Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help?


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Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Koreaby Lutz

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I. Introduction

This is an essay by Lutz Drescher, who lived as an ecumenical worker in the ROK from 1987 to 1993. Since 1991, he works for the Association of Churches and Missions in Southwest Germany (EMS) as liaison secretary for East Asia. He has participated in numerous meetings with representatives of the North Korean Christian Federation, including a meeting with Kim Il Sung in 1992 and the (Evangelical Church-Germany) delegation to the DPRK in May 2002. The essay states "there is [true] freedom of religion, and yet it is a restricted freedom insofar as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not a democratic country with individual rights of liberty in the Western sense. One can say that the members of the church in North Korea live out their faith under particularly harsh conditions. For precisely this reason, they depend on our intercessions and solidarity."

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II. Essay by Lutz Drescher

"Threatening Gestures as Cries for Help? Questioning an Overly Fixed Image of North Korea"
by Lutz Drescher

Is admitting that they had restarted work on a nuclear program, the DPRK's latest provocative gesture? Reports in the German media have largely followed the US government's verdict on the isolated country. North Korea is called a "rogue state" and "a hell, cold and dark" (Der Zeit, 3-25-2003). The following essay is an attempt to understand North Korea "from within" and to identify possible reasons for its behavior. The author does not intend to minimize or dispute the critical analyses of the human rights situation (cf. e.g., www.kcna.co.jp/item/2003/200303/news03/20030306-01e.html; www.amnesty.org), nor the views of North Korean refugees with, whom he has spoken. Nevertheless, he does wish to present another perspective, which he hopes will contribute to a more differentiated picture of its past and present that are concealed by the prevailing image of the country.]

North Korea is no longer a "blank spot" on the map, to be sure, and yet there is hardly another country for which so little reliable information is available. In his State of the Union address, one of the engineers that sponsor terror, as US President George W. Bush claimed in February 2002? Or is it a huge prison as some concentration camp? Or a Stalinist relic that has survived the end of the Cold War, nevertheless largely distributed equally as many left-wing South Korean students suppose? Why is it that almost every visitor of the country has the feeling of being in a staged reality? What lies behind the almost god-like veneration rendered to the great leader and his family? Is there a future for the country? And what role and what solution to the current nuclear crisis be understood? And what role does the church play in this country?

No definitive answers can be given to these questions. Our knowledge of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is incomplete. All that can be said about it remains fragmentary. For an isolated and unknown country such as North Korea, however, attending to the fragmentary is the most honest approach. In this essay I note some of the fragments that I have encountered, and which have given rise to my own a number of questions. Above all, however, I attempt to make North Korea understandable in the context of its culture and history. For one cannot understand the DPRK's present situation and the country without knowledge of the influence of shamanism and Confucianism upon its culture and attention to its historical background.

Impressions of Pyongyang

Landing in Pyongyang's Sunan airport, the usual controls elicit mixed feelings. Memories of the difficulties experienced in entering the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) were still too fresh in my mind. Even though I had entered the country for the first time at an official delegation of the German Protestant Church in May 2002 – our speedy passage through immigration controls, without even one question being asked concerning our luggage.

At first glance, Pyongyang itself seems an astonishingly modern city with its high-rise buildings and wide boulevards. Signs of the once traditional Korean architecture is difficult to find, since the whole city was reduced to ashes by US bombardment during the Korean War (1950-53). Even the usual problems associated with large cities, such as crumbling plaster and countless potholes that are not limited to side streets, belatedly little is known about the life style within the skyscrapers. Germans living in Pyongyang reported major problems with heating during the ice-cold winters, especially on the upper floors.

Striking and clearly visible from every direction is the uncompleted 100-floor hotel that was to become the highest building in Asia. Its construction was begun in the 1980s, but was soon discontinued in fact the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the resulting shortage of cheap energy from the former Soviet Union hindered its completion. Today, the hotel is a ghostly reminder of the megalomania that lies in the shadow of a building that was planned to be a symbol of superiority, but instead became a monument of economic decline and decay!

Pyongyang's air is clear, clearer than that of Seoul. Economic production has nearly come to a standstill due to a shortage of energy. Only in the evening hours does the city disappear behind a yellow cloak of smoke. Resident foreigners and fugitives have both reported that the energy produced there is generally sufficient for Pyongyang itself, but that neighborhoods are supplied for only a few hours per day.

Many visitors are shown the Pyongyang Maternity Hospital, which is a good hospital with fairly modern equipment. The scene there does not correspond well with the images and reports of the almost primitive conditions that exist in the rest of the country. It is not surprising to find it is more a hospital for the party and military elite than for the simple people. In view of the inequity of the distribution of health care and energy, the myth of a "people's paradise" takes a beating.

Staged Reality

What visitors are permitted to see – in the Maternity Hospital and elsewhere – is almost like a play, a staged production that only reflects a small part of reality. This is not a completely foreign phenomenon. Similar things can be seen in the Soviet Union in its last side, and this is particularly widespread in Eastern Asia. Similar phenomena have also been seen in South Korea. During the economic boom years of the 1970s and 1980s, the VIP routes that connected the highways were sealed villages with attractive, self-contained houses that were hardly comparable to the simple body that could be seen on a detour to the countryside. In 1988, shortly before the Olympic Games, the view from the highway to a poor quarter was blocked off with a high wall. Even the trees that were planted were painted colorfully in order to give a romantic impression. Staged reality both here and there.

Here we find a key to understanding many contexts, the knowledge of which is essential to an understanding of North Korean reality. In the culture of East Asia, it is of great importance to "save one's face", to be conscious of one's honor. The Chinese characters behind this expression, however, point in an additional direction. Literally translated, they mean "the outward appearance". It is important to keep the outward side of the body intact. Or to put it more bitterly: "the facade must be correct". It is because of this cleavage between reality and the outward appearance that it is not unusual for cleavages that the North Korean government attributes their need for emergency assistance to flood and drought catastrophes, i.e., natural events. Confessing the failure of the economic system would lead to a loss of face.

Ancestor Worship

Although the socialist world view has prevailed in North Korea for more than 50 years, there are still traces of the century-long influence of Confucianism. Its influence is not limited to the political and emotionality. In the South at least, one can clearly discern such traces in families, firms, politics, the economy, and even in the churches.(1) It is also clearly discernible in North Korea, for example in the thinking can also be found in the North: in the party, the military and the producer's cooperatives.

It is a central Confucian value that families stick together. The emotional scenes that may be seen at every family reunification program on television in the South, e.g., on the 15th day of the family, and after his death, his eldest son takes his place. If a communist dynasty seems very strange to Westerners, in the context of Confucian thinking it is completely normal that the eldest son of the ruler may succeed his father. Moreover, it is all the more understandable, since president Kim Il Sung, who died in 1994, presented himself as the father of the entire country, and his mythologically exaggerated family history has remained a central theme of propaganda. Kim Jong Il's succession to his father's office is a modern of succession, one can find parallels in the South as well.

Among Protestant churches in South Korea, there is ongoing discussion concerning the question of the succession of pastors in some of the large and wealthy churches. They rule over their congregations as though they were small kingdoms.

There is another phenomenon in North Korea. At the death of former President Kim Il Sung, tens of thousands of people literally burst into tears. Many of them were not party members, but were simply common workering on mass hysteria. Nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that an old cultural-religious pattern is also active here. Korea as a whole has a long tradition of shamanism, which is practiced by creatures by shamanism. In shamanism, emotions play a major role. It is part of the ceremony that people shed tears and become enthroned. According to old reports, people in the North were particularly religious. It is possible that a part of this religiosity was channeled and transformed by the Kim Il Sung cult. He himself was also viewed by legends during his lifetime, he receives almost god-like veneration. This concept has is not foreign to shamanism. A whole series of great historical figures, who have been deified because of their services to their country, joined the Pantheons of the gods and spirits, and continue to play a role in shamanistic rituals to this day.

At many places in Pyongyang, – especially on public buildings – long red banners can be seen, sporting tarican slogans related to the party and its leaders. On the wall of the Juche Tower, which is called the "eternity tower") one can read these words: "The great leader, comrade Kim Il Sung, will live with us eternally." This almost fundamentalistic belief in the eternity of the dead is also found in the cultural-religious setting. The veneration of ancestors plays a major role in both Confucian and shamanistic traditions. In Kool Asia the dead are more alive than in the West. In both North and South Korea people gather at gravesites on special family memorial days, and express their feelings and concerns to the dead, in order to hold communion "in the presence of the ancestors"

The Making of a Conflict

There are several reasons for the "greatness" of Kim Il Sung. Nevertheless, the central reason for his veneration is his commitment to the liberation of Korea from Japanese hegemony.

Geographically, Korea has always had a strategic and strategic importance. It is the "dagger aimed at the heart of Japan" and the bridge to China. In the course of history it has experienced many invasions, while the Korean people have never conducted a war of expansion.(2) From 1905 to 1945 Korea was a colony of Japan. At this time, Japanese troops were stationed in Korea, which were not captivated after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 15, 1945, the Japanese troops in the North of the country surrendered to the Soviets, and those in the South to those in the South by the Americans. From the beginning, a different political strategy was pursued in the two "liberated" land at the same time "occupied" zones. This is one of the main reasons for the division of the country. Whereas in the South it was communist rebels, generally of the left-wing, who had fought against the Japanese, and who came to power, in the South it was right-wing conservatives (and before long also circles infiltrated by collaborators) who came to power.

The Korean War (1950-1953) resulted, in part, from the mounting opposition between East and West. Its traumatic consequences continue to overshadow the lives of the people in both parts of Korea. Up until the beginning of the 90's, there was intensive debate among historians concerning the question of who was to blame for the war. Since the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union, it can be shown that the troops of the North crossed the border into the South on June 25, 1950. Nevertheless, there are still many who have serious doubts about conditions akin to a civil war in the South after 1945. Examples are the riot in October 1946 in Taegu, in which 6,000 people died, and the bombardment of the island Jejudo, in which nearly 30,000 people (a tenth of the population) were killed. During the Korean War, the Americans were joined by troops of the Chinese volunteer troops from China on the side of the North. About 1.5 million people fell victim to the war. Broad parts of North Korea were reduced to ashes. The war ended in 1953 with the signing of a truce agreement, ratified by North Korea and the United States, and valid to this day. As a result of the Korean War dictators arose on both sides of the demilitarized zone. In the South, they were not really overcome until 1992. To the present day, the highest concentration of troops and weapons in the world is on the border, where only 1.5 million soldiers face each other across the border.

Since the Korean War, up to 40,000 US-American soldiers are stationed in South Korea. They are officially there to deter the North from its project democracy and freedom. But the fact that US-American policy has provided little opposition to the rotating dictatorships in the South nourishes the suspicion that geo-strategic considerations also played a role. Moreover, while the North Korean army has more than twice as many tanks as the South Korean army, the South Korean military is much better equipped. Thus, South Korea has probably been in the position to defeat itself for some time. Whether the presence of US troops is necessary or not, US troops in South Korea, their presence is felt as a threat in the North. Whereas the Clinton administration made some careful, preliminary steps toward normalization of relations with North Korea, especially since the resumption of office by President George Bush and his verdict that North Korea belongs to the axis of evil. In the fall of 2002, North Korea made the surprising announcement that it was working on a nuclear programme, and has subsequently retitled world opinion with ever escalating conflict threat. What lies behind these threats?

Threatening Gestures and Cries for Help

Several factors can be identified. First, it is by now quite obvious that the slogans on many of the large red banners on public buildings were about holding together and "reducing". Even the North Korean government knows that the strength of the people is being devoured by the economic crisis that has the country in its grip. During an official visit to Pyongyang in May 2002, I received the impression that extended even into military and party circles. The offensive rhetoric and invocation of the aggressive aims of the USA are meant to serve as a mobilization of forces, in order to avoid the fate of being "overlooked" and forgotten by the world public. With such rhetoric it places itself back on the news and makes headlines.

North Korea clearly has two aims in mind. First, it seeks a non-aggressive pact and thus security in relation to the USA, which it considers to be its chief enemy. Secondly, it hopes to obtain a peace and is also employed as a means of negotiation – a strategy that was often successful in the past. Secondly, it hopes to obtain a greater degree of independence from China and Russia in the areas of energy and food. This signals a radical political change. Whereas in the past the "Juche" idea of independent and self-reliant development was the policy standard, it appears that at least in the economic sphere, one is now prepared to pursue a different path. At the same, they still wish to hold on to the "Juche" ideology, since to abandon it would only lead to a dead-end. The North Korean nation is on the verge of ruin. It has nothing to lose. Cries for help lie hidden behind their threats. Even if one does not like the way they go about it, and even if the situation, for nobody there has an interest in the total breakdown of the North Korean regime. Such a breakdown would have numerous consequences that South Korea would not be able to master, such as a flood of refugees. For this reason, unexpressed by the tensions, talks between the two Koreas have increased in the past two or three years. There intensity increased after Roh Moo-Hyun was the presidency in the South. He has promised to continue the Sunshine Policy of his predecessor, but has also expressed his solidarity with the USA, and has decisively opposed all plans of attack.(3)

North Korea is on the way to greater openness, a development that visitors from the South have also confirmed. One can only hope that neither the North Koreans nor others will slam the doors shut. There is no doubt that reunification will have a far-reaching positive impact on the relationship between the two Koreas. It remains uncertain, however, whether steps toward a further opening of North Korea will be taken, or whether the country will choose the path of isolation and self-chosen exclusion are viable options for the future.

Religious Freedom and the Church

Unrestricted religious freedom does not exist in North Korea. There is no doubt that the activities of Christians are closely supervised, just as the society as a whole is characterized by a high degree of control. For this reason, the existence of an underground church – as reported from time to time by analogy to the Chinese situation – is improbable. Of the three officially recognized Christian churches in existence (KCF), the Roman Catholic "cathedral" and the 500 house churches are presumably the only places in which people read the Bible, pray and sing hymns. The latter two churches were founded in order to serve as a service arm/ Christian faith meant to them, they answered that faith helped them to better serve their country and people – an answer that is very similar to what one can hear in China.

From time to time Christian circles in South Korea dispute the assertion that there is no freedom of religion in the North. For the Christians, they would have to be in opposition to the regime. This opinion, however, overlooks the fact that the 12,000 Christians in North Korea are not to be compared with the Christian community of more than 20 million people. Nor can it be ignored that many of those who express this opinion were themselves quite willing to compromise with the obtruding South Korean dictators of the past. Shortly before his death, former president Kim Il-Sung spoke of his joy that the children of the party elite were being raised in a way that sometimes visited the children's service. In this way, the practice of religion was acknowledged to a certain degree by the highest authorities. There is a certain degree of affinity between Confucianism and Christianity, though it is expected that the members of the church will serve their country and people. There is thus freedom of religion, and yet it is a restricted freedom insofar as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not a democratic country with individual rights of liberty in the Western sense. One can say that the members of the church in North Korea live out their faith under particularly harsh conditions. For precisely this reason, they depend on our intercessions and solidarity.

The present chairman of the North Korean Christian Federation is Rev. Kang Yong Sop, a relative of the mother of Kim Il Sung. When most Christians fled to the South in 1945, his father remained, and to some extent held high offices. Pastor Kang also had a career as a lawyer, and was a representative of the Supreme People's Assembly, a representative chairman of the highest court. From this information a one can draw valuable conclusions concerning the role and function of the church in North Korea. It serves as one of the many state channels through which the North Korean government operates diplomatically. On the other hand, it is also a channel in reverse. Many outside churches gain entrance to North Korea via the KCF. Invitations from representatives of the Korean Christian Federation are a prerequisite for any visit to the country, even for visits within the isolated country. As for Pastor Kang's self-understanding, this was his answer to the question whether he now himself more as a diplomat or a pastor: "I am a pastor and a diplomat."

A Country in which People Live

North Korea is no "blank spot" on the map, but a country in which people live and struggle for survival. It is a country in crisis, however. It is a country that finds itself in the midst of a crisis, and a process of transformation. The task of the international community is to help this transformation move in the right direction.

ENDNOTES (1) Cf. A survey concerning the churches: L. Drescher, "Elitik und Kleinze – Beobachtungen über den Einfluss von Konfuzianismus und Schamanismus auf die koreanischen Kirchen", in Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft, Münster, 78 (1994) 4, pp. 274-288. (2) Cf. L. Drescher, "Nordkorea – Von der Kolonialisierung durch Japan zum geteilten Korea," in: U. Duchrow (Hg.), Weltfrieb, Versöhnung und Neuordnig nach im Westen – oder nur im Süden und Osten? Bremen Dokumente, Bremen 2003, pp. 109-120. (3) For the "Sunshine Policy" following the example of NGO. Brandt's "East policy" he gives abundant information in: Roh Moo Hyun, Frieden und Prosperität in Nordeastasien, ed. by Presse und Kulturabteilung der Botschaft der Republik Korea 2003.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to nautilus@nautilus.org. Responses may be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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