

Violence, Terrorism, and the Problem of Hu-Han

by Kevin Considine

Like many countries, the United States has a long history of violence. In 1999, however, a different kind of violence was projected into every television and computer not only in the United States, but globally. This was when two teenage boys in Colorado entered their high school and carried out their plan to murder as many of their classmates as possible. Thirteen people died, and many more were wounded, before the pair of shooters committed suicide. This was neither the first nor the last of its kind. But it did signify a shift in media coverage of such actions and also a renewed focus upon the underlying culture that enabled two teenage boys to plan and carry out the murders. Paired with later terrorist attacks such as 9/11, what had once been “safe spaces” to a majority of U.S. residents had now become ambiguous, fearful spaces. Elementary schools, cultural events, marches for justice, and the social spaces, and worship spaces of marginalized populations were only some of the safe spaces that young men attempted to transform into spaces of fear. And, in doing so, they willed their own deaths as supposed martyrs to some grievance or cause. Such public violence was nothing new but the technology was new: the saturation of media communications now enhanced through the internet and the wide availability of military-style weapons to the civilian population.

In my own work teaching at a small Catholic college, this kind of violence is very much on my students’ minds. And my own. Because most often it is perpetrated by young men and I, too, was once a troubled, frustrated young man. As are some of my students. This problem is not an exclusively male one, but I think it is not a coincidence that the vast majority of perpetrators are young men. In particular, they are disenchanted, troubled young men who are finding meaning through acts of violence against innocents in service of some larger cause. Their cultural, spiritual, and psychological wounds often go untreated and they then burrow more deeply into a context of fragmentation and isolation.

Recent violence in the United States and abroad show that a different variation of deep brokenness has become more visible. It is a spiritual sickness that many Korean theologians would refer to as *han*. Although I am not Korean, the majority of my work has focused upon *han* and in particular upon God’s salvation for creation from *han*.¹ In general, *han* is a “black hole in the soul,” a “wounded heart” and “frustrated hope”² that is the residue of being

1 Kevin P. Considine, *Salvation for the Sinned-Against: Han and Schillebeeckx in Intercultural Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

2 Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15-20.

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sinned-against. It is like an infection in a wound that is carried not only by individuals but entire peoples and communities. As Chang-Hee 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...³

Although difficult to translate, *han* refers to a thick description of human woundedness and may manifest in various ways: aggression and lashing out (*won-han*), bitterness and lashing in (*jeong-han*), and spiritual emptiness, collapse, and nihilism (*hu-han*).

The Context: Failure of Global Systems

It is the last of these, *hu-han*, that now is becoming more visible. This is because we are connected to one another as never before in a kind of virtual “global village.” The prevalence of communication platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow strangers in different parts of the world to interact with one another. This can lead to good. For example, thousands were able to text-message donations to the tsunami-ravaged areas of South and Southeast Asia in 2012, thousands more claimed “je suis Charlie” after 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, and countless others continue to utilize the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as consciousness is raised about the continuing brutality against African-Americans, and those of African descent in other nations. At the same time, these technologies are ambiguous. As a teacher I can attest that social media often circulates paranoia and rumors as “fact” that connects with the feelings of disenchantment among young people. Through this predatory communication, individuals encounter insidious messages and ideologies that seem to explain their frustration. Although they often cannot name the larger culprit—what Pope Francis calls a global economic system that kills and casts out instead of bringing life and inclusion⁴—they feel it in the core of their being. Failures of global systems are communicated through social media and easily can amplify brokenness, frustration, and disillusionment. As such, this is a breeding ground for *hu-han*.

The Danger of Hu-Han for Society

Jae Hoon Lee describes *hu-han* as a flight from external and internal realities of pain to a deep place within the self where one cannot be harmed. He argues that people of *hu-han* often withdraw so deeply into themselves in order to escape pain that they can lose touch with the external world.⁵ As they disintegrate from aggression, to bitterness, to emptiness, energy akin to a black hole emerges and takes control. They become the foundation for violence in the name of a larger cause. Lee thinks that due to its predominant feeling of emptiness, it is *hu-han* that poses the greatest social risk. To quote Lee at length, the people of *hu-han*,

suffer boredom, dullness, futility, and meaninglessness in their everyday lives. As a desperate attempt to escape from the psychological predicament they often find solution in devoting themselves to a great social cause or ideology and thus become members of a collective social force. The collective social force rooted in ‘hu-han’ expresses itself in violent and destructive activities, because ‘hu-han’ by

3 Chang-Hee Son, *Haan 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), 14.

4 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 52-75, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazi-one-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

5 Jae-Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 51.

its very nature seeks out destruction. People of 'hu-han' are nihilists who value nothing in themselves and society, though they worship a great social cause or ideology expressed in their slogans and statements.⁶

Young men seem particularly susceptible to such manipulation as they search for meaning and purpose. Violent social and religious ideologies interconnect with *hu-han* and offer a perverse sense of meaning. For them, the world is irredeemable and the only hope is to submit to the cancer of *hu-han*. In pairing the murder of innocents with self annihilation they can become a temporary media sensation. Their actions can result in an investigation into their motives and their perverted ideology is then spread to connect with others consumed by *hu-han*.

A Christian Response of Salvation

This is a serious problem and it must be the Church and other religious communities that take the lead in addressing *hu-han*. This is because, at its core, *hu-han* is a disintegrating soul imbued with hopelessness and violence. It is a spiritual cancer that needs the healing touch of God. So, the Church needs to become the "field hospital" and "medical ward" envisioned by Pope Francis.⁷ For such emptiness can only be countered by the real presence of God's love, hope, justice, and healing. And this is found by putting "flesh in the game" through creating small Christian communities that show the hope of the Resurrection. That is, communities dedicated to sharing one another's burdens, invoking God's healing presence, and working for justice through love. This last part is of great importance, for people of *hu-han* have not been heard and through being marginalized have experienced neither justice nor transformative love. Such an experience within a loving community is a remedy to *hu-han*. As Rev. Martin Luther King observed, "...I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love."⁸

Globally, billions of people are yearning for change and something better. Globalization is a mixed bag and creates winners and losers which means that social justice, transformative love, and political engagement are necessary. And where it breaks down and *hu-han* appears, the Church must bring itself as the wounded, resurrected, Body of Christ, into an embrace and transformation of *hu-han* from that which breeds death to that which gives life. But what is the foundation for a burning thirst for change? Lee captures this conundrum well:

It is an illusion to build a humane, healthy society based on 'hu-han' type social activities, no matter how beautiful their slogans and statements. At the center of these 'hu-han' people exists an empty shell in which no value, beauty, authentic feeling, or hope can be contained. Therefore, a discernment is needed to distinguish between social activities that are based on genuine and healthy personal values, and those that are based upon false, sick, and nihilistic tendencies of destruction.⁹

The Church as "field hospital" must be characterized by mercy, justice, and healing to those wounded and cast out by church and society. Unlike any other force in global societies, religious communities, including the Catholic Church, can embody the hope, justice, and transformative love to recognize this cancer, grapple with it, and bring it into God's salvific presence. We can follow God's lead and address the cancer of *hu-han*.

6 Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds*, 160-161.

7 Pope Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God," Interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *America* (September 30, 2013), <http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

8 Martin Luther King, "Address to the First Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting," in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, eds. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001), 11.

9 Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds*, 160-161.