

## Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction

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**ABSTRACT:** Blaming epidemics on unpopular religious minorities, which served as scapegoats, has been common in past centuries. It is happening again with the COVID-19 crisis, in various countries: the more unpopular the minority is, the more severe is the blame. Shincheonji, which was accused of spreading the virus in South Korea after one of its female members was infected, is a case in point. Although it did commit mistakes in its handling of the crisis, accusations that it supplied to the authorities incomplete or false lists of its members, or refused to cooperate, have been recognized as false by South Korea's Deputy Minister of Health and Chief Prosecutor. The campaign against Shincheonji, however, continues, driven by Christian counter-cult opposition and by some politicians' electoral interests.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, COVID-19 2020 Epidemics in South Korea, COVID-19 and Religion, Coronavirus and Religion, Shincheonji, Lee Man Hee.

*Epidemics, scapegoats, and religion*

Looking for scapegoats is historically common in times of epidemics. Often, these scapegoats are identified with unpopular religious minorities. During the Black Death epidemics of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, Jews were accused of intentionally spreading the plague out of their alleged hatred for the Christian majority. Thousands were lynched or burned at stake. In the city of Strasbourg, France, only, on February 14, 1349, 2,000 Jews were burned for their supposed plague-spreading crimes (Gottfried 1983, 74).

In 1545, during the rule of John Calvin (1509–1564) in Geneva, religious dissidents were blamed for an outbreak of the plague, and at least 29 were executed (Naphy 2003, 90–1). Catholics in Protestant countries and Protestants in Catholic countries continued to be executed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century under accusation of plague-spreading (Naphy 2002). As late as 1630 in Milan, practitioners of forms of folk religion easily mistaken for witchcraft were among those accused of spreading the plague, and some were executed (Nicolini 1937)—a story well-known in Italy as it was mentioned in the country’s national novel, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873).

It is not surprising that during the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic, religious minorities found themselves accused of spreading the virus through their gatherings and missionary activities. In France, the evangelical megachurch Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (Christian Open Door) was accused for an international event that gathered more than 3,000 persons in Mulhouse from February 17 to 21, 2020. Reportedly, African participants took the virus to several African countries, and hundreds of French devotees were infected as well. Porte Ouverte reported that, after the accusations, children were insulted in their schools and church members were beaten in the street. The megachurch admitted the gathering might have contributed to spreading the virus, but claimed it has been “scapegoated” and noted that before February 21, no restrictions existed for public events, and on February 18 thousands had gathered in the same city of Mulhouse to welcome the visiting French President Emmanuel Macron, with no restrictions or precautions (Lindell 2020).

In Italy, the Roman Catholic Neo-Catechumenate movement was accused by the Governor of the Region of Campania and some media of having irresponsibly spread the virus through “mystical rites,” and threatened with criminal actions,

because of retreats it organized in two towns of the province of Salerno, Atena Lucana and Sala Consilina, respectively from February 28 to March 1 and on March 4, 2020. 16 participants to the gatherings were infected, and two died, including a priest (Iurillo 2020, Cernuzio 2020). In this case also, the Neo-Catechumenate answered that the ban on public gatherings was introduced in Italy only on March 8, and both the local bishop and the bishop of the diocese most of the participants came from stated that the movement was being unfairly scapegoated (Cernuzio 2020). On February 29, without objections by the Governor, some 25,000 had gathered in Naples, Campania's capital, to see the local soccer team defeat Torino F.C. (Guerrera 2020).

In India, the Muslim missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat was accused of spreading the virus through a large gathering it held in Delhi in early March and the wanderings of its travelling missionaries. The Chief Minister of the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, accused missionaries to misbehave in the hospitals to which they had been admitted, and called the Tablighi “enemies of the humanity” (Dongare, Pandey and Gosh 2020). While the hospital incidents should be obviously investigated, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is a Hindu cleric well-known for his inflammatory anti-Muslim statements (Barry 2017). A campaign developed in India claiming that the Tablighi were consciously infecting Hindus with what was called “coronajihad” or “TablighiJammatVirus,” using fake videos and more than 300,000 posts on Twitter in a few days (Perrigo 2020).

In California, Bethany Slavic Missionary Church, an independent Russian-speaking Pentecostal congregation in Sacramento, received similar criticism after 71 of its members were infected. Again, public gatherings were forbidden in Sacramento only after the event leading to the infection of church members (Chabria, Greene and Lin 2020). Several other similar cases involving Evangelical churches occurred in the United States (Paris 2020) and in Brazil (Meyerfield 2020), as well as in South Korea, independently from the Shincheonji incident (Yonap News Agency 2020). One of the most well-known Pentecostal ministers in the United States, South-African-born Rodney Howard-Browne, even went to jail in Tampa, Florida, accused of having spread the virus through his packed, emotional services (Paris 2020). As late as March 22, “hundreds of South Korean Protestant churches” were continuing with their

worship, despite governmental advice not to do so (Yonap News Agency 2020), while Shincheonji had stopped its services on February 18.

There are probably several hundreds of such examples throughout the world. It is of course true that religious gatherings, pilgrimages, and processions may be dangerous in times of epidemics, as are all other mass events, including soccer games, and may contribute to spreading viruses. It is also the case that some Protestant conservative and fundamentalist churches in the United States openly defied state or municipal lockdown orders and hold services illegally (Paris 2020). In other incidents, however, religious organizations made the same mistake as organizers of soccer games and other public events did. They hold their services and paid a price in human lives. But they did not breach any law, as long as the laws still (mistakenly, as it was discovered later) allowed public events to proceed.

The question, thus, is why religious organizations received more public blame than other groups. The Champions League game between the Italian team Atalanta and the Spanish team Valencia of February 19, 2020, was called a “biological bomb,” likely responsible for thousands of deaths among the 44,000 fans who gathered in Milan and those who were infected by them (Hope 2020). Yet, nobody called for sanctions against the European soccer federation UEFA, which insisted the game should be played. On the other hand, there were suggestions that religious groups that gathered in the same days should be punished, and even disbanded.

But not *all* religious groups. As scapegoating theories would predict, the virus was the opportunity for singling out already unpopular religious organizations. Muslim activists are unpopular among India’s Hindu majority. In France, Pentecostals and other Christians that are not perceived as “really” included in the mainline of the “historical” Protestant churches had long been at risk of being attracted into the frequent governmental campaigns against “cults” (Palmer 2011, 16 and 220). The *Los Angeles Times*, in singling out Bethany Slavic Missionary Church for its behavior in the early days of the epidemics, noted it was unpopular for its “anti-gay rhetoric” and because one of its lay members was convicted of pedophilia in 2018 (Chabria, Greene and Lin 2020: what this has to do with the epidemics is unclear). The Neo-Catechumenate movement has a sizable share of critics in Italy, including among fellow Catholics, both for its conservative morals and creative, progressive liturgy (Magister 2012).

In short, religious groups are scapegoated in a crisis if they already have an organized opposition, ready to use the crisis as an opportunity. This happened to Shincheonji, whose opponents are discussed in the articles by Šorytė and Fautré in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, during the COVID-19 crisis in South Korea.

### *Shincheonji, Suffering, and Illness*

When the coronavirus crisis erupted, we read all sort of comments on Shincheonji's theological positions about suffering and illness, ranging from the simply inaccurate to the outward silly. One problem is that most journalists who wrote about Shincheonji were obviously not familiar with Christian theology in general. They regarded as unique to Shincheonji theories about why humans suffer and die that are shared by millions of Christians. An otherwise authoritative magazine declared Shincheonji's view of suffering "bad theology" (Park 2020). The word "ridiculous" was also liberally used for theological statements by Shincheonji that American reporters, in particular, might have easily encountered by simply attending a Sunday service in the Evangelical church next door, statements dozens of American senators and even politicians on higher positions would agree with.

Indeed, what is distinctive about Shincheonji's theology of human suffering is that it is not distinctive. Certainly, other theological ideas of Shincheonji are original and far away from the Christian mainline, including that Chairman Lee is the promised pastor who will lead humanity into the Millennium, and that some of the events announced in the Book of Revelation already happened in South Korea (see Introvigne, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). But this is not true for Chairman Lee's teachings about suffering. They are shared by most conservative Protestant churches throughout the world.

Chairman Lee teaches that, as we read in the Bible, God did not want humans to suffer, get sick, and die. We can discover the source of these evils by reading the story of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the *Book of Genesis*, the first book of the Bible. God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruits of this tree in the Garden of Eden. Seduced by the Devil, the first progenitors did eat these fruits. Consequently, suffering, sickness, and death entered the world. While some conservative and fundamentalist Christians would insist that this story

should be intended literally, Chairman Lee teaches that “the fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil are clearly not real fruits,” and “eating” them means “listening to and accepting Satan’s teachings,” which lead to perform the evil deeds that God regards as sins (Lee M. 2014, 94–5).

What happened in the Garden of Eden, Chairman Lee teaches, had dramatic consequences for all human history. Until the full restoration of God’s original covenant with humanity, we will continue to suffer and die. There is, however, hope. The *Book of Revelation* announces the Millennium, a world where there will be no illness, no suffering, no death. Those who will enter the Millennium will finally be liberated from these evils. These teachings are also common to many conservative Protestant churches.

While the events leading to this glorious conclusion have already started unfolding (Lee M. 2014, 251), clearly, we have not yet entered the Millennium. Until the Millennium comes, the movement teaches, we continue to get sick and die, and this also applies to members of Shincheonji. While in the Millennium there will be no illness, for the time being we still get sick, and we need help in the shape of assistance, hospitals, and doctors. Some media confused Shincheonji’s hope in a *future* Millennium where illness will disappear with the *present* attitude of Shincheonji members toward illness.

Those of us who have studied Shincheonji have had the experience of meetings with its members postponed because they should visit a doctor or a dentist. When the crisis hit, Korean media discovered with some surprise that there are indeed Shincheonji members who *work* in the hospitals. HWPL donates relief money to support hospitals and medical care when disasters such as earthquakes and flood hit developing countries. Like all Christians, and indeed most devotees of all religions, Shincheonji members believe that prayer helps in time of sickness, if not by healing at least by helping the sick to live their painful experience with calm, patience, and hope. In some circumstances, sickness can be an *opportunity* for spiritual growth. But we never encountered in Shincheonji the idea that healthy Christians should *seek* illness and suffering to further their spiritual progress, a rare idea within Christianity, and one that was promoted by some within baroque 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism and promptly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church (de Certeau 1982). Shincheonji comes from a Protestant matrix, which is far away from a certain Catholic mysticism of suffering and its unorthodox excesses.

It has also been argued that by sitting on the floor next to each other rather than on chairs or pews, Shincheonji members hold their services in uniquely unhygienic conditions, more conducive to spreading bacteria and viruses. In fact, this also happens in several other religions. Most Islamic mosques and Buddhist or Hindu temples do not have chairs or pews either.

### *Shincheonji and the Virus: Patient 31*

The first case of coronavirus was detected in South Korea on January 20, 2020, when a Chinese woman who flew from Wuhan to Seoul was tested positive upon her arrival at Incheon Airport and quarantined (Reuters 2020). Shincheonji became involved in the crisis in the early morning of February 18, when a female Shincheonji member from the church's Daegu congregation identified as Patient 31 tested positive (unreferenced details in this and the following paragraph come from Skype interviews with members of Shincheonji and others in Korea in February and March, 2020).

Patient 31 was later blamed for not submitting to the test before. Some Korean media reported that she refused the test twice. She told a different story. On February 7, she was admitted to Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital for a minor car accident and shortly thereafter started showing symptoms of cold. The X-ray results showed she had pneumonia, but according to Patient 31 the hospital did not mention COVID-19 as a possibility to her, nor suggested a test. With permission for the hospital to go out, she attended a church service. Only the following week, after her symptoms worsened, a test for COVID-19 was recommended on February 17, and she accepted to be tested, was found positive, and quarantined. That, when quarantined, she started screaming and assaulted the nurse in charge in the hospital, was reported by some media but denied by both Patient 31 and the nurse.

Although speculations abound, at the time of his writing there is no clear evidence of how Patient 31 was infected. Some claim that she was infected by fellow Shincheonji members from China, or specifically, from Wuhan. The latter theory is unlikely to be true, considering that since 2018, due to opposition by the Chinese authorities, Shincheonji has not organized any gathering or worship services in Wuhan, although there are members there who keep in touch via the Internet. It is, however, true that from December 1, 2019, 88 Chinese

Shincheonji members (none of them from Wuhan) entered South Korea. On February 21, 2020, Shincheonji submitted to the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention a list of these Chinese members and their movements. None of them had visited Daegu. On the other hand, there was no prohibition for Chinese visitors in general to enter Daegu. Shincheonji points out that a large group of Chinese students in school trip had visited Daegu prior to Patient 31's first hospitalization.

There is no evidence that Patient 31 was aware that she was infected by the virus before she was tested. Allegations that she was offered a test before and refused may well be attempts by personnel at Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital to defend themselves after it became obvious that theirs was a tragical mistake. Had Patient 31's symptoms been recognized before as deriving from COVID-19, rather than from a common cold, she would have been quarantined on time. Instead, she was able to attend a Shincheonji service, thus setting in motion a chain of events that eventually infected thousands of Shincheonji members.

After Patient 31 tested positive, Shincheonji church members were massively tested for COVID-19, which resulted in many confirmed cases. This gave the Korean media the opportunity to start a campaign against Shincheonji as a "secretive cult" that endangered public health.

One event that Patient 31 did not attend was the funeral of the elder brother of Chairman Lee, who died at Cheongdo Daenam Hospital on January 31, 2020. Rumors that she attended the funeral were denied by herself and Shincheonji, and even hostile media admitted there is no evidence that she did. The funeral issue is not crucial, as Shincheonji does not deny that Patient 31 infected other Shincheonji members. The only controversial matter is whether Patient 31 accepted to be tested for the virus the first time the test was proposed, as she claims, or only when the request was reiterated for the third time, as claimed by the doctors at Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital—who at any rate could have placed her in forced quarantine before February 18, but didn't.

Even more important is how Shincheonji reacted to the crisis. It is not true that Shincheonji was not concerned about the epidemics. On January 25, and again on January 28, Shincheonji's leadership issued orders that no Shincheonji members who had recently arrived from China to South Korea should be allowed to attend church services.



Shincheonji's leaders in Daegu learned that Patient 31 was infected at 9 a.m. on February 18. The same day, Shincheonji closed all its centers in Daegu, and recommended that all its members there avoid also private gatherings and meetings, and went into self-quarantine. Later in the day, orders were issued to close all churches and mission centers throughout South Korea, and services continued only via the Internet. Shincheonji also suspended services and events abroad on February 22 and all forms of meetings, activities or gatherings in all countries on February 26.

On February 19, South Korean President Moon Jae-In stated that the government needed a full list of members of Shincheonji, and the most controversial phase of the crisis started.

### *The Lists: Did Shincheonji Cooperate with the Authorities?*

It is not surprising that fundamentalists, who have operated for years anti-Shincheonji groups such as the so-called National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji Church, have collected signatures and filed suits asking for the dissolution of Shincheonji after the virus crisis. They simply hope that the virus may succeed where they consistently failed, i.e. in putting a halt to the growth of Shincheonji and to the movement's annoying (for them) habit of converting their own members. It is also not very surprising that leaders of non-fundamentalist Christian churches joined their voices to the attacks against Shincheonji. They have also seen their members converting to Shincheonji during the years, and such kind of competition is never welcome.

What is surprising, however, is that politicians at various levels, from city authorities to cabinet ministers, have also supported proposals to de-register Shincheonji as a religion (and even HWPL, a humanitarian and peace organization chaired by Chairman Lee, which is technically not a religious organization: see Šorytè, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), raid its churches, and file criminal lawsuits against its leaders, including Chairman Lee. When the crisis hit, South Korea was awaiting general elections in April 2020, and scapegoating an already unpopular group was a convenient way for some politicians to distract attention from their own mistakes in handling the virus crisis. Fundamentalists, who hate Shincheonji, are a sizeable bloc of voters, and they had succeeded in creating a diffuse hostility against the movement. Candidly,

the Korean Minister of Justice admitted that there was no legal precedent for measures against Shincheonji, but she would consider adopting them because polls showed they were supported by 86% of South Korean citizens (Shim 2020). Acting against a minority based on polls seems strange in a democracy, but the incident illustrates the level of anti-Shincheonji moral panic in South Korea.

Of what, exactly, Shincheonji was accused? There was considerable confusion in both Korean and international media. An old laundry list of accusations against “cults” was repeated—brainwashing, breaking families, and even misinterpreting the Bible—and mixed up with allegations that Shincheonji “did not cooperate” with the authorities.

Whatever the truth about Patient 31 and her tests, clearly Shincheonji cannot be held responsible for her dealings with the hospital authorities. Individual Shincheonji members have also been accused of hiding their affiliation with the movement when asked in schools and workplaces, and a “Deceptive Response Manual” instructing Daegu members how to credibly deny that they belong to Shincheonji was published by some media. According to Shincheonji, the “Manual” was compiled by an individual member who, when the text became known to the local church leaders in Daegu, was reprimanded and referred to a disciplinary committee for having violated the church’s instructions to cooperate with the authorities. Disclosing that one is a member of Shincheonji may have catastrophic consequences in South Korea, and that some tried to hide their affiliation is not surprising. Members identified as such have been ridiculed, beaten, and fired from their jobs. Yet, within the context of the virus crisis, Shincheonji’s instructions to members are to accept all requests by the authorities.

The basis of the allegation that Shincheonji did not fully cooperate with the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) after February 18 is that it did not entirely comply with the KCDC’s request to obtain full lists of the movement’s members. Establishing what exactly happened is thus important.

Although some religious organizations are better than others in keeping records of their members, we do not know of any organization that has complete lists of all its devotees, with their current addresses and with no omissions nor mistakes. Huge computers in the Vatican with the names and addresses of all Catholics in the world exist only in novels. Members may become inactive and move without telling their church of their new addresses. In Shincheonji, one may

also be a member of a church in one city while residing in another city, perhaps because he or she has friends there.

When President Moon himself stated that the government needed a list of all Shincheonji members, the movement started compiling lists, starting from Daegu. National lists were handed in six days from the request, on February 25. Controversies, however, had started even before.

In one province, it was alleged that there were two lists with a different number of members, and this was taken as evidence of Shincheonji's lack of cooperation. Soon, it came out that one included the children of members, and the other didn't.

The government objected that the list of February 25 included less members than those mentioned in Shincheonji's official statistics. But the latter also count foreign members, and Shincheonji had understood that the KCDC needed only data about members in South Korea. Why exactly Korean authorities need to know the names of Shincheonji members in Europe or North America is unclear but, when they asked for the lists of foreign members, they received them as well.

The main problem concerned "students," which is the name Shincheonji uses for those who are not members of the church but attend courses and other activities in the mission centers and may (or may not) one day join the church. Shincheonji had records of 54,176 such "students" in South Korea and 10,951 abroad. It also had serious privacy concerns about them. Notwithstanding the promises of the authorities, some lists of members had been leaked to the media. This was bad enough, but if one becomes a member of Shincheonji in South Korea (not necessarily abroad), he or she is aware of the risks this involves. The same is not true for "students." In fact, they may evaluate the risks and decide *not* to join—and of course the risks are higher now after anti-Shincheonji hostility peaked with the virus crisis. Shincheonji's hesitation in disclosing the names of "students" was thus understandable. It is also understandable that health authorities believed that those who had attended Shincheonji centers were all equally at risk to be infected, be they members or "students." On February 27, the KCDC formally requested the list of "students," and undertook to assume legal responsibility for any possible breach of privacy and related consequences. The list was handed the same day.

All this work involved communicating to the government lists involving some 300,000 names and addresses. That the exercise might have been entirely free of mistakes was beyond human possibilities, but the mistakes the authorities found do not indicate bad faith by Shincheonji.

Opponents took the opportunity to tell the media that there should be somewhere lists of those Shincheonji members who attend other Christian churches without disclosing their Shincheonji affiliation in an endeavor to make friends there and proselytize. The practice is discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, but Shincheonji's position is that, no matter what they are currently doing, if they are members of Shincheonji they should be registered as such with one of the tribes.

Parallel problems concerned the government's request of a full list of real estate owned or rented by Shincheonji. This, again, was less simple than it may seem. Real estate is owned or rented by a variety of different legal entities, some of them connected with Shincheonji's headquarters and others with one of the twelve tribes. Shincheonji supplied initially a list of 1,100 properties, which the authorities objected to as being incomplete. They also complained that some addresses were wrong, and in fact further investigation by Shincheonji found that 23 of the listed properties had been shut down. Later, Shincheonji reported that the total number of properties owned or rented was 1,903, including the 23 shut down, but this number included parcels of land, warehouses, and private houses and shops owned and rented that were not used by Shincheonji members for any gathering or meeting.

### *Conclusion: Criminal Negligence or Scapegoating?*

On March 2, 2020, Chairman Lee held a press conference, in which he apologized for the mistakes Shincheonji might have committed and even knelt before the reporters. For those of us who have interviewed him, and no doubt much more for the members, the sight of an 89-year-old religious leader kneeling in front of a crowd including people who had vilified and slandered him for years was deeply moving. It may also be misinterpreted. In our Western mindset, leaders rarely apologize, and we tend to believe that, when they do, they should really be guilty. But the East Asian tradition is different. Leaders take

responsibility for their subordinates, and a leader is appreciated if he or she shows humility.

Did Shincheonji make mistakes? Chairman Lee's answer was yes. The rhetoric of his press conference should be understood, yet, for all the practical problems we mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is also possible that Shincheonji was slow to realize the magnitude of the crisis, which went well beyond Patient 31 and threatened its very existence and future, as well as the public health of millions of Koreans. Probably some mistakes and delays in compiling lists and working with the authorities could not have been avoided, but others were avoidable.

Mistakes, however, should not be confused with crimes. Shincheonji could have answered some requests of the authorities in a quicker and better way, but it operated under extreme pressure and in very difficult circumstances. South Korean vice-minister of Health, Kim Kang-lip, told the media that, “no evidence has been found that Shincheonji supplied missing or altered lists,” and that between the lists collected and checked by the government and those supplied by Shincheonji “there were only minor differences,” which could be explained with different ways of counting members, and whether minor children of members were included or not (Lee M. 2020).

As reported by local media in South Korea,

After the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters conducted an administrative probe into the Shincheonji headquarters in Gwacheon on March 5, digital forensics agents from the Supreme Prosecutors' Office assisted with the analysis of data retrieved from the Shincheonji server—such as the list of adherents and the church's app and fingerprint recognition records, which indicate who attended its worship services. Shincheonji followers need to scan their fingerprints or QR codes on their app in order to enter the chapel, and all the data is automatically saved in the system. Investigators compared the data they obtained from the server at the Shincheonji headquarters in Gwacheon with what they received from the sect, and found “no meaningful differences” between the two, according to sources (Kim 2020).

Despite the fact that “Gyeonggi Governor Lee Jae-myung stormed into the residence of the church's leader in the middle of the night to snatch a full list of its followers in the province,” and “even boasted of his ‘heroic feat’ on social media,” no discrepancies were found there either (Lee H. 2020). It is another indication of the climate prevailing in South Korea that the Justice Minister and the Mayor of Seoul, who had both jumped on the anti-Shincheonji bandwagon prior to the elections, rather than accepting that by comparing the lists supplied

by Shincheonji and those seized by the authorities no significant discrepancies had emerged, attacked and threatened South Korea's chief prosecutor Yoon Seok-youl (already at odds with them for having investigated corruption in their party) for being "soft" on Shincheonji (Kim 2020).

At the time of this writing, the campaign against Shincheonji continues, although it is increasingly criticized by media both outside (Rashid 2020) and inside (Lee H. 2020) South Korea. In a document published in March 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan body whose members are appointed by the President of the United States and the congressional leaders of both political parties, noted that Shincheonji was suffering

harassment from the South Korean government and society. Although some government measures appeared to be driven by legitimate public health concerns, others appeared to exaggerate the church's role in the outbreak. The government of Seoul locked down Shincheonji churches in the capital, and some mainline Protestant groups have accused the church of deliberately spreading the disease. Local prosecutors are investigating criminal charges against Lee Man-hee for homicide by "willful negligence." USCIRF has received reports of individuals encountering discrimination at work and spousal abuse because of their affiliation with the church. Meanwhile, a petition to ban the church has received more than 1.2 million signatures. Despite this, Vice Minister of Health Kim Kang-lip has publicly stated that the Shincheonji church has cooperated with authorities (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020b, 3).

One of the most distinguished East Asian sociologists of religions, Yang Fenggang, offered a rare voice of common sense when he told the *South China Morning Post* that,

I think there is no necessary link between Shincheonji and coronavirus spread in South Korea. It is accidental that this large religious group happened to have some infected people who infected others through religious gatherings or individual interactions. There are many megachurches in South Korea, some are huge, with hundreds of thousands of members. Any of these evangelical or Pentecostal megachurches could have had such an accident (Lau 2020).

As for the individual members of Shincheonji who did not volunteer to disclose their affiliation with the movement until the authorities arrived at them through the list, tried to hide it to the bitter end notwithstanding the movement's instruction called for cooperation, and may thus in some cases have delayed their virus testing, before judging their behavior one should consider that they were risking their jobs.

And perhaps their lives. In Ulsan, on February 26, a Shincheonji female member died after falling from a window on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the building where she lived. The incident occurred where her husband, who had a history of domestic violence, was attacking her and trying to compel her to leave Shincheonji (Moon 2020). At the time of this writing, the police are investigating possible foul play. A parallel “fall from a window” was classified as “suicide.”

These lethal incidents are just the tip of an iceberg. Discriminations against members of Shincheonji continue to grow, and the movement has reported some 6,000 cases of intolerance. Being identified as a member of Shincheonji leads to the serious risk of being harassed, bullied, beaten, or fired from one’s job. For the opponents, the virus is the opportunity for a “final solution” of the “problem” of Shincheonji.

We wholeheartedly subscribe to the appeal of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which

is concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members are being blamed for the spread of the #coronavirus. We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020a).

The virus cannot be an excuse to violate the human rights and religious liberty of hundreds of thousands of believers.

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