Martyrs in the family: What Seoul and Kampala have in common

by Philip Jenkins in the April 20, 2010 issue

What has Seoul to do with Kampala? In the 1980s, the term “Global South” gained currency as a means of describing those parts of the planet outside the advanced regions of Europe, North America and Japan. Various writers, including myself, noted the dramatic rise of Christian numbers in that vast region.

The problem, of course, is that the whole concept of the Global South is outrageously broad, including as it does some very heavily developed regions, like South Korea, and many countries characterized by cataclysmic poverty and underdevelopment, such as the Congo. We should not use a term as vague as “Global South Christianity” without careful qualification. I tend to use it with the plural and speak of “Christianities.”

Yet it is not ridiculous to compare churches in very dissimilar societies, provided they share significant features that distinguish them from the traditional Christian heartlands. In many African and Asian countries, for instance, churches are largely made up of Christians relatively new to the faith, either first- or second-generation converts, and that characteristic affects styles of worship and faith. Also, across the Global South Christians live alongside numerous members of other faiths, possibly as small minority populations, so that they always have to bear in mind the risk of hostility from these neighbors. Christians bear with them a substantial cultural baggage from these other religions. In these ways, Christians in the newer churches operate on assumptions very different from believers in the U.S. or Germany.

Among these differences, I would stress another one that rarely receives the attention it deserves: African and Asian churches know the concept of martyrdom as a recent historical reality. In North America, congregations might commemorate martyrs through the dedications of their buildings or through liturgies. The martyrs’ sacrifices are remembered in art (St. Andrew’s cross, St. Catherine’s wheel). Normally, though, the martyrs are associated with antiquity, with the world of

headsmen and torturers, of the beasts of the Roman arena. Europe has produced plenty of Christian witnesses in modern times, especially under communist tyrannies, but speaking of martyrs normally evokes a world as distant from us as that of the church fathers.

Not so in the Global South. During the 19th century, Chris tian missions were often associated with the aggressive power of colonial empires, which meant that they were believed to pose a threat to native regimes. Some of these regimes were highly developed states in their own right, with the will and the means to defend themselves against suspect foreign influences. In consequence, the great age of imperial expansion was a dreadful time for Christian believers unlucky enough to live beyond the protection of British gunships or French armies.

Although rarely remembered by Western Christians, Asian and African believers suffered massacres on a vast scale during the 19th century. To take just the most outrageous examples: Korea’s Buddhist-Confucian regime killed 8,000 Catholic Christians. Perhaps 100,000 perished in Buddhist Vietnam, including several hundred priests and nuns. By some accounts, even these holocausts were dwarfed by the mass killings under Madagascar’s Queen Ranavalona. Hundreds more were slaughtered in Uganda in the 1880s. The Japanese occupations of the 20th century added hideous new chapters to the stories of Asian believers.

These experiences—which are widely commemorated locally—have become the foundation on which later churches were built. You cannot comprehend Vietnamese Catholicism except in light of the basilica of La Vang, which commemorates both a Marian apparition and the great martyrdoms.

Such events are accessible to these believers in a way that stories of ancient martyrs are not for Americans. For a modern-day Vietnamese or Ugandan believer, the martyrs are people like them, living in a recognizable style and probably in a town close by. They might even be a direct ancestor, or that of a neighbor. The martyrs are familiar, if not actually family. This fact makes nonsense of any claim that Christianity is a foreign, Western religion imposed by colonialists. How could it be for them, when their great-grandfathers died for it?

Stories of conflict have a political impact. Even societies in which religious leaders strive for good interfaith relations have recollections of injuries suffered in the not too distant past—by the Buddhists of this temple or the Muslims of that town. Stories of persecution always underlie views of contemporary governments in ways that

recall early Christians’ ambivalent attitudes to secular power. However benevolent and democratic a regime may seem today, citizens know what its predecessors were like and what might well happen again. Memories of martyrdom shape faith and conduct. To that extent at least, churches in Seoul do have something in common with those of Kampala.