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A path toward religious freedom in the DPRK

Is it possible?

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Abstract

North Korea is one of the most authoritarian states in the world, and members of religious groups face severe persecution. This article explores how deeply religious persecution is anchored in the state system and how it is handled in practice. It presents a six-point plan to improve the situation of believers short of waiting for a regime change. The plan focuses on strengthening the role of religious organizations in inter-Korean dialogue, international cooperation with religious organizations of the DPRK, encouraging the DPRK in liberalizing religion in its country, while avoiding a foreign infiltration through religious organizations, and conducting reforms by taking other countries as role models.

Keywords

DPRK, North Korea, Juche, leader cult, religious persecution.

1. Introduction

The government of North Korea, formally called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is notorious for its low regard for religious freedom. It is "described as a 'Antireligious State,' characterized by an officially hostile attitude toward religions and state policies which oppose any important public role for religion" (Levi & Husarski 2021:82), despite the constitutionally guaranteed right

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of free religious activities. It is generally acknowledged that "the Period of the Soviet occupation and formative years of the new political system in the Northern Part of the Korean Peninsula was disastrous for traditional religious life" (Levi & Husarski 2021:82). This situation persists today. In this paper, I analyze how this religious oppression is established in the state ideology, depict how different religious groups can function in practice (to the extent that this information is known or can be assumed with a high degree of certainty), and suggest a six-point plan to advance religious freedom without treating regime change as a prerequisite.

2. Juche idea as guiding ideology

The state ideology of the DPRK, the Juche idea, is concerned not only with how to manage a state, but also with providing holistic truth. It sees the progression of knowledge from a Marxist perspective, regarding itself as at a new and higher stage than 19th-century Marxism, claiming to target the demands of a socialist society in today's era. But it fails to be either holistic or scientific (Schmitz 2022). Like Marxism, Juche highly rejects idealism, and as religion transcends matter and purely materialistic processes, it is also targeted as unacceptable. Religion is contrasted to philosophy, and as Juche accepts only a materialist philosophy – and even declares itself to be the right view within materialism – no true attitude of philosophical inquiry is pursued; rather, Juche is a closed ideology which exists simply to be followed (Schmitz 2022).

Thus, the Juche idea is extremely hostile toward any form of pluralism. But to understand why this is the case, one has to understand that Juche itself consists of multiple core principles. First, man is the master of the revolution and as such is an independent being whose independence can be upheld only by fighting against the enemies of freedom, which Juche identifies to be imperialism and the bourgeoisie of a society which wants to uphold imperialism (Schmitz 2022). Nonetheless, Juche teaches that Kim Il-sung liberated Korea in 1945 from the Japanese occupation and, by doing so, inaugurated a new era in which every individual is said to enjoy the taste of freedom, by being able to shape his fate on his own. To do so, however, the revolutionary cause must be upheld by the so-called "Democratic Front" and the Korean Worker's Party in particular who has a leader at its top. The leader principle in fact relativizes the independence of the people, up to the point that man (who is praised as being in the highest position in Juche) becomes nothing more than a machine. He is one tiny tool of the machine called the "masses" (sometimes synonymously with "people"), and everyone has to fulfill his role as part of the masses. As a result, if one does not do what the government tells him to do, he is treated like a disease or tumor in the otherwise healthy body or machine, and as such he has to be replaced, according to the North Korean understanding (Schmitz 2022).

In other words, ideologically speaking, there is no space for individual choices because the state demands uniform thinking from its citizens. This concept is called *Ilsim Tangyŏl*. Ko Yŏng-hak writes, "The Juche idea reveals the highest level of unity in which the leader, the army and the people are most united in a scientific way as the essence of a *single-minded unity*" (Ko 2015, my translation). All citizens are thus (formally) bound to a materialistic worldview in which one has to serve the leader, and therefore religious activities are in opposition to the state doctrine, which explains why there is such a low appreciation of religious freedom in practice.

The paradox within Juche, however, is that Juche itself is not materialistic anymore, because the leader occupies a quasi-godlike position. This can be seen in the vivid veneration of Kim Il-sung (1912-1994) and Kim Jong-il (1942-2011; he succeeded Kim Il-sung as supreme leader in 1994) even after their deaths, with Kim Jong-un (who succeeded Kim Jong-il after his death in 2011) continuing this tradition.

3. Religion as one of many worldviews and as a cultural heritage

The Juche idea recognizes that there exist different worldviews. However, Juche claims to be teaching the sole legitimate worldview, and other worldviews are labeled as wrong (Schmitz 2022). A worldview, according to Kim, is "a view of the world and an attitude toward the world as a whole, which includes a religious worldview and a philosophical worldview" (Kim 2014:10, my translation). However, religion is quickly "exposed" as a supposedly wrong worldview, as it is seen as a sign of backwardness in the DPRK. This assumption within Juche is based on Marxist philosophy (see the explanation in Kim 2014:20). As a result, the citizens of the DPRK do not have access to a free religious education and there is no independent information on religion. The superior position of the state ideology becomes the foundation of religious oppression.

In fact, though citizens of the DPRK are discouraged from adopting a religious belief and are highly encouraged to follow the materialist state doctrine, there do exist legal churches, as we will see below. As this stands in a large contradiction to what was noted above (the demand for unquestioned loyalty to Kim as quasi-divine), it is crucial to consider how religious groups operate and in which frame they are able to operate at all (and, of course, what it means in consequence for the regime and its operations).

It is intriguing that Kim Il-sung himself cherished religious groups, including Christianity, as part of Korea's historical past, and the Kims praise the national heritage and history. For instance, Kim Il-sung wrote in his memoirs in appreciation of Korea's 1919 uprising:

> The March First Popular Uprising was scrupulously planned and carried forward under the leadership of people in the religious world, from *Chondoism*, Christianity and Buddhism, and patriotic teachers and students. The national spirit of our people which had been inherited and sublimated through the reformist revolution in 1884, the movement for defending justice and rejecting injustice, the peasant war in 1894, the patriotic enlightenment movement and the volunteers' struggle, erupted at last like a volcano in a call for sovereignty and independence. (Kim 1994:37)

Kim further stated, "I do not think the spirit of Christianity that preaches universal peace and harmony contradicts my idea advocating an independent life for man" (1994:103). This is interesting because the independent life of man is a core theme of Juche ideology. Jo (2004:337) pointed out that Jucheist thinkers claimed similarities between Juche and Christianity. Nonetheless, this should not lead us to false conclusions, because Kim Il-sung also strikingly rejected Christianity and tried to teach Christians (long before taking power) that there was no God (see for instance Kim 1994:102ff., 237ff.).

To understand the ambiguous relationship between Kim Il-sung and religion, we should note that the Kim family has a Christian background themselves and that Kim Il-sung was brought up as a Christian, "serving as an organist in his family's church" (Levi & Husarski 2021:1984). However, "when he became leader of North Korea [he] adopted a hostile attitude toward religion" (Levi & Husarski 2021:1984) and especially Christianity, as a foreign-perceived religion. As a result, Christianity suffered greatly during the 1957 anti-religious campaigns (see also Jo 2004:335, who describes the campaign activities in 1958).

Immediately after World War II, the communists' policy toward religion was more tolerant:

> Until the end of 1946, the policies of northern communist authorities toward religion were not yet repressive. Among the basic principles behind these policies was an outstretched hand to progressive religious groups, which led democratic Protestants to participate and take responsibilities on People's Committees. Communist authorities also followed other principles: not interfering directly in religious matters, punishing only those acts which violated the law, while encouraging progressive religious forces to purge themselves of 'illegal characteristics'. (Chérel-Riquier 2013:75)

The shift toward incorporating religion as part of Korea's cultural heritage and national pride started in the 1960s (cp. Levi & Husarski 2021:84), after the anti-religious campaigns were terminated.

4. Eradication theories vs. remnant theories

Concerning the question of whether religion was actively professed between 1957 (when the anti-religious campaigns began) and 1972 (the date of the restoration of religious institutions in the DPRK), there are two main theories. Eradication theories assume that the government successfully eradicated all forms of religion on its territory. These theories "reflect the Cold War perspective that has long dominated the South Korean and western view of North Korea since the division of the nation. The fundamental aim of these anti-communist theories has been to condemn North Korea and to emphasize the superiority of the capitalist-liberal South Korean system" (Ryu 2006:660). The revival of religious organizations in the DPRK, therefore, was often labelled "fake" by adherents of eradication theories (cp. Ryu 2006:662).

In contrast to that view stand the remnant theories which do not "accept a complete obliteration of North Korean religion, despite the attempts of the government. Supporters of the Remnant Models believe that religious practitioners, in whatever form, have existed" (Ryu 2006:664). There has been a very intense discussion concerning evidence backing either one or the other theory. I will not summarize every argument here, since that would go beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will cite Ryu's conclusion: "Evidence for the persecution-eradication models is not altogether trustworthy" (2006:663). Therefore, we should assume a constant continuation of religious practice on an underground or family basis, despite the different policies over the decades under the Kims' rule, and that religion was always present in the DPRK in some form.

Since 1972, there have existed legal religious organizations. In that year, Marxism-Leninism was constitutionally diminished and mainly replaced by Juche as a constitutional concept (see Hale 2002). Despite the presence of official state-sanctioned churches, illegal religious activities may also be continuing up to the present; however, we have no solid or verified information as to how intensively such activities are conducted. Logistically, they are most likely to be found in border regions, supported by cross-border smuggling of illegal religious materials.

5. Legal temples and churches as a niche: Buddhism and Chondoism

In the DPRK, Buddhism and Chondoism are appreciated as traditional religions, each having had its own religious association within the country since 1972. However, both groups are supervised by a state entity and only activities authorized by the state organizations are allowed. Senécal reminds us:

> Northern Buddhists are often described as the 'most active and powerful' North Korean religious organization. Moreover, many Korean Buddhists see their tradition as an indigenous one, unlike Christianity, which they deem 'imported.' Accordingly, Buddhist representatives from both sides of the DMZ believe that a merger of North and South Korean Buddhism is an essential key to the peninsula's reunification. (2013:9)

The Buddhist tradition traditionally prevalent in Korea is Mahayana Buddhism, which claims "that all sentient beings, because they are originally endowed with Buddha-nature (*pulsŏng* 佛性), can achieve full awakening, i.e. become Buddha (*sŏngbul* 成佛). Since the realization of full awakening provides freedom from the cycle of rebirths or samsara, … [they] consider that becoming a Buddha ought to be the ultimate goal of any human life" (Senécal 2013:10). The Korean Buddhist Association represents Buddhists in the DPRK. The purpose of the institution is defined as following: "Based on the basic idea of relieving suffering and bringing joy through compassion (*palgoyŏrak*), the fundamental mission is to realize the 'Pure Land on Earth'" (Ryu 2009, my translation). This means that the cosmic principles of Buddhism are projected on the immanent world and therefore materialized to make them in accordance with Juche. As such, Buddhism is not considered an anti-revolutionary activity; instead, Buddhists enjoy significant prestige and a frame for religious activity.

Buddhists, in both the DPRK and Republic of Korea (ROK), engage in mutual activities, including food aid from southerners to their northern counterparts (Senécal 2013:9). One of the most famous South Korean Mahayanists working in North-South relations is the Venerable Sin Pŏpta, sometimes called the "Bodhisattva of Reunification" (Senécal 2013:11). Originally, like most people in the ROK, he "basically accepted the anti-communist interpretation" (Ryu 2006:665) that religious institutions in the DPRK had been eliminated by the regime, "but several visits to North Korea since the late 1980s convinced him that Buddhism and other religions, although not in a familiar form, had been practiced there" (Ryu 2006:665). As a result, he emphasized the need for inter-Korean religious dialogue, since "Seeing North Korean religion as nothing more than a propaganda tool simply because it is in the communist North Korean society … would eliminate any possibility of constructive dialogue" (Ryu 2006:665). In the 1980s, the Korean Buddhist Federation of the DPRK was present at several international Buddhist events, and during Kim Dae-jung's period of sunshine policy (1998-2003), they "took part in dialogue with South Korean Buddhist organisations" (Levi & Husarski 2021:85). They also focused on "receiving humanitarian aid and funds

from a well-known Buddhist organization called Good Friends, led by the Venerable Pomnyun, a South Korean Buddhist monk, who has been working inside North Korea for over 25 years" (Levi & Husarski 2021:85).

In summary, Buddhism is actively practiced in the DPRK though the theology is syncretized with the state doctrine's demands. Nonetheless, Buddhist activities in the DPRK also aim to represent national interests of the DPRK and, as such, are used as a political tool (Levi & Husarski 2021:84ff.).

Chondoism is a native religion of Korea, founded in the 19th century by Confucian reformist Choe Je-u. Kim et al. point out, "At the time of liberation, Chondoism was the largest religion in North Korea with over 2.8 million believers" (2002:4, my translation). Chondoism was targeted in 1958 during the anti-religious campaigns (Jo 2004:335). However, since the legalization of religions in 1972, it is the religion that has adapted most fully to the DPRK system, and it has over 800 locations nationwide (Kim et al. 2002:4). Chondoism "is a monotheistic religion emphasizing the equality of humanity and the oneness of humans and God, known as *Hanulnim*. Because man and God are the same, there must be equality among humanity. Doing evil deeds runs counter to the will of the universe and distances a person from his or her true nature as part of the cosmos" (Malinowski 2002:73-74). As such, like Buddhism, Chondoism can be materialized by focusing on the immanent, and the leader can be regarded as the most self-perfected human being.

The Chondoists in the DPRK even have their own party, the Chondoist Youth Party, which is part of the Democratic Front, although it has little real influence on DPRK politics and is de facto subject to Kim's authority. The party's purpose is to defend the homeland against imperialism and to promote Korean reunification through peaceful means (Han 2016:41). Notably, "A few prominent South Korean Chondoists have defected to the North …, where they became anti-South spokespeople" (Malinowski 2002:74). The most prominent of these is former party leader Ryu Mi-yong (1921-2016), the wife of ROK foreign minister Choe Deok-sin (who also defected to the DPRK). However, I strongly disagree with Malinowski's claim that Chondoism functions mostly as a political tool to maintain contact with the ROK and for intelligence purposes. The Chondoist organizations, like all religious organizations in the DPRK, of course also have a political function, but primarily, their members are true believers in Chondoism and practice their religion. As an indigenous Korean tradition, Chondoism enjoys a certain respect as part of the national heritage. Boer appropriately describes Chondoism as "the primary religion supported by the state as a revolutionary movement" (2018:17). As such, Chondoism is not a focus of persecution, but neither is it something that one can freely practice independent of the state.

6. The special case of Christianity

As for Christianity, one may be surprised to learn that in the recent past:

> Scriptures and a hymnal have been published, churches have been newly built for the first time since the Korean War, and the Protestant seminary in Pyongyang has nurtured future leaders. These changes are not limited to the external environment, but rather there has been a striking rebirth in religious activities. Worshippers fill churches each Sunday, and many other Christians reportedly attend hundreds of 'house churches' scattered throughout the country. In addition, church leaders have been actively involved in dialogues and exchanges with South Korean and international Christians and Christian organizations. (Ryu 2006:659)

This is in a sharp contrast of how the country is generally perceived, "because the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was infamous for its intolerance of religion and its particularly harsh treatment of Christians" (Ryu 2006:659), and, as pointed out before, it was long believed that Christianity had been violently eradicated (Ryu 2006:659). Among adherents of the eradication theories, the revival of Christian organizations was often labeled as fake, and it was accordingly proposed as a consequence that true Christianity and the actual reconstruction of churches would have to be conducted by the ROK and foreign countries (Ryu 2006:662). The remnant theories, on the other hand, suppose that Christianity never completely vanished and "Therefore, they do not think of Christian and religious organizations and activities in recent years, awkward and political as they might seem, as mere propaganda exhibition" (Ryu 2006:664). However, it is indisputable that Christian churches are in the most difficult situation, because unlike Buddhism and Chondoism, Christianity is perceived as foreign. Moreover, a belief in Jesus Christ as Savior is a necessary precondition for Christians, and thus the religion cannot be materialized. There is no way to confirm reports of religious persecutions presented by defectors, and it is not clear whether these testimonies are credible. The underlying problem is that much of the audience outside the DPRK wants to hear about the DPRK only what fits with their worldview and has been previously believed by rumor (see Rohrlich 2014).

In this regard, it is also important to pay attention to churches in the ROK and their attitude toward North Korean refugees in the South. Jung points out:

> The evangelical churches provide the second most substantial resources after the government to help these famine-scarred 'brothers and sis-

> ters' in their southern resettlement. I have argued elsewhere that while former defectors were publicly celebrated by the South Korean state as anticommunist 'heroes and heroines,' at present it is only in the logic of religious conversion and human rights regimes that North Korean migrants are empowered to claim leadership roles in envisioning a reunified Korea. (Jung 2016:124)

Therefore, we must recognize that the discourse on religious freedom and persecution is also heavily influenced by South Korean stakeholders, such as certain churches whose focus is on evangelization according to their doctrines and on increased influence in the North (Sawa cited after Ryu 2006:665). An important factor in this regard is the strong state-church relationship in conservative circles in the ROK: "The intimate interrelationship between conservative political power and the evangelical churches is not unknown and it is often equated with the American evangelical tradition" (Jung 2016:128).

On one hand, it is evidently unreasonable to neglect the evidence of persecution of Christians in the DPRK, because Christianity has been seen as an ideological enemy throughout the Cold War period and is still in conflict with the DPRK state doctrine, which emphasizes a strict materialism, and as such is incompatible with what the state demands of its citizens, namely an undivided loyalty to the Kims. On the other hand, as already noted, one must be careful about quoting actual testimonies, since they cannot be confirmed and their credibility might be contested, especially in view of the fact that refugees from the DPRK receive considerable resources from evangelical organizations. The latter try to influence North Korean refugees (which are thus not an objective source), possibly to gain greater influence among North Koreans and maybe to gain some type of foothold within the DPRK. As Jung states:

> Nearly all the megachurches in the Seoul metropolitan area run special support programs for North Korean migrants. The programs serve as contact zone in which established South Korean evangelicals can project, experiment, and develop migrant-tailored services as well as missionary training that are potentially applicable to future missionary work in North Korea. (Jung 2016:128)

Thus, without diminishing the pain and the suffering of Christians in the DPRK, I want to focus on the facts we can know, or at least on what is most likely true. Second, I agree with Ryu that the eradication theories are an anti-Communist Cold War relic, which was not built on facts but rather on foreign narratives,

as Ryu convincingly explains in depth with some examples, such as the cases of professing Christians in the DPRK who attained high-ranking positions. As such, the remnant theories seem more suitable. Also, the Venerable Sin Pŏpta "concludes that North Korean religious organizations have been allowed to operate, albeit not independently" (Ryu 2006:665). This remark was not limited to Buddhism, but was meant to refer to religion in general, thus including Christianity. The advocates of remnant theories do not diminish the persecution of Christians in the DPRK, but they want to clarify that despite extreme restrictions, there was no full eradication of Christians.

Turning to the hard facts, there are four Christian churches organized by state institutions in the DPRK. Pongsu and Chilgol Churches are run by the Korean Christian Association, which is the Protestant church body in the DPRK. The association has six goals, including advancing national reunification processes, advocating world peace, and the training of house church leaders (Yu 2009). With regard to Catholicism, the situation is much more complicated. They have only one official church (cathedral), run by the Korean Catholic Association, which was founded in 1988, much later than its Protestant counterpart. Therefore, Catholicism is likely to have been legalized much later than other religions. In the 1980s, "The institutional South Korean Catholic Church aimed, in quite a traditional conception of its role, at establishing direct contacts with North Korean Catholics and evangelizing North Korea" (Chérel-Riquier 2013:81). The first official visit by a Catholic priest from the ROK to the DPRK was in 1984, and in 1987, "priest Chang Ik also went to P'yŏngyang as a member of the Vatican delegation and had the opportunity to meet five North Korean Catholics" (Chérel-Riquier 2013:82). Even further, "Some South Korean Catholic priests based in the United States also had the opportunity to travel to P'yŏngyang" (Chérel-Riquier 2013:82). Despite various delegation visits and dialogues, the overall results were unsuccessful. The process was marked by several ups and downs. For instance, as a consequence of the North-South rapprochement under Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy, Catholic contacts largely revived, including humanitarian aid to the North (Chérel-Riquier 2013:84), and Catholic bodies in the ROK continue to promote dialogue and cooperation.

The Church of Life-Giving Trinity in Pyongyang is the only Orthodox Christian church, and it serves the Russian community in the capital. Except for the clergy, who were selected by the government to study theology, there are no known Korean converts. The church is run by the Orthodox Commission of Korea, which was established in 2003. It seems to be a sign of good relations with the Russian Federation and a gesture of friendship.

As for the overall situation of Christianity, it was speculated in the early 2000s that there are at around 520 Christian house churches in the DPRK, with most

locations being assumed in South Pyong'an and Pyongyang City (Jo 2004:337), which shows that despite all the odds, Christianity is still a vital religion.

7. The Council of Religionists

All these religious groups are members of the Council of Religionists (the official English name given by the DPRK), formed in 1989, which is a council of religious leaders headed by the Chondoist Church. In fact, it is simply a higher body that supervises the independent associations and is itself supervised by a party organ. According to the DPRK:

> It struggles for socialist construction and the independent, peaceful reunification of the country and peace against war and nuclear weapons. It conducts activities to promote cooperation among its affiliate religious organizations and strengthen ties of friendship with the international religious institutions and organizations. (Uriminzokkiri)

However, little is known about the Council's activities and the organization mainly remains a black box to us. At the end of the last millennium, the Council officially estimated that there were approximately 38,000 religious believers in the DPRK (in a total population of about 25 million), with 15,000 Chondoists making up the biggest number, followed by Christianity (about 10,000 Protestants and 3,000 to 4,000 Catholics) (Kim et al. 2002:43). We do not have any reliable independent figures, but the statistics – if they bear any relationship to the truth – show that the access to religious institutions is still scarce, and that many citizens either are not aware of their existence or feel too intimidated to visit or join such an organization.

8. What could be done?

First, we can summarize that the DPRK government allows certain religious institutions to operate, but that all religious institutions are required to join the Council of Religionists, which is strongly allied with the party. The Council supervises the church organizations that operate the temples (in the case of Buddhism) and churches and house churches (in the case of Christianity). All religious activities are strongly monitored, and no independent practice of religion is possible at this time. Religious activities are thriving among a small number of North Koreans, although access to religious activities is still difficult, given the low number of legally reported religious adherents. Joining a religious community is highly discouraged by the state ideology, which citizens have to study repeatedly and which demands loyalty to the leader. The restriction of religious freedoms violates not only the freedom of individual conscience, but also human rights in general.

Several attempts to improve inter-Korean religious exchanges have been made in the past. These included dialogues between religious communities. As a positive observation, it must be remarked that not only Buddhist and Chondoist religious groups, which are preferred by the state, were involved, but also Christian organizations took part. The religious organization members in the DPRK, though they are closely supervised by the party, are most likely real believers, and therefore it is necessary to continue regarding the DPRK religious bodies as authentic and not as fake or propaganda. For instance, the Theological Seminary in Pyongyang accepts a few Protestant students each year and regularly consults the Methodist organization known as KMC in the ROK (UCA 2000).

Nonetheless, freedom of religion is extremely restricted, and it is important to support means that could benefit religious believers in the DPRK. I believe that only soft solutions could help religious groups as long as the regime relies on the Juche ideology as it does now. A dismantling of the authoritarian elements of Juche seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, so working with the existing structures is the only possible way to produce any change. Therefore, I propose the following six points as keys to improvement:

1) Religious organizations can (continue to) make important contributions to the inter-Korean dialogue. This dialogue might help to strengthen human rights.
2) Religious institutions of the DPRK should be treated as serious religious institutions and not dismissed as mere propaganda. These bodies might play a stronger role in liberalization processes.
3) All citizens must have the right to join these religious institutions. Therefore, we must encourage the DPRK to open up religious institutions to the whole public. The DPRK must become transparent on this issue for international observers. (The DPRK propaganda claims that anyone is free to join a religious group, but this is not true.)
4) Foreign interference in the structures of religious institutions should be avoided. The Korean people should be able to organize themselves. The risk of religious institutions being abused by foreign interests contrary to those of the Korean people must be avoided.
5) To win the trust of the DPRK government, the churches must follow the guidelines of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). The WPK in turn must recognize all worldviews as legitimate.
6) It is absolutely possible to establish a socialist Christianity in Korea. The WPK can be inspired by the examples of socialist Christians in other countries.

The first point focuses on the fact that political and religious institutions are in a strong relationship with each other, in both the DPRK and ROK. As the reli-

gious bodies of the DPRK are under the direct control of party institutions, religious groups are also an important political player, and strengthening religious rights is a political decision that can happen only with DPRK support. The inter-Korean dialogue is a good forum for such opportunities (despite Kim Jong-un's most recent statement ruling out rapprochement and reunification; see Tagesschau 2023).

Second, it is difficult to work for change from the outside, and therefore certain aspirations must be pursued from within the DPRK by North Koreans themselves. Pressure from the outside has not helped North Koreans up to now, because the government seems to regard this pressure as a sign that religions are affiliated with foreign countries and oppose the DPRK's self-understanding. However, it is important to advocate for openness from outside the DPRK by appealing to the DPRK that all citizens should have unlimited opportunity to join a religious organization without fear or threat. The DPRK must be transparent in proving that they do not hinder believers from entering a church or temple or joining a religion.

The fifth and sixth points are extremely important. If we cannot expect a regime change, then the churches and temples must win the trust of the party to receive more freedom. As such, it is important to ensure that foreign influences do not undermine the self-determination of North Korean religious institutions, because of the danger that foreign stakeholders may try to use religious organizations to enhance their power. This danger comes partly from religious organizations themselves, such as several evangelical organizations in the ROK. As the DPRK mistrusts foreign missionary work, all religious activities should be organized by indigenous citizens themselves, so that the party does not fear any uprisings or unrest. Achieving this objective is important if we want to achieve any real change for believers in the DPRK. Furthermore, the Juche idea's claim that there is only one legitimate worldview should be given up for the sake of pluralism, by admitting that there are several worldviews which could be applied.

In summary, the two keys are (1) *encouragement* of liberties and (2) *exchange* between religious groups and foreign counterparts without infiltrating the DPRK. An agreement should be reached so that all religions are promoted, and the WPK should participate in it in a trusting spirit. It is unreasonable to expect the DPRK to give up the core of its existence, as a counterforce opposing the United States and Western states, so we simply cannot exclude the values of the WPK unless we want to wait for a regime change before trying to make the situation for religious groups in the DPRK better.

Finally, the DPRK could learn from other states that religion and socialism are not necessarily in contradiction. A possible role model could be the development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 1983 and 2017. Despite its strong

persecution of Christians during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the country opened up for religious activities in the 1980s, even establishing a forum for exchange with Protestant leaders, the China Christian Council. Famous Chinese Christian socialists include Wu Yaozong (1893-1979), Deng Yuzhi (1900-1996), and Ding Guangxun (1915-2012), though the situation in the PRC is not yet perfect, given that the 2017 reforms on religion ("2017 Regulations of Religious Affairs") led to a wave of crackdowns on non-state-affiliated churches and gatherings outside of official religious sites, which are regarded to be illegal. However, the DPRK could use the Chinese example of the Post-Cultural Revolution advancement to allow the promotion of Christian socialism within its borders as a first try to open up or to conduct a set of soft reforms. Another possible role model for a first change could be Cuba, which is a close ally of the DPRK, though here as well, the situation is not perfect, and especially evangelical pastors are a target of crackdowns.

9. Conclusion

Although it is commonly assumed that all religious activity in the DPRK is forcefully suppressed, in practice the situation is not as tense, and the suppression is not conducted as notoriously as suggested by the Juche ideology. Of course, this finding does not give us any reason for euphoria. The DPRK is a highly authoritarian state in which daily life revolves around its leader, Kim Jong-un, and his divinely venerated family as part of a personality cult, while religious activities beyond a narrow legal framework are not allowed and are strongly persecuted. There have been several talks between DPRK religious bodies and their southern counterparts in the past, and despite Kim Jong-un's announcement that he will not consider reunification with the ROK or continue rapprochement, the hope for inter-Korean activities between religious bodies should not be abandoned and the channels should not be dismissed (point 1). Meanwhile, we should not stop appealing to the DPRK to relax its tight controls and we should continue monitoring the situation (points 2 and 3). At the same time, we must ensure that religious cooperation is not used as a means of foreign infiltration into the DPRK, as religious persecution might be relaxed only if the regime trusts religious adherents and their loyalty to the party (points 4 and 5). The DPRK could look at other countries as role models demonstrating that a co-existence between Christianity and socialism is possible.

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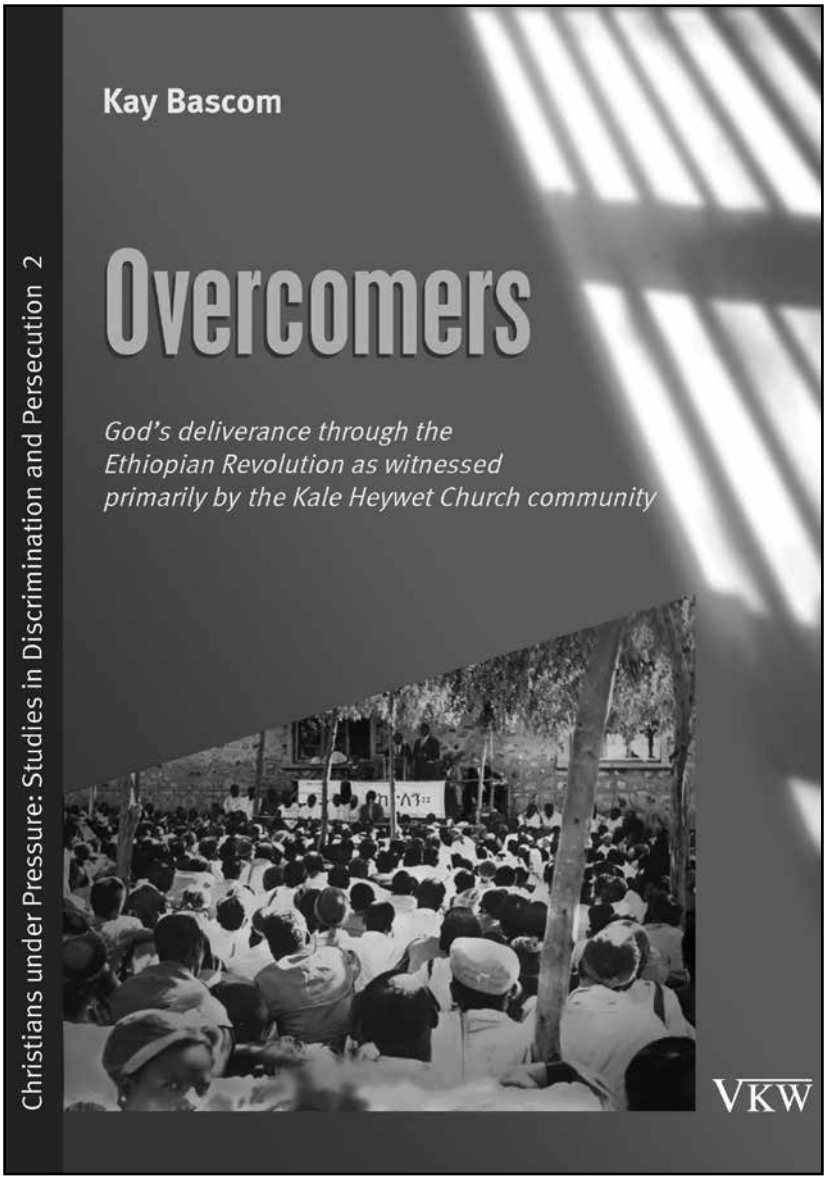

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