

Moon Ik-Hwan's Sacramental Imagination for Political Transformation in his Sermon¹

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As William T. Cavanaugh says “politics is a practice of imagination,”² imagination is political because it has the potential to critique reality and evoke the hope for political transformation. While theologians have used biblical stories as the resource for the imagination of political transformation,³ a group of scholars suggests sacramental imagination as another way in which one imagines the alternative world from the perspective embedded in the sacraments. Because many of those scholars are Catholics, it is hard to find the use of sacramental imagination among Korean theologians, who are usually standing in the Reformed tradition. However, one can find an exemplary case in Moon Ik-Hwan, a renowned minjung theologian and social activist, who sought social justice, reunification, and democratization in the 1970 - 1980s South Korea.⁴ Rev. Moon employed sacramental imagination in his sermon and poems as a way of resistance to political transformation.

In this paper, I explore his sacramental imagination and assess its implication in conversation with Western scholars who have studied sacramental imagination, James K. A. Smith, Mary Catherine Hilkert, and William T. Cavanaugh. In the first part, I will briefly explore Moon Ik-Hwan's sacramental imagination in the sermon, “To live after the resurrection.” In the second part, I will assess that Moon's sacramental imagination was a way of resistance for political transformation in conversation with those scholars I mentioned above.

Sacramental Imagination in Moon Ik-Hwan's Sermon

Moon Ik-Hwan delivered a sermon of “To live before the resurrection” at the 1983 Easter service of Ecumenical Youth Council (EYC), a progressive Christian social organization that collaborated with him for the democratization and reunification movement in the 1980s ~1990s.⁵ In this sermon, he describes the church as the community formed as a result of Christ's resurrection, and the ordinary meal as a Eucharistic action to experience the presence of Christ within the minjung.

¹ This article is based on my presentation at Midwest American Academy of Religion Regional Conference, Muncie, IN (March 2019).

² William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 1.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination* Second Edition. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001)

⁴ For further exploration of his life as a theologian and social activist, see Hee-Dong Chae, “The Life and Thought of Ik-Hwan Moon,” *Minjung and Theology* 3 [in Korean] (2000): 84-103; Hyung-Soo Kim, *A Critical Biography of Ik-Hwan Moon* [in Korean] (Seoul: Shilcheon Literature, 2004).

⁵ Ik-Hwan Moon is evaluated as one of the most influential preachers in South Korea. For his preaching life, see Jaewoong Jung, “Ik-Hwan Moon: The Preaching Poet in Wilderness,” *Journal of Korean American Ministries & Theology* 6 (2014): 89-97, and Un-Yong Kim, *A History of Korean Christian Preaching: The Stories of Preachers in View of Narrative Innovation* [in Korean] (Seoul: Holy Wave Plus, 2018), 687-698.

In the first part of the sermon, he talks about the birth of the first church in Jerusalem after the resurrection. Here, he claims that Christ's resurrection resulted in the resurrection of Galilean minjung, and simultaneously gave birth to the church. He does not understand the Pentecost and the resurrection of Jesus separately but as one event. In the same vein, he says that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus. In his understanding, as the first church was born with the rise of Galilean minjung who received the Holy Spirit as the spirit of Jesus, the church in the present is the minjung and coincidentally the body of Jesus who was dead and risen in the minjung. Accordingly, he asserts that Jesus is the risen minjung, as the resurrection of Jesus is the resurrection of minjung, and the suffering of Jesus is the suffering of minjung.⁶ Thus, he demonstrates the resurrection of Jesus as the pivotal event that gave birth to the church as the body of minjung, and that the body of Jesus enables the church to be identified with the minjung.

In the next part, he draws on his personal experience of eating rice meals and describes it as a symbolic event to identify the body of farmers – one of minjung – with himself, and the body of Jesus.

As I ate a meal and each rice grain fruited by the blood and sweat of farmers, I thought that I was eating the burning desire of the poor and mistreated farmers. I felt that I was chewing their rice in which the blood drops of farmers burst one by one. Then, this body (in which one eats rice) becomes not my body but the body of farmers. In other words, it becomes their body bearing their unfulfilled and heartburning desire. Such a body cannot betray their desire. If so, we are living with this body, not for them but for farmers' desire embodied in our flesh and bones. Didn't Jesus live with such a body? As this body is not my body, the body of Jesus was not his body but the body of farmers and the body of minjung. Thus, when we take part in the Eucharist, our acts of eating the body of Jesus and of drinking the blood of Jesus mean that we eat the body of the farmers and drink the blood of farmers. It means that we are embodied with the oppressed, alienated, and suffering body of the minjung. It means that each meal becomes the Eucharist. Therefore, the Eucharist doesn't mean the sign of personal salvation simply but that we are living the pain, despair, and nihility of the minjung and the desire of the minjung struggling for setting free from the painful reality with our whole body.⁷

Here, in the description of his eating experience, he claims the meal is a participation in the life of farmers. That is, when he eats rice grains, he does not only participate in a physical meal but also in "the anxious wishes of poor and aggrieved farmers" which is formed through the suffering life of minjung. By eating action, his body is united with the farmers' body so that Moon and minjung become one body that is inseparable and intermingled. Furthermore, he draws the hearers' eating experience at the Eucharist. That is, he claims, as he experienced a kind of union with the farmers through his eating rice meal, the hearers experience a union with the

⁶ Minjung theologians argue that Jesus Christ is present in the suffering *minjung*. Jung Young Lee (ed), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third publications, 1988), 11; Yong-Bock Kim, *Messiah and Minjung: Christi's solidarity with the people for new life* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia. Urban Rural Mission, 1992), 8; Chang Nak Kim, "Korean Minjung Theology: Overview," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 85.2. (1995), 9-10; Byung-Mu Ahn, *Stories of Minjung Theology: The Theological Journey of Ahn Myung-Mu in His Own Words*, trans. and ed. by Hanna In and Wongi Park (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 79-82.

⁷ Moon, "Living before the resurrection," <http://www.newsnojoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=26731> assessed on March. 22, 2021. (Translation is mine.)

body of minjung as well as with the body of Jesus through the eating at the Eucharist. In this sense, the Eucharist is not merely a sign of personal salvation but the symbol in which they are bodily united with the reality of minjung. In other words, to persuade hearers to recognize their bondage with the oppressive reality that minjung experience and to participate in the action for transformation such an oppressive reality, Moon Ik-Hwan develops his experience of eating meal into a kind of Eucharistic imagination in which three bodies – the crucified body of Jesus, the body of minjung, and the body of partaker(s), becomes the one body through the act of eating. In this manner, Moon employs the sacramental imagination in his sermon to reveal the unjust reality and evoke hope for the alternative world.

Sacramental Imagination for Political Transformation

On the basis of the observation of sacramental imagination in Moon Ik-Hwan's sermon, I attempt to assess its implications in conversation with contemporary scholars who approach the sacramental imagination as an interpretive key to uncover the relationship between the political transformation and the sacraments.

First of all, I begin a discussion about sacramental imagination with Charles Taylor's social imaginary. In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor defines social imaginary as the ways people imagine their social existence and what enables the practices of a society.⁸ To be more specific, according to him, social imaginary is "the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings that is ... carried in images, stories, and legends," and "the common understanding shared by large groups of people that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."⁹ Accordingly, "social imaginary implies the deeper normative notions and images that underlie the expectations that are normally met."¹⁰ Here, two ideas should be noted. One is his argument that social imaginary is carried in images, and the other is social imaginary share a sense of legitimacy. These arguments are important to develop an idea of sacramental imagination.

James K. A. Smith draws on Taylor's social imaginary to explain the cultural implications of the liturgy, providing a theoretical basis for the sacramental imagination as a social imaginary. Smith suggests "a Christian social imaginary that constitutes a distinctly Christian understanding of the world that is implicit in the practices of Christian worship."¹¹ He argues, if social imaginary is an understanding of the world that is implicit in the practices, a Christian worldview or a Christian social imaginary is "an understanding of the world that is carried in and implicit in Christian practices."¹² Furthermore, he claims that "these rituals – Christian practices *form* the imagination of a people who thus construe their world as a particular kind of environment based on the formation implicit in such practices."¹³ He names the imagination for a particular kind of world that is formed by practicing the rituals as "desire" and claims the desire shapes how one sees and understands the world.¹⁴ In other words, the desire formed in the practices leads to assess the reality and imagine an alternative world, if one finds

⁸ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

the discrepancy between the reality and the ideal implicit in the practices. Thus, Smith claims a certain kind of social imaginary formed in practices evokes a desire or an imagination of the alternative world, which may fuel to transform the reality.

Now, I move forward to discuss the sacramental imagination. The sacramental imagination as a form of social imaginary takes its meaning from the sacraments. That is, if social imaginary is “the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings that are carried in images, stories, and legends,” the sacramental imagination is a social imaginary, by which people imagine the reality that is carried in and implicit in the sacraments. In this sense, the sacramental imagination is the way of envisioning reality through the sacramental worldview that recognizes the finite can indeed mediate the infinite, that all aspects of created being can mediate grace. In *Naming Grace*, Mary Catherine Hilkert explains the sacramental imagination as follows.

The sacramental imagination emphasizes the presence of the God who is self-communicating love, the creation of human beings in the image of God, the mystery of the incarnation, grace as divinizing as well as forgiving, the mediating role of the church as the sacrament of salvation in the world, and the foretaste of the reign of God that is present in human community wherever God’s reign of justice, peace, and love is fostered.¹⁵

From this perspective, the material world is not separated from the spiritual world but united; the material world is the field in which God is present and people experience divine grace.

Interestingly, Mook Ik-Hwan shares Mary Hilkert’s conviction of God’s presence in the world, especially in human suffering that the oppressed people experience, and both employ the sacramental imagination to express their theological conviction. On the one hand, Hilkert as a Catholic theologian asserts that God’s grace is to be discovered in the depth of human experience.¹⁶ In her view, the sacramental imagination is “the interpretative key to identifying divine grace in human experience that is located in the biblical story and the basic symbols of the Christian tradition,” namely the sacrament. In this sense, she defines the sacramental imagination as the naming grace in human experience.¹⁷

On the other hand, Moon Ik-Hwan as a minjung theologian claims that Christ is within minjung; furthermore, minjung is a christ.¹⁸ While many minjung theologians claim Christ’s union with minjung on the basis of Christological reasonings, it is distinctive that Moon draws the sacramental imagination to claim it.¹⁹ In his sermon, “To live before the resurrection,” Moon makes a sacramental imagination in which the body of minjung is identified with the body of Jesus, in his remembering of eating rice meal. That is, Moon identifies the divine presence in minjung’s suffering through the sacramental imagination of mundane meals and urges his

¹⁵ Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1997), 15

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, Minjung theologians claim “Minjung Messiah,” in the sense that Jesus is united with the minjung, as Nam Dong Suh claims “Jesus is the *minjung* and the *minjung* is the messiah.” Nam-Dong Suh, *An Exploration of Minjung Theology* [in Korean] (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1983), 188-189.

¹⁹ Although Byung-Mu Ahn and Jaesoon Park note that table fellowship at the Lord’s Supper forms an alternative community, they don’t go further to the discussion of the sacramental union conferred in and through the Holy Communion nor discuss in depth the political significance of the Eucharistic union. Ahn, *Stories of Minjung Theology*, 247-252; Jae Soon Park, *Jesus Movement and Babsang Community* [in Korean] (Seoul: Choenji, 1988).

hearers to participate in minjung's suffering as the body of Christ who is present in human suffering.

William T. Cavanaugh is another theologian who employs the sacramental imagination to uncover the oppressive reality and urge the church to resist the oppression. Thus, Moon Ik-Hwan and Cavanaugh have some commonalities in the sense that both employ the Eucharistic imagination as a way to reveal the oppressive reality and call to action to change it. To be specific, claiming the Eucharist as a counter-politics of the church to the torture-politics of the state, he argues that "Christ's Eucharistic body is both sign and reality," in which we become Christ's body.²⁰ To be more specific, Cavanaugh states that Christ's Eucharistic body is the reality as well as the sign that is "imbued with God's presence" and "deeply involved in the sufferings of this world,"²¹ and in this Eucharistic reality, the bodies – the bodies of partakers and the bodies of oppressed people become the one body of Christ. That is, as the Eucharist is the sociopolitical reality in which Christ is present with the oppressed people, when one takes part in the Eucharist, he or she participates in the sociopolitical bodies, not only the body of Christ but also the bodies of oppressed people, in the Eucharist.

Here, one can see a significant similarity between Cavanaugh and Moon Ik-Hwan. Cavanaugh's Eucharistic union with the bodies of oppressed people is quite similar to Moon's description of the Eucharistic union with minjung. In short, in light of Cavanaugh's argument, by means of the sacramental imagination Moon discloses the sociopolitical reality in which minjung and his hearers are commonly situated and leads them to realize that they consciously or unconsciously participate in the oppressive reality of minjung as they take part in the Eucharist. Furthermore, the sacramental imagination leads to raising a question about the reality which belies the world implicit in the sacraments and evokes to seek the alternative world that is implicit in the sacraments. As noted above, Taylor points out that social imaginary is a widely shared sense of legitimacy that is carried in the image or the practices. In this sense, the sacramental imagination shares a sense of legitimacy that is formed by the practices of the sacraments. In other words, as people practice the sacraments, they gain a kind of normative notions and expectations for what to be. According to the legitimacy gained from the sacraments, people assess the reality and imagine the alternative world conforming to the logic of the sacraments. The discrepancy between the world that they witness under oppression and the world that the sacraments bear reveals the illegitimacy of the reality in which they live, and simultaneously it fuels them to transform the distorted world into the just world as the sacraments indicate.

On the basis of these understandings, one may note that Hilkert, Cavanaugh, and Moon commonly employ the sacramental imagination to draw hope for the future that is implicit in the sacraments. First of all, Mary Hilkert claims the sacramental imagination as "a different foundational perspective, asserting that God's word of salvation, hope, healing, and liberation is being spoken in new ways today in people's daily lives."²² Drawing on Edward Schillebeeckx's notion of "contrast experience," she notes that revelation occurs within human experience focuses particularly on negative experience of injustice, raising the question of God's presence in the apparent absence or even in the midst of evil.²³ In other words, as the revelation contrasts the

²⁰ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the body of Christ* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

reality in suffering and oppression to the expected experience from the conviction of God's presence in the world, it raises a question about the reality and causes human resistance and hope.

Similarly, Cavanaugh claims the logic of the Eucharist as an alternative economy to the secular politic of violence. To be more specific, as I discussed above the social imaginary that is carried in and implicit in practice, Cavanaugh claims that "Christians are called to conform their practice to the Eucharistic imagination," because he considers the Eucharist as "a resource for Christian social practice."²⁴ He identifies the calling for Christians to conform to the Eucharistic imagination as the calling for the church to become "what it eschatologically is" in the Eucharist.²⁵ To explain it further, as the Eucharistic imagination opens the eschatological vision of the kingdom of God, it disrupts the secular imagination of violence and calls the church to be the community, the true body of Christ, conforming to the eschatological vision embedded in the Eucharist. In this sense, Cavanaugh argues, "in the Eucharist, the church anticipates the Kingdom and supplants the imagination of secular time with the eschatological imagination."²⁶ In short, the eschatological imagination of the Eucharist leads to assess the reality in light of the vision of the Kingdom of God and reconfigure the present as an eschatological time that calls the church to participate in the future kingdom. Thus, for Cavanaugh, the Eucharist is a kind of social imaginary in which Christians imagine the alternative reality, the kingdom of God, and resist the present regime that governs the world with the politic of violence in order to transform the reality to the world conforming to the sacramental imagination of the Eucharist.

As Hilkert and Cavanaugh claim the sacramental imagination as a contrast experience or a counter-politic, it is noteworthy that the sacramental imagination in Moon Ik-Hwan's sermon is used to raise a question about reality and suggest an alternative logic to the secular imagination. According to the logic of modern industrial society, farmers and partakers are separated individuals who cannot be united, hardly supposing any communal relationship between them. Thus, for those who see the reality from the perspective of the modern industrial society's imaginary, the suffering of minjung shouldn't be relevant to the participants in the Eucharist or people who eat a rice meal. However, Moon's sacramental imagination envisions the interconnectivity of the lives of the minjung, the participants in the quotidian habit of eating rice meals, and the partakers of the Eucharist, which is the sacred ritual of Christianity. The rice meal or the Eucharist is a medium to open Christ's presence in the oppressive reality, seemingly hidden, and to connect the lives of minjung and the lives of partakers, and to invite those people to resist the oppressive reality. In this manner, the sacramental imagination functions as a way of resistance for political transformation.

Conclusion

Admittedly, Moon employs a variety of literary devices, including traditional Korean myth, shamanistic imagery, and prophetic imagination from the prophet Isaiah, in his sermons. Nonetheless, his sacramental imagination is noteworthy because it shows his conviction of Christ's union with minjung is expressed in his sacramental imagination which demonstrates the sacramental union between minjung and Christians. Furthermore, it reveals the injustice in the reality and invites the hearers to participate in the resistance to transform the sociopolitical

²⁴ Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 251.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 206, 250.

reality, as the sacramental imagination recalls its logic that is carried and implicit in the practices. Thus, it fuels the resistance to the unjust reality which belies the logic of the sacrament, and the eschatological hope of the kingdom that the Eucharist itself promises.