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2019 REA Annual Meeting. Nov 1-3

Crossing the Border: Religious Education of Coexistence With the Case of North Korean Refugees in the U.S.

Abstract

When one decides to cross the border of a nation due to political oppression and poverty, it is a crucial decision for the whole world and time around her/him. Many people make the treacherous journey across political, economic systems and religious background to pursue human dignity and happiness. Among many refugee groups who cross such borders, my research pays attention to North Korean refugees in the United States and their settlement process. As North Korean refugees enter this land of freedom and prosperity, are they provided adequate aids and education to redirect their mindset from communism to capitalism, from oppression and trauma to living together? What is the role of faith community and religious education in it? Based on the postcolonial feminist practical theology, this paper explores the journey together and offer a pedagogy of coexistence and mutual transformation.

Introduction

Since the Cold War era, and since 2002, when President George W. Bush named North Korea as one of "the axis of evil," North Korea has been described as a symbolic evil of the world, to be defeated in every way.[1] Caused by this secretive and absolute monarchial country, tensions and conflicts between countries, beyond ideological differences, such as nuclear weapons experiments that threaten the safety of global society, are undeniable. As a religious educator, however, what catches my attention is the dying people while the oppressive government overshadow its powers and interests only for gain at the expense of the oppressed.

North Korea's political and economic crisis and oppression against its own people destroy the world and history of individuals, and destroy the future of not only its own but the whole world's own.[2] We should not overlook the fact that there are tens of thousands of people dying

[1] Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "The 'axis of evil' is back," *CNN*, April 26, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/26/opinions/axis-of-evil-is-back-miller-sokolsky/index.html.

[2] "North Korea named worst human trafficking nation for 17th year," *The Korea Times*, June 21, 2019, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/06/103_270996.html.

and risking their lives during complex calculations between governments and international leaders. Human rights activists Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, in their book *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate*, emphasize that we should look for ways to practice the teachings of Christ by embracing immigrants into our community. They say:

> Living in relationships with immigrants, refugees and other low-income people has forced us to grapple with the question of what it means for us, as followers of Christ, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It has also awakened us to the ethically complex questions of immigration and refugee policy – whom do we let in, what do we do with those who came in even though our government did not allow them in, and what effect will our policies have on those already here and struggling to get by?[3]

Hence, the main questions of this study are: 1) why and how the North Koreans come to the United States; 2) what the issues the face in their settlement; 3) what the response and vision of religious education for coexistence and mutual transformation are.

Journey to the Promised Land

Thousands of North Koreans cross the border every year. Including the number of people died and deported during this process, and depending on the source, the exact number is unknown, yet given the number of about 1,000-1,500 people who arrive in South Korea each year, it is assumed that thousands North Koreans attempt to escape each year.[4] According to Radio Free Asia, reported in December 2018, the number of North Korean defectors has recently dropped sharply, leaving about nearly one thousand North Koreans who have entered South Korea in 2018. Experts pointed out that the border security of North Korea has been greatly strengthened, and that the amount of money to be paid through brokers for defection has increased.[5]

Yet, their journey to life and freedom does not end with simply crossing the border out of North Korea. They are exposed to numerous risks. Until they reach politically safe neighboring countries, they must cross the desert or the jungle, and get away the danger of human trafficking.

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[3] Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 16; See also 30.

[4] "탈북자: 올해 한국 온 탈북자 1 천 명…'여성 86%, 교육열 뜨거워' [North Korean Defectors: More Than a Thousand NK Defectors entered South Korea This Year … Women 86%, Eager to Learn]," BBC Korea, December 24, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/korean/46671620.

[5] Young Jung, "최근 남한입국 탈북자가 급감한 이유 [Why the Number of North Korean Defectors Recently Dropped]," *Radio Free Asia*, December 5, 2018, https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly_program/bd81d55cc740-c5b4b514b85c/nkdirection-12042018161449.html. Translation mine.

In this journey, violence against the weak, such as women and children, is indescribable. In the New York Times, journalist Miriam Jordan summarizes North Koreans' journey to exile as follows:

> Leaving the highly fortified country is notoriously difficult. North Koreans climb mountains, trudge through rugged terrain and cross rivers in their bids to escape. Even if they elude border agents and make it into China, the most common escape route, they risk being apprehended and repatriated by Chinese authorities. In recent years, the vast majority of escapees have been women, often sold into forced marriages in China. Others are trafficked for sex or cheap labor.[6]

Most North Korean defectors want South Korea as the destination of their asylum. It is quite reasonable for them to want asylum in the country where people share the same language, history, and ethnicity. Yet, a few of them seek asylum in the United States. Since 2004 when Congress passed the Human Rights Acts for North Korea, there are around 225 North Korean refugees came to the United States and received asylum. The yearly number of North Koreans admitted to refugee status in the U.S. was the highest in 2008. Twenty-eight North Koreans entered in 2007 and thirty-eight defectors entered in 2008. However, recently, the number has decreased sharply, especially in 2017 only one defector arrived in the U.S.

According to Yoen Chul Lee, the reporter in the Voice of America News, which is focusing on the activism for North Korean human rights and international policies, the combination of strengthened crackdowns of North Korean and Chinese governments the immigration policy of the Trump regime would affect the current number drop of North Korean exile.[7] Hieu Ju Park, in her dissertation "Twice Illegal: Ethnic Community, Identity and Social Networks among the North Korean Defectors in the United States," also points out that due to the long process of bureaucratic clearance and the complex path the North Korean refugees take before arriving the United States which make their application for asylum almost impossible, there are countless undocumented North Koreans staying in a limbo.[8]

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[6] Miriam Jordan, "U.S. Admission of North Korean Defectors Has Slowed to a Trickle," *The New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/us/north-korea-refugees-defectors-usa-utah.html.

[7] Yeon Chul Lee, "지난해 탈북 난민 6 명 미국 입국…2006 년 이후 총 218 명 [Last year, six North Korean refugees entered the United States… Total 218 since 2006]," *Voice of America*, January 2, 2019, https://www.voakorea.com/a/4724695.html. Translation mine.

[8] Hien Ju Park, "Twice Illegal: Ethnic Community, Identity and Social Networks among the North Korean Defectors in the U.S.*,"* (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2011), 2, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

North Korean's Life in the US: Collision of the Two Worlds

Hien Ju Park's dissertation is a one of the few researches that introduces and analyzes sociologically the lives of North Koreans in the United States through five years of ethnographic research with them. The stories of the North Koreans in this study include their decision to defect during the most difficult periods of time in the country with the great famine, economic and ideological crisis, and political oppression. Also, what their stories all have in common is that life in South Korea or in the United States is so different from what they imagined. The Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, did not exist in the real world. From the mandated education to the new ideology, to survive through in the capitalist society was different from what they have known before.[9]

In South Korea, North Korean defectors receive basic education and economic support for settlement in the first two years as well as citizenship.[10] In addition, sharing the same language and history is a great advantage for them to settle in South Korea. It is not easy, however, for them to be treated like second-class citizens, with their distinct dialects and appearance. There is an invisible barrier of ideological differences and social prejudice between North Koreans and South Koreans.[11] On the other hand, in the United States, it is relatively easy for North Koreans to live a life, hiding the particular identity as North Korean and blend in the society.[12]

Park says in her dissertation that North Koreans are juggling two identities: as North Korean defectors and as Korean immigrants. The same ethnic background as Korean helps them blend-in in the entire American society. But still their legal status in between international political relationships and domestic security prevents their lives from prospering. According to Park, North Koreans in general feel very anxious about their status and security after traveling through various countries in dangerous situations, and continue to stay on the border not only legally, economically, but also mentally.[13] Park says,

> Social stigma, and the identity dilemma it brings, has been the most stifling factor blocking their adjustment in South Korea. Upon arriving in the U.S., a new dilemma

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[9] Ibid., 31, 36.

[10] "The South Korean government grants citizenship to the North Korean defectors and settlement assistance for the first two years (Choi 2009). They qualify for subsidized national health care, and their children receive nine years of compulsory education from the elementary through the middle school (Tanaka 2008; Onishi 2006)." Park, 55-56.

[11] Ibid., 56.

[12] Roberta Cohen, "Admitting North Korean Refugees to the United States: Obstacles and Opportunities," *38 North*, September 20, 2011, https://www.38north.org/2011/09/rcohen092011/; Soo Youn, "North Korean Defectors See American Dream Deferred as Reality Sets in the US," *The Guardian*, Sep 5, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/13/north-korean-defectors-america-reality

[13] Park, 6, 36.

> emerges for the North Korean defectors: Although many come as South Koreans, they now need to assert their North Korean nationality in fomenting their asylum cases. This identity shifting is further complicated by complex race relations in the U.S., which becomes a new ethnicity dilemma to the North Koreans.[14]

Their life-long struggle to survive, does not end simply by arriving in South Korea or the United States. They are regarded as nonexistent in the macro-level discourses in the world, or as beings that exist only with negative influence. They are now cast out to survive through as unwelcomed strangers to this free and prosperous nation.

Now, for North Koreans defectors, as well as other immigrants and refugees, for those who need refuge and hope above all else, American dream disappears like a mirage. Surviving in a capitalist state that proclaimed the value of freedom and prosperity requires a too “expensive” price, with extremely limited resources and support. Soo Youn describes, “The American celluloid dream comes with skyrocketing price tags. North Koreans arrive with little or no experience of bills, rent, and no means to cope with the lack of social services and health insurance that illegal immigrants must navigate.”[15]

Park's interviews with North Koreans also reveal how much they suffer from the culture shock by the system of capitalist society. For the people who grew up in a society where the communal interests take precedence over the interests of individuals, and where there is no chance for social upward mobility, it is hard to grasp the capitalist social structures, where power is allocated and classes are determined by ability and ownership of capital, regardless age, gender, and natural status.[16] Moreover, unlike South Korean immigrants easily settle down and make social achievements, “most North Koreans, as a result of limited education and English, qualify only for low-paying work.” [17] Then, this repeats the harsh reality of classism and discrimination in the Korean immigrant society.

In the qualitative research, “US-Based North Korean Refugees,” which conducted in 2014 by the Bush Institute at the George W Bush Presidential Center, found that they are mostly grateful for the life in the US, but feeling difficult to live outside the Korean immigrant community. Most of respondents said they did not feel fully accepted by the Korean community. They often said they were ignored or pitted.[18]

In addition, Their previous education and traumatic experiences remain post-traumatic stress disorder and still haunt them, as Joo, one of the North Korean refugees living in Los Angeles, said, “I’m wondering: did I commit many sins in a past life to be born in North

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[14] Park 6-7.

[15] Youn, “North Korean Defectors See American Dream Deferred as Reality Sets in the US.”

[16] Park 31, 36.

[17] Jordan, “U.S. Admission of North Korean Defectors Has Slowed to a Trickle.”

[18] “U.S.-based North Korean Refugees: A Qualitative Study - October 2014,” *The George W. Bush Institute at the George W. Bush Presidential Center*, October 2014, 13-14, https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Resources/gwb_north_korea_executive_summary_r4.pdf; Youn, “North Korean Defectors See American Dream Deferred as Reality Sets in the US.”

Korea?"[19] The struggles from traumatic experiences in the past and the stress of adapting to new cultures are repeated in many sources.[20] Although there has never been a quantitative survey conducted on the life of the U.S.-based North Koreans, the researches – both qualitative and quantitative assessments – of the mental health of North Koreans living in South Korea prove that the dangerous situations and emotional issues that North Koreans went through during the escape and settlement processes lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, and depression and even suicide attempts.[21]

I have discussed the treacherous journey of North Korean defection and settlement of the United States. During their settlement in the United States, they often live as undocumented aliens due to complex and long process to receive refugee status. They mainly settled with the help of the Korean immigrant community and the churches, but still feeling alienation and loneliness. Not only are they a minority ethnic group with unique migration experiences in the whole society, they also experience multi-layered discrimination and separation in the South Korean immigrant community. North Koreans have been shown to experience depression and anxiety due to previous traumatic experiences and stress to settle in a completely different capitalist society. Now, it is time to look at what we must do as Christians for the refugees in our community. Clearly, simply welcoming the weary and providing bedding and food to them is not enough.

Toward Abundant Life Together: Exploring the Pedagogy of Coexistence

In her book, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church*, Boyung Lee criticizes the concept of multiculturality which is a leading idea of the current theological education. According to her, while pursuing dialogue that respects

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[19] Youn, "North Korean Defectors See American Dream Deferred as Reality Sets in the US."

[20] See also "U.S.-based North Korean Refugees: A Qualitative Study - October 2014," 6: "I thought I never wanted to go to the United States. I wanted to hit them if I were to meet them… I thought everything [I learned in school in North Korea] was true. When I realized everything was a lie when I came to China, I was in such a state of confusion. Everything I knew for the past 24 years in my mind and heart were all lies. I couldn't believe it. It was so difficult. When my mind was changing, I was so miserable I wanted to die (Female, 33, Hamkyongbukdo, Left NK in 2004, Arrived in US 2006).

[21] Younga Cho, Yeunhee Kim and Shieun You, "Predictors of Mental Health among North Korean defectors residing in South Korea over 7 years," *The Korean Journal of Counseling and Psychotherapy* 21, no. 1 (2009): 329-348; Subin Park, Yeeun Lee and Jin Yong Jun, "Trauma and Depression among North Korean Refugees: The Mediating Effect of Negative Cognition," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15, (March 2018): 1-10; Seul Ki Choi, Seong Joon Min, Myung Sook Cho, Hyojee Joung, and Sang Min Park, "Anxiety and Depression among North Korean Young Defectors in South Korea and Their Association with Health-Related Quality of Life," *Yonsei Medical Journal* 1, no. 52 (May 2011): 502–509.

the diverse cultures and positions of the marginalized, the structure of center-margin is still unbroken in this approach. This multiculturalism only serves to maintain the status quo of the dominant group through dialogue with the surrounding groups.[22]

In response to this notion, Lee suggests the concept of interculturality which places every group on an equal footing to interact with each other in peace and solidarity toward liberating interdependence.[23] Here, this liberating interdependence provides a direction for religious education in this such divided society. In this notion, there is no one dominant group in the center and other marginalized supporting groups for the center. There exist only independent yet interdependent groups in the community.

North Korean refugees in the United States are not the simply people who need help. They are not the people we can simply ignore or exclude from our boundaries. They, as also children of God, reveal God's love and grace to us. To love is to mutually respect. Jesus' teaching to love one another means that we should respect and learn from each other. To ignore and reject refugees around us is to miss the opportunity to learn another world through them and to grow together.

This corresponds to the concept of human being's coexistence presented by HyeRan Kim-Cragg. In her book, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology*, she introduces the relational characteristics of human beings.

> A Korean-Chinese etymology of being human figuratively illustrates this point well. A person "인간," "人 間" (pronounced as InGan in Korean) consists of two words, "人(in)" meaning "a person" and "間"(gan) means "between." The character "人," by depicting two lines leaning on one another, suggests that we are persons by virtue of the fact that we lean on each other. It may be interpreted to mean that people cannot stand alone; we need another to rely on. When we put the two characters, "人," (in) and "間" (gan) together we get "person-between" suggesting that what makes us human are the relationships between us.[24]

In this relational concept of person, there is no individual who can survive without others. Human beings exist only through relationships. If either side is broken, the relationship is not established, and if the relationship is not established, a human being cannot be humane. Here too, there is no structure of the center and the margin. Each individual, each community is equal and worthy, and complete together only through cooperative relationships.

Kim-Cragg introduces another Korean/Chinese term, "'SangSaeng'상생 (相生), literally translated as 'mutual life' or 'co-living' also points to a fundamentally interdependent way of life

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[22] Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), Kindle Location 2243-2294, Kindle.

[23] Ibid., Kindle Location 2294-2310.

[24] HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), Kindle Locations 686-691, Kindle.

together."[25] In this concept, our knowledge and faith have to be lived out in constructive relationship with each other. Rejecting refugees or denying their existence in our community does not make our country stronger. Rather, it destroys human dignity and community values. It is the work of religious education for coexistence, not to survive alone but to live together.

Therefore, the pedagogy of coexistence and mutual transformation should open the door to both directions for the minority refugees, and for the majority. We provide education and proper care for the refugees; and we should teach people how to welcome strangers and to live a "SangSaeng" with each other. We need to teach younger generation growing up with the wall around the country that such action is not the right way to live safe and abundantly.

Boarders do not exist only between countries. It is also in our hearts and minds. Prejudice, fear, and hate that separate and separate the members of society already living with us are the boundaries that we all must overcome. We need each other. Religious education is obliged to teach it, and to be a bridge between broken boundaries.

Soerens and Hwang, in their book *Welcoming the Stranger*, mention that religious organizations should be a prophetic voice in the public square to guide the society to the right direction on immigration and to bridge the divide.[26] They also assert "Advocacy is crucial because transformation should be about the whole of society, by meeting immediate needs but also changing the structures in which society operates."[27] Therefore, religious education for mutual transformation and coexistence takes all encompassing approach for both humanitarian engagement and public and political engagement.

Conclusion: Like the Bridge over the Troubled Water

This education is like tearing down the walls among communities building a bridge between them. As discussed earlier, the pedagogy of coexistence begins with the recognition that the host society and immigrants need each other to create a better society. Beyond the tensions of the majority and the minority, or the powerful and the powerless, we need to teach one another to respect and love. It requires a mindset of "SangSaeng," for a wide range of works to do: from helping individual's settlement to advocacy work urging changes policies.

The Bush Institute's Research on U.S.-based North Korean Refugees points out some key concerns to solve. According to the report, it is urgent to provide more opportunities of language education and vocational trainings. Find ways to support them to acquire mobility and health insurance is also crucial. Additionally, many participants expressed the need of community events with those who share similar background and challenges.[28] Many respondents "said that while they have become involved in Korean or church communities in their own areas, opportunities to connect with other refugees who share their background, experiences, and current challenges are rare. As the North Korean diaspora in the United States is small and

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[25] Ibid., Kindle Location 3274.

[26] Soerens and Hwang, 165-167.

[27] Ibid., 181.

[28] "U.S.-based North Korean Refugees: A Qualitative Study - October 2014," 18-19.

widely dispersed, many of the participants hoped that NGOs or other groups could sponsor events that bring them together with greater regularity."[29]

Such analysis and practical alternatives will be helpful in solving the immediate challenges North Korean refugees face. However, there is no consideration for their emotional burden. As revealed in the survey on mental health of North Koreans in South Korea, it is necessary to investigate more closely the mental issues many North Korean refugees in the US would also deal with, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, and provide appropriate cares. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities to hear voices of the minority communities, including North Korean refugees, in the wider society is also an issue to consider. Therefore, it is necessary to build a bridge and create a space between the groups where they can listen to each other for mutual understanding and transformation.

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[29] Ibid., 19.

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