

43 - Questions on North Korean Religion

by Ben Torrey

North Korean religion, also known as Juche Sasang, is a complex and deeply ingrained system of beliefs and practices that has superficial similarities to Christianity, but requires careful consideration and reflection when sharing the Gospel and love of Jesus Christ.

Duration: 7:59

Scripture: Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 6:5, Psalm 95:6, Matthew 22:37, Romans 12:1, Philippians 2:10

Topics: "North Korea"

Description

In this sermon, Ben Tori discusses the influence of religion in North Korea and its impact on the assumptions of its people. While North Korea is officially atheistic, it is considered one of the most religious countries in the world. The religion in North Korea revolves around the worship of the statues and portraits of the leaders, which are cared for more than the people themselves. This religion is deeply ingrained in the population from infancy to adulthood, but cracks are starting to appear due to exposure to the outside world.

Transcript

Good evening, this is Ben Torrey with you once again. Over the past couple weeks we've been looking at questions that need to be asked and answered as we prepare for the opening of North Korea. Questions that relate to what we know and what we need to know in order to be effective in sharing the Gospel and the love of Jesus with the people of North Korea.

Tonight I would like to discuss religion, specifically North Korean religion and its influence on the assumptions of North Koreans. You may ask what I mean by North Korean religion. North Korea is notoriously atheistic and against all forms of religion, or at least that is the propaganda.

The truth is that many consider North Korea to be one of the most religious countries in the world. One might call their religion a political or ideological religion, but it is religion nonetheless. The object of worship is Kim Il-sung and his son, the present ruler Kim Jong-il.

The religion goes by the name of Juche Sasang, however in North Korea itself it is often called Kim Il-sung Jui or Kim Il-sungism. It is also called Kim Il-sung Sasang or ideology. Superficially this religion has many similarities to Christianity.

This was very deliberate on Kim Il-sung's part. Kim Il-sung grew up in a Christian household. His mother was, we understand, a devout deaconess in the church of her community.

Kim Il-sung even had in recent years a Protestant church built in her village of Chilgol. When Kim Il-sung was a young man, he played the organ for a Methodist church in China while living with the pastor and his family. It is clear that he was exposed to a lot of Christian teaching, even if he did not internalize it as a believer.

Over the years he and his son have shaped the Juche ideology so that it is truly a religion and in so doing drew on many of Christianity's superficial aspects. For instance, there is a trinity of father, son, and for the Holy Spirit, the Korean Workers' Party. There is a Holy Mother in that Kim Jong-il's mother is highly revered as one of the three great generals of Mount Paektu along with Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

She is also held up as an example of selfless dedication to the leader and to the party. Kim Il-sung created the equivalent of the Ten Commandments in the ten articles by which everyone is to live their lives. The first two of these are, one, all societies, that's the whole world, must be governed by the Suryong's ideologies.

Number two, the Suryong must be revered and adored. Sounds a lot like how the Bible's Ten Commandments begin. Along with the ten articles, there are regular Kim Il-sung-ism study sessions, Bible study meetings, morning prayer meetings that include hymns to the Suryong, self-criticism sessions to evaluate whether or not the individual has broken one of the ten articles.

This is confession. There are study rooms in all schools, businesses, prisons, and public buildings that outsiders are not allowed to enter, chapels, and so forth. Kim Il-sung-ism also teaches that Kim Il-sung, the eternal president who is with us always, is the head and the people are his hands and feet.

Without him or his son who stands in for him, the body of the people cannot function. Where Kim Il-sung-ism departs from Christianity in terms of these superficial similarities is that we as Christians believe that our head, Jesus Christ, died to save the members of his body, while Kim Il-sung-ism teaches that the members of the body of which he is the head must lay down their lives to protect him. All North Koreans are taught that they are bullets and bombs to defend the Suryong from all enemies and that their greatest glory is to die for him.

Kim Il-sung is the source of life, political life, which is the only life worth having. Political life is the gift from the Suryong and continues on eternally, while the biological life that we gain from our biological parents will come to an end when our bodies die. Everyone must bow down to and worship the statues of the Suryong that are all over the country.

These statues, as well as portraits in every building, are cared for more than the people. They are lit with electric light all night long, even when electricity is not available to light homes, businesses and hotels. There was one episode that some American reporters tell about their time at the major hotel in the city of Haeju.

The weather was hot and there was no air conditioning. A while after they had requested fans at the front desk, they saw one of the staff bringing a fan into the main lobby, much to their relief. Imagine their surprise when it was not brought to where they were sitting, but placed instead in front of the painting of the great leader.

She turned it on and directed the breeze at the portrait. To the reporter's astonished question, she replied, Our great leader has many important things on his mind. We do not want the heat to disturb his thoughts.

People have received great praise and rewards for rescuing the portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il from fire and other danger, at risk to their own life, even while ignoring the needs of the injured and dying. North Korea has a religion that is taught from infancy into adulthood. It is practiced by everyone and appears to be genuinely believed by a significant proportion of the population.

Cracks are beginning to show in the faith as the result of contact with the outside world through China and growing access to South Korean videos and DVDs. However, even these cracks affect only a minority of the people. What is our question, then? Actually, we have several.

What happens to a person's ability to hold any faith deeply when they discover that all the sacrifice and devotion of their life, their whole reason for being, is based on a lie? North Koreans have suffered great hardship in the belief that all the sacrifice is for the Suryong, that his benefit is worth the sacrifice. What happens when they find out that all that sacrifice was meaningless? How difficult might it be to ever believe anything again? Do the superficial similarities to Christianity help or hinder genuine conversion? Many people think that all that needs to be done is to substitute God the Father for Kim Il-sung and Jesus Christ for Kim Jong-il. Can this really be done, or will it result only in a weak imitation of faith without deep inner conversion? How strong are these beliefs and aspects of them that might outlast the fall of the regime? There's a lot more to Kim Il-sungism than discussed here.

Much of it has to do with materialism and the denial of any spiritual reality. Will a lifetime of education along these lines and other anti-Christian lines be a barrier to developing a mature and orthodox faith? Has the constant bombardment with religious-type indoctrination from radio, TV, school, workplace, slogans everywhere, and so on, affected people's ability to receive and believe new teaching? Has it numbed their mind, training everyone to give lip service without faith? These are just a few questions that come to mind. If we are to share the Gospel and love of Jesus Christ with North Koreans, among us in the South, and in North Korea itself, we need to give questions like these some serious consideration.

It might be good for us to examine our own faith as well, and think about how much of it is taken for granted simply because that is all that we have been taught, and how much of it is genuine faith on our part. With that thought, I will say good night.

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