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Remembering North Korea's Christian martyrs

By Stephen Evans



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BBC News, Seoul (26.12.2016) - Christmas is a time of great celebration for the world's two billion or so Christians. In one part of the planet, though, the lights are out. There is not be a flicker of recognition of the festival in North Korea - or not in public. It may be celebrated secretly, particularly as 2016 is the anniversary of a great Christian martyrdom on the banks of the Taedong river in Pyongyang.

Nobody knows how many North Koreans celebrate the birth of Christ just over two millennia ago. For them, displays of faith can lead to prison or worse.

And nobody knows either who will remember the death 150 years ago of a missionary on the banks of the Taedong river.

The Welshman, Robert Jermain Thomas, was one of the big figures who brought Christianity to the Korean peninsula. Befitting his contribution, his death, around the end

of August in 1866, has been marked with loud and joyous celebrations in churches in Cardiff and Seoul.

But from Pyongyang, where Thomas was martyred, there has not even been a peep of the smallest trumpet.

The exact circumstances of his death are unclear but it is known that he was a missionary who became fascinated by Korea. At a time when Western influence was feared and rejected, he voyaged on an American ship to spread his faith. There was an altercation and fierce fighting broke out between the crew and the Koreans ashore.

In one version of the story, Thomas abandoned the burning ship and was captured by hostile troops on shore. He is said to have kneeled and given his executioner a Bible before being killed.

That legend resonates loudly 150 years later in South Korea, where Christianity thrives, and in my native Wales, where Korean missionaries now work in a reversal of the old role - once Welsh missionaries tried to convert the "savages" in exotic lands; now missionaries from prosperous countries like South Korea settle in Wales to spread the faith that once was strong.

South Koreans think Thomas, and his example, were very influential in spreading Christianity. Gi Jung Song, the Korean pastor of the International Church in Cardiff, told the BBC: "Korea was in darkness spiritually and this young man from Wales brought the Bible.

"He was killed soon after his arrival but his death influenced the whole of Korea. The person who killed him became a Christian and his house became a church."

The influence grew after Thomas's death. Pyongyang became a strong Christian centre with a hundred churches only fifteen years later. As the century turned, Korea started looking to Wales for inspiration, so the Welsh Religious Revival of 1904 was echoed by a revival of Christian belief in Korea in 1907.

These days, some devout Christians do visit North Korea but they do so understanding that they keep their Christianity to themselves. Doctors from Wales, for example, are helping to set up a medical school in Pyongyang, but they have been invited for their expertise and they leave their Bibles at home - those who didn't in the past were arrested and imprisoned.

One Christian who frequently visited the country told the BBC that, when he goes to Pyongyang, he unobtrusively tries to look for the last resting place of Robert Jermain Thomas: "I've had no success finding the actual grave but on the island (in the centre of Pyongyang where the death is thought to have happened), there is only one area where the boat could've run ashore and there are very old trees there."

These trees, he said, have been preserved partly because they were the site of a meeting between Kim Il-sung, the ruthless founding dictator of North Korea, and Syngman Rhee, the ruthless founding dictator of South Korea.

But might they also have a significance as the site of the martyrdom of Thomas, a significance unacknowledged by the regime but quietly known in hidden Christian enclaves?

One Korean in Wales, Jacob Park, said he had met North Korean defectors who said they had known of the death of Thomas but not of his significance: "Defectors knew about Robert Jermain Thomas before they left but they were told he was a thief and an imperialist. When they learned the truth, they accepted him as a hero."

Christians, like any citizens in North Korea, find it hard to get information they can trust. There are four churches in Pyongyang but it's hard to know whether they offer genuine worship. Visiting sympathisers with the regime tend to say that the worshippers can't all be actors bussed in for the tourists, while Christian groups say they are nothing but facades.

As with so much information about North Korea, a lot is incredible (though, like the Soviet Union, what seemed like the incredible stories of famine and mass execution in the 1930s turned out to be true).

So it's hard to know what credit to give to reports in the Western Christian media of unverifiable horrors like the execution by steam-roller of Christians or that they have been crucified over flames.

In September 2016, the Christian activist group, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, published a report which said: "Among other basic human rights denied to the people of North Korea, freedom of religion or belief is largely non-existent. Denial of this right has occurred since the 1950s, and the current leader, Kim Jong-un, continues to violate citizens' religious freedom."

The Christian group said that the regime claims there are about 500 unofficial churches in North Korea where people worship privately at home. The group is sceptical.

What is indisputable is that those who try to take Christianity into North Korea find themselves behind bars doing hard labour, sometimes after being threatened with execution.

In December 2015, a Toronto pastor, Hyeon Soo Lim, was detained in North Korea for what the authorities said was an attempt to overthrow the government.

Canadian officials went to North Korea in December 2016 to plead for his release. A Canadian diplomat said afterwards: "The government of Canada is very concerned about the health, well-being and continued detention of Mr. Lim".

He is not the only recent victim of North Korea's persecution of Christians.

In the spring of this year, a priest working in China to help defectors from North Korea was found murdered after having been beaten and attacked with an axe.

Christian activist groups strongly suspect North Korean agents operating on the Chinese side of the border.

"Han Choong Yeol was active in helping North Korean refugees by giving them food, medicine, clothing and other goods they needed for survival back in North Korea", said Open Doors, an organisation which helps persecuted Christians around the world.

The Welshman Robert Jermain Thomas was not the last Christian martyr in Korea.

Over 75 percent of Christians persecuted in North Korea don't survive their punishments

By Czarina Ong

Christian Today (12.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fBKxDq> - Christians don't fare very well in North Korea. Human rights groups are giving grim reports on the treatment of religious minorities in the East Asian country, saying that over 75 percent of those who are subjected to torture, imprisonment and all sorts of punishment do not live to tell their tales.

Reports obtained from the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, a South Korean non-profit organisation, showed that over 65,000 people have already been persecuted for their faith in North Korea. From that number, close to 99 percent of the 11,370 defectors confirmed that there is absolutely no religious freedom under Kim Jong-un's leadership.

What's worse, over 75 percent of Christians persecuted from their faith do not survive their punishments, The Christian Post reported. This is why only 1.2 percent of the defectors engaged in secret religious activities while they were still in North Korea.

Meanwhile, the group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) released a report called "Total Denial: Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea" in September revealing that members of religious minorities suspected of state crimes are "being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges, and trampled underfoot."

As if the torture isn't bad enough, the North Korean government even goes a step further by punishing the relatives of these Christians and members of other religious groups.

"A policy of guilt by association applies, meaning that the relatives of Christians are also detained regardless of whether they share the Christian belief. Even North Koreans who have escaped to China, and who are or become Christians, are often repatriated and subsequently imprisoned in a political prison camp," the CSW report stated.

The report added that Kim Jong-un sees religious belief as a major threat to his leadership. Thus, he requires people to acknowledge him as their nation's "supreme leader."

As a result, North Koreans don't enjoy the freedom of expressing their religious beliefs. If they try to do so, they are subjected to discrimination, detention, and all sorts of inhumane treatment.

North Korea report finds freedom of religion or belief "largely non-existent"

CSW (23.09.2016) - A new report on freedom of religion or belief in North Korea, released today by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), provides further evidence that freedom of religion or belief is a human right that is "largely non-existent" in the country.

Total Denial: Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea, details the persecution of Christians and discrimination against other religions and beliefs including Buddhism and Shamanism.

The report also explores the detention of North Korean refugees in China and the Chinese government's policy of repatriating them to North Korea. Today marks Save North Koreans Day, a global day of action during which people around the world will deliver a letter to Chinese embassies to urge China to change its policy and allow North Koreans safe passage through China to sanctuary in South Korea or beyond.

In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into human rights in North Korea found that "there is almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association" in North Korea, as well as possible crimes against humanity being perpetrated against the North Korean people. The Commission also noted that the regime in North Korea "considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat" and as a result, "Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted". Severe punishments are inflicted on "people caught practising Christianity".

CSW's new report states: "Christians usually practice their faith in secret. If discovered they are subject to detention and then likely taken to prison camps (kwanliso); crimes against them in these camps include extra-judicial killing, extermination, enslavement/forced labour, forcible transfer of population, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, persecution, enforced disappearance, rape and sexual violence, and other humane acts. Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges and trampled under-foot."

Practitioners of other religions, such as Buddhism, Shamanism and the native Korean Cheondoism – which combines elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taosim and Shamanism – also face restrictions and discrimination, but are treated more leniently. Christianity is repressed most harshly because it is viewed as a foreign religion, and Christians are suspected of being spies.

In Pyongyang, there are four churches – two Protestant, one Catholic and one Russian Orthodox – but these are widely regarded as Potemkin-style show churches for the benefit of foreign visitors.

Among its recommendations, the report calls for the North Korean government to acknowledge and implement the recommendations of the UN Commission of Inquiry and to allow the UN Independent Experts unhindered access to visit the country. CSW continues to call for North Korea to be referred to the International Criminal Court on account of evidence that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated in the country, or the establishment of an ad-hoc tribunal to ensure accountability.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "North Korea is the world's most closed, repressive State, where the regime is committing crimes against humanity. There is almost total denial of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion. To follow any belief other than total loyalty to the ruling Kim dynasty is to risk very grave punishment, and in some instances, death. Our report aims to shine a light on the darkest corner of the globe and to call on the international community to act. We also urge China to behave responsibly and to cease its policy of forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, which is tantamount to a death sentence. The time for change is long overdue."
