

Stephen Linton

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Stephen Linton Oral Testimony

Jan. 24. 2002

DR. LINTON: First of all, I'd like to thank the Committee on International Religious Freedom for inviting me here to testify today. As someone who's been working with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea--that's its official name--for most of my adult life, I'm encouraged when official attention is focussed on North Korea, even under the most trying circumstances. Why? Because the American policymakers, when they do focus on Korea and do it in a concentrated fashion, I think we can make more progress.

I'm going to skip most of the content. Actually I realize here I talked about my missionary background but I didn't talk about my academic background. I grew up in Korea, graduated from Wonju University Department of Philosophy and then I attended seminary in the States and in Korea, graduated from Korean seminary, returned to Columbia University and wrote my Ph.D. for the religion department on ideology and the inculcation of ethics in Korean textbooks. I did a considerable amount of that dissertation on North Korea, at least as much as I could possibly do.

I also haven't said too much about Eugene Bell's work. By the time I finished my dissertation the phone was ringing off the hook for consulting work, usually pro bono, on North Korea and finally I worked for Dr. Billy Graham and continue to do so and accompanied him on his two visits and met with the leadership in North Korea numerous times.

I also, in '95 when they formally asked for humanitarian assistance, I quit my position as the associate director of Columbia University Center for Korean Research because raising money or raising money for humanitarian aid eventually ended up a full-time job. It's a long story. It started as a research project and now we serve medical needs in North Korea. Last year's budget was about \$3 million.

What we do is we try to connect outside institutions with North Korean tuberculosis treatment facilities. Essentially we have people adopt them and we provide diagnostic equipment, modern medicine, and a modest amount of agricultural support on an on-going basis as long as

we can raise the money to do that.

The work again started as an attempt to give Korean-Americans a legitimate and legal and effective outlet to do humanitarian assistance in North Korea and has grown to now where we have formal relations and on-going contact with about two-thirds of North Korea's tuberculosis institutes, diagnostic and treatment facilities, and I have to travel there many times a year and write reports for our donors.

What we try to do is identify donors and in that capacity a certain amount of communication about religion is possible. I left a pictorial with the Commission and you're welcome to peruse it at your leisure that's a picture of a Catholic priest who is blessing his donation. We work with Maryknoll, with CRS (Catholic Relief Services), with Samaritans Purse. We handle donations for the South Korean government and, of course, raise lots of support from churches and nonchurches.

We've done work for Buddhists. In fact, I'm not sure that the testimony you heard about Buddhism was quite accurate but we can talk about that later.

We've even done work for native Korean religions. Whoever wants to work to try to assist somebody in North Korea in good faith and is willing to give us that work, that project, we do our best to assist them. So that's what I do.

This paper--I want to apologize. It's very pedantic. It's the first draft of a paper I'm writing for a conference and I'm trying to double up on the uses of it. It gives a general overview of the roots of religion in North Korea and then the role of religion in North Korean society and also ends with some recommendations.

After many, many pages what I conclude is that the roots of North Korea's policy on religion are very deep. They extend not only from tradition but from recent history, especially under the Japanese, and you can read it if you're interested, as well, of course, from Marxism and to some extent from Kim Il-Sung, the founder of North Korea's Christian roots.

So things are never quite as simple as we'd like them to be. It's a very complex and a very entwined problem. And my recommendations are the recommendations that gratefully, I think, virtually everyone who's testifying here today seems to be echoing, albeit perhaps nuanced a bit different. That is that we need to engage North Korea. You don't help

the situation by standing away from a distance and criticizing. It just doesn't work.

As someone who tries to, in a sense, design and promote projects in North Korea, someone who's done that for several decades actually, I try to find--you want to end up so that both parties are happy and you usually have to start with some kind of common ground and sometimes common ground is a stretch. I think you'll remember when the U.S. began to improve relations with China. We started with ping-pong. It was a stretch but you build from common ground, pilot projects, and you try to work things out from that point of view.

Several ideas that will not work and I emphasized here is the notion that you can simply threaten or even use military force against North Korea to change its policies on human rights and religion. That has even been talked about in this town, especially since September 11, but to implement such a policy in this part of the world would risk world war and probably the total destruction of Korea. I think everybody agrees with that.

To continue to isolate North Korea economically and politically is not only unwise but cruel because--and there's a problem, too; I wrote a paper about it once. North Korea is what you call a postcolonial state and it means that you can trigger an allergic reaction when you threaten them because the legitimacy of the state is founded on its resistance to colonial powers or what it defines as colonial powers. So it's a problem even for North Korea to appear to compromise with outside powers. It's a problem with government and its own people.

So threatening and isolating is just not going to work. And using humanitarian aid as leverage has proven not to work. In a sense, there are historical roots to this problem and you can find many examples in the 19th century, which I cover here.

I made five suggestions. One is to address North Korea's legitimate concerns. We have to recognize--you don't have to like North Korea, you don't have to even agree with anything they say, but you have to try to look at things from their perspective and that is this is a country that has lost--that has been abandoned by its former supporters--China and the former Soviet Union. In fact, one of their former supporters has disappeared. They see themselves as an island of socialism in a capitalist ocean, the last bastion of socialism.

South Korea, which is North Korea's arch rival, has twice its population and 20 times its GNP, so these people feel threatened and not without cause.

So you need to recognize their legitimate concerns. Remove obstacles to diplomatic recognition. The more conditions we throw out there, the greater we retard this process. If you engage and try to influence the society on the ground you'll make a lot more progress. That's also clearly demonstrable through history.

Promote nongovernmental contacts. One of America's strengths or I think probably America's primary strength is our civil society. And yet because of the tension between North Korea, and we've been North Korea's enemy longer than any country in our history and theirs, we don't have much engagement from civil society. I'm not saying that we shouldn't promote nonproliferation and the abstract interests of our people but more fundamentally we should be pushing for more contacts with civilians. Of course, you can't do that without some kind of a diplomatic position.

And then finally, I ended, number four, on pushing the problems, and this was my stretch to find common ground. We have American citizens who are divided families, whose families are in North Korea. And when you talk about human rights, when you talk about religious freedom, you need to give examples that that particular society can identify as legitimate. That's where you start. Then you move into areas that they might have a problem with. And family values is one because this is not only a Marxist but it's also a very traditional East Asian state.

Then finally, practice your freedom of religion, and I pointed out two things here. One is we should forbid our diplomats from participating in state cult rituals in North Korea. This has unfortunately happened under the previous administration. When you practice state religion with someone in order to show that you are culturally sensitive or open to foreign cultures, there can be undue consequences and there's a paper I wrote on this that I also left with your committee.

And finally, thicken the fire wall between religion and the state. Unfortunately in East Asia, the distinction between heterodoxy and treason has not always been very clear. Religions were seen as supporters, primarily institutions to support legitimacy of the state, and therefore there's very little fire wall. And unfortunately, religions organizations, a lot of them who work on the border in North Korea of North Korea and China, have been used as sources of information by intelligence agencies.

Now the only way you can present religion as a legitimate and useful human endeavor in North Korea is to make sure North Koreans understand that religion is not a tool to subvert their society and thickening that fire wall will do a much better job of presenting that fact

because in all too many cases in East Asia, and I don't know about other places in the world, when religious people are persecuted they're usually persecuted for threatening the existence of the state, for some act that is defined as treasonous.

Then I ended just by saying engagement, engagement, engagement. I hope I haven't run too far over my time. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Dr. Linton, thank you very much.