

**2006 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**NORTH KOREA: COMMISSION STUDY PROVIDES EVIDENCE  
OF SEVERE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS**

**The Commission Study**

The international community is growing accustomed to reports of government imposed excess and horror from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), including reports of extensive prison camps, the arbitrary detention of dissidents extending to three and four generations of their families, forced abortions, and people beaten down by constant suspicion, propaganda, and violence. Yet, concrete documentary evidence of human rights violations in North Korea is scarce, particularly testimony about violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. It is only recently that interviews with former North Koreans are being undertaken by human rights researchers in any systematic way.

In an attempt to address this dearth of information, the Commission undertook a study in 2005 to gain a more tangible understanding of conditions for human rights, particularly religious freedom, inside North Korea. The resulting report, entitled *Thank You, Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea*, was published in November 2005. The study was conducted by David Hawk, veteran human rights expert and author of the study *The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps*. The Commission also employed two respected academics, Jae Won Chun and Philo Kim, to manage the study's progress in South Korea. Through in-depth interviews with North Koreans who have fled their country, the study allowed former North Koreans to speak openly about conditions in North Korea. It also offered historical and comparative analysis to help define the nature and scope of religious freedom abuses over the past 50 years.

Forty former North Koreans were interviewed extensively regarding conditions of freedom of religion or belief in North Korea. *Thank You, Father Kim Il Sung* reports on the forceful suppression of North Korea's once vibrant religious and intellectual life, the establishment of a quasi-religious cult of personality centered on Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, and the survival of very limited religious activity in North Korea. The former North Koreans offer trenchant testimony on the role and character of the Kim Jong Il government and the extent to which it controls the thoughts and beliefs of the North Korean people. The thick curtain of secrecy that has shrouded the "hermit

kingdom” was thus pulled back—if only a bit—by the testimony of former North Koreans.

“Thank you, Father Kim Il Sung” is the first phrase North Korean parents are instructed to teach to their children. From cradle to grave, North Korean citizens are surrounded by the all-encompassing presence of the “Great Leader” and his son, the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il. The Kim dynasty is much more than an authoritarian government; it also holds itself out as the ultimate source of power, virtue, spiritual wisdom, and truth for the North Korean people. Heterodoxy and dissent are repressed, quickly and efficiently, with punishments meted out to successive generations of the dissident’s family. In this environment, it is hard to imagine any independent religious belief or practice surviving openly unless it serves the government’s larger purpose.

### ***Eliminate Religious Adherence: a Deliberate Policy of the North Korean Regime***

From its inception, the brutal suppression of religious activity and rival systems of thought and belief was a systematic policy of the DPRK government. In the early twentieth century, religious life flourished in North Korea. In fact, religious organizations provided the key organizational links in the fight against Japanese colonialism. Thus, it is not surprising that religious groups were viewed as one of the chief political competitors of Kim Il Sung’s Korean Workers Party. When Kim Il Sung came to power, religious adherents and their families were labeled as “counter-revolutionary elements” and targeted for repression. Recalling his policies to diminish the power of religion in North Korea, Kim Il Sung admitted that:

We [could not] turn into a Communist society along with the religious people. Therefore, we purged the key leaders above the rank of deacons in Protestant or Catholic churches and the wicked among the rest were put on trial. The general religious people were...put into prison camps [and given a chance to reform].... We learned later that those of religion can do away with their old habits only after they have been killed.<sup>1</sup>

After Kim Il Sung consolidated his hold on power, North Korean officials stratified society on the basis of family background and perceived loyalty to the state. Religious adherents who remained in North Korea, as well as their descendents, were eventually classified on the lowest strata of this complex system of 51 social categories, receiving fewer privileges and opportunities in such areas as education and employment. An extensive report by Amnesty International in 2003 details evidence that persons in lower categories have, in some cases, been forcibly relocated to remote and desolate areas

of the country and then systematically denied access to food aid and left to starve. Those in the lowest strata were deemed the “irredeemables” who gained the implacable hostility of the state and unyielding harassment of the security forces.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that only a few interviewees report first-hand awareness of religious activity in Kim Il Sung’s DPRK. They may remember a few religious structures in Pyongyang and clandestine religious activity by a small remnant of believers—but these latter recollections are mostly of suspicion, fear, and death.

In the most unique and compelling part of the study, the persons interviewed testified to the total veneration of the Kim family and the institutionalization of the *Juche* ideology. Schooled as they were from birth to venerate Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, these interviewees often expressed astonishment that anyone in North Korea would practice a belief-system challenging the reigning cult of personality. The religious cult around the Kims touches every individual and every province in the DPRK. Students are required to memorize the “Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System of the Party,” and every North Korean is expected to attend one or more of an estimated 450,000 “Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Research Centers” at least weekly for instruction, inspiration, and self-criticism.<sup>iii</sup>

It is now known that every home in the country has a portrait of the “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung and the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il. Inspectors visit homes to hand out fines and admonishments if the portraits are not well kept. Every government building and subway car displays the two portraits, and every adult citizen wears a button of Kim Il Sung. Movies and propaganda constantly proclaim the blessings bestowed on them by the two Kims.<sup>iv</sup> The veneration required is so complete that the former North Koreans interviewed for this report did not believe that religious activity was permitted because, among other reasons, it would be perceived as a threat to the government’s authority.

Religious activity survives nonetheless, whether in government approved religious organizations operating a handful of places of worship in Pyongyang or in more clandestine venues. In recent years, the government has formed several “religious federations” to interface with co-religionists abroad. Three churches, two Protestant and one Catholic, were opened in Pyongyang between 1988 and 1992. Only a few interviewees were even aware of these churches, and even they believed that these churches operated as showcases for foreign visitors. However, according to South Korean religious leaders conducting exchanges with North Korea, these religious venues are open weekly and some genuine religious practice does take place among North Koreans at the churches. There are also reportedly three Buddhist temples and a Chondokyo shrine in Pyongyang. Although some of the interviewees had seen or were aware of Buddhist temples in North Korea, none had seen religious practice in these temples.

The study provides interesting evidence that some North Koreans are testing prohibitions against religious activity. Fortune-telling, a remnant of Korean Shamanism, is re-surfacing. Several of those interviewed for this study claim that faith in the “Dear Leader” is not as strong as it was before the famine of the 1990s, having been shaken by the crushing economic and other deprivations in North Korea. The Commission’s study reveals that Kim Jong Il fears that cross-border contacts will puncture the hermetic seal that he has tried, with considerable success, to place around North Korea—the seal that preserves the Kim dynasty and its “divinity.” Anything that casts doubt on the beneficence or omnipotence of the “Dear Leader” has to be repressed. That is why there is renewed government interest in ensuring that North Koreans coming back from China are not “infected” either by South Korean democracy or any form of religious belief. As one interviewee explained after her encounter with North Korean border guards, the DPRK government fears that “*Juche* will be toppled by Christianity.”

All of those interviewed left North Korea through China. They fled due to persecution, disillusionment, hunger, and severe deprivation. Refugees have flooded across the border with China for the past decade. Even after the famine eased a few years ago, an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 North Korean refugees still remain in China. Under the terms of an agreement with North Korea, the Chinese government considers all such refugees to be economic migrants who are subject to forcible repatriation. Moreover, the North Korean authorities consider migration illegal, and returnees are subject to harassment, arrest, imprisonment, and often torture. New laws have eased penalties for “economic crimes,” but there is growing evidence that North Koreans repatriated from China are interrogated to determine if they have converted to Christianity or had contact with South Korean Christians. If they answer affirmatively, they may face lengthy prison terms with hard labor, among other punishments.

*Thank You, Father Kim Il Sung* illustrates the need for concerted action to address the widespread denial of basic human rights in North Korea and to seek effective solutions for North Koreans seeking refuge in China. This study also confirms that the human rights and humanitarian disasters perpetuated by the DPRK government profoundly threaten security on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, as regional powers grapple with the DPRK’s nuclear aspirations, human rights objectives should not be given short shrift. Negotiations to end nuclear proliferation should include issues such as family reunification, abductions, rule-of-law development, market reforms, needs-based food distribution, economic development and protections for religious freedom and other human rights. Pursuing both nuclear and human security is not mutually exclusive. In fact, examples of dual-track diplomacy can be found in both Soviet-American and Chinese-American relations.

North Koreans have suffered through five decades of failed social, economic, and political policies, as well as grave human rights abuses. The extent of the depredation is staggering. This study provides compelling evidence of the systematic denigration of religious life in North Korea and of ongoing abuses of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. It also shows how religious freedom concerns are linked directly to the other human rights and security concerns that have dominated international attention. This study thus sheds further light on the often perplexing situation in North Korea, offers some insight into the daily lives of ordinary North Koreans, and raises international awareness of the appalling human rights situation faced by North Koreans in the DPRK and in China.

## **The Study's Findings**

For a summary of religious freedom conditions in North Korea, as well as Commission recommendations for U.S. policy, see the country chapter on Korea, People's Democratic Republic of, in this report.

### *North Korean Law and Practice Restricting Freedom of Religion*

- Although the North Korean government has formally subscribed to international standards with regard to freedom of religion or belief through its accession to international human rights treaties, based on the information gathered for this report, it is evident that the DPRK government has committed—and continues to commit—severe human rights violations in this area.
  
- Article 68 of the DPRK Constitution states that “citizens have freedom of religious beliefs.” However, despite the DPRK government’s assertion to the UN Human Rights Committee that there are no limitations on religious practice, Article 68 also has provisions on “drawing in foreign forces” and “harming the state or social order,” provisions that could lead to potentially severe limitations that could easily result in the arbitrary application of the constitutional provision on “freedom of religious beliefs.”
  
- Article 67 of the DPRK Constitution provides for “freedom of speech, of the press, demonstration and association.” However, as is the case with “freedom of religious beliefs,” these freedoms are seriously—if not entirely—limited and circumscribed by other constitutional provisions, including that “the State shall adhere to the class line, strengthen the dictatorship of people’s democracy”; “the State shall oppose the

cultural infiltration of imperialism”; and “the State shall eliminate the way of life inherited from the outmoded society and establish a new socialist way of life in every sphere.”

- Those interviewed for this study claimed that there are four mutually reinforcing reasons for the lack of religious freedom in North Korea:
  - the intensive and continuous anti-religious propaganda by the government;
  - the banning of religious activity, as revealed in the fact that none of the interviewees was aware of any authorized religious activity inside North Korea;
  - the severe persecution of persons caught engaging in religious activity, which most interviewees had either heard about or personally witnessed; and
  - the fact that *Juche*, the official state ideology of Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Thought, was the only officially permitted system of thought or belief in North Korea.

#### *The Institutionalization of Juche Ideology: Anti-Religious Propaganda and Veneration of the Kim Family*

- Article 3 of the DPRK Constitution sets out the guiding role for *Juche* as an official system of thought or belief. Kim Jong Il, as a precursor to his succession, merged the *Juche* ideology with the ideology of Kim Il Sung known officially as “Kimilsungism.” This merged ideology is presented by the state as a “monolithic” or “unitary” ideological system, and it is the basis for the cult of personality, pre-1945 Japanese-style “emperor worship,” or semi-deification that surrounds the memory of North Korea’s Great Leader, Kim Il Sung.
- According to those interviewed, North Korean propaganda continually portrays religion as “opium”—the term used by virtually all of the interviewees. Television programs also regularly denigrate religion. North Koreans are exposed to this anti-religious propaganda in youth groups, political education sessions, and neighborhood or workplace study groups where attendance is mandatory. These sessions included indoctrination on the principles of *Juche/Kimilsungism* as a religious ideology to the exclusion of other religious beliefs and practices.

- Virtually all interviewees described the life-long system of ideological propagation and indoctrination. This starts with children learning to say “Thank you father Kim Il Sung” when learning to talk, and continues with ongoing, mandatory adult education classes in the workplace or in shrine-like “Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Idea Institutes,” “Study Halls,” or “Research rooms. The institutions are described as venues for education and for veneration of the Kim family and its political philosophy. Interviewees describe the experience as “solemn,” “divine,” and “holier than the churches of South Korea.” The interviewees also reported that the formal “studies” are supplemented by other forms of Workers Party control and education efforts, particularly Party-led weekly, obligatory small group discussions, held either at work or in residential neighborhoods through which the population would be kept on the correct path of revolutionary thought.

### ***Awareness of or Participation in Religious Activities***

- Most respondents said that they had never seen or encountered any religious activity, places of worship, religious literature, or clerical officials prior to fleeing to China. Some were aware of former Buddhist temples or shrines in the mountains that were preserved as “cultural relics,” but to their knowledge there were no Buddhist monks or worship practiced at these places. A few interviewees had knowledge of religion because their parents or grandparents had been believers, and they remembered it from their childhood. Many more knew of religion from the anti-religious propaganda at school or from the North Korean state-controlled media. Others knew of religious activity from witnessing or hearing about the public executions of religious believers.

### ***Alternative Systems of Thought or Belief***

- The interviews revealed the widespread re-emergence in North Korea of a remnant element of Shamanism, the ancient pan-Asiatic animistic belief system: “fortune telling,” or the belief that one’s destiny or fate is not under one’s own control (as in *Juche*), but lies in the stars or other natural phenomena. All the persons interviewed described fortune telling as an illegal activity. However, all said it was much too widespread for the authorities to eliminate it, and that even North Korean officials

utilized the services of fortune tellers. Many interviewees associated the re-emergence of fortune telling with the onset of the famine and the severe deterioration in social conditions in the mid-1990s.

- Only a handful of persons interviewed had ever heard about the three—soon to be four—Christian churches that operate in Pyongyang. Nor had any interviewees heard about or encountered any of the 500 “house churches” or home worship services that the DPRK has claimed in its reports to the UN are operational in North Korea. With one exception, the interviewees simply did not believe that such activities were permitted by the authorities.
- On the basis of the information obtained through this study, it is not possible to corroborate claims about the existence of a substantial underground Christian church in the DPRK. Fully half of the interviewees said simply “no” when asked if they had ever seen or encountered underground churches or non-recognized, unofficial religious activities in North Korea. Others also replied “no,” but then went on to describe acts of persecution against religious believers or those involved in presumed religious activity, such as the possession of a Bible. Only two interviewees said they were aware of an unofficial or underground church network.

### ***Penalties for Religious Activity***

- Two interviewees provided graphic and detailed eyewitness testimony of the summary executions of individuals accused of engaging in unauthorized religious activities. Another interviewee said that her brother was executed for involvement in such activities, but that she had not personally witnessed the execution. One additional interviewee had heard of executions of North Koreans involved in unauthorized religious activities, and as a police official had been involved in two separate cases resulting in the arrest of eleven individuals accused of involvement in such religious activities. Of the eleven arrested, two died during interrogation; the interviewee believed that the other nine had been executed. Others mentioned executions they had heard about but had not witnessed themselves.
- Several interviewees described instances where possession of a Bible or other religious text was an offense punishable by imprisonment or execution. One

interviewee, imprisoned following repatriation to North Korea, met a fellow prisoner who was imprisoned because a Bible had been found in his home.

### ***Religious Persecution along the North Korean-Chinese Border***

- Despite international human rights agreements that provide for the freedom to leave one's country of origin, leaving North Korea without the authorization of the DPRK authorities is a violation of the North Korean penal code. Despite the UN's contention that these North Koreans in China should be considered refugees, the Chinese police regularly apprehend large numbers of them and forcibly repatriate them back to the DPRK, in violation of Article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
- Following sometimes extremely brutal interrogation by North Korean police officials, repatriated North Koreans are apparently sent in large numbers to the *jipkyulso* misdemeanor level provincial incarceration facilities, and to shorter-term small, local mobile labor detention facilities.
- From interviewee responses it can be determined that religion is a factor in the process of interrogation and meting out punishment. One interviewee reported that while detained following repatriation from China, six other detainees were sent to a prison camp for political prisoners after confessing that they were "followers of Jesus." Another interviewee reported that he was severely beaten upon repatriation from China because, after repeated questioning, he admitted to studying in a Korean-Chinese church.
- Two-thirds of the interviewees had been forcibly repatriated from China. Virtually all of these interviewees report that after being asked preliminary questions about how they had fled to China, where they had crossed the border, and where they went and what they did in China, they were specifically asked (1) if they had attended Korean-Chinese churches, and (2) if they had had any contact with South Koreans in China (some of whom are representatives of religious organizations doing charitable and humanitarian work in the border area). Contact with Korean-Chinese believers, and, more certainly, contact with South Koreans is considered a political offense. Several

of the interviewees described the ways they had been persecuted as a result of their contacts with churches in China.

### ***Existing Religious Life in North Korea***

- By the 1960s, the King Il Sung regime had suppressed and eliminated virtually all public observance of religion, substituting *Juche/Kimilsungism* in its place. However, due to a changed international environment in the 1970s, the regime decided to allow the re-emergence of a highly circumscribed and controlled public religious practice. It is this revival of highly circumscribed and tightly monitored and controlled religious practice, organized and supervised through a series of religious “federations” for Buddhism, Chondokyo, and Protestant, Catholic and, most recently, Orthodox Christianity, that is cited by DPRK authorities to indicate that North Korea respects religious freedom.
- Religious believers inside North Korea today generally fit into one of three general categories: 1) People who participate in the officially sanctioned religious federations and who are described as “old society, pre-WWII” religious adherents and their children; 2) pre-WWII religious adherents who, along with their children, worship clandestinely outside of the officially sanctioned system; and 3) religious adherents who maintain religious beliefs in secret, but who acquired these beliefs from exposure to co-religionists in China, either by crossing the border themselves or through correspondence with others who cross the border and return. Persons in category three are not tolerated.
- This study reveals that the two Protestant churches and one Catholic church in Pyongyang, while under tight control of the government, are able to conduct some genuine religious activities. Worshipers at these churches as of 2005 are mostly old society, pre-WWII Christians and their children who use this opportunity to profess their faith openly and worship in the presence of other believers. These churches have, at least since 1995, held activities regularly, although under consistent government monitoring. Membership in, and attendance at, the churches in Pyongyang are controlled by the Korean Workers Party, and there is reportedly a lengthy waiting list.
- South Koreans and others interviewed for this study reported on their visits to eight officially sanctioned “house churches” in North Korea, including five in Pyongyang, one in Kaesong, one in Sungchon, and one in South Hwanghae Province.

Attendees at these gatherings were consistently identified as old-generation Christians and their children who gather to pray, read scriptures, and sing hymns, often from memory. The number of officially sanctioned house churches in North Korea could not be verified in the course of this study.

- There are no Roman Catholic priests in North Korea, and the one Catholic church in the country has no direct relationship with the Vatican.
- Leaders of the Chondokyo religion in South Korea state that while it is possible to study the religion at Kim Il Sung University, there is no freedom to propagate Chondokyo beliefs in North Korea. The number of Chondokyo adherents and “preaching rooms” could not be confirmed from the information gathered for this study.
- Many of the interviewees knew of the existence of some of the more famous mountain-top Buddhist temples in North Korea, but surmised that these temples were maintained as “cultural heritage sites.” None had seen a temple open for public religious activities or for residence of Buddhist monks. The extent to which worship, study, and meditation is carried out at Buddhist temples could not be ascertained during the course of this study.
- Despite North Korean government assertions that the state and religion are separate, religious activities in the DPRK are clearly under the auspices of government-sponsored religious federations that could more accurately be described as emanations of the North Korean party-state. The religious activity that is allowed takes place under the authority and control of the corresponding religious federation. The religious federations are members of, and controlled by, the National United Front for the Unification of the Fatherland, which is in turn controlled by the Korean Workers Party, the ruling arm of the regime. Under the federation structure, there is no apparent mechanism, procedure, or structure for allowing belief systems and forms of worship that are not covered by an appropriate federation.
- Interaction between North Korea federation churches and churches in South Korea is used as a medium of Korean reconciliation. Religious interaction between North Koreans and religious adherents outside North Korea that takes place outside of the supervision of the religious federations is not permitted.

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<sup>i</sup> Goh Tae Woo, *Bukhanui jonggyo jeongchaek* (North Korea's Policies on Religion), Minjokmunhwasa, 1989, pp. 79-80.

<sup>ii</sup> Kee Hang Gu, "Bukhanui jonggyo tanapgwa sing-ang saenghwal," (Religious Repression and Religious Life in North Korea), in *Hyeonsil chojeom* (Reality Focus), 1990 Summer Issue, p. 111.

<sup>iii</sup> Philo Kim, "New Religious Policy and the State of Religious Freedom in North Korea," paper given at 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on North Korean Human Rights & Refugees, February 29—March 1, 2004, Warsaw Poland.

<sup>iv</sup> Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, (St. Martins Press, 2004).