

Kim Il-Sung and Christianity in North Korea

Dae Young Ryu

Introduction

When an individual is the supreme ruler of a country, the life experiences and views of that individual will have a decisive impact on the course of that country. That happened with Kim Il-Sung (1912–1994) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereinafter DPRK), also known as North Korea. As the founder of North Korea, Kim and his legacy have strongly influenced the full dimensions of North Korean society. Its religious policy, perception of religion, and attitude toward religious practitioners are not exceptions. Interestingly, Kim’s view of Christianity was rather atypical of a communist leader, and there was something different about Kim’s relationship with Christians. His parents were Christians, he served as a Sunday school teacher, he received assistance and support from many Christians throughout his life, and he praised and rewarded “patriotic” or nationalistic Christians. Further, he never publicly condemned Christian faith per se.

The narrative below examines Kim Il-Sung’s view of Christianity and Christians and the impacts of that view on both North Korean politics and North Korean society. To do so, his published speeches and statements and his memoir titled *With the Century* are examined and analyzed. Other related materials, including the works of his son, Kim Jung-Il, and North Korean scholars, are also consulted.

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The discussion deals with Kim Il-Sung's works chronologically in order to trace the evolution of his views on Christianity and his relationship with Christians. Kim's speeches and writings on religion are analyzed and interpreted not only in the context of his personal life, but also in the historical context regarding the stages of socialization, constitutional amendments, and foreign relations that have occurred in his country, North Korea.

Kim Il-Sung's published works are the official statements of the North Korean government. Therefore, his opinions on religion allow one to trace the evolving attitude of the North Korean government toward religion and Christianity. All statements and speeches of Kim and other individuals used in this article are "public literature," namely, published materials open to general readers in North Korea. However, all North Korean public literature uses complex metaphors and practices dualism.¹ Thus the works are difficult to interpret without fully understanding their peculiar system of discourse. Naturally, Kim Il-Sung's personal and public attitude toward Christianity, the North Korean government's policy on religion, and the reality of Christianity as it was practiced in North Korea cannot be fully understood using only these open publications. Unfortunately, however, circulated materials within the inner circle of North Korean leadership do not mention religion often and, even if any do, are also hard to obtain. Thus, the following narrative necessarily falls within the limitations of available North Korean public materials.

The Early Days

In his memoir, *With the Century*, Kim Il-Sung writes, "It could be said that when I was young, I was surrounded by the believers who venerated Jesus."² Both of his parents were Christians, and all his close relatives, friends at his elementary school, and neighbors were also Christian. His mother, Gang Ban-Seok, came from a prominent Presbyterian family in Chilgol near Pyongyang. Gang's father, Gang Don-Uk, was an influential elder and one of the founders of Changdeok School, a church grammar school where Kim attended and received his Christian education. Gang Ryang-Uk, who eventually became vice president of the DPRK, was Gang Don-Uk's cousin and taught Kim at the school. Gang Ryang-Uk later became an ordained Presbyterian minister, but he also

1. Yi Jong-seok, *Understanding Modern North Korea* (Seoul: Yeoksja Bipeongsa, 2000), 35-60. All the cited works of Kim Il-Sung and other writings published in North and South Korea are written in the Korean language.

2. Kim Il-Sung, *Kim Il-Sung Memoirs: With the Century* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 1992), 5:377-78.

assisted Kim in establishing the DPRK. Kim went to church regularly with his mother when he was young. Kim Il-Sung's father, Kim Hyeong-Jik, attended the Soongsil Academy, a conservative Christian school founded by fundamentalist missionaries from the American "Northern" Presbyterian Mission to raise Korean church leaders.³ Kim Il-Sung remembered that "there were many Christians around me" with whom he "had made frequent contacts" because his father had attended a Christian school.⁴

Yet Kim Il-Sung denied that his parents were Christians despite their Christian backgrounds. He maintained that his father was an atheist.⁵ A North Korean study supports this claim and insists that Kim Hyeong-Jik dropped out of the Soongsil Academy due to his opposition to the missionaries' Bible education and after a fight with the school administration for its disrespect of students.⁶ Kim also wrote in his memoir that his mother "did not believe in Jesus although she went to church every week."⁷ When the young Kim asked his mother why she went to church, she explained, "I am too tired, so I go there for some rest."⁸ Further, Kim claimed that he was in no way influenced by Christianity, although he does admit he "had received many humane helps from the Christians."⁹

Apparently, Kim's denial of his parents' Christian faith was a carefully constructed political statement. The fact that his parents were Christians, if publicly announced, could have created complex political ramifications for Kim as the supreme leader. The cult of his personality placed great emphasis on the revolutionary tradition of his family, and his parents were described as anti-foreign revolutionaries.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is no gainsaying the fact that Kim's parents were indeed Christians.

3. On the conservative characteristics of Soongsil Academy, see Ryu Dae Young, "The Educational Ministry of William M. Baird," *Christianity and History in Korea* 32 (March 2010): 142-44, 145-48.

4. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:103-104.

5. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:103.

6. Jo Hye-Ran, "The Fight against the Reactionary Education of American Imperialism under the Leadership of Indomitable Revolutionary Mr. Kim Hyeong-Jik," *Ryeoksagwahak*, no. 4 (1999): 22-24.

7. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:102, 104; also see Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea's Struggle: An Unconventional Firsthand History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003), 200.

8. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:104; Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea's Struggle*, 200.

9. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:104.

10. See, for instance, Korean Workers' Party Press, ed., *Mr. Kim Hyeong-Jik, the Outstanding Leader of Our Nation's Anti-Japanese National Liberation Movement* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 1977); Labor Organization Press, ed., *Mrs. Gang Ban-Seok, Korea's Mother* (Pyongyang: Labor Organization Press, 1980).

According to one eyewitness, his mother was a “good Christian” who rarely missed the dawn prayer meetings that were usually attended by the most faithful.¹¹ In addition, Kim’s father was a Christian nationalist. He organized a branch of the nationalistic Joseon Gukminhoe (Korean People’s Association) with his Soongsil colleagues, Bae Min-Su and Ro Deok-Sun, and participated in the underground anti-Japanese independence movement. Yet, he was also a Christian who earnestly prayed for the independence of Korea and carried on his independence activities with the churches as the center of that effort.¹² Had he not been a professing Christian, he could not have been admitted to the Soongsil Academy, where only those who clearly demonstrated their Christian faith and character were accepted.¹³

Little is known about the evolution of Kim Il-Sung’s Christian identity after his childhood days. What we do know is that he moved to Manchuria where his father had been actively involved in anti-Japanese resistance activities and there fell ill. After his father’s untimely death from frostbite, he moved to Jilin and studied at Yuwen Middle School between 1927 and 1929. During this time, he attended a Korean Methodist church. Son Jeong-Do, the pastor of that church, was an independence activist and a friend of Kim’s father, and his family warmly cared for the fatherless child. Kim Il-Sung later wrote that he “respected and followed” Son “as if he were my own father” even though Son was “a devout Christian with deep faith.”¹⁴ Kim apparently served as a Sunday school teacher at Son’s church, although he did not mention this experience in his memoir.¹⁵ He also held youth association meetings at the church sanctuary, as he was the leader. When Kim was arrested and put into prison by the Chinese authorities for his involvement in students’ agitation in 1929, Son Jeong-Do sent private supplies to Kim for months and helped him to get released.¹⁶ Kim was everlastingly grateful that Son’s wife loved him “exceedingly” and regarded Son as “the savior of my life.”¹⁷

11. Choe Young-Ho, “A Christian Understanding of the Early Days of Kim Il-Sung,” *Christianity and History in Korea 2* (1992): 75.

12. Bang Gi-Jung, *Bae Min-Su’s Rural Movement and Christian Thought* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1999), 48-52; Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:29.

13. Ryu Dae Young, “Educational Ministry of William M. Baird,” 144.

14. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 2:6; Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea’s Struggle*, 134; Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:6, 354.

15. Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea’s Struggle* 45, 60.

16. Kim Il-Sung, *Conversation with Korean-American Sohn Won Tai* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1992), 19-27; Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:351.

17. Kim Il-Sung, *Conversation with Korean-American Sohn Won Tai*, 9, 19; Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 2:16; Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:355; Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea’s Struggle*, 134.

The young Kim Il-Sung met many Christian nationalists. He remembered that patriotic Christians like Son Jeong-Do devoted themselves to the independence of Korea and “prayed for Korea” whenever they did pray.¹⁸ According to him, his father used to say, “Believe in Korea’s Heaven if you intend to believe in heaven.”¹⁹ That was the origin of Kim’s famous dictum, “Believe in Korea’s God if you intend to believe in a god,” a phrase often quoted as his representative statement on religion. He praised the “pure faith” of the patriotic Christians, whom he knew during the Japanese colonial regime, that “was always connected to patriotism,” and stated that they endeavored to realize “their desire to build a paradise” through establishing Korea’s independence.²⁰ He also offers a positive portrayal of “patriotic” Christians in his memoir, as they endeavored to gain the independence of Korea; these Christians included some of his father’s friends and the nationalist leaders, Kim Gu and An Chang-Ho.

The Formative Years of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

The period between Korea’s Liberation from the Japanese colonial occupation and the establishment of DPRK was a time of “democratic reform” and when North Korean leaders laid their foundation for a socialist country. Immediately after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel into the American-occupied South and the Soviet-occupied North. Kim Il-Sung and his communist colleagues, backed by the Soviet forces, seized the initiative and established a North Korean government. They endeavored to eliminate the vestiges of Japanese colonialism and to reform the pre-modern elements that had existed since late Joseon Korea. To be more specific, they purged pro-Japanese collaborators and pro-American “agents of imperialism,” nationalized major companies previously owned by the Japanese, and abolished the landlord-tenant system that had been the basis of that pre-modern structure.

These reform measures were welcomed by the tenant farmers and laborers who made up the vast majority of North Korean population, and hence were able to be carried out successfully within a short period of time. Land reform, for instance, was based on the principle of confiscation followed by free distribution and was completed without any serious resistance within just one

18. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:355.

19. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:19.

20. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:355.

month in March 1946. Compared with the experience in other communist countries, such a rapid and sweeping reform was almost unprecedented. This land reform gave lands to tenant farmers for free, and 72 percent of North Korea's farming families acquired land; half of these were agricultural laborers who had never owned any piece of land before.²¹ The landlords were overwhelmed by the vast majority of population who supported the reform and soon fled to the capitalist South. Gang Ryang-Uk, who actively partook in this socialist nation building, told one Western visitor that Christians were "in general more reactionary," probably because they "were richer than average Koreans."²² Many Christians were dissatisfied with the land reform. Gang held that those Christian landlords who had fled to South Korea and were spreading rumors of "religious persecution" there, were actually "worried about their lands rather than their faith."

Protestant Christianity in North Korea was based on support by landowning farmers and businessmen, and hence became a victim of socialization. Few Christians were willing to abandon their propertied status and remain in a socialist North Korea just to protect their churches. Christian families began to migrate to South Korea, especially in the aftermath of the land reform.²³ They became part of the mass exodus of the bourgeois class to the capitalist and American-dominant South Korea. Anna Louise Strong, who visited North Korea in the summer of 1947, wrote that rapid reform was possible, as there was no real resistance to it due to the "disappearance of all rightist elements."²⁴ Most potential dissenters, such as former policemen, officials, landlords, and businessmen, simply defected to the South.

The goal of Kim Il-Sung and his colleagues was to establish a socialist country in a very short period of time; to do so, they needed to form and communicate a broad, united front with other elements of North Korean society. Thus, they attempted a grand coalition with nationalistic businessmen, nationalistic religious people, and progressive intellectuals. At first, Kim Il-Sung preferred to describe his political campaign by such terms as

21. Kim Il-Sung, "On the Strengthening of Party's Organizational and Ideological Business," *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 1982), 16:162; also see A. L. Strong, "Travel Journal: North Korea, Summer 1947," in *Understanding the Pre- and Post-Liberation Period* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1989), 5:517-22.

22. Strong, "Travel Journal," 516; also see Luise Rinser, *Another Motherland; Travel Journal of Luise Rinser* (Seoul: Gongdongche, 1988), 179-180.

23. See Hong Dong-Geun, *Unfinished Journal of Homecoming: Visiting North Korea, the "Nation of Juche"* (Seoul: Hanul, 1988), 208.

24. Strong, "Travel Journal," 505-506.

anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, or as a new and progressive democracy rather than simply socialism or communism.²⁵ Further, reunification was still an open possibility at this time, as politicians both in the North and the South were talking about it, and symbolic and real efforts were made toward achieving that national aspiration. Thus, the pursuit of revolution only to benefit the communists could be viewed as an attempt to permanently divide the nation.

On March 23, 1946, Kim Il-Sung broadcast on behalf of the Provisional People's Congress, the platform of the provisional government. Article 3 of that platform guaranteed "the freedom of speech, press, assembly, and faith to all people," and article 5 assured that all people "regardless of gender, religion, and wealth will have equal rights in the political and economic life."²⁶ Yet, article 2 held that the new government would "fight mercilessly against domestic reactionaries and anti-democratic elements, and completely prohibit the activities of fascist, anti-democratic parties, organizations, and individuals." With implementation of this provision, the North Korean rulers made it clear that they would suppress any element that opposed their socialist revolution as they defined it. Considering this pronouncement and Kim Il-Sung's emphasis on the broad, united front, the future of religious people in North Korea was to be determined not merely by their religiosity and beliefs, but rather by their attitude toward the new socialist regime.

As stated earlier, in many cases Christian institutions and adherents in North Korea became targets of the socialist revolution due to their bourgeois basis and anti-communist character. In particular, many of the Christians in the northwestern region, the stronghold of Korean conservative Protestantism, were landlords, landed farmers, and businessmen. Further, they had long maintained pro-American and anti-communist tendencies and opposed the establishment of the socialist regime spearheaded by Kim Il-Sung. The Association of Presbyteries in the Five Provinces, the umbrella organ of Presbyterianism in North Korea, refused to

25. See, for instance, the following documents in *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung I: For the Reunification-Independence and Democratization of the Father Land* (Pyongyang: National People's Press, 1949): "Report on Current Political Situation in Korea and the Organization of Provisional People's Congress of North Korea," 1-14; "Announcement to the Fellowmen Commemorating the May 1st Day," 35-56; "Announcement to the Korean Fellowmen Commemorating the 1st Anniversary of August 15th Liberation," 115-46; "Present Stage of the Establishment of Democracy and the Duty of the Cultured People," 147-60.

26. Kim Il-Sung, "Twenty Articles of Platform," *The Writings of Kim Il-Sung* (hereinafter cited as *Writings*), (Pyongyang; Korean Workers' Party Press, 1979), 2:125-26.

cooperate with the socialist nation building when election day for the Provisional People's Congress was set for a Sunday and church buildings were designated as polling stations. They announced in October 1946 that Christians were not allowed to participate in any activity other than religious ones on Sunday, and sanctuaries could not be used for any purpose other than worship services.²⁷

The protest and noncooperation of anti-communist Christian leaders made Kim Il-Sung impatient. Shortly before election day, he delivered a speech titled, "With the Democratic Election Ahead." In it, Kim held that no religion could prohibit patriotic activities designed for the country and the people, and he strongly criticized those "reactionaries with evil intentions" who were against the election.²⁸ He also insisted that religious freedom was guaranteed, that no religion was persecuted in North Korea, and that all religious practitioners fully enjoyed civil rights; hence, most voluntarily partook in the election. If any individual opposed the election under the pretext of any religious tradition and teaching, Kim contended, that person must have been "bought off to become an agent of a foreign country."²⁹ Citing non-cooperative Christian pastors as an example, Kim condemned them as being "the enemy agents who attempted to colonize Korea anew."

As election day approached, Kim Il-Sung invited about a dozen Protestant pastors to discuss the decision of the Association of Presbyteries to boycott the election. The association's decision, he argued, was "made by the anti-national traitors in league with the American imperialists to shatter the democratic election in the North by misusing the Christian doctrine."³⁰ Contending that the Bible said that religious individuals could do "good works" on the Sabbath and even elected church officers on the Sabbath, he asked the pastors why Christians could not participate in the election of the People's Congress, which was indeed "a good work for the fatherland and the people."

There were of course many religious practitioners who actively helped in the establishment of a socialist government. The Korean Christian Federation (hereinafter KCF), founded by Gang

27. Kim Yang-Seon, *The 10 Year History of Korean Christianity after the Liberation* (Seoul: Department of Religious Education, Presbyterian Church, 1956), 63.

28. Kim Il-Sung, "With the Democratic Election Ahead," *Writings*, 2:519-20.

29. Kim Il-Sung, "With the Democratic Election Ahead," *Writings*, 2:520.

30. "The Great Breast of the Love for Country and People: The Story of the Noble Compassion Gang Ryang-Uk, Former Vice-President of the Republic, Experienced," in *History of Christianity in North Korea after the Liberation: Researches, Testimonies, and Data*, ed. Kim Heung-Soo (Seoul: Dasangeulbang, 1992), 524; also see Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society* (n.p.: Samhaksa, [1980]), 60-61.

Ryang-Uk and his colleagues, mustered Christian support and led the way in cooperation with the communist leaders. An Sin-Ho, sister of An Chang-Ho, was a Christian who “carried the Bible day and night,” Kim Il-Sung remembered.³¹ Nonetheless, at Kim’s request, she worked for him as the vice chairperson of the Korean Democratic Women’s Coalition formed in November 1945. Kim praised the fact that An Sin-Ho enthusiastically participated in socialist nation building and kept her communist party membership card between the leaves of the Bible she always carried.³²

Many Christians became involved in various anti-socialist incidents.³³ Together with the noncompliant attitude of Christians toward the congressional election, this activity apparently made a deep impression on Kim Il-Sung. He thus maintained in a post-election address that “reactionaries” sent “some degenerate Christian pastors as spies” to disrupt the participation of Christians in the election.³⁴ Kim later declared that the United States had even sent missionaries who assumed the mask of religion to instill the spirit of worshipping America, and then “some reactionary pastors and elders” under their influence went on to oppose the establishment of the socialist government.³⁵ He also held that religion, which had historically been used by the feudal ruling class as “the tool to deceive, exploit, and oppress the people,” was used by “the imperialists as a tool to conquer the people of underdeveloped countries.”³⁶ These remarks by Kim Il-Sung reveal why he was so determined to eradicate the influence of uncompromising religious leaders. He had already experienced conflicts with them during the land reform program and the election of the People’s Congress.

The DPRK was established in September 1948. Its constitution did not guarantee full religious freedom, but rather allowed for “the freedom of faith”; religious people could practice their religion by “building religious facilities and performing religious

31. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:299.

32. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:300.

33. For various religion-related incidents, see Sawa Masahiko, “Christianity in Post-Liberation North Korea, August 1945-June 1950,” in *History of Christianity in North Korea*, 13-51; Byeon Jin-Heung, “The ‘Silent Church’ and Communism in North Korea: The Period of Sovietization (August 1945-June 1950),” in *History of Christianity in North Korea*, 70-130.

34. Kim Il-Sung, “National Consensus of the Democratic Election and the Urgent Task of the People’s Congress,” *Writings*, 2:584.

35. Kim Il-Sung, “On the Task of Our Party Organizations,” *The Complete Works of Kim Il-Sung* (hereinafter cited as *Complete Works*) (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1993), 7:116.

36. Kim Il-Sung, *Complete Works*, 7:154.

ceremonies.” All North Korean constitutions thereafter did not have within them any provision for “the freedom of religion” because religion per se was something ultimately to be eradicated as part of the socialist revolution. Thus, any religious activity that promoted religion, such as proselyting, religious education, and carrying the Bible outside the place of worship, was apparently prohibited. It became a debated topic whether the North Korean people could continue to enjoy their constitutional right to religion, limited as it was. Kim Il-Sung later admitted that in the post-Liberation time, there were “cases that aroused public criticism” because of “the prejudice that discriminated against religious people and antagonized religion itself.”³⁷ However, these cases were, he insisted, “not a general phenomenon or a vice caused by the systematic intention and order of the center.” Go Gi-Jun, the longtime secretary general of KCF, also argued that “false communists” caused the religious people to misunderstand the DPRK government.³⁸

Of note as well is the fact that North Korea’s first constitution excluded the provision for the freedom of anti-religious propaganda that the Soviet Union and all other socialist-communist countries thereafter had in their constitution along with the freedom of faith.³⁹ The reason for this difference appears to be the meaningful role of religious people in the establishment of DPRK. As stated earlier, the DPRK was founded through a broad coalition of different elements as clearly demonstrated by the election of the Methodist pastor, Hong Gi-Ju, as the vice chairman of the People’s Congress and Presbyterian pastor, Gang Ryang-Uk, as its secretary general. As a whole, 2.7 percent of the People’s Congress were religious practitioners, and many were indeed pastors; there were also pastors in leadership positions in the local governments.⁴⁰ Thus, the North Korean government not only did not include an anti-religious clause in its constitution, but also did not carry out any anti-religious propaganda in a systematic way at this juncture.⁴¹

37. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 5:367.

38. Jo Gwang-Dong, *Thinking People Walking Slowly* (Seoul: Jirisan, 1992), 120, 122.

39. Kim Cheol-Su, *A Study of the North Korean Constitution in Relation to Other Communist Countries* (Seoul: Policy Department, Bureau of Reunification, 1978), 55.

40. Kim Il-Sung, “National Consensus of the Democratic Election and the Urgent Task of the People’s Congress,” *Writings*, 2:544; Strong, “Travel Journal,” 516.

41. For typical Soviet anti-religious propaganda based on “Scientific Atheism,” see, for instance, James Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist “Scientific Atheism” and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (Berlin: Mouton, 1983).

Kim Il-Sung's view of religion during this time was revealed by his speech at a cabinet meeting in July 1949. He said that religion was "a reactionary and unscientific world-view" that paralyzed class consciousness and chilled revolutionary drive and hence could be called "the same thing as opium."⁴² Admitting that "some farmers and youths" still went to church, he held that they did so because they were "deceived by religion due to their ignorance." Kim then reaffirmed the constitutional freedom of religious faith and yet also told his ministers that they "should not sit on [their] hands on" the problem. He asked the cabinet not to "forcefully demand" Christians to stop their religious life, but rather to "make them realize the unscientific nature of religion and voluntarily stop going to church." To do so, Kim said that the government and particularly the Ministry of Cultural Propaganda should fully "expose the harmfulness and falseness of religion" through frequent public lectures on scientific knowledge and the publication and wide distribution of easy-to-read books on the nature and the principles of social evolution.

This statement indicates that the constitutional right of religious practice was not mere wordplay, and indeed people in the DPRK could still attend churches despite the government's general hostility toward religion. Further, a theological seminary was still operating even though only pro-governmental individuals could teach and study there, and *Sagyeonghoe*, or Bible study conferences, were also being held in churches. At this formative stage of the DPRK, as characterized by a broad, united front, Kim Il-Sung wanted religious practitioners to participate in the socialist nation building. His speech in October 1949 well summarizes his point. He said he would not tolerate religious people abusing their legal right and engaging in "activities that disrupt the nation-building."⁴³ It was in this speech also that he made the famous statement, "Believe in the Korean God rather than a foreign god if you intend to believe in a god." He demanded that Christians should give priority to the nation over religion and that the practicing of religion should contribute to "the prosperity of the fatherland and the happiness of our people."

Kim Il-Sung's attitude toward Christianity grew worse during the Korean War. Yet, it was peculiar that he provoked enmity against American missionaries rather than Korean Christians. According to the official North Korean interpretation, it was a war

42. Kim Il-Sung, "On Strengthening Cultural Propaganda and Developing Foreign Trade," *Writings*, 5:154.

43. Kim Il-Sung, "We Have to Preserve National Cultural Heritage," *Writings*, 5:285.

to “liberate” the South from imperialism and the vestiges of feudalism, and hence was named as “War for the Liberation of the Fatherland.”⁴⁴ Kim nearly achieved his goal to “liberate” South Korea quickly, but eventually failed due primarily to an American military intervention. Therefore, his anti-American sentiment worsened greatly during the war. His wartime, anti-American polemics began to emphasize the long history of American imperialism, and in so doing, he viciously attacked American missionaries as an imperialist force.

Kim held that the United States had dispatched Christian missionaries to Korea to make it “a slave colony.”⁴⁵ The missionaries, according to him, administered a “religious anaesthetic” on Koreans and instilled in them “the principle of nonresistance” so the Americans could conquer Korea easily. Using the example of one American missionary who wrote “Thief” with hydrochloric acid on the forehead of a boy who picked up an apple off the ground at an orchid, he condemned the cruel “dhole nature” of missionaries.⁴⁶ Further, Kim maintained that American missionaries also committed atrocities during the war. He even claimed that American missionaries “took carbines instead of the cross” and massacred dozens of pregnant women and were “driving tanks and running over children.”⁴⁷ He also contended that his soldiers could still shoot down U.S. bombers even though the Americans prayed to their “divine God” for protection each time they took off.⁴⁸ At the end of the war, Kim used his anti-missionary reasoning to purge Park Heon-Yeong, the leader of the South Korean Workers’ Party

44. For the North Korean view of the Korean War, see Jeong Hae-Gu, “Perception of the Korean War,” in *The North Korean Perception of Korean History II*, eds. An Byeong-U and Do Jin-Sun (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1990); Gang Seong-Cheol, “A Study on the Korean War,” in *Lectures on the Comparison of North and South Korean Perception of History*, Jeong Yong-Uk, et al. (Seoul: Ilsongjeong, 1989); Ha Young-Seon, “North Korea’s Interpretation of the Korean War,” in *A New Approach toward the Korean War*, ed. Ha Young-Seon (Seoul: Nanam, 1990).

45. Kim Il-Sung, “The Task of Political Parties for the Victory of the War for the Liberation of the Fatherland,” *Complete Works* (1995), 12:32; Kim Il-Sung, “On the Current Situation and the Urgent Task of the Youth Organizations,” *Complete Works* (1995), 13:46.

46. Kim Il-Sung, “Our Arts Should Contribute to Advancing Victory of the War,” *Complete Works*, 12:33, 491. Just as in Kim’s other illustrations of missionary cruelty, he overstated this case. For the examination of the incident, see Han Kyu-Moo, “The Procession and Peculiarity of ‘the Haysmer Accident,’” *Christianity and History in Korea 23* (Sep. 2005): 5-23.

47. Kim Il-Sung, *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 3:245. The names of the missionaries allegedly involved in massacres were mentioned in Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 79.

48. Kim Il-Sung, “The Report in Commemoration of the 7th Anniversary of the August 15th Day,” Kim Il-Sung, *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 4:184.

and Kim's most formidable archrival. Park was sentenced to death under charges that before the Liberation he had communicated secretly with American intelligence agent "Underwood," who had "disguised himself as a missionary," and worked as "an American-employed spy."⁴⁹

The bloody and destructive Korean War spread what the North Korean Christians called a "religious nihilism" throughout the country. The reason was the complete destruction that the American forces inflicted on North Korea. One U.S. Air Force general commented, "we burned down every town in North Korea"; the relentless and indiscriminate American bombing hardly left a worthy target standing and produced "a virtual holocaust."⁵⁰ Thus, there was really no place for Christians to assemble for services because the U.S. bombers had destroyed all the religious facilities. **Many Christians reportedly perished in churches because they sought shelter there believing that Americans would never bomb churches.**⁵¹ In the end, the North Korean people regarded Christianity as only the religion of America, their archenemy, and thus Christians had to hide their religious identity.⁵² Many even abandoned their faith. Kim Il-Sung later asserted that Christians saw that their God could not keep the U.S. forces from destroying their churches and killing Christians and hence "voluntarily abandoned their faith" and instead became believers in Juche Ideology that taught that humans are the center of all and creators of the world.⁵³

In early 1951, the North Korean government ferreted out all "reactionaries" who had joined anti-communist organizations and had cooperated with the Allied forces during their occupation of North Korea. Many Christians were arrested.⁵⁴ Some were publicly

49. *Trial Records of the Espionage and the Conspiracy against the DPRK by the American-employed Spies Park Heon-Young and Lee Seung-Yop Group Case* (Pyongyang: National Press, [1955]), 4-124; Kim Il Sung, "On Strengthening the Class Education among the Party Members," *Writings*, 9: 250; Kim Il-Sung, "On Several Problems Regarding the Tasks of the Party and the Nation at this Stage," *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 1: 546. The "Underwood" must be Horace H. Underwood.

50. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), 298; also see Richard P. Hallion, "Naval Air Operations in Korea," in *A Revolutionary War*, ed. William J. Williams (Chicago: Imprint, 1993), 129-47.

51. Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 77.

52. Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 80. Park wrote that North Korean orphans in Rumania and Poland vandalized churches and insulted ministers due to their anti-American, anti-Christian sentiment.

53. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 5:366.

54. Sin Pyeong-Gil, "The Process of the Workers' Party's Anti-Religious Policy," *North Korea* (July 1995): 56.

executed, put in prison, or sent to internment camps. However, it is argued that most received mild punishment because of Kim Il-Sung's definition of reactionary, namely, that "only the flagrant offenders who are opposing our revolutionary task of today are anti-revolutionary elements."⁵⁵ That may have been true considering that most anti-communist activity leaders had already left for South Korea with the retreating Allied forces. Although there were "reactionary" Christians, many North Korean Christians, along with the KCF as their rallying point, called Kim Il-Sung's military campaign "the righteous holy war" and prayed for the North Korean victory.⁵⁶

The Period of Socialist Revolution

After the attempt to "liberate" the South failed, Kim Il-Sung had to accept national division as a reality and recover his country from the ruins of war and strengthen socialism. The period from the end of the Korean War to 1972 was thus a time of full-scale socialist revolution. In the postwar restoration and economic reconstruction, Kim gave priority to heavy industry and endeavored to completely socialize its production and ownership system.⁵⁷ Even after the earlier land reform and nationalization of major industries, farmers privately owned land and individuals privately ran small businesses. The socialist restructuring of agriculture and private business was speedily carried out and completed within five years after the war. Kim Il-Sung thus declared in September 1958 that "the socialist remodeling of the relation of production" was accomplished.⁵⁸ By this time, the private ownership of land and of the means of production had disappeared from the DPRK, and all farming land and factories were cooperatively owned and operated. The socialization of the economy was fully achieved.

55. Kim Il-Sung, "On the Methods of the Party Business," *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 1960), esp. 6:305-306; also see Sawa Masahiko, *On the History of Christianity in North and South Korea*, trans. Kim Suk-Ja and Gang Mun-Gyu (Minjungsa, 1997), 268.

56. "All Christians Stood up Against the Military Invasion of the American Imperialist Thieves" and "An Appeal to All the Patriotic Christians and Religious People in Korea" in *History of Christianity in North Korea*, 499, 500.

57. Kim Il-Sung, "The Construction of Socialism in the DPRK and the Revolution of South Korea," *Writings*, 19:281-83; Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs: I Saw the Truth of History* (Seoul: 1999), 121; Yi Jong-Seok, *Understanding Modern North Korea*, 75-76.

58. Kim Il-Sung, "Against Passivity and Conservatism in Socialist Construction," *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 6:100; also see Im Young-Tae, *The 50 Years of North Korean History: Reading in the Time of National Reconciliation and Cooperation* (Seoul: Deulnyeok, 1999), 301-309.

Christians were encouraged to participate in the socialist revolution at this stage. Kim Il-Sung once said in a postwar speech that the make-up of the North Korean labor class was so complex that it could not operate factories if all troublesome individuals were eliminated. He emphasized that “the only way” to carry out the socialist revolution successfully was to “reeducate all the people and convert them into the revolutionary labor class.”⁵⁹ He also denounced “the leftist bias” that tended to automatically antagonize “people with a past.” In a similar vein, Kim contended in another speech that “anybody can become a communist new human being in our socialism.”⁶⁰ That is, the government could reeducate and convert all the people except for “very few vicious individuals.” Anybody who held “a vestige of the old idea” could make a mistake, Kim said, but socialism should not abandon such a person, rather “reeducate them steadily and convert them into a new human being.”⁶¹ If these remarks were any indication, Kim Il-Sung had an idea of inclusive socialism.

There is little doubt that Christians were considered to be among those people retaining “a vestige of the old idea.” Apparently, efforts were continuously still made to invite them to join the socialist reconstruction. A case in point is Kim Il-Sung’s 1956 speech to the Central Committee of the Youth Association.⁶² He told them that the Youth Association held the character of the united front and hence they should accept “youths from all classes and walks of life.” He also pointed out a problem, namely, that youth organizations had continued to ostracize the children of religious people, businessmen, and defectors to the South. Then he asked the young leaders “not to disbelieve or exclude the youths who believe in religion” because the religious youths “could also be converted into socialists when they are allowed to be among the young laborers and reeducate them.” Kim added that these religious youths had the freedom to hold religious belief and could not be forced to abandon their faith; however, youth-oriented entertainment and cultural projects and Marxist-Leninism indoctrination could still work to change their thinking to be more receptive to socialism and ultimately to convert them away from religion.

59. Kim Il-Sung, “On the Methods of the Party Business,” *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 6:304-306, 311-12.

60. Kim Il-Sung, “Let’s Create Literature and Arts in Accordance with the Cheollima Era,” *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 2:582-83.

61. *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 2:582.

62. Kim Il-Sung, “On Some Tasks in front of the Youth Organizations,” *On the Youth Business and the Duty of the Coalition of Socialist Youth Laborers* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1969), 1:201-205.

The completion of the socialist economic revolution in 1958 was a milestone in the history of the DPRK. Now the North Koreans had entered what one prominent North Korean theorist called “a golden era of socialist construction in North Korea.”⁶³ With the completion of this socialist economic revolution, religion in North Korean society now entered a new phase. Of note is that religion-related words began to disappear dramatically after 1957–1958 in Kim Il-Sung’s published speeches.⁶⁴ Before that time, he always put “religious people” on his list of various elements found in the North Korean population and mentioned them specifically whenever he addressed to all the people of the country.

This change has made some observers speculate that religion disappeared from North Korea after the 1950s. However, Kim Il-Sung reportedly said in October 1958 after the cooperation system was completed that “should anybody want to proceed with us, we will not make an issue of their past even if they used to be capitalists, landlords, or pastors.”⁶⁵ In a 1959 speech, he even admitted that some would not support communism “to the end.”⁶⁶ However, he continued to invite his comrades to “go hand in hand” with those people unless they “oppose what we are doing.” In all likelihood, the success of the socialist economic revolution did reduce the number and vitality of Christians. Kim Il-Sung’s remarks nonetheless revealed that there were still Christians who did not endorse communism at this stage of the revolution and that it was difficult for the government to purge them totally.

A fundamental shift in the ideological orientation of North Korea came with the creation of Juche Ideology. Perhaps the first reported case where Kim Il-Sung used “Juche” (literally “self-reliance”) was in 1955, when he encouraged his comrades to shape the government “in accordance with the peculiar conditions of our country.”⁶⁷ For about a decade afterwards, Juche became primarily a matter of creatively applying Marxist-Leninism to the concrete conditions found in North Korea.⁶⁸ Then an important evolution of Juche Ideology happened in April of 1965 when Kim Il-Sung delivered a speech in Indonesia about the socialist construction of his country on the tenth anniversary of the Bandung

63. Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 350; also see Im Young-Tae, *The 50 Years of North Korean History*, 346-75.

64. Sawa, *On the History of Christianity in North and South Korea*, 191.

65. Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 55.

66. Kim Il-Sung, “On Some Tasks for the Socialist Economic Construction,” *Complete Works*, 24:457.

67. Kim Il-Sung, “On the Eradication of Dogmatism and Formalism in Ideology Business and Establishing Juche,” *Writings*, 9:467, 474.

68. Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 136-37.

Conference. In the speech, he held that the decisive factor that defined North Korean ideology, politics, economy, and defense was “Juche Ideology.”⁶⁹ This statement was an indication that Juche Ideology meant much more than a simple creative application of Marxist-Leninism to the unique specifics found in North Korea.

This was a time of ideological conflict between China and the Soviet Union, and the DPRK was trying to create something of its own that fell between the two.⁷⁰ Nikita Khrushchev held that communists should stop the class struggle and widen democracy after socialist modes of production were well established. Mao Zedong, in contrast, contended a continuation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the class struggle until the final victory of communism was achieved. Further, criticism against Kim Il-Sung was growing within North Korea for his failure to win the Korean War. Thus, Kim had to ride out this difficult situation. His solution was pronounced and appeared in a statement of May 1967.⁷¹ Kim ostensibly took a middle ground between the views of Khrushchev and Mao, but in reality he sided with Mao and chose to carry out an ideological policy that became “a small-scale Cultural Revolution of China.”⁷² Just as in China, the North Korean cultural revolution began to absolutize Kim Il-Sung’s authority in terms of the proper interpretation of ideology, and thus it strengthened the cult of personality surrounding Kim.⁷³ Juche Ideology was now developed to legitimize the absolutization of Kim Il-Sung, and it soon began to evolve into “Kim Il-Sung-ism.”

The criticism of religion became part of the North Korean cultural revolution. In March 1968, Kim Il-Sung asked educational workers to “properly evaluate religions like Buddhism and Christianity.”⁷⁴ Pointing out that there were still many religious people in South Korea, he told them to teach their students about “the nature and harmfulness of religion” so that they could wage “an effective struggle against religion.” In this context, Kim also criticized any scholars who failed to prove the vices of religion “as

69. Kim Il-Sung, “The Construction of Socialism in the DPRK and the Revolution of South Korea,” *Writings*, 19:304-306; also see Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 137.

70. See Chi-Kwan Mark, *China and the World Since 1945: An International History* (New York: Routledge, 2012), chs. 4 and 6; Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 148-49, 353-54.

71. Kim Il-Sung, “The Transitional Period from Capitalism to Socialism and the Problem of the Proletariat Dictatorship,” *Writings*, 21:259-75.

72. Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 149, 354.

73. Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 155.

74. Kim Il-Sung, “Let’s Educate the Students to Make Them True Forces in Rear for the Construction of Communism,” *Writings*, 26:52.

if religion had played an important role” in Korean culture.⁷⁵ He did not denounce religious culture categorically, but, nevertheless, he asserted that the development of the national culture had been seriously impeded by religion. In assessing the cultural heritage of religion, the educational workers should “abandon backward and reactionary items and inherit, accept, and critically develop progressive and proletarian items in accordance with today’s socialist reality.”⁷⁶ That is, Kim wanted to distinguish the cultural-artistic value of a religious artifact from the religious teachings it represented. Educators, for instance, could highly appreciate the artistic value of a statue of the Buddha, but they should help their students clearly understand the falseness of Buddhist teaching. This attitude paved the way for restoring and preserving religious cultural heritage, such as Buddhist temples, while keeping the tenets of religion and its practices under sharp ideological criticism during the cultural revolution.

This anti-religious campaign went hand in hand with an apparent acknowledgement of compliant Christians. In 1968, the North Korean government reportedly allowed old and cooperative Christians like An Sin-Ho to hold worship services and officially recognized about two hundred places of “house services.”⁷⁷ A close examination of propaganda works of that time also reveals that the target of these attacks was not religious faith per se. *The Household of Choe Hak-Sin*, a popular movie of this time, offers a good example. Kim Jung-Il, the producer of this movie, told his crew that the purpose of the movie was not to take issue with the faith of Christians. The true purpose was to question “the worshippers of America who believe in American Imperialists as their god” and show their “illusionary view of and attitude toward American Imperialism.”⁷⁸ This explanation was justified by the character development of Pastor Choe’s family. They were some of the staunch “worshippers of America.” During the American occupation in the Korea War, however, they experienced the brutality of American soldiers and also found that the American missionary they befriended was really a secret information agent;

75. Kim Il-Sung, “Let’s Educate the Students to Make Them True Forces in Rear for the Construction of Communism,” *Writings*, 26:52; Kim Il-Sung, *On the Duty of Social Science* (Tokyo: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1969), 511.

76. Kim Il-Sung, *The Theory of Socialist Literature and Arts*, 528 quoted in Choe Bong-Ik, *The Spread of Buddhist Philosophy in the Feudal Period of Our Nation and Its Harmfulness* (Pyongyang: Social Science Press, 1976), 174.

77. Sin Pyeong-Gil, “The Process of the Workers’ Party’s Anti-Religious Policy,” 58-59.

78. Kim Jung-Il, “On Making the Art Movie *the Household of Choe Hak-Sin* a Masterpiece to Contribute to Anti-American Education,” *The Selected Writings of Kim Jung-Il* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1992), 1:181-82.

they eventually became anti-American and devoted themselves to socialist construction.⁷⁹

When this movie was released in 1967, Kim Il-Sung commended it as “a good work that correctly reflected our Party’s position on class.”⁸⁰ The movie “clearly showed that we can build a united front with religious people, but not with pro-American elements,” he added. **This statement implies that there were Christians in North Korean at this time, and Kim Il-Sung wanted them to become his supporters. A case in point is that as late as 1969 Kim Il-Sung lamented that “in some schools, high-achieving students failed classes for the reason that they are children of pastors,” and said that such a practice should never happen again.**⁸¹

The Kim Il-Sung-ism Period

In December 1972, the DPRK passed a new constitution titled “the Socialist Constitution.” It was the second constitution since the founding of the nation in 1948. The very epithet “socialist” indicated that North Korea wanted to declare the completion of its socialist revolution in all sectors of North Korean society. The next goal was the “complete victory of socialism.”⁸² The new Socialist Constitution also established the presidency for Kim Il-Sung as the paramount representative of national sovereignty. This constitutional expression confirmed the fact that Juche Ideology was the sole ideology of the nation and “the Suryeong” or “the Great Leader” Kim Il-Sung was its supreme and sole interpreter. In February 1974, Kim Jung-Il officially renamed Juche Ideology “Kim Il-Sung-ism” and made it the monolithic guiding principle of the Korean Workers’ Party.⁸³

As Juche Ideology continued to be developed, the Great Leader was declared the center of the socialist revolution and the “supreme brain” of the people and also the “supreme embodiment” of their interests. Then in the 1980s, Juche Ideology declared that the entire North Korea society was one blood-related “Grand Family of Revolution” that had the Great Leader as its

79. See Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 69-72; Jeong Min-A, “Family Drama of War Movies in South and North Korea during the Period of the Solidification of Division in the Korean Peninsula,” *Contemporary Film Research* 4 (2007): 176-81.

80. Kim Il-Sung, *The Theory of Socialist Literature and Arts*, 455-56, quoted in Kim Jeong-Ung, *The Creative Thought about the Faithfulness of Socialist Literature and Arts to the Party, the Labor Class, and the People That the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-Sung Created* (Pyongyang: Social Science Press, 1976), 80; also see Park Il-Seok, *Religion and Society*, 69-72.

81. Kim Il-Sung, “On Some Tasks in front of the Youth Organizations,” 201.

82. Yi Jong-Seok, *Understanding Modern North Korea*, 286.

83. Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 179-81.

patriarch.⁸⁴ The Great Leader, the Korean Workers' Party, and the people were together a "socio-political life form," and each individual, as a part of it, could outlive bodily life and achieve "immortality" as long as it survives.⁸⁵ The North Korean government called this peculiar system a "Socialism of Our Style" and made a claim as to its originality to the world.

It was particularly noticeable that the new constitution added "the freedom of anti-religious propaganda" clause to the provision of religion. This addition meant that those who disliked religion were free to produce and disseminate anti-religious propaganda. Based on this provision, the North Korean government began to actively carry out anti-religious propaganda through its publications, movies, and stage performances. The *Rodongsinmun*, the most widely distributed daily newspaper, as well as popular periodicals such as *Chollima* and *Rodongcheongnyeon*, published articles like "The Dhole Carrying a Cross," "The American Imperialist Dhole Assuming the Mask of Missionary," and "The Salvation Hospital: A Human Slaughterhouse."⁸⁶ These agitating articles portrayed the inhumane and imperialistic behavior of American missionaries. The provocative description in these articles often exaggerated or distorted the facts. Christianity also became the target of anti-religious propaganda on screen and stage. While movies like *The Life of the Old Bellman* and *Pastor Kim's Family* emphasized the pro-American and imperialistic nature of Christianity, the musical *Seongwhangdang* communicated the unscientific, feudal characteristics of religion.⁸⁷ Just as with Kim Il-Sung's previous anti-Christian statements, the primary target of this anti-religious campaign was always American missionaries.

"You are the master of your destiny and you are also the power to carve it out," Kim Il-Sung declared in the 1970s.⁸⁸ The heart of Juche Ideology was the exaltation of human beings as the master of history and human autonomy and creativity. As Juche Ideology evolved, religion was criticized not only from the classic Marxist-Leninist critique that religion was the opium of the people, but

84. Kim Il-Sung, "On the Duty of Educational Workers in Youth Education," *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 3:45; Kim Jeong-Ung, 81.

85. Yi Jong-Seok, *Understanding Modern North Korea*, 210-21.

86. *Rodongsinmun*, March 7, 1986; Go Tae-U, *North Korea's Religious Policy* (Seoul: Munjokmunwhasa, 1988), 129-36.

87. Go Tae-U, *North Korea's Religious Policy*, 136-42.

88. Kim Il-Sung, "On Our Party's Juche Ideology and Several Issues about the DPRK Government's Domestic and Foreign Policy," *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 6:268; Kim Il-Sung, "The Answer to the Question Raised by the Chief Editor of the Ghanaian Government's Organ *Ghana Times*," *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 8:472-74.

also from the Juche worldview, which argued that religion made human beings, who were the masters of the world, both dependent and uncreative. Nonetheless, a careful examination of Kim Il-Sung's published speeches and other anti-religious propaganda publications of this period reveals that religious people were still a part of North Korean society. Kim's confident statement in the late 1960s that "we can say that the question of religion was basically solved" does not mean that there was no religion left in North Korea.⁸⁹ Similarly, that North Korea "is destined to be" the only nation in the world "from which all religions and superstitions will disappear," the famous line from the musical *Seongwhangdang*, was merely a prediction of the future, not the pronouncement of the present completed state.

All communist countries at one time or another have carried out anti-religious propaganda. The fact that the North Korean authorities added a new constitutional provision to that purpose and actively launched strong anti-religious propaganda does not mean that religion was a menace to them. In all likelihood, they were mindful of the religious people in South Korea. At this time, the DPRK was a confident country and proud of its socialist achievements and eager to reunify the entire nation on its own terms. Kim Il-Sung used to emphasize that anti-religious propaganda was necessary to prepare for reunification because there were so many religious practitioners in South Korea.⁹⁰

The position of the North Korean government on religion has remained consistently the same over time, namely, the freedom of faith is a provision of the constitution and guaranteed precisely. Kim Il-Sung said that this constitutional provision was not mere "hollow words or a vapory promise."⁹¹ The North Korean government "has never violated the freedom of faith or persecuted religious practitioners," he claimed. Kim held that the government punished only those criminal religionists who "betrayed the interests of the fatherland and the people" or were "anti-nationalistic traitors." Kim Jung-Il also asserted that his father had denounced "the maneuvers of the reactionary ruling class and imperialists who abused religion" but had "never ostracized religion and religious people."⁹² The "Constitution of the Socialism of Our Style,"

89. Kim Il-Sung, "Let's Educate the Students," *Writings*, 26:52; Kim Il-Sung, *On the Duty of Social Science*, 510-511.

90. See Heo Jong-Ho, *Theory of the South Korean Revolution and Reunification* (Pyongyang: Social Science Press), 112-14.

91. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 5:367.

92. Kim Jung-Il, *On the Fundamentals of Juche Ideology*, 189 quoted in Park Seung-Deok, "The New Perspective of Juche Ideology Regarding Christianity," *Christianity and Juche Ideology* (Seoul: Faith and Intelligence, 1993), 81.

that was amended in 1992, has a similar perspective. It allowed for the freedom of faith on the condition that “nobody should use religion to attract foreign power or to disrupt the order of nation and society.”

The DPRK has continued under the system of the people’s democracy or under the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁹³ Therefore, religion should exist to benefit the class interests of the proletariat. Thus, the freedom of faith could be restricted whenever the Korean Workers’ Party deemed it necessary, and hence it must have been difficult for religious people to fully enjoy their constitutional right in any continuous manner. Nonetheless, Juche Ideology also carried the banner of “One for All, All for One,” and one of the greatest merits of that thinking expected from Kim Il-Sung, as the “parent” of the Grand Family, was his Catholicity or generosity. No wonder then that he professed “Indeok Jeongchi” or “the politics of trust in and love for the people.” As far as religion was concerned, Kim’s Indeok Jeongchi was expressed as embracing of “patriotic” religious people who worked for the Korean people.⁹⁴ It was in this context that his cordial relations with the patriotic people of religion began to be seen and published.

The stories of Kim’s relationship with Park In-Jin, a Cheondogyo (Religion of Heavenly Way) believer, and Kim Chang-Jun, a Methodist pastor, were introduced in *The Great Bread of the Sun* (1982) and other publications.⁹⁵ Then in June of 1987, the *Pyongyangsinmun* carried Gang Ryang-Uk’s narrative of his relationship with Kim Il-Sung. Kim’s positive appraisal of patriotic religious people was fully expressed in his memoir and tended to demonstrate his open-mindedness toward religious people.⁹⁶ Therein, he described his childhood exposure to Christianity and his relationship with many Christians, including Son Jeong-Do.

Of special note is that most of the religious people whom Kim Il-Sung complimented in his memoir were not particularly in favor of communism. For instance, Kim criticized An Chang-Ho’s toadyism, nihilistic attitude toward the nation, and his moderate reformism. Nonetheless, he praised An Chang-Ho in that he

93. Kim Il-Sung, “For the Fruitful Carrying Out of the First Five Year Plan,” *The Selected Works of Kim Il-Sung*, 5:391.

94. Kim Il-Sung, “On the Duty of Educational Workers in Youth Education,” *The Selected Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, 3:44-45.

95. Kim Yun-Wol, “Leading a Religious Person to Restoration,” *The Great Bread of the Sun* (Pyongyang: Joguksa, 1982), 234-59; Kim Chang-Jun, “Memoirs of a Pastor,” *The Great Bread of the Sun*, 304-28; Lee Du-Su, “Trusting the Cheondogyo Hamnam Chief,” *For the People’s Freedom and Liberation* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1993); *Seeking the Bread of the Sun (2): The Fatherland Visited in Late Years* (Pyongyang: Korean Workers’ Party Press, 1998).

96. Won Tai Sohn, *Kim Il Sung and Korea’s Struggle*, 200.

“endured all the sufferings to the end without staining his name as a patriot.”⁹⁷ He similarly regarded Cheodogyo believers, Choe Dong-O and Yi Don-Wha, very highly.⁹⁸ The person to whom Kim paid special attention in the memoir was Son Jeong-Do.⁹⁹ He devoted an entire chapter to Son. Kim’s memoir, just as his other published writings, became required reading for the people of North Korea. A high official informed South Korean Christians and scholars that “everybody from elementary school students to adults” knew of Son Jeong-Do. Kim Il-Sung’s mention of his relationship with these individuals led to an official reappraisal of their religion. Beginning in the early 1990s, dictionaries and lexicons began to revise their descriptions of religion-related entries, and their explanations became as neutral and objective as those found in any Western reference book. For instance, the *Dictionary of Modern Korean* (1981) defined Christianity as a religion that “preaches the people to obey the ruling class”; in comparison, the new *Grand Dictionary of Korean* (1992) explained that the key idea of Christianity was equality and compassion.¹⁰⁰

In his memoir, Kim appeared to value the Korean nation over class. “There is no god over the nation and there cannot be any class or partisan interests over the nation. There is no abyss or wall that cannot be overcome for the nation,” he said.¹⁰¹ This statement sounds like an absoluteness of nation that gave priority to the nation over religion and also to the nation over ideology. Kim’s emphasis on the nation explains why he had a particularly high opinion of nationalistic religions in his memoir. He mentions an interesting case in which he rebuked his anti-Japanese resistance colleagues who criticized a nationalistic religion. He did not reject the Marxist proposition that religion was the opium of people; however, he told them that they must not apply that proposition to all religions. Kim told his readers not to interpret the Marxist thesis “tendentiously” or “one-sidedly” but to interpret it as it was intended, namely, as a caution against “the religious fantasy” and not as a pretext for excluding “the general religious people.”¹⁰²

97. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:298-99.

98. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 5:380, 387.

99. Choe Sang-Sun, “Pastor Son Jeong-Do Was the Great Star of Patriotism Who Sublimated the Christian Spirit to the Independence Spirit,” *The Life and Thought of Son Jeong-Do* (Seoul: Methodist Theological University Press, 2004), 22-23.

100. Ryu Dae Young and Kim Heung-Soo, *Religion in North Korea: A New Understanding* (Seoul: Dasangeulbang, 2002), 174.

101. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 5:403.

102. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:267.

Kim Il-Sung's attempt in his last years to connect religion and Juche Ideology through the bridge that was the nation suggests a more tolerant attitude toward religion than his earlier views imply. The true reason for this shift in opinion is not altogether clear. However, Kim was the supreme interpreter of Juche Ideology, and therefore, his publicly expressed opinion would have importance and influence in North Korean society.

International politics partially explains why Kim began to show a more positive attitude toward Christianity. The communist bloc started to dissolve in the late 1980s, and North Korea faced unprecedented difficulties. The greatest task of North Korean diplomacy, therefore, was to better its relations with the Western countries, and the United States in particular. Religious exchanges with Western churches turned out to be a particularly useful means of communication. **It was in this context that the North Korean authorities helped Christians construct Bongsu Church (Protestant) and Jangchung Church (Catholic) in 1988, followed by the construction of other religious facilities.**¹⁰³ In March 1992, the KCF and the Association of Catholics in North Korea **invited Billy Graham, who came to Pyongyang carrying President Bill Clinton's letter.** Kim invited Graham to his private residence and said to him, "It seems like a new spring of DPRK-American relations is beginning."¹⁰⁴ Graham preached at Bongsu Church and delivered Kim's response letter personally to Clinton.

Shortly after Graham's visit, the KCF invited delegates of the National Council of Churches in the United States (NCCUS). Fifteen delegates representing major Protestant denominations visited North Korea. The North Korean authorities accorded the American guests the same treatment as national guests. Meeting with them, **Kim Il-Sung mentioned the contributions that Korean Christians had made to the independence movement** and asked them to help him reconcile with America. The activities of Graham and the NCCUS delegates were televised daily in North Korea. Kim Il-Sung's televised welcoming of the American Christians likely let the North Koreans realize a change in their government's religious policy.

"I think the Christian spirit that hopes for the peaceful and harmonious living together of all people in the world does not contradict my idea that claims the autonomous life of human beings," Kim Il-Sung wrote in the first volume of his memoir.¹⁰⁵ Kim Jung-Il

103. Dae Young Ryu, "Religion, Politics, and Church Construction in North Korea," *Theology Today* 63, no. 4 (Jan. 2007): 493-99; Ryu and Kim, *Religion in North Korea*, 155-64.

104. "Billy Graham North Korean Report, June 1992," CNN special coverage video of Billy Graham's North Korean visit narrated by Mike Chinoy.

105. Kim Il-Sung, *Memoirs*, 1:104.

supported this claim, writing that “all things in religion are not bad; there are good things in religion, too.”¹⁰⁶ For instance, the religious teaching that “people should love each other and live peacefully can be regarded a good thing,” he added. Before Kim Il-Sung wrote it in his memoir, the view that religion and Juche Ideology could go hand in hand had been put forth by Juche Ideology theorists in the 1980s. The most important contributor to this development was Park Seung-Deok of Juche Ideology Institute. According to Park, Marxist-Leninism saw the nature of Christianity only as its “illusory and mystical world-view.”¹⁰⁷ Juche Ideology, however, found that the nature of Christianity was “the view of life that showed the autonomous way of life to the people who opposed oppression and subjugation and desired freedom and equality.” Thus, Juche Ideology could have a productive dialogue with Christianity “to seek common methods of life and struggle for human salvation and human liberation.”¹⁰⁸

Further, Park Seung-Deok criticized Marxist materialism that it overemphasized the economic condition of human life and asserted that Juche Ideology overcame that aspect by appreciating human creativity in politics and culture.¹⁰⁹ He also held that Juche Ideology’s teaching of collective immortality paved “the true way for realizing the [human] desire of immortality.”¹¹⁰ In other words, everything that religion seeks to find and apply could be found in Juche Ideology.¹¹¹ Similar views have been expressed by other North Korean theorists and scholars, including Hwang Jang-Yop.¹¹² Further, the leaders of North Korean religious organizations have asserted that they were not materialists

106. Kim Jung-Il, *Fundamentals of Juche Ideology*, 189.

107. Park Seung-Deok, “Juche Ideology’s View of Religion,” *Christianity and Juche Ideology*, 186.

108. Park Seung-Deok, “The New Perspective of Juche Ideology regarding Christianity,” 81-83.

109. Park Seung-Deok, “On Several Issues of Juche Ideology,” *Christianity and Juche Ideology*, 174-76.

110. Park, “On Several Issues of Juche Ideology,” 170. Juche Ideology in this regard criticized the traditional Western philosophy that regarded human beings as “natural beings” rather than “social beings.”; see, for instance, Park Gwang-Nam, “The Historical Progressiveness and Fundamental Limitations of the Anti-religious Idea of Humanism,” *Kim Il-Sung University Bulletin: Philosophy and Economics* 46, no. 3 (2000): 34-38; Hyeon Cheol, “The Meaning and Limitations of Humanism and the Protestant Reformation Idea,” *Cheolhakyongu*, no. 3 (1997): 47-48.

111. Park Seung-Deok, “Juche Ideology’s View of Religion,” 188-90.

112. Sumiya Mikio, “After Visiting North Korea,” in *One Church, One Nation*, ed. Hyeongsangsa Editorial Department (Seoul: Hyeongsangsa, 1989), 87-88; Whang Jang-Yop, *Memoirs*, 249-51; Kim Ju-Cheol, “A New Examination of the Nature of Religion,” in *Article Abstracts of the 4th International Scholarly Conference of*

and their religious beliefs did not in any way contradict Juche Ideology.¹¹³

Conclusion

The North Korean government's approach to Christianity has been different from that of other socialist-communist countries.

In the Soviet Union and the communist Eastern European countries there were dialogues between Christians and Marxists. These dialogues began after it was proven that Christianity could not be eradicated in societies that had a strong Christian socio-cultural background and history. The Chinese government's official position on religion has remained unchanged; that is, **religion is only the opium of the people.** The Chinese authorities tend not to publicize this position as often as before, but there is no indication that they have modified it. They interpret that China is at an early stage of socialism and allow for limited religious freedom, especially for those ethnic groups that have strong religious traditions, during the long transitional period to the completion of socialism.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, when the possibility of "a socialist religion" was suggested by the leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the Chinese Communist Party did not accept that concept.¹¹⁵ North Korea was different from these countries in that it not only continued to invite Christians to join in socialist construction but also developed its ideology to embrace Christianity although it did not have a strong Christian background.

North Korea's approach toward Christianity appears to have been influenced by Kim Il-Sung's personal experience and early views of Christianity in his life. He is revealed in his published writings as a communist leader tolerant toward Christianity. Regardless of his public statements, however, it does not seem that the North Korean people, and particularly Christians, fully enjoyed that promised religious freedom. The North Korean

Korean Studies Held in Beijing, China, Aug. 20-22, 1992 (Beijing: Korean Culture Institute, Beijing University, 1992), 248.

113. See, for instance, Jo Jae-Geol, *Is North Korea Changing* (Seoul: Samminsa, 1991), 125-26; Sin Beop-Ta, *A Study of North Korean Buddhism* (Seoul: Minjoksa, 2000), 288-89.

114. The Chinese Communist Party Central, "The Basic Perspective and Policy of Religious Problem in the Socialist Stage of Our Nation," *Research on Communist Countries* (November 1989): 125-40; Jong Yo, "The Existence, Evolving Process, and Role of Religion at the Early Stage of Socialism," *China-Soviet Research* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 221-23.

115. Gao Wangzhi, "Y. T. Wu: A Christian Leader Under Communism," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 351.

government shifted its attitude toward religion in a more positive direction during the 1970s. Yet, this change was due more to its consideration for the religious people in the South and overseas than for those in North Korea; that is, the change reflected Kim Il-Sung's hope for reunification and betterment of the relations with the United States. The strengthening of anti-religious propaganda in North Korea at this time can be understood as a precautionary measure preparing for increasing interactions with Christians. It was necessary for Kim to embrace those religious Koreans living outside of North Korea as he emphasized the wholeness of the Korean nation. The North Korean attitude toward the Christianity-Juche Ideology dialogue was thus as much a practical decision as a philosophical one. The North Korean participants were more interested in actual cooperation to solve the problem of reunification rather than having any abstract conversation on religious ideas.¹¹⁶

The North Korean government declared a separation from Marxist-Leninism through its constitution of 1992. From that time forward, both North Korean authorities and scholars emphasized to the outside Christians they met that they were not Marxists, but instead Juche Ideologists. That is, since they were not Marxist materialists they did not have an issue with believers in a god and they could hold a productive dialogue with anybody to benefit the Korean people and humanity. Yet, it does not seem that Juche Ideology gave up dialectic materialism and the idea of class struggle.¹¹⁷ Kim Il-Sung nonetheless did see positive aspects in historical Christianity and wanted to cooperate with Christians for their mutual aim of "human liberation" and "national liberation."

Kim Il-Sung's publicized tolerant attitude toward Christians was thus politically motivated. It was most likely that he wanted to embrace compliant Christians to consolidate his own power.

116. Park Seung-Deok, "The New Perspective of Juche Ideology regarding Christianity," 86.

117. For examples of the interpretation of religion on the basis of materialism and class struggle, see: Kim Su-Young, "Jeong Do-Jeon's Critique of Buddhist Doctrines," *Cheolhakyongu*, no. 2 (2001): 40-42; Jang Il-Gyeong, "Understanding the Mutual Relations of Li-Chi in Eastern Medieval Philosophy," *Kim Il-Sung University Bulletin: Philosophy and Economics* 47, no. 1 (2001): 27-32; Bae Young-Cheol, "A Study of German Protestant Reformation," *Kim Il-Sung University Bulletin: History and Law* 44, no. 4 (1997): 31-36; Ryeom Seung-Gweon, "Some Observations of the Early Religious Life in the Mesopotamian Region," *Kim Il-Sung University Bulletin: History and Law* 43, no. 2 (1997): 33-37; Han Gi-Cheol, "The Infiltration of Christianity (Protestant) to Our Nation and Their Harmful Roles in the Late 19th-Early 20th Centuries," *Kim Il-Sung University Bulletin: History and Law* 43, no. 2 (1997): 27-32.

However, it cannot be denied that his experience with “patriotic” Christians, including his parents and Son Jeong-Do, were still lurking in his memory. Despite his official denunciation, Kim must have remembered that his parents were Christians; he also attended churches before he became a communist. Even as a communist leader, he tended to criticize only American missionaries and pro-American and anti-communist Christians rather than Christians in general. In his later years, Kim Il-Sung regarded religion as the matter of “disciplining one’s conscience” and did not deny there was indeed value in that practice.¹¹⁸

Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, and the North Korean government amended its constitution anew in 1998, naming it “the Kim Il-Sung Constitution.” This constitution abolished the presidency and made him “the Eternal President.” Kim Jong-Il faithfully followed the teachings left by his father, and Kim Jong-Un has also been trying to copy his grandfather even in his outlook and speeches. The legitimacy of the still young and unaccomplished Kim Jong-Un heavily depends on the lasting authority of his grandfather. In a real sense, Kim Il-Sung has continued to rule the DPRK through his legacy even after his death. Unlike his grandfather, Kim Jong-Un apparently never has had any particular relationship with Christians. However, it appears today that Kim Il-Sung’s published position on Christianity will not be challenged by his Swiss-educated grandson who wants to steer North Korea to become a “normal country.” As Kim Jong-Un began dialogues with South Korea and the United States in 2018 to end the Korean War and open North Korea to foreign investment, he will need to give North Korean Christians a legitimate role just like his grandfather did.

118. Won Tai Sohn, “Memoirs of Sohn Won Tai” (unpublished typescript) (Omaha, Nebraska, 1996), 151. The translation in Won Tai Sohn, 200 (“they go [church] to regulate their conscience”) does not fully convey the meaning of Kim’s words.