

수영로교회 Suyeong Road Church, Busan by  
Scarlet Sappho.  
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#### Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Christians described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both. As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

## Conversions and the Public Testimonials of North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Many North Koreans seeking to escape from harsh economic conditions and political repression by the North Korean government rely on the support of various Christian groups in South Korea to help them get out. Christians make up about 62 percent of the people who espouse religious affiliation in South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Seeking acceptance and refuge, these North Korean refugees share personal stories about their harrowing experiences and escape through religious conversion stories. These public and dramatic Christian testimonies—shared with predominantly South Korean audiences—are part of a complicated intersection between religion, migrant experiences, Korea’s history with imperialism, and ideas about national belonging.<sup>2</sup>

The first public testimonials that linked Christian identity to South Korean allegiance and citizenship were the North Korean prisoner-of-war “blood petitions” during the Korean War.<sup>3</sup> North Korean POWs received a heavy dose of American Presbyterian evangelism and religious services through the U.S. Department of Army Civilian (DAC) POW Ministry.<sup>4</sup> Fearing persecution as Christian converts if forced to return to North Korea after the war, North Korean POWs—writing in their blood—successfully petitioned the South Korean government after the 1953 armistice to stay in South Korea and become citizens.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea,” state.gov, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/republic-of-korea/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jin-Heon Jung, “Refugee and Religious Narratives: The Conversion of North Koreans from Refugees to God’s Warriors,” in *Building Noah’s Ark for Migrants, Refugees, and Religious Communities*, ed. Horstmann Alexander and Jin-Heon Jung (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 83, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137496300>.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson to Chaplain Harold Voelkel, 1953-1954, *North Korean prisoners of war blood petitions*, Pearl Digital Collections, Presbyterian Historical Society, [https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A145118?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=ecb8be598424fee12634&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=35&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=4#page/1/mode/1up](https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A145118?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=ecb8be598424fee12634&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=35&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=4#page/1/mode/1up).

<sup>4</sup> Sandra H. Park, “Christianity, Citizenship, and American Empire in the Korean War,” *American Religion*, n.d., <https://www.american-religion.org/inside-out/park>.

<sup>5</sup> Park, “Christianity, Citizenship, and American Empire.”

The South Korean government recognizes North Koreans as citizens, and many receive government support through resettlement benefits. Hoping to resettle as citizens in prosperous South Korea, about 34,000 North Korean refugees escaped desperate conditions in North Korea in the 1990s. They fled along “underground railroads” to the Chinese-Korean border area, “relying on networks of various Christian groups, non-governmental organizations, and people smugglers” to escape into South Korea.<sup>6</sup> Many of the South Korean evangelical churches and organizations who broker escape for North Korean refugees have a mission, like the South Korean government, to reunite the two Koreas.<sup>7</sup> The logic of both the government and churches is that the successful integration of North Korean defectors and refugees would foreshadow the success of the reunification of the two Koreas.<sup>8</sup>

Along with this support can come control and requirements of displays of devotion through public religious testimonials.<sup>9</sup> Refugee converts speak at evangelical church services and appear on human rights websites and in popular media. They provide details of their lives in North Korea and their difficulties as illegal immigrants in China.<sup>10</sup> Their narratives testify to God’s grace and push the political narrative of the hope for a reunited Korea. One young North Korean woman testified, “I believe that the Lord prepares us to be the avant-garde for reunification.”<sup>11</sup> While these refugees can uplift themselves through their conversion stories, their accounts can feed stereotypes and marginalize other refugees by casting suspicion on those who do not convert or make public testimonials.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that not all South Korean Christian churches providing support services require conversion. For example, Young Nak Presbyterian Church runs a night school for young adults but avoids mandatory religious instruction that refugees might interpret as religious coercion in exchange for help.<sup>13</sup>

Though refugees speak Korean (with a distinguishable accent) and arguably share the same ethnicity as South Koreans, many lack education or professional skills, struggle with unemployment and low-wage jobs and live in state-subsidized housing.<sup>14</sup> One explanation for North Koreans’ struggles in South Korea is that the seventy-year history of isolation, indoctrination, and suffering in North Korea has created cultural differences that act as barriers to successful integration and social equality. Media perpetuates the idea of North Koreans as “cultural others” when TV shows feature North Koreans sharing personal

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<sup>6</sup>Jennifer Hough and Markus Bell, “North Koreans’ public narratives and conditional inclusion in South Korea,” *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2020.1740606>.

<sup>7</sup>Jin-Heon Jung, “Refugee and Religious Narratives: The Conversion of North Koreans from Refugees to God’s Warriors,” in *Building Noah’s Ark for Migrants, Refugees, and Religious Communities*, ed. Horstmann Alexander and Jin-Heon Jung (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137496300>.

<sup>8</sup>Jin-Heon Jung, “Underground Railroads of Christian Conversion: North Korean Migrants and Evangelical Missionary Networks in Northeast Asia / 皈依基督教的地下通道: 北朝鲜1移民与东北亚的新教传教,” *Cultural Diversity in China* 1, no. 2 (2015): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1515/cdc-2015-0012>.

<sup>9</sup>Shin Ji Kang, “Postcolonial Reflection on the Christian Mission: The Case of North Korean Refugees in China and South Korea,” *Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2016): 67, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci5040067>.

<sup>10</sup>Hough and Bell, “North Koreans’ public narratives,” 167.

<sup>11</sup>Jung, “Refugee and Religious Narratives,” 88.

<sup>12</sup>Hough and Bell, “North Koreans’ public narratives,” 168.

<sup>13</sup>Rachel Cohrs, “Why do South Korean Christians support North Korean defectors?,” The Groundtruth Project, April 25, 2018, <https://thegroundtruthproject.org/south-korean-christians-support-north-korean-defectors>.

<sup>14</sup>Kyung Hyo Chun, “North Korean Defectors as Cultural Other in South Korea: Perception and Construction of Cultural Differences,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 1 (2022): 185–213, <https://doi.org/10.18588/202203.00a227>.

stories that reinforce stereotypes in the minds of both South and North Koreans.<sup>15</sup> However, scholar Kyung Hyo Chun rejects the “cultural differences” argument and suggests that through constructing and naturalizing ideas about cultural otherness, “identifiable North Koreanness” becomes stigmatized and mapped onto a social hierarchy and power dynamics that contribute to their marginalization and inequality.<sup>16</sup>

For North Koreans living in South Korea, a condition of belonging is assimilating into South Korean culture—not one of North and South Koreans mutually adapting.<sup>17</sup> This one-way process of assimilation conflates South Korean national identity with Christianity, Western values, and prosperity. Conversions and accompanying narratives are evidence of God’s plan for the nation.<sup>18</sup> However, as a younger generation of South Koreans places less emphasis on both religion and reunification, this could change.<sup>19</sup>

North Korean conversion narratives provide insight into how these complex interactions and dynamics of social and national inclusion operate within South Korea now and how they might in the future.

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<sup>15</sup> Chun, “North Korean Defectors,” 194.

<sup>16</sup> Chun, “North Korean Defectors,” 200, 205.

<sup>17</sup> Chun, “North Korean Defectors,” 191.

<sup>18</sup> Jung, “Refugee and Religious Narratives,” 79.

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Ong, “North and South Korea Drift Further Apart Every Day,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2023, accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/26/opinion/north-south-korea-unification-war.html>.

## Additional Resources

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## Discussion Questions

- What are the different meanings and connotations of the words "refugee," "immigrant," "asylum seeker," and "citizen"? How might language shape ideas about identity and belonging?
- What embedded assumptions about religious identity and belonging in South Korea does this case study surface and disrupt?
- How do public conversion narratives contribute to the broader cultural project of national reunification in South Korea? How do they reflect or challenge dominant narratives about North Korean identity?
- How have historical events shaped the intersections between Christianity, migration, and notions of national identity in South Korea?
- Consider the methods of different religious organizations to support conversions and North Korean defectors. Using Galtung's typology, discuss how these groups do or do not support forms of peace?
- Explore the linkages between Christianity, Western values, and economic prosperity in South Korean conceptions of national identity. How does this association contribute to perceptions of cultural superiority and exclusion?
- Consider the diverse motivations behind defectors' engagement with public religious narratives. How might social pressure, desire for social acceptance, and genuine faith influence their decision to share their stories?
- Consider evolving attitudes towards religion and reunification among younger generations of South Koreans. How might shifts in these attitudes influence the dynamics of social and national inclusion for North Korean defectors?