

# Rebuilding the “Jerusalem of the East”

North Korea’s Christian past, present, and future

Sandra Park

*Perhaps this is a sign of things to come, and Pyongyang is on the verge of regaining its old title of “The Jerusalem of the East.”*

—Andrei Lankov, *North of the DMZ*

Professor Andrei Lankov of South Korea’s Kookmin University presented his new book, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, at the University of Chicago’s Seminary Co-Op Bookstore on April 22. Lankov is a Russian scholar of Korean history who attended Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang as a Soviet foreign exchange student in the 1980s. He charmed us all with his self-described “Bond villain” accent as he unpacked the rationality behind North Korea’s recent behavior. Within an hour, he laid out the predictable, cyclical pattern of outbursts from the regime and the ideological and economic circumstances necessitating them. “The North Koreans are brilliant in foreign policy,” argued Lankov. They tactfully used the Soviet-Chinese rivalry during the Cold War to “squeeze” out aid, and now they are flexing their nuclear muscle to extract resources from South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Then, Lankov threw out an even more intriguing statement: “The North Koreans are deadly afraid of Christianity.”

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By now the general public is all-too-familiar with the North Korean regime’s anti-religious position and the cult-personality around the ruling Kim family. However, Lankov’s statement invites deeper probing into North Korea’s tumultuous relationship with Christianity, especially in light of the recent high rates of conversion

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to Christianity among refugees from North Korea. While there are many books on the early period of Christianity in (North) Korea, a handful of works on the period between the Korean War (1950-53) and 1990, and numerous sociological studies on North Korean refugees, no one has written a comprehensive history that considers the emergence of North Korean Christians in light of its Christian past. Remembering the “Jerusalem of the East” enhances our understanding of North Korea’s ongoing Christianization; rather than the introduction of something “new,” it is a “re-deliverance” of something past.

Most of us in the West have forgotten the rich history of Christianity in North Korea. Western missionaries originally hailed Pyongyang as the “Jerusalem of the East” in the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup> The Protestant missionaries from the West who missionized Korea from the 1880s to 1945 sowed Christianity across the peninsula. Since the Korean War, most of us have associated Christianity with South Korea, which sends more missionaries abroad than any country besides the United States. But the mecca for Christianity prior to 1945 was not Seoul, but Pyongyang. Western (mostly American) missionaries used a “triad” of evangelism, education, and medicine.<sup>2</sup> They built churches, schools, and hospitals all over the peninsula, extending their reach into all aspects of daily life. By 1908, Pyongyang had surpassed all other cities in Korea in the number of self-supporting churches, active members, and children enrolled in Presbyterian

schools.<sup>3</sup> Missionary schools in Pyongyang educated native Koreans alongside the children of Western missionaries, including Ruth Bell, who would become the future wife of Billy Graham. The decades of missionary work on the peninsula culminated with the Great



What a plague have I to do with a buff jerkin?

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1. Chung: 53

2. Clark, *Missionary Photography in Korea*: 12

3. Clark, “Missionary Presence”: 240-241

Pyongyang Revival of 1907, which led to mass conversions and hastened the uptake of indigenous missionary activity. The Revival was a fervent time for Korean Christians. The *Missionary Review of the World* reported in 1907 that “the whole congregation [of Ch’angdaehyön Presbyterian Church] united in audible prayer which rose and diminished in fervor like the waves of the sea.”<sup>4</sup>

Korea’s openness to Christianity is largely a result of its juncture with the rest of the continent only at its uppermost tip, meaning anyone traveling to the Korean mainland by land enters through the North. North Korea’s historical role as a channel for communication and commercial exchange with Manchuria, Liaodong, and China proper rendered northern society more tolerant of diversity and more open to new ideas.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the southern region of the Korean peninsula

was traditionally mostly agricultural backwater, and its engulfment by water on all three sides kept it isolated from the outside world. Thus, when Protestant missionaries arrived at the end of the 19th century, they found the northern regions to be most receptive. The period from 1880 to 1945 was a heyday for North Korean Christianity.

This all changed with the inception of the Democratic People’s Republic in 1948. Kim Il Sung, prime minister and “Great Leader,” sought to build a North Korean Stalinist utopia, and also to extricate Christianity from the national psyche. Kim, himself from a Christian family, embarked on a series of mass persecutions to systematically purge all opposition to the Party, including religious groups. Many Christians had organized in opposition to Communism and were influential in Pyongyang, which led to more intense persecution



There’s no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune

4. “Revival in North Korea”: 323

5. Clark, “Missionary Presence”: 235

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of Christians than any other group.<sup>6</sup> In the years leading up to the Korean War, the regime focused its suppression on politically active Christians. In other words, “Christian churches remained open until the war, and worship was allowed, but Christian political activities were stamped out.”<sup>7</sup>

Immediately following the war, though, the regime turned its focus to the entire Christian community. Kim directed the persecutions against Christians in general because their religion posed a threat to the very legitimacy of his regime. Kim relied on the heroism of his younger days as a guerilla fighter against Japanese imperialists as an expression of his power. When America began investing itself in Korean affairs after World War II, Kim viewed this as yet another act of imperialism, with South Korea serving as the Americans’ puppet government. The North Korean administration quickly became fervently anti-American, and Christian missionary activity was heartily condemned as imperial meddling. The fact that organized Christian groups had mounted the most opposition to the emerging DPRK in the 1940s only confirmed Kim’s suspicions.

More personally, Kim saw the Christian faith as a threat to the undivided loyalty of the people to him as “Great Leader.” As Bruce Cumings suggests, it was no coincidence that the first statue of Kim was unveiled on Christmas Day, in 1949. It was an explicit maneuver to present Kim as a “Christ-substitute.”<sup>8</sup> Just as Christianity does not allow worshipping two gods, North Korea under Kim Il Sung would only be allowed to “worship” Kim.

By the late 1960s the government had successfully dismantled the institutional foundations of Christianity in North Korea. Any and all forms of public display of Christian worship were banned. Surviving Christians took their beliefs underground, practicing in small, secret circles to avoid detection. This resulted in the permanent structural transformation of Christian worship in North Korea. A traditional Christian community, one that congregates publicly for worship, prayer, and other religious activities, ceased to exist. Yet family-based

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6. Cumings: 230

7. *Ibid.*: 231

8. *Ibid.*: 420



Christian practices arose in its place. Informal worship sessions, memorizing hymns and prayers, and silent reflection on one's deeds replaced public worship.<sup>9</sup> Other than a few official churches that were built in Pyongyang in the 1980s to operate as displays of "religious liberty" to the outside world, Christian activity in North Korea remains underground to this day.

Evidence of Christianity's survival is available through the accounts of Christian refugees. The most detailed account is that of "Mr. Bae," as recorded in Eric Foley's *These are the Generations*. Unlike most refugees, Mr. Bae did not first encounter Christianity outside North Korea, but through his parents and grandparents, who survived persecution and successfully sustained their faith undetected. Despite the challenge posed by conflicting interests of church and state, Mr. Bae retained his faith. He made it through prison after being arrested for evangelism sometime in the 1990s and even managed to convert his wife. Mrs. Bae stopped attending mandatory events for Kim Il Sung and instead memorized the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed.<sup>10</sup> Testimonies like those of the Baes confirm Christianity's trans-generational survival, even within North Korea itself.

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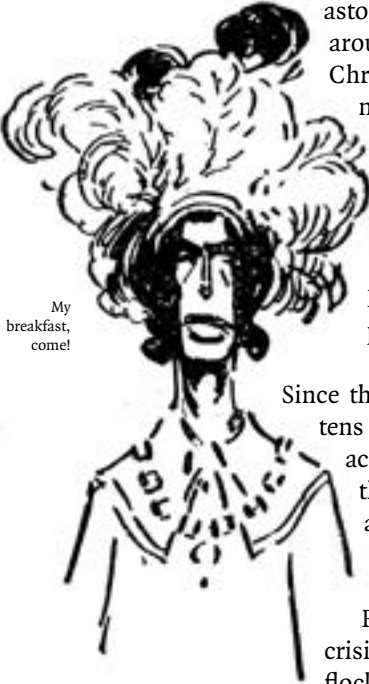
9. Kim: 165-166

10. Foley: 83-87

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Reports of persecutions have long shaped our knowledge of North Korea as atheist and totalitarian. These terms may still hold true, but the odds have changed. The “Jerusalem of the East” may have been forgotten by most of the world, even by many Koreans, but there is a religious stirring among today’s evangelicals to rebuild. North Korea’s Christian origins are beginning to reemerge. The religion stands on the brink of a revival. As of 2013, the total number of North Korean defectors in South Korea has surpassed 23,000.<sup>11</sup> Yet the most

astonishing aspect of this phenomenon is that around 88 percent of these defectors profess Christianity upon entering their southern neighbor.<sup>12</sup> I have had the opportunity to personally meet or correspond with dozens of North Korean defectors in the past year, and only one of them had rejected Christianity. I have also had the opportunity to meet dozens of North Korean refugees living in Seoul; all were practicing Christians.



My  
breakfast,  
come!

Since the catastrophic famine of the mid-1990s, tens of thousands of North Koreans have fled across the border into China. While some of the defectors become permanent refugees and seek resettlement, the majority return to their homes. And when they do, they often bring Christianity back with them. For in response to this humanitarian crisis, many South Korean missionaries have flocked to northeastern China to deliver aid, evangelizing refugees at the same time. A strong underground network of churches and missionaries has arisen on the Chinese side of the border, and over the past two decades, it has steadily been redelivering Christianity to the former “Jerusalem of the East.”<sup>13</sup>

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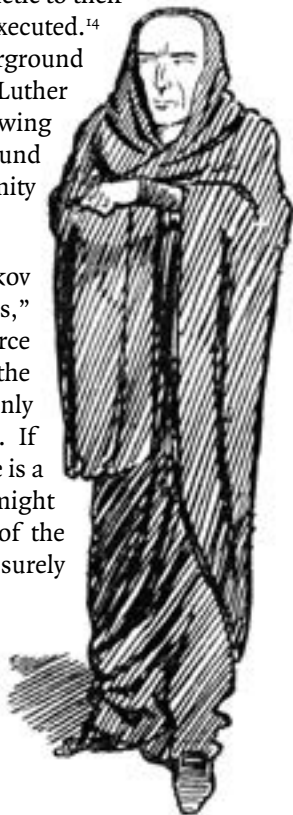
11. “Major Statistics in Inter-Korean Relations” and “Refugee Arrival Data”

12. Chung: 21

13. Lankov: 208

This is a dangerous mission, constantly under the threat of exposure by Chinese authorities. Moreover, North Korean authorities take care to extract confessions from anyone caught repatriating or defecting to identify Christians. Torture is applied to everyone who is caught, but Christians—or even those sympathetic to their cause—are sent to prison camps and often executed.<sup>14</sup> But even in the face of these difficulties, underground missionaries like Eric Foley, Eugene Bach, and Luther Martin attest that Christianity is increasingly flowing back into North Korea through underground networks. The obstacles are steep, but Christianity is still gaining ground.

Indeed, missionaries and scholars like Lankov confirm that underground “catacomb churches,” like those in northeast China, are a growing force in North Korea. As evangelical activity along the border region increases, Christianity will only continue to spread amongst North Koreans. If this trend continues, and in the event that there is a regime change (or reunification), Pyongyang might just reclaim her old title of “The Jerusalem of the East.”<sup>15</sup> When this happens, Kim Il Sung will surely turn in his grave.



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14. Cohen

15. Lankov: 209

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