Once the realm of perception is revolutionized, reality cannot hold out
Hegel

The 1990s were a decade in which people demanded change. Yet in the face of the changes that marked the close of the 20th century, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) appeared extraordinarily recalcitrant, prompting cries of ‘When in heaven’s name are they going to change?’, as if heaven were some sort of guarantor of change. But on the contrary, in the DPRK, heaven is the guarantor of non-change, and the champion of resolute adherence to the order of society that has been formed since the 1950s. Steadfastness is a quality very high on the list of North Korean virtues. I believe my use here of religious metaphor is entirely apt. For a study of its religious policy deals directly with the phenomenon of North Korea, since it relates to the means of cultural monopolization of perception there and throws light on the interrelations of the North Korean system.

I propose to argue that a consideration of North Korea’s religious policy provides a clue to understanding the North Korean polity.

Paradoxical as this might seem, we should not be too surprised by this if we remember that religion may be defined as that which constitutes the way in which humans connect all the otherwise disparate parts of their lives into one meaningful whole. When related to a kind of politics that gives rulers the right and power to determine people’s culture and thought, it is easier to see how this means planning and maintaining an order strictly according to the beliefs about how all these disparate parts are or ought to be connected.

NORTH KOREA’S POLICY ON RELIGION

The 1972 Constitution stipulates in Chapter I, Article 2 that ‘The DPRK relies on the political-ideological unity of the entire people’ and at Chapter IV, Article 54 that ‘Citizens have freedom of faith and freedom of anti-religious propaganda.’

20 The place of religion in North Korean ideology
KENNETH M. WELLS
Kim Il Sung’s Collected Works contain a few brief references to religion, of which the following is a succinct example:

Religion is a kind of superstition. Whether one believes in Jesus or in Buddhism, in essence one is believing in a superstition. Historically, religion fell into the clutches of the ruling class and was used as a tool to deceive the people in order to exploit and oppress them, while in recent times it has been used by the imperialists as an ideological tool to invade the peoples of undeveloped states.²

Apart from this and a few other references that repeat this generalization, there is no publicly disclosed and elaborated religious policy in the DPRK worth speaking of. When religious issues do make their appearance on North Korea’s cultural and political maps, the markings are so faint and unreliable that one hesitates to draw any conclusions.

When visitors inquire about religious matters, the official response used invariably to be the boast that North Korea needs neither churches nor prisons. While this coupling of religious with penal establishments suggests that religion is regarded as a social disease, it also reveals the tendency to ignore religious issues under the pretext that the ‘problem’ of religion has already been solved by its alleged absence from Korean society. Officially, there is no religious question. But such an official position is, of course, the centre-piece of its religious policy.

In many important respects, North Korea’s leaders have taken note of policies in the former Soviet Union, the erstwhile Eastern Bloc and, of course, China. Marx had asserted that religion is ‘the self-awareness of a humanity which has not found itself or has lost itself again’.³ In the Soviet Union, the Party newspaper Pravda carried detailed attacks on religion from the 1920s, a League of Militant Atheists culled religious people from educational institutions, and anti-religious publications rose from 12 million printed pages in 1927 to 800 million in 1930.⁴ In December 1967, Pravda proclaimed that ‘the struggle against religion is not a campaign, not an isolated phenomenon, not a self-contained entity; it is an inseparable component part of the entire ideological activity of Party organizations, an essential link and necessary element in the complex of communist education.’⁵

In China, Mao taught that Chinese people had been oppressed by three authorities – political, clan and religious, criticized Buddhism, Chinese metaphysics, Christianity and Hegel for their denial of dialectical materialism, and authorized a concerted educational campaign against them. Education again was the key, and religious freedom was guaranteed by the letter of the law. But the terms of what was acceptable were such that a religion could not attempt to promote an alternative view of how things held together. In 1954 it was firmly stated in public that ‘safeguarding freedom of religious belief is quite a different matter from safeguarding freedom of counter-revolutionary activities.’⁶ And after the Red Guards closed down all public religious activity in 1966, there was, for a period of fifteen years, practically no official mention of religious policy or practice.

North Korean religious policy has basically followed that of the Red