CHAPTER SEVEN

THEOLOGY AS A SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY OF THE MINJUNG

KIM YONG-BOCK (*1938)

Born in Cholla province in 1938 Kim Yong-Bock was by far the youngest among those who were working in the spirit of Minjung theology long before the CCA conference in 1979, although they may not yet necessarily have used the term as such. Already in the early seventies—after finishing his study of theology in the US (1963–68)—Kim worked as an advisor for the CCA in Japan. In Tokyo he set up a center of Documentation for Action Groups in Asia (DAGA) and was in charge of a URM research project on the role of trans-national corporations in Asia. Coming from the world of the “little people,” Kim rose rapidly in the Asian ecumenical scene and pursued his vision of a political theology in the Asian context with determination. Regarding the following autobiographical protocol, Kim expressed himself just like Ahn fully according to my presupposition that theological biography is fundamentally an open process: “Well the story of your life is not an objective account as to what happened, the story of your life is always different, when you tell it, according to the time and according to the context.”

My father died very early, when I was six years old. It was January 1946, right after the Korean independence in 1945 and by the end of World War II. By that time my family was completely ruined. My father was a truck-driver. Like any young man he was forced to go to Manchuria, to be a truck-driver in the coal mine. So he got tuberculosis, because of malnutrition, cold and hard work. He came home to die. I remember very little about him.

Together with my mother and my little sister, I lived in my uncle’s house. My life was a very difficult one. The first time that I was exposed to the church was in my primary school age. My aunt was a Christian and she had a son of my age, who took me to Sunday school. I found

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that church was a place where I could find a friendly community. I had to do a lot of household chores in my uncle’s house, but on Sundays I sneaked out, because the church was attractive to me.

At the end of my high school period, I began to think about my future. I should say that I already had a certain sense of mission for my life, not just for myself, but also for my people and for my country. During primary school and junior high, I was very much influenced by the readings related to the great national leaders who fought against the Japanese. Some of them were military leaders like Ahn Jung-Gun and Han Chan-Ho. During that time, I was also reading some European biographies. I don’t know whether you know Grundtvig3 of Denmark, he was a great educator of the people. I was deeply moved by that particular book. So I wanted to be a teacher at that time. Even in high school I was reading all the educational theoretical books I could find.

But it was very difficult for me to think about going to university, because I didn’t have any means to go there. So I was thinking about getting a scholarship. There was a possibility to enter a military academy. I thought about it quite a bit. If I became a military officer, I would be in a powerful position. But, because of my Christian faith and church experience, I thought that spiritual work was much more powerful. In the last year of high school I was involved in the strike against the school administration. We were preparing to go to university, but the high school was not really responding to our needs. I was dismissed from the high school. That caused a profound crisis in my life. Because I was a very good student, the principal of the school decided to reinstate me after three weeks. That crisis had raised many philosophical questions, though, and I think I became more or less religious, so to speak. I decided to study theology, to become a pastor.

I took the examination for the Presbyterian Theological Seminary […], but at the same time I took the examination for the Philosophy Department of Yonsei University. There were lots of discussions in my family. Everyone said: “Oh, you are hopeless, because financially we are zero, nobody can pay for your tuition.” At the same time, my high school teachers were saying: “Why don’t you go to Yonsei instead of to that theological seminary?” At that time a theological seminary was regarded as a very poor school, whereas Yonsei is one of the top schools. I decided then, that even when you do theology, you have to do philosophy. So I went to study philosophy. I studied philosophy and history and I didn’t care so much about the school curriculum. My grades were good, though. I didn’t intend to become first in my class, I mean my

3 Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) established the rural schools that are so typical of the Danish adult education. He opened the first adult education centre in Rödding in 1844. Grundtvig made a stand for a national church of the people (Volkskirche) and succeeded in forcing through the right to form free electoral congregations within the state church. He created a joyful religious art of nature-poetry.