

Recent Changes in North Korean Christianity

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1. Real Church or Fake Church?

The year 1988 was a turning point for the history of Christianity in North Korea. Monumental event took place in Pyongyang, the seat of the regime which had been oppressing religions: two churches were built, one Catholic, the other Protestant. When these churches began to hold regular worship services on Sundays, with 150-300 people attending, two kinds of interpretation emerged to account for this unexpected development: one sought the reasons from external (extra-religious) factors; the other saw internal (religious) factors as decisive.

Some North Korea-visitors, experts, and South Korean intelligence agencies, who were wondering why the religion-hostile government of North Korea had all the sudden built churches, asserted that the motivation rested in external factors rather than in religious reasons. The “theory of external cause” thus claims that the establishment of churches is a product of Pyongyang’s concern for external relations and its diplomatic policy. According to this position, North Korean authorities had to prepare religious facilities for the coming Seoul Olympic (September, 1988)—because a talk regarding a possible co-sponsorship of the Olympic by South and North Korea was underway—or for the World Festival of Youth and Students (June, 1989) which took place in Pyongyang. Churches were built to give an impression that there was religious freedom in the country, as the theory goes, and people who attended religious ceremonies in such places were mobilized by the government. In fact, Hwang Jang-yop, a high-ranking official who sought asylum in South Korea in 1997, stated, “we have created two fake churches to deceive South Koreans.”²

The Korean Christian Federation (KCF), the umbrella organization of North Korean churches, also has been distrusted. South Korean experts of religions in North have argued that Pyongyang revived the KCF, a “camouflage religious organization,” during the 1970’s out of political necessity. They regard all religious organizations which have come into being in and after the 1970’s

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² Hwang Jang-yop, *I Saw the Truth of History* (Seoul: Haneul, 1999), 368. This book is written in the Korean language. After his arrival in the South, he became a harsh critic of North Korea through his books and treatises.

are fake, as they believe that all (real) religions have been annihilated under harsh persecution after the Korean War. All religious organizations had in fact remained silent in the 1960's, but vigorously started issuing political statements from 1974 onward, supporting the democratic movement in South Korea and the unification policy of North. Consequently, religious organizations in North Korea gave a strong impression that they were political entities than religious ones, and thus invited suspicions from South Korean society. Therefore, some South Koreans tend to judge recent developments in North Korean Christianity as communist political propaganda that is lacking any religious significance. They believe that Christian churches in Pyongyang are government-made fabrications.

There is yet another approach to explain the establishment of churches. This is to hold that Christianity, which has been under the extremely intense persecution after the war, has finally gained an official status with the governmental permission. According to this theory, there have been practitioners of religion who have survived in a unique way under this socialist regime which is infamous for its intolerance of religion. These Christians have kept their faith through the so-called "house churches," and have given birth to Protestant Pongsu church and Catholic Changchung church, which have been built in 1988. According to Lee Chang-guk, professor of religious studies at Kim Il-sung University, Christians were moved by the news that churches emerged in North Korea in 1988.³ The "theory of internal cause" thus sees that these people (of two churches) include real Christians whose faith has been kept in the past 40 years after the Korean War, and maintains that practice of that faith in the form of house churches took root secretly or unofficially after the war and developed into a traditional form of church worship with the aid of political environment. If we see it this way, we can say that "real" Christianity has continued to exist in North Korea.

According to what the late Rev. Ko Gi-jun of the KCF mentioned in 1981, there were 1,473 churches and some 117,000 Christians in North Korea shortly before the Korean War. After the breakout of the war, many of them moved to the southern part of the peninsula, and those left in North, the remnant, was forced to practice their faith alone or in scattered small groups as the early Christians under Roman empire. This was the beginning of house churches. These Christians were under systematic persecution since 1958, some of them being arrested, detained and sent into exile, some others having kept their religious life secretly. Through them, faith was transmitted until the 1960's. Thus, after the war, having abandoned the church as a formal institution, they individually or through the house churches with a small number of members, kept witnessing to their Christian faith as "stump" (Isaiah 6:13) faith

³ Lee Chang-guk, "Religion and Socialism," Kim Deuk-Jung, ed., *Rev. Sohn Jeong-do's Life and Thought* (Seoul: Methodist Theological Seminary, 2004), 195-206. Korean language.

communities.

It was Shin Pyeong-gil, an ex-officer of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP, the ruling party of North Korea), who reported that house churches had continued throughout the 1960's and 70's.⁴ During these two decades, the anti-religious propaganda was in its height. In 1968, however, the permission of worship in house churches was given particularly to some of the hard-working peasants among those who had been under sanction and suppression. The permission was meant to alleviate the increasing frustrations among the people under a stringent policy of religious suppression. Religious practitioners who were in their 60's or above were given the permission at this time. 200 house churches were approved in areas where Christianity had been quite active before the war, such as Sonchon (宣川) and Jeongju (定州) in Pyonganbuk-do, Nampo (南浦) in Pyongannam-do, and Sinchon (信川) and Jaeryong (載寧) in Hwanghae-do. Although it was prohibited to evangelize even family members or neighbors, these Christians were allowed to worship in house churches with one or 2 to 3 people on Sundays.

Although worship in house churches was permitted again during the 1970's with some restrictions, the number of faith communities drastically decreased between 1967 and 1972, in the process that the sole and official ideology of the country was established. The situation of house churches during this period came to be known in 1977. In October, a pastor from New Zealand who visited North Korea heard from an official of the KCF that "there are 'several thousands' Christians in North Korea, who are mostly Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic, and they keep their faith in house churches or individually."⁵ Their existence was reported again in 1981. In November, the aforementioned Rev. Ko revealed, "there are some five thousand Christians in North Korea and they worship in about 500 locations nationwide, including 60 in Pyongyang." House church typically consisted of 8 to 15 people. According to a testimony of a North Korean defector, the government has granted an extensive amnesty before the sixth plenary assembly of the KWP in October, 1980. A lot of Christians who had been exiled in the peripheries returned at this time and later constituted the core of the current North Korean believers.

The news about the survival of house churches from the 1950's onward and about the continuing suppression throughout the 1970's point to the fact that there have been not a small number of people who have kept their faith either through house churches or on their own as individuals. They survived from the 1970's up to the 1990's. For example, in a secret letter of 1992 to her friend who lived in the United States, a North Korean woman confessed, "I

⁴ Shin Pyeong-gil, "The Process of the Labor Party's Anti-Religious Policies," *North Korea* (July 1995), 59. Korean language.

⁵ Don Borrie's Letter to Philip Potter, Kim Heung Soo, ed., *Documents of the WCC Library: Korean Christian Federation* (Seoul: The Institute for Korean Church History, 2003), 43.

offer prayers of thanksgiving to God who protects and remembers us in any adversity. I only hope to spend the rest of my life as God's daughter ” Among these believers and members of house churches, some who live in Pyongyang as well as some who used to practice faith long ago seem to have joined Pongsu church. Even if this church is managed by the state and attendees of its worship are mobilized by the government, it testifies to the continuing and visible existence of Christianity in North Korea, as far as it has Christians, however small in number, who have kept their faith through house churches.

Many experts of North Korean religions have been emphasizing on the religious policy of the government and have sought to understand the history of Christianity as that of religious suppression and the process of extinction. They therefore have not paid enough attention to the religious experience of North Korean Christians themselves. If we move our emphasis from governmental policy on religion to the survival of Christianity, the history can be summarized as follows.⁶ Right after the division of North and South Korea, North Korean Christians have variously reacted to the socialist regime: some accepted, others struggled with, yet some others confronted (1945-53). After the Korean War, an extremely small number of Christians who remained in North has spent the period of silence by secretly witnessing to their faith through house churches or individually in the anti-Christian environment (1953-72). Some of them belonged to KCF and made appearances in North Korean society (1972-1988). These streams have been empowered through the exchanges with international religious organizations and South Korean churches and also by a new understanding of religion in Juche philosophy [i.e., the sole official ideology] and thus took shape as Pongsu and Changchung churches (1988-). This is the historical *modus operandi* of North Korean Christianity.

2. The Changes since the 1990s

It is true that North Korean church is under suspicion about its authenticity and that the government of Pyongyang has also been criticized by international community for suppressing religious freedom. Yet, while these suspicion and criticism remain, two major changes have been occurring in the church in North Korea since the 1990's onward. The first is the expansion of church's activity from the political area to the economic one. The second change is the creation of underground church by those who have once fled the country due to food shortage and yet returned, after their contact with Christianity, and have started secretly living out their religious conviction.

2.1 From Politics to Economy

If politics was a decisive factor for the survival of religions in North Korea

⁶ Kim Heung Soo and Ryu Dae Young, *Religion in North Korea: A New Understanding* (Seoul: Dasangeulbang, 2002), 328-329. Korean language.

in the 1980's, it is economy that is crucial for their survival after the food shortage in the mid-1990's. This change has been brought about in the serious economic crisis. The exhaustion of the North Korean economy has started with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe as well as of the USSR itself. The damage caused by hail in 1994 aggravated the food shortage to a critical level. North Korea was further hit by two floods in July and August 1995. In the same August, North Korea's Permanent Mission to the United Nations requested an emergency relief from UNDHA (United Nations Department for Humanitarian Affairs) as well as medical personnel from WHO. Thus, UN's full-scale support for North Korea has been initiated. KCF has also asked the World Council of Churches (WCC) for an emergency relief. In response, Action by Churches Together, an emergency relief organization of WCC and Lutheran World Federation, has immediately launched its relief operation.

Since the mid-1990's, as the food crisis reached its peak, the issue of humanitarian aid has become the substance of exchanges between North and South Korean religions. In this process, the North side has increasingly been inclined to request aid such as food rather than discussing the unification between North and South Korea. North Korean authorities sought to obtain humanitarian aid through KCF, Korean Catholic Federation, Korean Buddhist Federation, Korean Chondogyo Central Guiding Committee and Korean Council of Religionists from their Southern counterparts. These organizations made connection with any sort of religious entities regardless of ideological orientations, as far as it would help obtaining food supply and financial support. In such a process, religions have gained a new status in North Korea, giving birth also to a new understanding of religions within the society. Previously, religious organizations carried out only political functions following the demand of the state, without being able to even consider their religious roles due to the lack of finance. Yet, since the latter half of the 1990's, they have developed various social activities to overcome natural disasters and economic trials, with the help of the humanitarian aid from South Korean and international religious organizations. Based on such experience, they seem to be seeking to reinforce the role of faith communities which are primarily committed to social service. These attempts have come to lead the KCF to formulate its ecclesiastical definition in its context as "a diaconal mission church."⁷ If Christianity in North Korea will continue to harmonize their diaconal mission with politics-centered activities, it may develop into a spirituality unique to North Korean Christianity.

2.2 The Emergence of the Underground Church

It has been claimed mainly by Protestant churches since the 1980's that

⁷ Park Seong-won, "Struggle for Survival, Struggle for Dignity – Report of a Visit to North Korea," Kim, ed., *Documents of the WCC Library: Korean Christian Federation*, 325.

there is a so-called underground religion in North Korea. From the mid-1990's on, some newspapers, magazines and Protestant mission agencies have openly asserted the existence of the underground church. The existence of such a church, however, is by nature hard to verify. Even some church leaders who have visited North Korea many times and are well informed conclude that such an entity is an illusion created by Christians of South Korea and abroad who insist on the evangelization of North. There are also some people among North Korean defectors who doubt the existence of the underground church. In their opinion, "such a secret religious organization is impossible in North Korea, and it is not even necessary." On the other hand, people who claim to be secretly working for the underground church have even revealed some evidence of the church such as letters allegedly written by an underground believers. Yet, the information about the existence of such a church and its suppression by the government mainly rely on the testimonies of the defectors, and recognized neither by the North Korean authorities nor by the visitors from South. The annual reports by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom refer to unauthorized religious groups in North Korea as well as suppression and imprisonment of religious practitioners related to missionaries active around North Korean border with China, but the reports say that these are all based on "unverified reports." Nevertheless, taking into account various evidence and situation, it can be considered that the underground church exists and is a new phenomenon operative in the areas around the border with China.

Since the mid-1990's, as the economy of North faced a serious crisis, a lot of people started going to China. On the Chinese side of the border, South Korean and other foreign missionaries became active who sought to convert them and send them back to their homeland. There is a report that as the number of temporary and permanent defectors increases, who come to the three north-eastern provinces of China to obtain food, the number of people is also on the rise, who have come into contact with Christian faith while in exile and go back home as Christians. It is a similar situation to the late nineteenth century when missionaries in Manchuria could not enter Korean peninsula. At that time, missionaries transmitted faith to Korea by converting Koreans who came to China for trade. It is claimed that the underground church today is a secret faith community created by these newly converted North Koreans returning from China and evangelizing people secretly around them. We have few information about the mode of existence of such a church, except that it is a kind of faith community without clergy and sacrament. Given the history of religions, religiosity of human beings, and various efforts of evangelism towards North Korea, the underground church probably exists. Yet, considering the tight control of society by the government as well as the nature of the underground church, its size and influence may be much less than what is usually claimed.⁸

⁸ Ibid., 199.

3. Possibility of Juche Christianity

The 1980's is the most dramatic period of change in the recent history of religions in North Korea. For the first time ever since the Korean War, religious facilities such as Christian churches and Buddhist temples were rebuilt and restored, scriptures published, education of clergy and religious specialists initiated. It was also since the 1980's that students of Juche philosophy have started regarding religions in a positive light. No one in South was able to predict such a big change. Rather, at the beginning of the 1980's, it was considered that Christianity in North Korea was heading to a substantial extinction, given the situation that Juche philosophy was being propagated and that Kim Il-sung was being divinized in various ways.

That prediction was wrong, but it was right to connect the possibility of Christianity's survival in North with Juche philosophy. Juche philosophy, which is a revolution philosophy of Kim Il-sung, had content of anti-flunkeyism during the 1950-60's, took human-centrism emphasizing people as the subject of history instead of Marxist-Leninist emphasis on material in the 1970's, and transformed into a leader-centrism, with a stress on the principle of "guidance" in revolution and construction, from the 1970's to the 1980's. In order to understand Christianity in North Korea, it is necessary to consider how the relationship between this religion and Juche philosophy is understood in North Korean society. Since the 1980's, Kim Il-sung and theorists of Juche philosophy have been arguing that, in short, even though there are essential differences of world view between their philosophy and religion, there is nonetheless a common ground.

Interests in religions among the scholars of Juche philosophy already surfaced in the late 1970's. At the International Juche Philosophy Seminar held in Pyongyang in October 1977, Hwang Jang-yop, the aforementioned defector and the then president of Kim Il-sung University, told a pastor from New Zealand that he was interested very much in "theological, philosophical discussion on the Buddhist and Christian understanding of man (sic) as compared too the Korean Juche understanding of man (sic)."⁹ At the meeting of Reconciliation between South Korean Christians in Overseas and North Korean Christians held in Vienna in November 1981, Rev. Ko, the KCF secretary, referred to this issue for the first time as a leader of North Korean church. He revealed that there were common grounds between followers of Juche philosophy and Christians on such matters as charity, liberation of the poor and the oppressed, preferential concern for national problems. He also made a point that the anti-flunkeyism and the human-centered perspective of Juche philosophy are not different from what Christianity advocates.

Among the Juche theorists, it was Park Seung-duk of the Institute of Juche Philosophy of the Academy of Social Sciences who most profoundly expounded

⁹ Don Borrie's Letter to Philip Potter, 43.

the relationship between Juche philosophy and religion. When the delegates from WCC visited North Korea in November 1987, he explained them the difference between Juche philosophy and Marxism, Juche understanding of religion, and cooperation between Kim Il-sung and followers of religions under the rule of Japanese empire. He also told them that Juche theorists were interested in how religion treated people's aspiration.¹⁰ Later, at an annual convention of North American Christians held in Beijing in 1990, he characterized positively the ongoing dialogue between Christianity and Juche philosophy abroad as a development of "new history of thought." According to him, Juche theorists, unlike Marxists, do not dispute whether Christianity stands on a scientific world view or not, but rather are interested in dialogue with Christians in seeking a common method of struggle for human liberation and salvation.

It seems that it was through the encounter of Juche theorists with Koreans and religionists abroad that their thought about the relationship between religion and Juche philosophy has been gradually developed. Hwang Jang-yop too, as the best mind of Juche theorists, told that he got a hint about mutual collaboration between religion and Juche philosophy when he had a serious dialogue with Fr. Laurence T. Murphy, a former president of Seton Hall University, who visited Pyongyang in 1989. They discussed religion and Juche philosophy, and Hwang found a convergence and possibility of mutual collaboration on the point that religion exhorted human beings to love one another and empowered them to shape their own destiny. Later, Hwang came to be interested in having more exchanges with religionists, and came to be convinced that, in connecting religion and Juche philosophy, there had to be a "new development of religion," namely, a shift from a God-centered world view to a human-centered one. If such a shift to human-centered perspective was a creation of Juche Christianity, it was Hwang who sought it among Juche theorists.

The theological stance of North Korean Christianity has been little known, but it seems that it has been influenced by the philosophical principle of Juche philosophy, i.e., human beings are the master of everything, and everything has to be decided by them. The determination of everything by human beings does in no way mean that every change and development in the world are brought about by human beings. It simply means that human beings have a central role in changes of the world and in opening their own way. In 1988, Rev. Ko told the delegates of the National Council of Churches of Canada, "Christians in North Korea believe in almighty God who is the Creator, but they do not entrust everything to God...We human beings must strive to accomplish what

¹⁰ Erich Weingartner, "CCIA/WCC Delegation to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Kim, ed., *Documents of the WCC Library: Korean Christian Federation*, 138-142.

we must do by using all the God-given gifts and wisdom and talents.”¹¹ This demonstrated, if we borrow the words of Hwang, a shift from a God-centered worldview to a human-centered one.

One of the principal components of Juche philosophy is a principle that the masses are the subject of society and history. According to this principle, every socio-historical movement, unlike movements in nature, have a subject, and social movements are caused and developed by active agency and role of the subject. In Juche philosophy, the masses assume this role of powerfully directing social movement. Everything is created by them, and history develops through their struggle. When thinkers and religionists of North Korea say that Juche philosophy and religion have a common ground, this Juche philosophy is a human-centered one. In short, it is a philosophy that holds that the masses are the master and main driving-force of revolution and construction. As already mentioned, Rev. Ko told at the dialogue with Koreans abroad for unification, the reason why Christians and communists in North Korea can work together for the construction of socialist society and unification of Korea is that there is a common theoretical foundation between human-centered Juche philosophy and Christian ideal of charity. This was the first instance which demonstrated that North Korean religionists interpreted Christianity through the human-centered Juche philosophy.

The masses-centrism is a theory proposed by Hwang Jang-yop. Kim Jong-il, however, in his article “On Juche Philosophy” published in 1982 emphatically argued that, in order for the masses to assume the status of the subject of history and play this role, they must be “united with the guidance.” The union of the “guidance” and the masses is a problem directly linked to the issue of guidance of the masses by the Party and the leader, leading to the perpetuation of the absolute dictatorship by the leader. When this version of Juche philosophy is presented by the state as the sole system of thought, diverse interpretations of social phenomena and political events are ruled out, and the absolute submission to the leader is required. It is not clear how the relationship between Christianity and leader-centrism will develop, but it is very likely that the demands of the leader take the absolute precedence in the area of religion as well. If the post-Kim Jong-il administration does not emphasize this type of Juche philosophy, Christianity in North Korea will have a chance for a new development. However, if the absolute dictatorship continues, the government will not easily permit growth of Christianity which will be a burden for their governance, and even if they permit, it will be with stringent supervision and control by the state. If Christianity cannot secure its autonomy in such a situation, it will lose its identity and collapse, as did

¹¹ National Council of Churches of Canada, “Report of Visit to Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” *Theological Thought*(Summer 1989), 384. This report is translated into the Korean language.

Christianity under Japanese rule which imposed an emperor-worship cult. The future of Juche Christianity depends on whether Christianity can maintain its own identity while adapting the world view of Juche philosophy.