreans fled to China, Russia or overseas because of Japanese colonial politics. Ahn portrays the situation of the three million Korean immigrants in Manchuria as depressing. In retrospect, he compares the situation to that of Galilee in Jesus’ time. While initially raised in a Confucian way, Byung-Mu converted to Christianity in childhood.

In the village where we lived, there was no church. I had never heard anything about Christianity, neither at school, nor at home. But there was a man, who worked as a servant for a rich family, whom they called a Catholic. The children laughed at him. It was a funny climate back then—also when the Buddhist monks came, the children laughed and made fun of them. I did not pay any attention to it, in the beginning. Yet one day, I do not remember what age I was, but it was in my pre-school period, I came to a village about four kilometers away, where there was a Catholic congregation. Behind the village, there was a crucifix. It was the first time in my life that I saw such a crucifix. I asked what it was. The children then told me that someone had been crucified. This seemed odd to me. Afterwards, I forgot about it again.

Then, at the end of fourth grade, I took part in a strike against the principal of the school who was always very unfair to the pupils. I was suspended from school because of this. It made me decide to leave the village and go to school in a small city about twenty kilometers away. There were two or three churches there and I came across a crucifix again. I thought, there must have been such a man here as well. I got

1 Cf. Andreas Hoffmann-Richter, Ahn Byung-Mu als Minjung-Theologe, Gütersloh 1990; Sunhee Lee, Die Minjung-Theologie Ahn Byung-Mus von ihren Voraussetzungen her dargestellt, Frankfurt a.M. etc. 1991. Hoffmann-Richter explicitly claims that he portrays Ahn from a theological-biographical perspective. However, he disavows this attempt in his preface, where he characterizes the biographical parts as “illustration” (op. cit., 13).
interested and asked what it was all about. The children answered: “If one comes here, one cannot have a concubine nor drink alcohol.” Peculiarly, they gave me this answer. I liked it, because my father had a concubine and I suffered from it. He also drank. Although he was a doctor, he still drank, mostly during the afternoon. So I liked it and I decided that I wanted to join them. It was in the fifth grade, so I must have been twelve. I joined, even though my father strongly opposed it.  

The harsh conflicts with his father over his involvement with the Christian youth program, eventually led to a break. His mother divorced her husband and took both sons with her. Ahn contributed to their subsistence with temporary jobs. After about a year, he entered the secondary school of the Canadian Presbyterian mission in Yongchang. Among the teachers and students, Ahn encountered people who would join him as allies on his future path in life: Ham Sok-Hon (1901–1989), the ‘Korean Gandhi’, Kim Chai-Choon (1901–1987)—co-founder of the Hanguk Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK, in Korean: kichang) and one of the most well-known Korean theologians of Ahn’s teacher-generation—and finally his school friend Moon Dong-Hwan (*1921). After finishing the mission school, Ahn traveled to Japan in 1941. He completed the College of Taisho University and in 1943 started studying philosophy with a sociological emphasis at Waseda University. Ahn read Kierkegaard extensively. When the Japanese army threatened to recruit him, Ahn interrupted his university studies and hid in Manchuria, where he served a congregation as a lay preacher for some time. When the war was over, with the Japanese leaving a power vacuum behind, he became involved in self-governance by negotiating with the occupying Soviet troops. In 1946 Ahn flew from the communists and went to Seoul. He managed to support himself and his mother by teaching English. At the same time he resumed his study of sociology at Seoul National University (1946–1950), choosing religious studies as a minor. In these years he was also elected as the chair of the Korea Student Christian Movement (KSCM).

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2 Interview with Ahn May 14, 1988.
3 In 1981 the theological seminary was enlarged with humanities and social sciences and the name was changed to Hanshin University. This step was motivated by the Missio Dei concept: the university wants to train Christian leaders who can play a crucial role in the society at large.