

HOPES & PROBLEMS OF KOREAN UNIFICATION

In the light of the experience of Germany

Canon Paul Oestreicher

To my regret I am not able to be present at the Anglican consultation taking place hopefully in both Koreas. I offer some thoughts in the light of many years' experience of the two German states which are now once again united. Some lessons may be learned from the German experience. As both an Anglican priest and a graduate in political science I was from 1964-1985 responsible for church relations with eastern Europe in the service of the British Council of Churches. Subsequently I was Director of the Centre for International Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral.

When Hitler's Germany was defeated in 1945 by the Soviet Union and the western allies, a unified German state ceased to exist. Three western zones were ruled by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. An eastern zone was ruled by the Soviet Union. The developing Cold War led to the establishment of two antagonistic states in 1949: the Federal Republic of Germany in the west, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the east. North and South Korea were born in comparable circumstances. Nevertheless the consequent histories differed markedly.

From the outset the German Communist rulers of the GDR who had suffered in Hitler's concentration camps or in exile had to contend with a population that resented Russian occupation. They had to pay reparations for the devastation Germans had caused in Russia. Nevertheless there was enough idealism to create an anti-fascist socialist society and to make the new state a relative success. There were intellectuals to support it, Christians among them. Life in the GDR was economically and in other respects much better than in other European communist ruled states. That did not stop a major exodus of the middle classes to the west. Not until the frontier was hermetically sealed in 1971 did that large-scale exodus cease. The Berlin Wall became the symbol of both the Cold War and of what was in certain respects a captive society.

The Federal Republic, larger and from the outset richer, was given a massive injection of aid from the Marshall Plan. It was an economic success story. This was in part the result of American generosity, in part an expression of the need for a strong ally in the Cold War.

Despite the antagonism, the two Germanys remained in a symbiotic relationship.

Road, rail, postal and telecommunications never ceased.

Travel from west to east was always possible even when not easy. Travel from east to west was also possible for businessmen, sportspeople, church leaders and privileged officials. Latterly western television was the eastern window on the Federal Republic. Church congregations in east and west established partnerships. There were important, though often hidden, economic ties and in the later period diplomatic ties. At the same time huge military forces faced each other across the divide: that was called mutual deterrence.

In contrast, Stalin had given a strong North Korean army the go-ahead in 1950 to take over the whole of Korea. It would have succeeded had not the United States (in UN colours) intervened, which in turn led Chinese "volunteers" to join the North Koreans. A bitter war was fought to a stalemate. Officially peace was never declared. That is a totally different background to the German one. At the same time North Korea took over a Stalinist or Maoist style of rule by personality cult. A god-like father figure (and then his son) shaped North Korean society which, within its own terms, was successful and popular until a collapse of the economy led to widespread poverty and starvation. Religion, to all outward appearances, virtually ceased to exist. A strictly controlled autocratic communist state kept North Korea in almost total isolation.

South Korea was for many years far from stable and went from an early attempt at democracy through dictatorship, military rule and eventually an economically highly successful democratic state, one of Asia's 'tiger economies'. Religion, Buddhist and Christian thrived.

In 1989/90 the whole of communist ruled eastern Europe went into meltdown. The GDR reached such an internal crisis after years of economic stagnation that the pressure of people wanting to leave could no longer be withstood. With the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall the existing order could not be sustained and a democratic government was elected. The peaceful transition, replicated elsewhere in eastern Europe, was in the GDR largely facilitated by the Protestant and Catholic Churches. In essence, however, the GDR had little chance of survival, once the Soviet Union had given up its protective role.

Clearly German unification was in the air. The western politicians and most east Germans wanted unity and wanted it quickly. It happened at breakneck speed. The people who had gone on to the streets in the cities of the GDR, creating a peaceful revolution, carried slogans that said: We are One People. What followed was not in fact unification so much as voluntary annexation of the GDR by the Federal Republic. The regions of the GDR simply became the new states of that Republic.

The result has been a very mixed blessing. Now many people in east and west wish a slower organic process had been chosen, leading to a genuinely new Germany incorporating the half-century of eastern and western experience. The economic discrepancies remain great and, more importantly, although the physical wall of separation has gone, there is still a wall in people's heads. In the east a certain kind of nostalgia has even set in. Only a few would really want the old GDR back but that does not mean that they are happy westerners. Many feel they have been colonised and are judged by how quickly they can adopt western attitudes and become "real" Germans. That is wounding to their

self-esteem.

After a bitter war and virtually total separation the Korean situation is not at all like the German one. Nevertheless the people of both North and South do want their country to be united again. A political collapse in the North does not seem to be imminent and even if it was, a takeover by the South on the German pattern would probably be disastrous. Both the human mind sets and the economies are too radically different. An avalanche of migration from north to south on economic grounds would destabilise the whole peninsula.

What would be needed to prepare for eventual unity would first of all be an end to vilification of the one part by the other. No more propaganda war. Then a very gradual growth of permitted movement and contact. That has already very cautiously begun. Religious people and institutions in the South can help to create a climate that makes reconciliation possible. I would call it the burial of hate.

Most importantly a reordering of the northern economy should now begin. The model surely must be China. As in China the Communist Party could oversee and control it. An existing father figure could even be its inspirer. Autocracy and one party rule can – if the leader or the party want to – make more rapid changes than a parliamentary system. Unity by forcing the North to its knees is not the way to a happy future. A sudden collapse of the North, analogous to the GDR, would cost all Koreans dearly.

Rather a process of growing together could be initiated by both states and underwritten by "godparents", China and the United States. Korea does not live in an international vacuum. What would the process look like? Not exactly the same but not unlike China/Hongkong or even China/Taiwan: One state, two systems and that perhaps for half a century. There might be certain common or at least cooperating institutions on matters like the environment but perhaps also working towards a common security and defence policy. However two administrations would remain intact. A constitutional commission preparing for eventual unity might have a very long life.

The planned cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, long at odds with each other, might give some useful pointers. Importantly in this complex process, neither side should seek to humiliate the other.

Judicial processes leading to the punishment of crimes or perceived crimes by one side or the other in recent Korean history would, I believe, stand in the way of eventual reconciliation. Some kind of non-punitive truth commission might at some stage be creative and helpful.

As for the role of religion in all this, great sensitivity will be needed. Clearly, as greater freedom of expression and of life style reaches the north, religion will resurface as it has in Albania which had officially abolished all religion. The south may help in the process but whatever grows must grow in native soil. A sudden influx of southern or foreign missionaries would be an unhelpful and in effect aggressive invasion. It would be naïve to imagine that most North Koreans are simply waiting to be converted, converted to what? To one of an infinite number of rivalling truths. The result: social disorientation. What religions can do is to help create a climate of forgiveness and tolerance that will ease the hard but rewarding way to unity. God, by whatever name, will be

in the process, incognito.

Canon Paul Oestreicher
The Chaplaincy
University of Sussex
Brighton BN1 9RH
England

Home:97 Furze Croft, Furze Hill
Hove BN3 1PE
England

00441273 728033
paulo@reconcile.org.uk

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