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NORTH KOREA: Mystery of the last "Hermit Kingdom"

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Although some things are known about North Korea's control over all aspects of its citizens' lives and about its chemical and biological experiments on prisoners, less is known about the country's religious life. Although religious freedom does not exist, there is dispute about how genuine religious practice is at the handful of "show churches" in the capital Pyongyang. Dusty pews suggest that they are not well used. Buddhist temples are mere cultural relics. Parents are reportedly afraid to pass on their faith to their children, as sporadic refugee accounts suggest believers are still punished for practising their faith in secret. It is often as refugees in China that North Koreans first encounter religious life. Refugees repatriated from China have reported that they are interrogated about their contacts with mainly Protestant South Korean missionaries, while the North Koreans have reportedly set up a fake Protestant church in China to lure back defectors. Evidence suggests that any religious revival in North Korea is a recent phenomenon resulting from repatriates sharing their faith. This might prove a challenge to the regime.

On 1 February the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) presented a powerful inside look at the human rights conditions in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea. The television programme showed a totalitarian regime bent on controlling every aspect of its citizens' thoughts and behaviour while it threatens the world with the possibility of nuclear war. Dissent is not allowed and the state demands that its citizens worship the dictator, Kim Jong-Il, and his deceased father, President ("for life") Kim Il-Sung. Those who are deemed "unreliable" due to family heritage or who have "betrayed" the country by escaping elsewhere are at best destined for life-long servitude in North Korea's infamous prison camps and at worst subject to cruel and inhumane chemical and biological experimentation. The final outcome of either scenario is death.

However, even as the BBC programme demonstrated how much we know about the horrible conditions in North Korea, there is also much about conditions inside this true "Hermit Kingdom" of which we remain ignorant. For one thing, notwithstanding the effusive praises for Kim Jong-Il and the vehement diatribes against the United States, it is unclear to what extent the North Korean people are aware of the plight of their country and therefore sceptical about the regime's propaganda. Although we have some information about conditions in the prison camps from reliable sources, we are still left wondering about the conditions of the inmates who are "housed" there. Given the tightly-controlled atmosphere and the current regime's apparent capacity to muddle through, it seems unlikely that we will have answers to these questions soon.

One of the most mysterious aspects about North Korea is the conditions of religious organisations and adherents there. Any person who has a modicum of understanding about the nature of the DPRK's political system will be sceptical about the existence of any meaningful religious practices there. In its 2003 resolution that condemned the North Korean regime's human rights practices, the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights noted the "[a]ll-pervasive and severe restrictions on the freedoms of thought, conscience, [and] religion" in the DPRK. The US State Department, in its December 2003 International Religious Freedom Report for North Korea, for the third consecutive year, was even more blunt: "Genuine religious freedom does not exist."

Clearly, no one disputes the deplorable conditions of religious freedom in North Korea. What we do not know is the extent to which there are (or not) genuine religious activities and practitioners. In an attempt to seek an answer to this question, in its 2001 concluding observations about the most recent report submitted by the DPRK in compliance with the requirements of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was ratified by the North Korean government, the UN Human Rights Committee, the body that monitors states' compliance with ICCPR provisions, not only expressed its concern about the regime's reported violations of religious freedom, but "requested" from the North Korean authorities "up-to-date information about the number of citizens belonging to religious communities and the number of places of worship".

Such a request understandably reflected scepticism about the credibility of the government in question. However, it must also be based on some prior knowledge about the religious condition in North Korea that contradicts the government's rhetoric. It thus begs the question: What do we know?

Since most foreigners who have visited North Korea have had their activities confined to the capital Pyongyang and its vicinity, it is only natural that we have more confirmed observations about the religious conditions in Pyongyang than elsewhere in the country. By all accounts, Pyongyang has two Protestant churches (the Protestant Chigul Church and a house church in the city's Nangnam district) and one Catholic church, in Changchung. Foreign officials, journalists and even ordinary tourists have visited these

facilities, including such senior religious figures as Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the then Vatican Undersecretary of State, and the Reverend Billy Graham, whose wife briefly attended a missionary boarding school in Pyongyang in the 1930s.

Foreigners who have attended services in these churches disagreed on whether they were staged by the government and whether the North Korean participants were genuine believers. What they agree on is that sermons include political references. The sceptics claimed that the churches primarily existed to support official propaganda and that there is no regularly-held activity. They noted the accumulation of dust on the pews when they visited the facilities unannounced. A South Korean newspaper reported in 2002 that the head of the North Korean Catholic Association stated that there was no priest to serve the North Korean Catholic community.

More religious facilities are being constructed in Pyongyang. The Russian Orthodox Church held a dedication ceremony in June 2003 for its new Holy Trinity church in the capital's Jongbaek district whose construction had been approved by Kim Jong-Il during his tour of Siberia in summer 2002. The South Korea-based Unification Church (commonly known as the Moonies) is also reportedly constructing an interfaith religious centre in the city. The recent "building boom", unfortunately, does not shed any additional light on the scope of religious activities, if any, and the size of the religious population, again if any, in the capital. Following the June 2003 visit to Pyongyang for the dedication ceremony, Russian Orthodox Archbishop Kliment of Kaluga and Borovsk suggested the existence of indigenous North Korean Orthodox believers. Three students for the priesthood are now studying in a Russian Orthodox seminary. Yet assessing the religious life of any Orthodox community in North Korea is almost impossible. Indeed, in October 2002, a Russian Orthodox priest who visited North Korea declared that the future Orthodox church in Pyongyang would primarily serve "locally-based Russian citizens", giving no indication that he was aware of any North Korean Orthodox adherents.

In comparison to what we know about the Orthodox community, there is more information regarding other religious communities in North Korea. However, it still is not much. In July 2002, the North Korean government told the UN Human Rights Committee that there were 800 Roman Catholics in the country, two "public worship centres", and one "sanctuary". The government did not indicate the existence of a priesthood, which corresponds to the aforementioned South Korean report. However, there is a lack of clarity about the three religious facilities. Even if one were to assume that the "sanctuary" in question refers to the church in Pyongyang, there is no independent source that could confirm the existence of the "public worship centres". In fact, such reporting flies in the face of the common perception that the three Christian churches in Pyongyang mentioned above are the only officially-allowed Christian facilities in the entire country.

If knowledge about the conditions of the Catholic community in North Korea is murky, it is even more perplexing with respect to the Protestant community. The North Korean government has claimed that there were two churches, 500 "family worship centres", and 20 priests to serve approximately 12,000 believers. Other than the two churches, there seems to be little agreement between government data and foreign estimates. Some foreign observers have provided varying estimates of the size of the Protestant population in North Korea, generally indicating a much larger Protestant population than the government has reported.

For example, in January 2004, Reverend Isaac of the Cornerstone Ministries told the US Commission on International Religious Freedom that there were as many as 100,000 North Korean Protestant Christians. One foreign missionary who has had experience dealing with the North Korean government claimed that there were over 500 "underground" house churches in North Korea, which, even if true, does not tell us very much about the size of the Protestant population since we do not know the average size of these "churches". Interestingly, the number 500 was mentioned by both the missionary and the government. Could it be that they were really talking about the same things? However, it appears that even government representatives are not quite sure about their own statistics. When two British parliamentarians, Baroness Cox and Lord Alton, visited North Korea in September 2003, they were told by their hosts that there were 200 house churches.

The same mystery surrounds our understanding of the conditions of non-Christian religious communities. Even though the North Korean government has reported that there were 10,000 Buddhist adherents, 60 Buddhist temples (the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report gives an estimate as high as 300), and 200 monks, reliable sources indicate that there is no genuine Buddhist presence. In fact, there is no evidence that these temples serve any function other than as cultural relics. Foreign visitors also noted that the "monks" who reside in these temples were more like caretakers than monks. The visitors doubted that they were truly monks because they did not adhere to Buddhist requirements, such as the maintenance of celibacy for monks.

We have even less first-hand knowledge to either confirm or deny the government's claim that there are 15,000 adherents of the Chondogyo religion, an indigenous Korean religious belief, who supposedly maintain 800 "preaching rooms in apartments".

Most experts agree that the North Korean totalitarian regime was extremely successful in forcibly eradicating all vestiges of religion from the northern part of the peninsula. The North Korean state, through the inculcation of the state "religion", Juche, with its accompanying version of "emperor worship", has demonstrated zero tolerance for competing religions. Ironically, the government's explanation that over the last 50 years, old religious persons have "died off" and the succeeding generations have not become religious adherents may actually contain significant elements of truth. In this regard, it seems that the government has engaged in a bit of creative accounting (probably as a public relations ploy to address foreign concerns) to come up with the aforementioned statistics for the various religious communities. These historical findings also raise questions about the statistical figures provided for North Korean religious communities by foreign sources.

Indeed, many experts have noted that given the highly-controlled atmosphere, it was impossible for religious propagation to have taken place, even between parents and children. Foreigners working along the Chinese border with North Korea have been told cases involving North Koreans who were neighbours and yet for 50 years did not know that they shared the same religious belief. Although some believers have survived the repression, it would seem logical that they represent a dwindling community. In the light of the regime's repression, it seems ironic that Kim Il-Sung's mother was a leader in the Presbyterian Church in Pyongyang and that one of the two Protestant churches in Pyongyang today was established in her memory.

Notwithstanding the deteriorating conditions in the country, government persecution of individual believers seems to have continued unabated. One such case apparently took place in 2000. A South Korean who has interviewed North Korean refugees told Forum 18 that a group of elderly Christians (who have maintained their faith since pre-1950) in a small town along the North Korean-Chinese border were executed for their refusal to renounce their faith. Former North Korean officials and prisoners like Mrs Soon-Ok Lee have also testified that religious persons, particularly Christians, who were imprisoned, were subject to worse treatment than other prisoners. However, they have been unable to tell us the number of prisoners held for religious reasons.

Based on these fragments of information, how then can we account for some of the high estimates for the size of the Protestant community in North Korea? Many have attributed this phenomenon to the increased people-to-people exchanges along the Sino-North Korean border since the beginning of the North Korean famine in the early to mid-1990s. According to experts and humanitarian workers in northeast China, many North Koreans who have fled to China in search of economic assistance and political freedom have come into contact with many South Korean Christian organisations and individuals providing humanitarian assistance in northeast China. As a result of the interaction, many North Koreans were converted to the Christian faith and brought the gospel with them upon their return to their homeland. Reverend Isaac of the Cornerstone Ministries told the US Commission on International Religious Freedom that a majority of the 100,000 Protestant Christians in North Korea today adopted their religious faith through either direct or indirect contact with South Korean Christians in China.

In recent years, the North Korean regime has become aware of this source of "spiritual pollution" and has tried to halt its spread. There were reports that North Korean officials, including guards along the Sino-North Korean border and diplomats in China and their agents, have been active in northeastern China, where an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 North Korean refugees reside, in an effort to identify, arrest and forcibly repatriate these refugees. A Japanese human rights advocate claimed that the North Korean government had established what appeared to be a fake church in Yanji, Jilin province, which is approximately 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the border. He told Forum 18 that Chinese officials seem to have adopted a hands-off attitude toward the church and its pastor despite the knowledge that North Korean refugees attend the church in question. The Japanese source also claimed that many North Koreans who attended the church have been arrested by the Chinese police and forcibly repatriated to North Korea. He suggested that the pastor in question might have been forced to work in this capacity because his family is being held hostage in North Korea.

As numerous refugees and South Korean Christian groups in China have testified, North Korean refugees who were arrested by North Korean border officials were questioned about the extent of their contacts with South Korean missionaries while in China, whether they have read the Bible and whether they attended church while in China. Those who answered affirmatively were either imprisoned or suffered capital punishment. However, the regime's concern that South Korean Christian groups in China pose a security threat to North Korea is not entirely illegitimate. For many years, South Korean organisations and individuals who wish to conduct humanitarian activities in North Korea or along the Chinese border with the DPRK must receive the approval of the South Korean Ministry of Unification. South Korean government approval of their activities was also conditioned upon their willingness to gather "intelligence" on its behalf.

The evidence that we have suggests that any religious "revival" in North Korea is a recent phenomenon resulting from external influences. If true, it is indeed ironic that in the midst of their sufferings, the North Korean people have come to find comfort in religious beliefs that they had been told for so many years were illegitimate. If so, it would seem that the "state religion" has demonstrated its bankrupt nature and the totalitarian regime's hold on its people is no longer so complete. The implications of these findings are stark. To the North Korean regime, the United States suddenly does not look quite as menacing when compared with their own citizens who have found their salvation in places other than the state. It seems that Kim Jong-Il and his comrades now really have something to worry about.

A printer-friendly map of North Korea is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=nkorea>

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