

## Personality Cults

Looking at the images of thousands of wailing mourners at the recent funeral of Kim Jung-Il was thought-provoking and vaguely embarrassing. The CBC received no shortage of cynical comments, echoed by my son-in-law who's currently teaching English in South Korea. Look at their faces, he said – they're dry.

Still, whether it's out of love or fear, the enormous power of a personality cult, and the numbers involved here, was a shocker. It highlights one reason people are scared of religion, since religion seems to have the same power, and the numbers can be even greater. While I'm not trying to insult the world's religions by calling them personality cults, it's instructive to see the similarities and differences.

North Korea, in theory, has no religion. It's officially atheist. Has the tendency to (or tradition of) worship just been transferred to the dear leader? Are we hard-wired for this behavior? Is it part of human nature to seek out someone or something to adore?

There is no other force in history to rival the power of religion to unify people, to create systems of morality, to initiate civilizations and transform the way people look at not just themselves but each other and life itself.

I'm wondering if, on the other hand, there's any force that can be as destructive. Neither Stalin nor Hitler acted in the name of religion, although both acted in the name of their respective ideologies. Millions perished. The fervor inspired resembled that of a personality cult. Wars and acts of terrorism done in the name of religion have also been brutal, although not quite so effective.

So where does this leave us in our thinking about the real or apparent hysteria we saw in North Korea?

I would think it true that we, as a species, are predisposed to worship. It obviously isn't conducive to violence to worship a Creator identified or defined in many religions as the essence of Love and Truth. The problem is the worship of anything and anybody other than this.

For some it may be a leader or an ideology, for others it may be money. It can also be a little trickier than that in the gray areas – which may be why many religions, in their infancy, forbade images, especially those of their Founders. Images, like preconceived ideas or engrained traditions, have a tendency to become dangerously false. They lose their reference points and become things in themselves.

I belong to one of the youngest traditions, the Bahá'í Faith, which is no different than its predecessors in the sense that worship of God alone (as defined above) is acceptable. At any other point in my life, the term "idol worship" barely made sense to me, so long and powerful is that notion of exclusivity. And yet there, in the television's high definition image, was evidence of that ancient tendency of human beings to both demand worship and to be given it.

If it's vaguely uncomfortable, maybe that's why?