

The Sick Way North Korea Twisted the Trinity to Fit a Communist Agenda

North Korea's population continues to live under government surveillance and with a propaganda machine controlled by the national leader's personality cult.

It actually is not unlike George Orwell's classic book *1984*, John Choi* comments, a Christian human rights advocate who escaped from North Korea and now lives in the UK:

"Life [in North Korea] is very rough. Frequent food shortages, power cuts, typhoons, floods and other natural disasters; [these are] just some of the challenges North Koreans still have to deal with. Add to that gross human rights violations, total lack of freedom, information censorship, propaganda and the ongoing political mismanagement and you can see why living in North Korea is like living in Orwell's *1984*," he says.

Under the "god-like" leadership of the Kim dynasty from the 1950s onward, thousands of Christians have been sent to labor camps as they are seen as hostile to the regime and have to be eradicated.

"Many fled, others were captured and/or killed. But a small remnant was able to go underground. They survived as secret believers, which is a God-sized miracle," says the activist.

He estimates that there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians in the DPRK, of which 50,000 – 70,000 are in the prison system: "The others have managed to keep their faith secret and continue to stay faithful under the most difficult circumstances." Imprisonment, torture and death are the potential risks—not only to oneself, but to one's family.

The country is No. 1 on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Christian references

It wasn't always like that. Between the two Koreas, the North was always more open and tolerant than the traditionally agricultural backwater of the South. With its position bordering the rest of the East Asian continent, it was the place for commercial and cultural exchange with China and Manchuria. It was also the place where Christianity flourished. In the early 20th century, Pyongyang came to be known as the "Jerusalem of the East," with so many church crosses dotting the horizon.

The present leader Kim Jong-un's grandfather, "the great leader" Kim Il-sung, came from a Christian family. He was raised for most of his life by his grandparents who were deacons in the church, but his parents were committed Christians as well, according to Choi.

"His father, Kim Hyung-Jik, didn't like communism because communists did not accept Christian love and equal rights. The Protestant Chilgol Church in Pyongyang is dedicated to his mother, Kang Pan-Suk. Her name means 'rock'. She was named after the apostle Simon, named 'Peter' (Rock) by Jesus", he says, adding, "What a tragedy that this church is now one of the four showcase churches in the country."

Choi says that it is very likely that, as a child, Kim Il-sung joined his family in going to church, and that this might explain why there are so many Christian references in Kim's personality cult: "For example, they have their own trinity with Kim Il-sung as the father, his son Kim Jong-il as the son and the Juche (self-reliance) ideology in the role of 'Holy Spirit.' There's even a nativity-like story for Kim Jong-il's birth. People don't go to church on Sunday, but they have to

go to the local Kim Il-Sung Research Center on Saturday and study the leaders' scriptures."

'Divide-and-rule Approach'

So what happened to Kim Il-sung that made him turn against the religion of his fathers?

"What may play a part is that some of his first—and strongest—opponents were actually Christians," says Choi. In the time between the end of 30 years of Japanese occupancy (at the end of World War II) and the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with Kim as premier, Soviet authorities helped him implement communist policies. This led to opposition.

"The Christian Social Democratic Party (CSDP) was founded in September 1945, and the Korean Democratic Party—led by a Christian—in November 1945. In 1947, some Christian ministers founded the Christian Liberal Party," explains Choi.

"Kim Il-sung especially had to deal with Cho Man-Sik (the best-known nationalist leader in the North) and the Protestant community, which supported Cho and other Christian leaders. There were several violent clashes between pro-communists and anti-communist groups. Christians led most of the anti-communist activities at the time."

"Through a clever divide-and-rule approach, Kim Il-sung eventually won the battle," Choi continues. "Many Christian leaders were arrested, with a significant percentage of them executed. Cho himself died in captivity in 1950, soon after the start of the Korean War. It's believed he was murdered in prison."

Christians in North Korea then were given three options: to become communist and abandon their faith, become a martyr, or escape to South Korea. According to Choi, between 1946 and 1953 up to 1.5 million North Koreans, mostly Christians, chose

the last option and moved south.

But Kim Il-sung wasn't successful in his attempt to wipe out the Christian church in North Korea, and neither were his successors.

** John Choi (not his real name) also pens a series of blogs for Christian charity Open Doors International. {eoa}*

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.