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Christian martyrdom is 'today's story'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 27, 2009 NCR Today

According to the Associated Press, a 33-year-old woman and mother of three has been executed in North Korea on charges of distributing Bibles, which are banned in the communist country, and of allegedly spying for foreign nations. A July 24 report from the Investigative Commission on Crimes against Humanity, quoted by the AP, says that Ri Hyon-ok was executed in the northwestern city of Ryongchon bordering China on June 16, and that her husband, children and parents were sent to a political prison the day after her execution.

In a July 25 front page essay in Corriere della Sera*, Italy?s leading daily, Andrea Riccardi argues that the episode confirms the ?liberating? nature of the Bible and of religious faith, which always ?makes tyrannical regimes afraid.? Paying attention to the heroism of today?s Christian martyrs, Riccardi argues, protects Western Christians from an ?overly restricted vision.? Riccardi is the founder of the Community of Sant?Egidio, a new movement in the Catholic church promoting ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, conflict resolution, and development. Sant?Egidio is also a global leader in efforts to abolish the death penalty.*

The following is an NCR translation of Riccardi?s essay.

By ANDREA RICCARDI

A mother of a family, accused of having distributed Bibles, recently was put to death in North Korea. The news, which leaked out by chance from the reign of silence of Kim Jong-Il, turns attention anew to the county, and not only for its atomic weaponry after the most recent nuclear test.

The North Koreans are, unfortunately, ?one of the most brtualized peoples of the world,? according to Amnesty International. Strict control of the population, with campaigns of terror and a system of concentration camps, accompanies the cult of the Dear Leader, the expression of a ?red monarchy? which mixes elements of Stalinsm and Asian despotism. During a season of relaxation, three churches in Pyongyang were allowed to open, attended for the most part by foreigners. But we?re still far from even a minimal degree of religious freedom; indeed, this is a society that does not tolerate any personal conviction.

tWhat exactly does a Christian represent to deserve the death penalty? What kind of threat is a Bible? In fact, the Bible resonates in a different way under a totalitarianism without exceptions, such as North Korea, with a ?liberating? force to which we in the West aren?t accustomed.

tCommunist regimes have always regared Christianity, even when it?s weak, as a threat. They?ve responded with a terror disproportionate to the actual possibility of political action by Christians. The cruel sacrifices of believers represent not only a measure of control, but a rite which celebrates the mass idolatry of the omnipotence of the party. With the zeal of a new religion, the struggle for a new world must eradicate the lived faith. That?s how it was not only in the Soviet Union, but also in Albania, transformed into an atheocracy with the abolition of religion in 1967. Those who, like me, witnessed it remember how the suriviving Christians posed no threat at all for the total power of the state; nonetheless, they were eliminated implacably.

tWhoever believes in a spiritual dimension seems to silently resist the religion of the terrestial communist paradise. That resistance must be combatted with religious zeal. Korean communism, with the cult of the leader, has taken on the character of a mass religion. These are stories of promised paradises which become concentration camps.

tThe sad development regarding the Korean woman seems to belong to the past, to the era of Cambodia or of communism in Eastern Europe. Instead it?s today?s story, and it reminds us of the impossible life facing the handful of Christians in North Korea (perhaps 30,000). It?s a story that?s not over.

tThe Christian faith makes tyrannical regimes afraid. Indeed, they?re afraid of the Bible. In reality, Christian existence, even in the most limited spaces, often represents a human zone in dishuman worlds, a silent testimony to liberty, for which there?s something beyond that never yields.

John Paul II regarded the twentieth century as the century of martyrdom, but the story continues in the first decade of the twenty-first century. There?s the suffering of the Christian minority in India or in the Islamic world. There?s the martyrdom of the pacifists, who represent a form of resistance to the diffuse violence in not a few regions of the world.

Fr. Andrea Santoro, a Roman priest killed in Turkey in 2005, wrote: ?We witness spectacles of ferocious inhumanity. But the alternative to ferocity is charity.?

In such contexts, the practice of the faith and of charity is seen as an alternative, and sometimes execrated with violence. Paying attention to these situations protects us from an overly limited vision, which circles around us in a mode that?s alternately cheerful or self-pitying. It makes us reflect on so many acts of barbarity, but also on so many women and men who are both strong and humble.

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