

Religious persecution in North Korea

Process and phases of oppression 1945-2011

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Abstract

Once called the Jerusalem of Asia, North Korea is one of the most oppressive states suppressing religious freedom. While there is an appearance of religious activity in a few of the government sponsored places of worship, extensive testimonies have shown that the regime treats religious people as national security criminals and prosecutes them accordingly.² Many religious leaders and their family members, including children, have been punished without due process, tortured, executed, or sent to political prison camps. Additionally, religious believers have faced systematic socio-political discrimination. This paper will describe the process and phases of religious oppression by the North Korean regime from the independence movement to the Korean War and to the present. To show the overall pattern of religious oppression, the paper is divided into four phases: First Phase – Pre-Korean War (1946 to 1950), Second Phase – Korean War (1950 to 1953), Third Phase – Before the Kimilsungism Movement (1953 to 1971), and Fourth Phase – Era of Juche³ (1972 to present). The analysis will illustrate the big picture of religious persecution, but the focus will be on Protestant Christianity, which became the main target of oppression. Comparisons between the persecution of Christianity and Buddhism will also be drawn. This paper relies on findings from testimonies of North Korean refugees in addition to traditional research sources.

Keywords North Korea, religious freedom, persecution, history, policy.

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² WON, Jae-Chun & Kim Byoung Lo, A prison without bars: Refugee and defector testimonies of severe violations of freedom of religion or belief in North Korea, p. 38, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, (March 2008).

³ Juche means “self-reliance” and/or “self-sufficiency” in Korean.

1. First phase: Conciliation and suppression

From independence until the Korean War (1946-1950) – The significance of the religious group⁴ and North Korea's dual policy on religion

At the time of independence from Japan, approximately 24.7% of the North Korean population believed in religion, including Cheondogyo⁵, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism.⁶ The Protestant church was a place of learning,⁷ and Christian leaders were actively involved in national activities for independence.⁸ In this sense, Christian influence went beyond mere statistics and largely affected society and politics. North Korean policy was two-fold. First, Protestantism, like other religions, had to be eliminated. However, Protestantism's significant social and political influence needed to be exploited.⁹ In this sense, the North Korean regime employed a dual policy of conciliation and tempered suppression.

1.1 Inducement of the progressive Protestant group and deceitful suppression against anti-party religious groups

North Korea's position on Protestantism can be illustrated by Kim Il Sung's speech delivered during an October 1945 conference for the Communist Party.¹⁰

We ought to establish a Unified Front involving every patriotic democratic resource including not only proletariat and peasantry but also national enterprises. . . . Intellectuals, religious believers, and capitalist class are also taking actions although

⁴ Religious group implies Protestant leaders and churches that possessed potential influence to bring actual change to North Korean society in a pertinent period.

⁵ Cheondogyo is a traditional Korean religion based on the "human first" doctrine.

⁶ KANG In-cheol, A new understanding of modern North Korean religion history, North Korean Post Independence, Dasan Publications, 1992, p. 149 [Korean].

⁷ In May 1910, there were a total of 511 Protestant missionary schools in the Northwestern region. This number accounted for 78% of all Protestant schools, 64% of all religious schools, and 23% of all private schools in Korea. (YUN Kyeong-ro, The passion of Protestantism and the 105 person case, Boseong Publications, 1986, p. 313.) 'The predominant number of schools in the northwestern region leads to a preponderance of intellectuals in the northwestern area of North Korea'; KANG In-cheol, op. cit., p. 149.

⁸ Religious distribution of national leaders who signed the Declaration of Independence: Protestant – 16 including LEE Seung-hun; Cheondogyo – 15; Buddhist – 2. The Protestant National Movements were led by two camps and two leaders, Hwangseong YMCA (LEE Seung-man, Seoul region) and Sin-minhoe (AN Chang-ho). Both pursued a free and civilized society based on Christian principles. The three giants of the Korean provisional government, LEE Seung-man, AN Chang-ho, and LEE Dong-hui were all Christians.

⁹ BYEON Jin-heung, The North Korean "silence church" and Communism, North Korean Church History in Post Independence, p. 89 [Korean].

¹⁰ Hwajeonchunso (和田春樹), The Soviet Union's Policy on North Korea 1945-1946 [Korean]; Bruce Cumings, Modern history around the division of Korea, Ilwolsoegak Publications, pp. 268-271; BYEON Jin-heung, op. cit., p. 89 [Korean].

they are not very well organized. . . . [W]e should not recklessly exclude them or ignore nationalists' capacity to form under our National Unified Front.¹¹

In addition, numerous religious representatives were involved in the formation of the "North Korean People's Provisional Committee" in February 1946.¹² Many religious leaders were also elected to Province, City, and District positions during the People's Committee Election on November 3, 1946.¹³

Kim Il Sung endorsed religious leaders' involvement in the election in the following statement:

Religious freedom is officially guaranteed in North Korea and no religion should be persecuted or suppressed. All religious believers in North Korea have [the] complete right and freedom as a citizen to participate in People's Committee Election with equal rights.¹⁴

Simultaneously, the Communist government, described religious people as "pro-imperialist, pro-feudalist, and malign reactionary religious people who are hostile to democratic revolution." In a speech regarding these "reactionary religious people," Kim Il Sung described them as "[B]ourgeois who owned lands and ate without labor. . . . They are all like parasites that exploit and waste money and food with no effort so we don't have to feed them."¹⁵

The regime strategically held uncooperative religious people in check while they encouraged pro-communist religious believers to take part in social and political activities. This "freedom," however, was short-lived.

1.2 Restricted religious freedom: Observance of "Unified Frontal Order and Discipline"

Religious freedom in this period was highly restrictive and only free for those who were cooperative with the "Unified Frontal Order and Discipline." The regime

¹¹ Kim Il Sung, "On establishing the New Korea and the National Unified Front" (13 October 1945), Kim Il Sung, *Collected speeches volume 1*, 1963, pp. 1-10 (KIM Jun-yeop, KIM Chang-sun's co-editionship, *Collection of North Korea study volume 1*, Research Institute of Asia Affairs, Korea University, 1969, p. 20), cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 89 [Korean].

¹² KIM Nam-sik & JO Ae-suk, *North Korea's recent policy on religion and tactical use*, *A Monthly Policy Study*, November 1982, Research Institute of International Affairs, p. 25, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 89 [Korean].

¹³ Sawa Masahiko, *History of South and North Korean Protestants*, Japanese Denomination Press, Tokyo, 1982, p. 190, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 89 [Korean].

¹⁴ Kim Il Sung, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-237 (KIM Jun-yeop, *op. cit.*, p. 191), cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 90 [Korean].

¹⁵ GOH Tae-wu, *Religious Policy of North Korea*, Minjok Munhwa Publications, 1989, pp. 108-109 [Korean].

strictly kept religion under control to take maximum advantage and prevent religious groups from hindering the formation of communism.

From 1946 to 1948, the regime implemented a series of policies to suppress religious people directly and indirectly. Among these policies were the seizure of Church and religious believers' land,¹⁶ the denial of political party membership,¹⁷ a campaign to eradicate superstitions,¹⁸ and arrests of church leaders.¹⁹ Administrative persecution in the form of imposed instruction at theology schools,²⁰ the designation of Monday instead of Sunday as the national holiday,²¹ and a 6 p.m. curfew aimed at prohibiting evening service attendance²² was also implemented.

1.3 Changes in policy after the establishment of the government: Within the frame of "limited freedom of religion"

After the government's establishment in September 1948, the regime's policy on religion entered into a new phase. Previously, the Soviet military administration secretly persecuted religion, allowing only nominal religious freedom to preserve its international reputation. Once the government was established, however, a full-scale attack aimed at cleansing out religion commenced in 1949.²³

As part of this campaign, Article 14 of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Constitution, which provided religious freedom, became a means to arbitrarily suppress religion by classifying any religious believer who engaged in anti-national activities as a criminal.²⁴ Additionally, church schools were confiscated²⁵ and religious leaders were illegally arrested or abducted.²⁶ Many of these leaders were executed.²⁷

¹⁶ Korean central yearbook, 1950, p. 198, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 89 [Korean].

¹⁷ History of Pyeongyang Catholic parish, Pyeongyang Catholic Parish Press, Bundo Publication, 1981, p. 183, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 98 [Korean].

¹⁸ Korean complete history volume 24, 1981, p. 502, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 94 [Korean].

¹⁹ History of Korean Advent Church, LEE Yeong-rin, p. 276, cited in North Korean Church History Writing Committee [NK Committee] in the Institute for Korean Church History [History Institute], North Korean Church History, 1996, p. 405 [Korean].

²⁰ Institute of North Korea Study, History of North Korea's Democratic Unification I, p. 397 [Korean].

²¹ GOH Tae-wu, *op. cit.*, p. 185 [Korean].

²² *Ibid.*, p. 401 [Korean].

²³ BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 101 [Korean].

²⁴ KIM Se-kyun, Unification Policy, Introduction to North Korea, 1990, pp. 658-666, cited in KANG In-cheol, *op. cit.*, p. 149 [Korean].

²⁵ JANG Byeong-uk, The Church and the invasion in the Korean War, Korea Education Organization, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 101 [Korean].

²⁶ Pyeongyang parish history, pp. 209-213, cited in BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 105 [Korean].

²⁷ BYEON Jin-heung, *op. cit.*, p. 105 [Korean].

1.4 Buddhism: The disappearance

Buddhism has remained the most popular religion on the Korean Peninsula since the era of the Three States, and it has greatly influenced Korean culture, spirit, and ideology for more than 1,600 years. This was especially true after Japanese colonial rule ended.

Before the Korean War, Christianity was the subject of a more severe limitation policy as compared to Buddhism. Buddhist temples were located in the mountains, and gatherings were usually personal. In addition, longstanding Eastern ideas of harmony and fate lie behind Buddhism. Conversely, Christianity was introduced from the West, and churches were located in cities. Christian gatherings were usually large, and Christians were active in social and political reforms. Furthermore, unlike Buddhists, Christians were systematically organized.²⁸

Due to these differences, Buddhism was not the target of extreme persecution and was utilized by the regime at a relatively early stage. A representative case is the North Korean Buddhism Confederation, which was established on December 26, 1945 and had a membership of 375,438 people.²⁹

The material foundations of Buddhism disintegrated with the land reforms of 1946. Land reform had a devastating impact due to the nature of Buddhism's organization. In the case of Seokwang Temple, about 4,000 pyeong (1 pyeong = 3.3 m²) of land was confiscated. The regime also restricted the number of monks and rationed food.³⁰ As a result, many monks left the temple and the number of monks decreased from more than 200 to 30. The situation was similar in Bohyeon, Geonbong, Yujeom, and Gwiju temple where there were more than 100 monks.³¹ After the establishment of the North Korean government in 1948, most Buddhist temples were converted into tourist spots or resorts.

In comparison, Buddhism in North Korea suffered a less severe level of suppression and was utilized for political and social purposes much earlier than other religions.

1.5 Conclusion

From Korea's independence until the Korean War, the regime tried to assimilate Christianity for its own social and political needs. At the same time, the regime secretly and skillfully suppressed Christians who would not comply with its needs under the pretense of eradicating superstitions.

²⁸ GOH Tae-wu, op. cit., p. 57 [Korean].

²⁹ Ibid., p. 122 [Korean].

³⁰ Testimony of CHOI Gwang-seok, op. cit., GOH Tae-wu, op. cit., p. 192 [Korean].

³¹ HONG Sa-seong, Reappraisal of North Korea Buddhism, National Buddhism, 1989, p. 254, cited in KANG In-cheol, op. cit., pp. 163-164 [Korean].

After the government was officially established in September 1948, it took on different forms of oppression. The level and intensity of religious suppression was heightened in order to build up the Communist state.

Buddhism's own characteristics made the regime recognize it as only a minor problem in establishing the Communist state. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism was under the government's control before the Korean War.

2. Second phase: Undisguised suppression and war related losses

The Korean War (1950-1953) – Sufferings of Churches

2.1 Illegal abduction of religious people and large-scale massacre

The North Korean government took advantage of the chaos caused by the war and inflicted selective and malicious suppression on religious people, especially Christian leaders. Many believers became the victims of a large-scale massacre. There were also many cases where believers from one town were collectively slaughtered and entire families of religious workers were killed.

2.2 Losses and suppression of North Korean churches

The losses that churches suffered during the Korean War were exceptionally high due to illegal arrests, imprisonments and massacres done at the hands of the government. The number of North Korean pastors and evangelists who died, disappeared, or were arrested during this time reached a total of 350 people.³² As the People's Armed Forces were retreating, they massacred church leaders in the occupied area. For example, Pastor Lee Seung-man testified that he had witnessed the deaths of his father and "approximately 50 pastors [who] were driven into a hole (near Daedong River)."³³

The oppression that North Korean churches experienced during this period is shown in the following testimony by a North Korean defector.³⁴

Interviewee 9, born in North Hamgyeong Province in 1939: "My big brother who worked as a pastor before the Korean War took shelter in the mountain and used to worship together with other believers during the war. He was arrested in 1954 because he was a pastor. He was released after spending 16 years in the *gyohwaso*.³⁵

³² Sawa Masahiko, Christianity post dependence in North Korea, 1996, p. 34, cited in NK Committee in Korea Christianity History Institute [Korea Institute], op. cit., p. 419 [Korean].

³³ LEE Seung-man, "No war has a human face," A Monthly Mail, July 1994, p. 47, cited in NK Committee in Korea Institute, op. cit., p. 419 [Korean].

³⁴ To protect the identity of the refugees, numbers and letters were assigned.

³⁵ North Korean prison.

However, he was again taken away and sent to the Political Offence Concentration Camp.”

Due to the massacre, imprisonment and mass exile of a large portion of pastors to the South, less than twenty pastors remained in North Korea.³⁶ Loss of human resources during the war also included escapees to South Korea in the retreat on 4 January 1951. From the period of independence until the end of the Korean War, the presumed number of Protestant escapees to South Korea totalled approximately 70,000 people.³⁷ The reasonable estimated number of Protestants remaining in North Korea was less than 50,000 people.

Religious groups were devastated by the Korean War and the North Korean government’s full-scale “religion eradication policy.” After the war, public exercise of religion was virtually abolished from North Korea.

2.3 Conclusion

Once the official government was established, the regime started to openly suppress and persecute religion. Christianity was especially targeted because it was considered to be strongly connected with the United States. As Christians faced tough persecution after the war, Protestantism struggled to survive.

3. Third phase: Systematic persecution and liquidation

Before the Kimilsungism Movement (1953-1971) – Suppressing the remaining religious people

3.1 After the Korean War – 1953: Purge of underground churches and the ideological readjustment movement

After the Korean War, the regime started to form an independent socialist system. To stabilize the system politically, a Kim Il Sung-centered unitary government was formed. In addition, the ideology of Jucheism, which focused on independent rule of the government, was established.³⁸ During this post-war rebuilding period, most of the remaining religious people either fled south or assimilated into the North Korean policy. Among North Koreans, a mood of anti-Protestantism and even religious nihilism prevailed because of the hatred against the United States, which resulted from atrocities allegedly committed by the U.S. military and U.S.

³⁶ LEE Yeong-bin & KIM Sun-hwan, *Unification and Christianity*, Gonanhamkke Publications, p. 107, cited in NK Committee in Korea Institute, op. cit., p. 419 [Korean].

³⁷ KANG In-cheol, *The root of Protestantism and Catholicism that came over to South Korea: Revolution and Protestantism in North Korea after the independence*, pp. 134-135, cited in NK Committee in Korea Institute, op. cit., p. 419 [Korean].

³⁸ Kang In-cheol, op. cit., 169 [Korean].

missionaries during the war.³⁹ During this period, the North Korean government started to organize a more systematic form of religious persecution and initiated an annihilation policy to root out the remaining religious people who were opposed to the regime.

In the late 1950's North Korea carried out an attitudinal readjustment policy in parallel with a campaign of ideological education in order to coerce religious people to give up their faith. At the same time, the annihilation policy of ferreting out, suppressing, and persecuting the activities of underground churches was conducted.⁴⁰ Because the North Korean Worker's Party regarded religious believers who persisted in their faith to be vicious elements, it adopted the hard line policy of execution and persecution.⁴¹

In the interviews for this paper, testimonies were collected about large-scale religious persecution and execution in 1958. Interviewee J, who fled North Korea in 2001, testified that in July 1958 he saw more than 100 people being taken away in front of the West Pyeongyang Station. Public Security Officers (PSOs) said that they were classified as reactionary and wicked believers because they said that "people should not work on Sundays to observe the Sabbath."

In 1959, the North Korean Worker's Party and Korean Democratic Youth League published numerous books that forthrightly opposed religion⁴². The publishing was done as part of the ideological readjustment movement to encourage people to educate, enlighten and join in socialist activities. The movement also attempted to disclose the reactionary character and unscientific disposition of religions through various forms, such as newspapers, books, dramas, and movies in order to incite people to voluntarily participate in the struggle.⁴³

3.2 1960-1971: National Resident Registration and Seongbun⁴⁴ class system

In 1960, North Korea implemented a more systematic hard-line policy to remove any remaining religious heritage while still maintaining the annihilation policy.⁴⁵ As

³⁹ Ibid., p. 179 [Korean].

⁴⁰ SHIN Pyeong-gil, The process of the Workers' Party's anti-religious policy, Monthly North Korea, July, 1995, p. 57 [Korean].

⁴¹ KANG In-cheol, op. cit., p. 179 [Korean].

⁴² DOH Hong-yeol, Society and culture: Collection of books for comparison between South Korea and North Korea, Ministry of Unification, 1999, p. 152, cited in NK Committee in the Institute for Korean Church History [History Institute], op. cit., p. 430 [Korean].

⁴³ JEONG Ha-cheol, Why do we have to oppose the religion?, The Workers' Party's Publication, 1959, cited in NK Committee in the History Institute, 1996, op. cit., p. 429 [Korean].

⁴⁴ Seongbun is a Korean word for a person's background or status.

⁴⁵ SHIN Pyeong-gil, op. cit., p. 58 [Korean].

part of this policy, National Resident Registration was conducted from April 1964 to 1969. Additionally, the Seongbun Survey Project, which reorganized people's class based on their family background at the time of 1945 and the personal degree of faithfulness to the Party, was conducted. In 1971, the North Korean population was divided largely into three classes (the core class, the wavering class, and the hostile class) and sub-divided into 51 categories. The official purpose of the seongbun class system was to revolutionize and classify workers, but the actual purpose was to research people's political inclination and to control them efficiently.⁴⁶

Religious people – Protestants, Buddhists, Catholics, and Confucians – were classified as “hostile” and were discriminated against in treatment related to job positions, opportunities for education, moving, obtaining travel permission, and so on.

According to the interviewees of this report, National Resident Registration and the seongbun class system brought about discriminative treatment⁴⁷ and were tied to religious coercion. The following are specific testimonial responses.

Interviewee E: “In the 1960's and 1970's, Kim Il Sung asserted that one's competence should be considered more important than one's seongbun or family background. However, only children of party members can go to college in Pyongyang or enter Kim Il Sung University. If one's father is a common worker like my father, then that person can enter just a mining college or a forestry college, so ... society makes him work under the ground. Thus, seongbun is prior to all other things in reality so there are no talented people. I worked in NSA from 1964 to 1975. I joined the Department of Resident Registration in [the] Public Security Agency (PSA) and made [official] documents on residents through secret investigation. The documents still exist and play an important role in oppressing [North Korean] human rights. I [wrote them down] ... when I was in PSA. I was the first son and my father was a coal miner when I was born and my mother did something and so on. I was in charge of one village and I investigated residents in that village secretly. Then I made a document called “residents register” after investigating what people did in the past and what their parents did in the old times and [filed] ... it. North Koreans are classified according to their background in [the] residents register. Families of POW are listed as number 43, families that have been exiled and were brought back are listed as number 49, people who committed a flagrant offence during the war or before independence are a hostile group and they are listed as number 49. Therefore, people think number 49 should be killed first in case of a war. Religious people are not classified because ... [they should be liquidated first].”

⁴⁶ www.nkchosun.com, News Encyclopedia, Seongbun: Seongbun Survey Project [Korean].

⁴⁷ www.nkchosun.com, News Encyclopedia, Seongbun: Classification and treatment [Korean].

Interviewee I: “My family background as ‘a family of the people who fled to South Korea’ was found in National Resident Registration that started in 1965. Since I was classified as a descendent of people who fled to South Korea, my entire family was forced to live in a secluded mountainous area. My [oldest] ... daughter complained a lot about why she had to suffer because of her grandmother and grandfather whom she had never seen ... My daughter was so smart that she used to win second prize in a mathematics competition and so on. However, she complained a lot to me saying that her teacher said that ‘How can a granddaughter of a person who had fled to South Korea dare to go to a university?’”

3.3 Conclusion

After the Korean War, North Korea strengthened its ideological education and focused on purging the remaining religious people who had not assimilated. The regime reinforced its socialist ideology and anti-Protestant propaganda through various publications. In the 1960’s, National Resident Registration and the seongbun class system were implemented. Religious people were designated as the lowest level class and were subjected to social discrimination.

4. Fourth phase: Advent of the religion-friendly policy

Era of Juche (1972-present) – Religion as a Government

Departmental function

Throughout its existence, North Korea has pursued the traditional Communist principles of continuous revolution, totalitarianism, and hostility toward any contrary view. After attempting to subjugate religion entirely, North Korea began to use it as a political tool to engage South Korea and the Western World. After holding the South-North dialogue in 1972, the World Youth Festival in 1989, and receiving aid from various international religious organizations in response to the country’s food shortage crisis in the 1990’s, North Korea instituted a religion-utilization policy.⁴⁸

4.1 Anti-religion propaganda

Although North Korea’s anti-religious propaganda continued in the 1970’s, its negative attitude toward religion softened. In 1972, North Korea amended its constitution to separate the “freedom of anti-religion propaganda” clause from the “freedom of religion” clause. Since the amendment, the number of administrative sanctions against religion has decreased. Instead, methods of persuasion through movies, plays and other media have been introduced.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ www.nkchosun.com, News Encyclopedia, Religion: Policy change [Korean].

⁴⁹ NK Committee in the History Institute, op. cit., p. 467 [Korean].

Along this same policy line, the Supreme People's Assembly, which was held on 22 April 1990, accepted six government sponsored religious associates as representatives among the total of 687 representatives.

In 1992, the socialist constitution was amended to soften the anti-religious language. However, many oppressive practices continued because there was no freedom of expression. It should be noted that North Korea started to engage international religious organizations only in accordance with its communist agenda.⁵⁰

4.2 The advent of so called religion-friendly policy

North Korea has used religious organizations' activities as a channel to communicate with the international society. The Korean Christian Federation, Korean Buddhist Federation, and Korean Cheondogyo Association have resumed their activities. In addition, Jangchung Cathedral and Bongsu Church were built in Pyongyang in 1988, and a Christmas service was held in Bongsu Church. In 1989, Chilgol Church was also built in Pyongyang. Christianity became an important foreign affairs channel in the 1990's due to its remarkable ability to mobilize material supplies.

The external work of North Korea's religious organizations has also been actively developed. In 2003, the chairman of the Korean Religious People's Association, the vice chairman of the Cheondogyo Central Committee, and the vice chairman of the Korean Buddhist Federation jointly celebrated the "March 1 People's Declaration" in Seoul with South Korea's religious representatives.⁵¹ Additionally, a delegation of the Korean Christian Federation visited Tokyo, Japan to attend the "Christian International Conference Supporting Peace and Unification of Korea" in 2004.⁵² Despite these religion-friendly movements in North Korea, these religious organizations' activities have been limited within the Worker's Party's policy line.⁵³ When the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's Annual Report designated North Korea as a country of religious oppression on 21 October 2001, the official North Korean religious organizations denounced the United States through an official statement.

4.3 Ongoing religious suppression and persecution

While North Korea has used religion as a quasi-government ministerial branch, the actual religious life of ordinary people has not improved much according to the

⁵⁰ KANG In-cheol, A new understanding of modern North Korean religion history, cited in KIM Heung-su, op. cit., p. 222 [Korean].

⁵¹ The "March 1, 1919 Declaration" supported liberation from Japan. Of the 33 signatories, more than half were Christians, a much larger proportion than in the Korean population, which created the impression that the independence movement was a Christ-inspired cause. cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, citation: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/364173/March-First-Movement>.

⁵² www.nkchosun.com, News Encyclopedia, Religion: Policy change [Korean].

⁵³ SHIN Pyeong-gil, op. cit., p. 62 [Korean].

testimonies of North Korean defectors.⁵⁴ Interestingly, most of the cases of religious oppression in the testimonies were related to Christianity, whereas suppression of other religions such as Buddhism was barely found. There is much evidence to support the notion that the regime has perceived Christianity differently from other religions and tailored its focus of oppression accordingly.

North Korean defectors have testified that their religious life was extremely limited. If religious books or meetings were discovered by the government, the offenders would be publicly or secretly executed or sent to the *gyohwaso* or the Political Penal Concentration Camp. The defectors also testified that there has been no distinguishable change in anti-religion propaganda education as compared to the past. A North Korean's daily life, including religious life, is under strict government surveillance.

4.3.1 Public execution

Interviewee 19: "When I was serving in the army, I found the list of member[s] in [the] underground church so after investigation 25 people were arrested and five leaders were executed in Southern Nampo on December 20, 1996."

Interviewee 42: "Christians were seen being tied to a wooden post and shot in front of their neighbors. I heard that someone shouted 'I'm going to Heaven' and another just smiled in his/her last moment (in around 1997)."

Interviewee H: "I heard from a North Korean defector who escaped North Korea in 2006 that in 2000 an old woman was caught reading a Bible and [the] government hanged her in public."

4.3.2 Imprisonment in *gyohwaso* and Political Penal Concentration Camp

Interviewee 47: "My brother was sent to jail and spent 10 years in jail because he contacted Christians and he is in North Korea now."

Interviewee 63, a woman in her 40's whose husband worked at NSA: "In 1997, a man who worked for my husband gave us a Bible and taught [us] how to pray. My cousin who lives [in] China came to pray for us. I heard from my husband that some people were sent to the *gwalliso* (political penal-labor colony) No. 22 because of the religious incident. [Later the Bible was found and the man was caught.] As a [result] .., I was charged with many different crimes that I could not even think of, such as human trafficking and illegal money laundering, etc. I was sentenced to 15 years at the first trial."

⁵⁴ Reliable current information from North Korea is scarce and reports from defectors are basically the main source available. As some have accused defectors of exaggerating and only reporting hearsay, we have taken care to concentrate on first hand eye-witness accounts and to quote several sources for each type of oppression.

4.3.3 Anti-religion instructions, lecture sessions and education

Interviewee 44, a woman in her 30's: "I've heard of the Bible. I've never seen them but heard that they are displayed at Bongsu Church respectively. There is also 'Movie Literature Study.' [We learn to] be watchful against a pretty child with faith in religion who propagates religion not in public but in secret. Believing religion is said to make you confused and hysterical."

Interviewee 57, a man in his 30's: "There was a public announcement made once in 2000 or 2001. It said, 'If you exercise religion, you will be sentenced to severe punishment.' On a big piece of paper, things like superstition exercise, and such and such exercise were written."

Interviewee A, a former NSA member: "There is another instruction that says, 'Believe in Korean god rather than foreign god if you want to believe in a god! Kim Il Sung is god himself.' Also, there was a mass arrest in Pyeongyang ... [and those arrested] were sent to the Concentration Camp due to Kim Il Sung's instruction in 1974, most were liquidated and were sent to [the] countryside."

4.3.4 Discrimination against North Korean defectors who encountered religion

Interviewee 45: "In around 1999 to 2000 one lady went to China to earn some money and returned to North Korea carrying two Bibles with her. She was arrested and sent to the NSA. Then, her whole family disappeared."

Interviewee 54, a man in his 30's: "They don't even ask about Buddhists anymore because its culture is preserved [in North Korea]. [However], they are sensitive to Christianity. Once they confirm the fact that they have contacted [Christians], they transfer those people to another place in vehicles."

Interviewee A, a former NSA member: "When a person is repatriated to North Korea, the very first question he is asked is whether he went to church in China. If he says 'yes' to that question, preliminary investigation no longer means anything. [The authorities] regard him as an anti-revolutionary element and they are marked as a special group."

4.4 Conclusion

North Korea has allowed religious activities to resume so that they may be used as communicative channels. As a part of this policy, the government has begun to build places of worship like cathedrals, churches and Buddhist temples. In addition, government sponsored religious organizations have been allowed to participate in various international conferences.

However, recent North Korean defectors who have crossed the border since 2003 have testified that in spite of the "religion-friendly policy" and external re-

ligious activities, actual religious freedom in North Korea is extremely limited. The North Korean regime is closely watching the religious lives of ordinary people through an extensive surveillance network. If any secret religious activity is caught, it is punished harshly.

Furthermore, ordinary people cannot enter the religious places built in Pyeongyang, and one of the interviewees testified that all of the members of Bongsu Church and Chilgol Church are also members of the Worker's Party.⁵⁵

5. Conclusion

Ever since Communism has taken hold in North Korea, religious people and their family members have been subjected to systematic social and political discrimination. They have been classified as the bottom of society and denied jobs, education opportunities, and other basic necessities of life. One can even argue that there is evidence of crimes against humanity and even genocide.

Some argue that there is enough evidence that the North Korean state responsibility to protect its citizens has failed, and humanitarian intervention is warranted. In March 2011, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea started to archive incidents of human rights violations and document those responsible for atrocities.⁵⁶ This could lead to criminal and civil liability similar to cases in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Tokyo, Cambodia and the Nuremberg trials.

Without freedom of religion and freedom of expression, there is no true freedom and democracy. North Korea is one of the least free countries in the world. Nevertheless, we are hopeful that there will come a time when North Korea will once again serve as an example of restoration of freedom of thought, consciousness, and religion in the not so distant future.

⁵⁵ Interviewees 41, 54, 56, 64, B.

⁵⁶ RAMSTAD, Evan, "Hey Kim Jong Il, Seoul is now taking names," *The Wall Street Journal* (March 16, 2011): <http://tinyurl.com/HRCK> (last checked 2 July 2011).