Han (恨) and Salvation for the Sinned-Against

by Kevin Considine

For over six years now, I have been part of a home-based, ecumenical Bible study group here in Chicago. Our group gathers each week to pray, study Scripture, and learn how to be a life-giving community. As a tiny ekklesia, we have learned to share each other’s joys and burdens. Together, we eat, laugh, celebrate milestones, and enjoy each other’s company. However, like many communities, our members have wounds that run broad and deep, the causes of which include sexual violence, mental illness, racial denigration, persistent sexism, chronic miscarriages, cultural chauvinism, and family strife, to name but a few. I have quickly learned the depth and breadth of my own wounds, as well as those carried by others.

This experience, as well as my time working with at-risk youth, led me to focus my doctoral studies upon how we connect God’s offer of salvation, through Jesus the Christ, to the wounds that are the result of being “sinned-against”—of being the victims of sin. I am convinced that within the church and world we lack an adequate vocabulary to account for the depth and breadth of the effects of sin. Thus, I focused my studies on this problem and the question of how God persistently works in moments of fragmentary salvation in this world.

Our group is comprised of many interracial couples from a variety of Christian backgrounds, and this diversity has enriched our collective vocabulary for talking about God. Within this context, my own marriage to a Korean-American woman and my interaction with her family kindled my interest in exploring other ways of speaking about God and the effects of sin upon the “sinned-against.”

In my studies, I encountered one word for offering a more adequate account of the effects of sin—a thick description of woundedness—that comes from Korean culture and theology: Han. Han is not identical with the English term suffering. Suffering is too thin to account for the full complexity of woundedness. Han points to the interconnected levels of woundedness in human beings, their communities, and all of creation. Han is a festering wound and frozen energy in need of unraveling. The question is not if it will unravel, but when and how it will unravel and what the consequences will be.

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1 The term “sinned-against” is found in Raymond Fung, “Compassion for the Sinned-Against,” Theology Today 37, no. 2 (July 1980): 162-169.
Han is neither an abstract concept nor a philosophical category in the Western, Kantian sense. Han, essentially untranslatable, is akin to an anthropology that refers to the deep wounds carried by oppressed and violated individuals, groups, and peoples. Chang-Hee Son provides a philosophical-linguistic analysis of han. Son traces its origin to two Chinese characters (恨) upon which the full character is based. Son argues that the first carries the meaning of “heart” or “mind” and the second carries the meaning “to remain still or calm.” Son describes the fullness of the character (恨) as connoting a tree with roots stretching very deeply into the earth. As Son writes:

… [han] is used to describe the heart of a person or people who has/have endured or is/are enduring an affliction but the pains, wounds, and scars are not always apparent and visible because they are the kind that occur deep within the essence, core being, or heart of a person … [han] connotes a mind’s or a heart’s affliction and struggle with a deep emotional or spiritual pain which either poisons the entire being or even ends up nourishing the person …

Han is a black hole in the soul, so to speak, and it is an enormous, churning energy that can be unraveled either to bring life or death. The positive unraveling of han can lead to psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical healing; the creation of a nurturing and constructive community; and the strength for positive resistance, protest, and action to confront and change unjust political and social systems. The negative unraveling and continued festering of han can lead to mental illness, physical and spiritual sickness, suicide, interpersonal violence, and a nihilistic attachment to a great political cause that can lead to little more than greater pain, suffering, and oppression for the most vulnerable of society.

Korean-American Protestant theologian Andrew Sung Park is the foremost interpreter of han within Christian theology. He provides a basic definition of han as a multifaceted “abyss of pain” and a “wounded heart” that is the residue of violence unleashed upon the innocent. Park describes han as a “black hole” and a festering wound whose energy must be channeled and resolved either to give life or to give death to one’s self and others. For Park, han is essentially untranslatable yet he attempts to describe it through phrases such a “wounded heart,” “bitter resentment,” and “frustrated hope,” as well as narratives of exploited workers, sexual abuse victims, and Holocaust survivors. Han is a deep woundedness that festers within the mind, body, and spirit of violated and exploited women and men. It has its major roots in the structural sins of racism, classism, and sexism.

Jae-Hoon Lee and Kim Chi-Ha offer further assistance in explaining han. Lee brings the psychology of Carl Jung and Melanie Klein into dialogue with Korean culture and arrives at three interconnected variations: won-han, jeong-han, and hu-han. To simplify, these variations are based in aggression, resignation, and nihilism, respectively. They are all of a piece, yet one variation tends to manifest and dominate the life of a victim. Kim, a Korean poet, provides some of the most definitive images and understandings of han. As theologian Suh Nam-Dong has argued, Kim is “the person who has done the most to develop han as a theme in Christian theology.” Kim thinks han is the destructive experiences of oppression that also carry constructive energy for social transformation. He writes, “… accumulated han is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people,” and it possesses “the

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2 Chang-Hee Son, Han of Minjung Theology and the Han of Han Philosophy: In the Paradigm of Process Philosophy and Metaphysics of Relatedness (New York: University Press of America, 2000), 4.
3 Chang-Hee Son, 14.
emotional core of anti-regime action.” However, Kim emphasizes the intense negativity of han for, as Wonhee Anne Joh points out, han is never innocent. Its deep negativity cannot be underestimated, and one of Kim’s sharpest descriptions of han is “a people eating monster.” For Kim, han is a “ghostly creature” that “appears as a concrete substance with enormous ugly and evil energy…”

Chung Hyun-Kyung has pointed out that the han of women is the most severe and mostly overlooked. The han of women is so pervasive that some have argued that han should be applied almost exclusively to the woundedness of women. Due to the interconnections of patriarchy, class oppression, and neo-Confucian gender roles, women are the most saturated with han within a han-filled world. Many women have embraced the general description of Han Wang-Sang: “Han is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of overwhelming odds against one’s feeling of total abandonment, a feeling of acute pain and sorrow in one’s guts and bowels.” This description shows how deeply women’s han runs and how insidious is its marginalization by the male power structure. Although women’s han traditionally has been addressed by Shamanism—Korea’s oldest religion—some theologians have attempted to re-think Christian theology and praxis in light of women’s han. For example, Grace Ji-Sun Kim constructs a Christology in which Jesus-Sophia is deeply involved in the resolution of the enduring han of women.

The problem of innocent suffering is moving closer and closer to the center of Roman Catholic theology. This is because we find ourselves in a world saturated with a barbarous excess of violence and injustice. In my own journey with my Bible study group, the problems of innocent suffering, injustice, and where to encounter God’s salvation in this world have been more pressing than the problem of atheism or belief (although that, too, is important). The language of suffering has reached a saturation point and, on its own, is in danger of losing its meaning and relevancy. It is quickly becoming unable to account for the depth and breadth of woundedness within this world, as well as unable to envision God’s ongoing and relentless work of healing, liberation, redemption, and reconciliation. If theologians and ministers can better understand the interconnected physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of human brokenness, we become better equipped for articulating the means by which healing may occur. This thick understanding is what han offers for the future.

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7 Kim Chi-Ha, quoted in Suh Nam-Dong, 64.
9 Kim Chi-Ha, quoted in Suh Nam-Dong, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 64.
10 Kim Chi-Ha, quoted in Suh Nam-Dong, 64.
12 Chung Hyun-Kyung, Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).
13 Wang-Sang Han, quoted in Wonhee Anne Joh, Heart of the Cross, xxii.