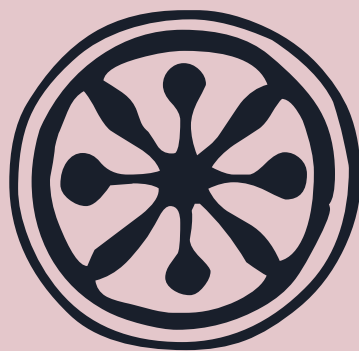

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and Marco Respinti*

Shincheonji: An Introduction

Massimo Introvigne
CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)
maxintrovigne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Thousands of media articles were published throughout the world about a Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, after one of its members was infected with the virus responsible for COVID-19. This set in motion a chain of events leading to thousands of her co-religionists being infected, and to an unprecedented assault against Shincheonji by Christian counter-cultists and some politicians. Most of these articles were hastily written, and included serious mistakes about the history and theology of Shincheonji. The article deals with the emergence of Shincheonji within the context of Korean Christian new religious movements, and discusses its main doctrines and practices.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, Lee Man Hee, COVID-19 Epidemics in South Korea, South Korea Christian New Religious Movements.

Lee Man Hee and Shincheonji: A Short History

Reporters who had never heard its name before discovered overnight a South Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji) on February 19, 2020. At that date, news spread that one of its members in Daegu, South Korea, had been infected with COVID-19. She had been wrongly released from the hospital after having been diagnosed with a common cold, and allowed to participate in her religion's gatherings. This set in motion a chain of events that resulted in thousands of her co-religionists testing positive to the virus, and a media and political outcry against the "secretive cult" allegedly responsible for the spread of the epidemics in South Korea. Few articles about Shincheonji were

accurate, and some spread, based on hostile or low-level Internet sources, what can only be called fake news. Few independent scholars had studied Shincheonji before the COVID-19 crisis, and even fewer had interviewed his founder, Lee Man Hee. I am part of this small minority, and had written the first English-language monographic account of Shincheonji, in the shape of an entry for the online encyclopedia *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, on which this article is largely based (Introvigne 2019).

Accounts by outsiders and by insiders about the origins of Shincheonji, as it often happens in the world of religions, may present the same events in different terms, depending on whether they are told from the emic point of view of the members or the secular perspective of outside observers. The emic story, in turn, cannot be ignored by scholars, as it offers crucial elements on the self-perception of the members. We learn from emic accounts, and may identify what in each tradition devotees regard as essential, which may well coincide with what makes a new religion successful (Stark and Finke 2000, 257–58).

Lee Man Hee was born on September 15, 1931, at Punggak Village, Cheongdo District, North Gyeongsang Province, Korea (now South Korea). In 1946, he was among the first graduates of Punggak Public Elementary School after the Japanese left Korea. Lee did not receive any higher education, but is proud of his level of knowledge and understanding of all books in the Bible, which he attributes to revelations he received from Heaven.

Lee started his life of faith by praying fervently with his grandfather, who was a devout Christian (Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 3–4; I also rely on personal interviews with members of Shincheonji conducted in Seoul and Gwacheon in March and June 2019, including one with Chairman Lee in Gwacheon on June 6, 2019; I interviewed again Chairman Lee, together with other scholars, on December 2, 2019). Lee served in the South Korean Army's 7th Infantry Division during the Korean War and, when the war ended, settled in his native village of Hyeonri-ri, Punggak-Myeon, Gyeongsang Province as a farmer. He later reported that he started experiencing visions and revelations from divine messengers and from Jesus himself. For ten years, between 1957 and 1967, he participated in the religious activities of the Olive Tree, founded in 1955 by Park Tae-seon (1915–1990), which had a religious village in Sosa District, Bucheon, Gyeonggi Province, and was at that time the most successful Christian new religious movement in Korea,

with an estimated 1,500,000 followers. Although repeatedly arrested and tried for fraud, Park managed to achieve what many regarded as a phenomenal success (Moos 1964, 1967).

During the 1960s, Park's message evolved into a direction that positioned the Olive Tree far away from traditional Christianity. He started claiming that he was God incarnate and had a position higher than Jesus Christ (Kim 2007, 222–23). The number of members rapidly decreased, and several senior pastors and laypersons left the Olive Tree, including Lee.

In 1966, under the leadership of Yoo Jae Yul (b. 1949), eight people (seven “messengers” and one “elder”) gathered on the Cheonggye Mountain, where they remained for 100 days, feeling they were learning the Bible guided by the Holy Spirit. Following what they believed was the will of God, they established the Tabernacle Temple. Lee was among its first members.

The seven “messengers” had not received a formal theological education, but their sermons appeared as persuasive to many who gathered around the Tabernacle Temple. However, corruption and divisions soon developed. Yoo was arrested for fraud. In first degree, in 1976, he was sentenced to five years in prison, but his sentence was shortened to two and a half years with four years probation on appeal (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1976; *Kyunggyang Shinmun* 1976).

Giving voice to many members, Lee wrote to the seven denouncing the corruption prevailing in the Temple and calling them to repent. As a result, he was repeatedly threatened and beaten, until he gave up his attempts at reforming the Temple. The Tabernacle Temple, in the meantime, had collapsed.

In 1980, when General Chun Doo-hwan (b. 1931) led a military coup and became President of South Korea, the government launched an anti-cult campaign known as the “religious purification policy” (part of a broader program of “society purification”). An institution called the Stewardship Education Center, originally created to educate pastors in the mainline Christian churches, joined the “purification” movement and coordinated the churches’ action against the “cults.” In order to avoid the consequences of the anti-cult campaign, Oh Pyeong Ho, an evangelist of the Tabernacle who had a certificate as pastor from the Presbyterian Church, was appointed as the new head of the Tabernacle, replacing Yoo. Oh introduced the Stewardship Education Center into the Tabernacle, which eventually caused the whole of the Tabernacle to merge into

the Presbyterian Church, with all its members and assets. Yoo willingly gave up his position as leader of the Tabernacle, and eventually left for the United States in the late 1980s, claiming he will study theology there, and escaped dangerous accusations of being a “cult” leader by the Korean authoritarian government.

Lee continued to visit the Tabernacle Temple when the latter was in the process of joining the Presbyterian Church. He denounced the corruption prevailing in the Temple to its members. Having listened to his testimony, several members came out of the Temple and followed Lee. With them, Lee founded his own separate organization, Shincheonji (“New Heaven and New Earth”) on March 14, 1984. Since then, Lee continued to expose the corruption of the Temple and what he believed to be the destructive role performed by the Stewardship Education Center. Finally, the Stewardship Education Center closed its doors in 1990.

All these events, according to Shincheonji, were not coincidental, and represented the fulfillment of key prophecies in the *Book of Revelation* (Lee 2014, 176–278). The Cheonggye Mountain in Gwacheon, Shincheonji argues, is the location where these prophecies were physically fulfilled, and for this reason God commanded Lee to join the Tabernacle Temple. As foretold in the Book of Revelation, first seven stars and seven lampstands (corresponding to the seven angels of the seven churches, *Revelation* 1:20: the seven leaders of the Tabernacle, whose representative was Yoo) appeared, then the heretic “Nicolaites” (*Revelation* 2:6 and 15: those in the Tabernacle Temple who corrupted the doctrine), seven destroyers (the Presbyterian pastors, some of them associated with the Stewardship Education Center, or the destroyers of the Tabernacle from outside), led by “a beast coming out of the sea” (*Revelation* 13), a “great prostitute” (*Revelation* 17: Tak Myeong Hwan as the head of the Center), and a “chief destroyer” (*Revelation* 13 and 17: Oh Pyeong Ho, the destroyer of the Tabernacle from inside, described as “the beast coming out of the earth” of *Revelation* 13 and the “eighth king” of *Revelation* 17). Finally, the “one who overcomes” manifested himself (*Revelation* 2–3: Lee), fought and was victorious over the Nicolaites and the chief destroyer, and became the “promised pastor of the New Testament” Jesus had announced (according to Shincheonji’s interpretation of *Revelation* 12 and 22:16). As the time when the new heaven and the new earth (Shincheonji) were created, 1984 according to the movement also

represents the year when the universe completed its orbit and returned to its point of origin (see Kim and Bang 2019, 212).

The first temple of Shincheonji was opened in June 1984 in Anyang, Gyeonggi Province, South Korea. The beginnings of the new church were not easy. Branch churches were opened between 1984 and 1986 in Busan (now Busan Metropolitan City), Gwangju (now a Metropolitan City, then in South Jeolla Province), Cheonan (South Chungcheong Province), Daejeon (now a Metropolitan City, then in South Chungcheong Province) and in the Seongbuk district of Seoul. However, the total membership in 1986 did not exceed 120 (Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 8).

A key event for the expansion of Shincheonji was the establishment of Zion Christian Mission Center in Seoul in June 1990. Members started being prepared through courses and exams. The first graduation ceremony, in 1991, involved twelve graduates. In South Korea, the work progressed through the territorial division of the members into Twelve Tribes, formally established in 1995. The South Korean tribes were also assigned responsibility for missions abroad, which led to the inauguration of the first church in a Western country in 1996, in Los Angeles, the first in Europe, in Berlin, in 2000, the first in Australia, in Sydney, in 2009, and the first in Africa, in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2012.

In 1999, the headquarters were moved from Anyang to Gwacheon, an area with great spiritual and prophetic significance in Shincheonji's theology. Shincheonji became also known to the public through the activities of the Shincheonji Mannam Volunteer Organization (established in 2003) and the Shincheonji National Olympiads, started in 1993. By 2007, membership had reached 45,000, and the growth accelerated in subsequent years. According to the movement's own statistics, there were 120,000 members in 2012, 140,000 in 2014, 170,000 in 2016, and 200,000 in 2018 (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 8).

This growth could not go unnoticed from mainline Christian churches, particularly because most new members of Shincheonji were converted from among their flocks. They started increasingly vocal campaigns against Shincheonji, and 2003 saw the first cases of deprogramming (see Fautré, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

Controversies, however, did not stop Shincheonji's growth, nor the development of its peace and humanitarian activities. In May 2012, Chairman Lee conducted his first World Peace Tour. On May 25, 2013, he proclaimed a "Declaration of World Peace," and Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL), an NGO also including non-members of Shincheonji, was incorporated (Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light 2018). One of the main events HWPL organized was the HWPL World Peace Summit in Seoul, on September 18, 2014. On March 14, 2016, the Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW) was proclaimed. In 2017, HWPL was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Chairman Lee continued to conduct world tours and visiting heads of states, religious leaders, and chiefs of international organizations (see Lee 2018; Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

For several years, Lee was accompanied in his tours by Ms. Kim Nam Hee, a close disciple whom critics argued may become his "successor" in leading the movement. Shincheonji, however, dismissed these as mere rumors, and stated that there are no projects for electing a successor of Chairman Lee. In fact, it seems it was Ms. Kim herself who was fueling the rumors. When it became clear that Shincheonji would not accept her as leader or "successor," Ms. Kim started creating her own splinter group, which met with limited success. She was expelled from Shincheonji in January 2018, and had to face a trial at the Seoul Central District Court, on charges of embezzling 1.4 billion won from the Shincheonji-owned SMV Broadcasting and occupying the broadcasting station by force. On July 26, 2019, the Seoul Central District Court sentenced her to two years in prison, with three years of probation, for embezzlement. Some congregation members of Shincheonji also accused her of having fraudulently collected 16 billion won from church devotees. When the coronavirus crisis hit, Ms. Kim emerged as one of the most vocal critics of Shincheonji, accusing Lee of all sort of wrongdoings while conveniently ignoring her own judicial misadventures.

Shincheonji's Theology: An Overview

Shincheonji insists that, strictly speaking, it does not have a "doctrine," as doctrines are created by humans while Shincheonji's teachings are all found in the

Bible. The Bible is interpreted allegorically and through the method historians of Christianity call “typology,” where events of the Old Testament are considered as “types” to which parallel “antitypes” correspond in the New Testament. Shincheonji believes that, although the Bible records historical facts, prophecies are expressed through parables. These prophecies are the promises that will be fulfilled in the future. Shincheonji teaches that, when the prophecies are physically fulfilled, the true meaning of the parables can be understood (Shincheonji 2019b, 8). For example, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden were not real trees, but symbols referring to two types of pastors and spirits working with them, coming respectively from God and Satan.

Regarding the content, the Bible according to Shincheonji is divided into history, moral instruction, prophecy, and fulfillment. Shincheonji teaches that promised future events in the Bible are announced in prophecies, and these prophecies are presented in parables. When the events develop according to the prophecies, the true meaning of the parables becomes known. According to Shincheonji, there is a consistency between the Old and the New Testament. The prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled during Jesus’ first coming, and the prophecies of the New Testament are fulfilled during the Second Coming. The Second Coming is today, and the fulfillment of the New Testament prophecies is Shincheonji itself.

Shincheonji believes that God created both the spiritual and the physical realm. Because in the spiritual realm Satan sinned and separated from God, in the physical realm two seeds, the seed of God and the seed of Satan, were sowed in the heart of humans (Lee 2014, 289–304). “The parable of the two seeds [*Matthew* 13:24–30] is the first parable we should understand out of all the parables Jesus told” (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2019b, 3), and the two spiritual seeds reappear through the whole of human history. In the Garden of Eden, the two seeds correspond to God, who is the tree of life, and the devil, who is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Lee 2014, 377–83).

In *Daniel* 4, the evil King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is also described as a tree, and represents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, while God’s chosen people represents the tree of life (Lee 2014, 379–80). In the Gospels, Jesus is the tree of life, the true vine (*John* 15:1–5), and the Pharisees are the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the Lord's Prayer, whose interpretation is also crucial for Shincheonji (Lee 2014, 314–23), Christians ask God that his “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (*Matthew* 6:10). God's will is done in heaven, but after Adam's sin, it was not done on earth. God acted on earth for the restoration of his will through several providential figures or “pastors,” including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. A scheme of salvation (through a covenant with God) after betrayal and destruction was repeated throughout the different eras. Among the people God chooses, some betray and destroy his covenant until a new covenant is fulfilled (Lee 2014, 55–6).

Shincheonji views the Bible as a succession of covenants between God and groups identified as the “recipients” of each covenant. The covenant God established with the Israelites in the era of the Old Testament was not faithfully kept by the recipients. God thus changed the recipients of the covenant, substituting the Physical Israelites with the Spiritual Israelites (i.e. the Christians) in the new covenant that was established by Jesus. Today, Christians need to keep the new covenant made with Jesus' blood (*Luke* 22:14–20) and join the New Spiritual Israel.

Jesus saved humans from their sins by carrying the cross (*Matthew* 1:21). God's spirit came and dwelt with Jesus. At the first coming of Jesus, the Physical Israel came to an end and was replaced by the Spiritual Israel. However, Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot (just as one of the Twelve Tribes, Dan, had betrayed the Physical Israel), and, after Jesus left this earth and ascended to heaven, his message was gradually betrayed by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Shincheonji interprets *John* 9:4–5 as predicting that the world will become dark as long as the “promised pastor” working with God is not present on earth. Shincheonji teaches that the New Testament and the Book of Revelation prophesy that the promised pastor will come, overcome the false pastors representing the group led by Satan (the “Nicolaites” of *Revelation* 2 and 3), and establish the third Israel, the New Spiritual Israel.

The promised pastor of the New Testament, however, could only appear after a figure, or figures, performing the role of John the Baptist would manifest themselves, and after a new process of betrayal and destruction (*2 Thessalonians* 2:1–4). Shincheonji teaches that the events prophesied in the Book of Revelation were physically fulfilled in Korea in the 20th century (Lee 2014, 176–278). The role of John the Baptist was performed (at the second coming of Jesus) by the

seven messengers of the Tabernacle Temple, the seven lampstands (*Revelation* 1:20), holding lamps that burned in the night for a time until the promised pastor came. As mentioned earlier, according to Shincheonji, the betrayal prophesied in different books of the New Testament (*2 Thessalonians* 2:1–4; *Matthew* 8:11–12; *Matthew* 24:12), in addition to the Book of Revelation, was fulfilled through the corruption of the Tabernacle Temple, and Oh Pyeong-Ho was the chief destroyer who persuaded many in the Tabernacle to receive the mark of the Beast (*Revelation* 13), i.e. the false teachings of the mainline Christian churches.

At that time, just when Satan's Nicolaites had invaded the tabernacle where the seven messengers worked (*Revelation* 2 and 3), "one who overcomes" appeared, defeated Satan's pastor, the destroyer, and received authority from God and Jesus as the promised pastor. He received an opened book from an angel coming from Heaven (*Revelation* 10) after Jesus had broken the seven seals (*Revelation* 6 and 8) of the sealed book of *Revelation* 5, which corresponds to the sealed book mentioned by prophet Isaiah (*Isaiah* 29:9–12). The scroll is now open, and the promised pastor can testify the words of prophecy recorded in the book and their physical fulfillment.

The promised pastor of the New Testament that Shincheonji announces is Chairman Lee. This teaching is often misunderstood by critics, who claim that Shincheonji regards Chairman Lee as God or Jesus. This is not the case. Chairman Lee is regarded as a man, not as God, although in the last days God works through Chairman Lee, who is the pastor and teacher announced by the prophecies of the New Testament, serves as the "advocate" for humankind, and ushers in the Kingdom of God (Lee 2014, 78–85). In *John* 14:16–17 and 26, the "advocate" is the Holy Spirit. This, Shincheonji teaches, refers to a "spiritual advocate" whom Jesus sends to earth in the last days. However, the "spiritual advocate" works and speaks through a physical advocate (*John* 14:17), i.e. Chairman Lee. Shincheonji teaches that Jesus was also the physical advocate at his first coming, as he worked with the Holy Spirit, and indicates *Ezekiel* 1–3 as prophecy and *1 John* 2:1 and *John* 17:8 as fulfillment.

Having conquered the evil Nicolaites, the promised pastor established the new heaven and new earth (Shincheonji) as the New Spiritual Israel, and restored the Twelve Tribes. From the new Twelve Tribes, 144,000 saints (*Revelation* 7:2–8 and 14:1–5), the sealed 12,000 from each tribe, will participate in the "first resurrection," unite with the souls of the martyrs who will descend from Heaven,

and reign on earth with Jesus for 1,000 years as priests and kings. The return of the martyrs is not intended as a sort of “possession” of humans by the martyrs’ souls. The martyrs will resurrect in spiritual, heavenly bodies (*I Corinthians* 15) and will reign together with the 144,000 saints in a family relationship of sort.

Today, Shincheonji has more than 144,000 members. However, it was anticipated that some would betray and form their own “apostate sects.” Some tribes have not yet completed their quotas of 12,000 “priests.” And not all members of Shincheonji will be part of the 144,000. Some will belong to the “Great White Multitude” (*Revelation* 7:9–10). Satan “will be locked up during the 1,000 years, but he will be set free again when the 1,000 years are over,” although “those inside the holy city [Shincheonji] will not be harmed” (Lee 2014, 141). After the 1,000 years and this final temptation, Satan and those corrupted by him will be thrown into hell (*Revelation* 20:7–10), while those belonging to the seed of God will live forever in the new heaven and new earth.

Prophecies, Shincheonji claims, indicate that the promised pastor will not die and will enter the millennial Kingdom of God with his body, together with many others who are alive today and will survive until the Millennium will come. However, when asked what would happen if Chairman Lee, who turned 89 in 2019, will die, Shincheonji members simply answer that everything will happen according to the will of God, who until now has fulfilled every promise he made.

Shincheonji’s Ritual Life

Shincheonji’s services are offered twice a week, on Wednesday and Sunday. Shincheonji members kneel during the services, therefore, there are no chairs (except for the elderly and infirm) in their churches. This is, of course, not unique to Shincheonji: mosques and Hindu or Buddhist temples normally do not have chairs or pews. Churches are often located in large buildings where other floors serve different purposes. This happens both because securing government permission for Shincheonji places of worship is difficult, and land prices in some metropolitan areas are extremely high and exceed the financial possibilities of the local congregations.

Devotees wear white shirts (an allusion to *Revelation* 7 and 14) and signs of different colors corresponding to their affiliation to one or another of the Twelve

Tribes (*Revelation* 21:19–20). The services mostly consist of singing hymns and hearing a sermon, often preached by Chairman Lee himself and broadcast all over the world. The themes come from the entire Bible, but the Book of Revelation is emphasized.

Once a month, a Wednesday meeting includes the sharing of information about Shincheonji's main activities in the month. Once a year, a General Assembly reports on the year's activities in Shincheonji and includes a statement about the church's finances.

Special services are held four times during the year, for Passover (January 14), the Feast of the Tabernacles (July 15), the Feast of Ingathering (September 24), and for commemorating the day when the church was founded in 1984 (March 14).

Shincheonji does not hold events celebrating Christmas or Easter, as it believes they are not appropriate celebration in the time of Jesus's second coming. Rather than celebrating Jesus' birth, it is time to greet Jesus at his second coming. Furthermore, instead of celebrating Jesus' resurrection, it is now time to participate in the "first resurrection." Shincheonji believes that its teachings reveal the true meaning of Christmas and Easter, making their celebration unnecessary.

Joining the Tribes: Courses and Exams

Shincheonji regards itself as the only church where one enters not through baptism, but by completing a Bible study course (for which it refers to *Revelation* 22:14). This is an extremely serious matter for the members. They should follow through Zion Christian Mission Center, across all South Korea and abroad, a course of at least six months divided in beginners', intermediate, and advanced stages, and prepare for the exams. The courses can now be followed also via Internet, in different languages.

The exams, in written form, are uniformly described by members as difficult and severe. They consist of three questionnaires with a total of 300 questions about the *Book of Revelation*. It is not uncommon to repeat them several times (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2018). On average, women score better than men. The highest scores for age

cohorts are by those in their 40s, but there are cases when students older than 80 graduated with a high score (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2018:54–5). The graduation is celebrated in style, as the graduates are regarded as “walking Bibles,” ready even for the harshest missionary fields. Although there are few full-time missionaries, each Zion graduate is expected to devote some time to proselytization activities.

All the organization of Shincheonji is articulated through the Twelve Tribes, each with a tribe leader: John, Peter, Busan James, Andrew, Thaddeus, Philip, Simon, Bartholomew, Matthew, Matthias, Seoul James, Thomas. The Twelve Tribes oversee 128 churches in 29 countries (71 churches in South Korea, 57 overseas). As mentioned earlier, missions outside South Korea are also distributed among the various Korean tribes.

Shincheonji’s rapid growth largely happened by converting members of other Christian churches. They reacted by accusing Shincheonji of “sheep stealing,” “heresy,” and being a “cult” (see e.g. Kim 2016). South Korea is a country where old stereotypes about “cults” survive, promoted by both secular media and conservative and fundamentalist Christian churches.

Apart from “heresy,” an accusation liberally traded between Christians since the times of the Apostles, Shincheonji has been accused of dissimulation and “brainwashing.” The idea that new religious movements use “brainwashing” has been debunked decades ago by Western scholars of new religious movements (Richardson 1996, 2014, 2015), but is still used by popular media and seems to maintain supporters among Korean mainline Christian churches. Because they were “brainwashed,” opponents of new religious movements claimed in the 20th century in North America and Europe, “cultists” needed to be “deprogrammed,” i.e. kidnapped, confined, and submitted to intensive anti-cult indoctrination (Bromley and Richardson 1983). By the end of the 20th century, deprogramming had been declared illegal in most Western countries (Richardson 2011). It survived for some years in Japan, until courts there reached the same conclusions. The only democratic country where deprogramming is still largely practiced is Korea, and Shincheonji’s members account for the largest cohort of victims (Fautré, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The issue of dissimulation reemerged often during the coronavirus crisis. Indeed, Shincheonji does admit that Christians and others invited to its meetings are not immediately told that the organizer is Shincheonji, that some of their

street stalls do not use the name Shincheonji, and that members do attend incognito meetings and services of other churches, hoping to make friends there and invite them to Shincheonji courses. The movement justifies this by explaining that opponents of Shincheonji spread derogatory information through seminars organized by conservative and fundamentalist Christian churches and media outlets, thus causing a vicious circle. Because of the media slander and conservative-fundamentalist propaganda, few would attend events if the name Shincheonji would be mentioned, as the movement is described negatively as problematic to society. In turn, the fact that the name of the church is not immediately advertised is used by critics to claim Shincheonji is a “cult” that practices “dissimulation.”

There is also, Shincheonji claims, a Biblical justification for this behavior. Apostle Paul in *1 Thessalonians* 5:2 prophesied that at his second coming Jesus will come “as a thief in the night,” which Shincheonji interprets to the effect that the harvesting will be very difficult due to organized opposition, which suggests a cautious approach. And it is also true that introducing religious movements on the streets, particularly when they have been slandered by the media, without disclosing their name or by presenting first their non-religious cultural activities, is comparatively common in South Korea and not unique to Shincheonji.

Be it as it may be, in these times of quick access to information via the Internet, alternative names are easily connected to Shincheonji through a simple two-minute Google search. Opponents claim that most converts to Shincheonji are “deceived” into joining it. They insist that they did not know they were going to a Shincheonji meeting the firsts times they were invited to a Bible study course. However, even those who accepted to attend a service or meeting without realizing the organizer was Shincheonji, obviously realized which religious movement they had encountered once they started listening more carefully to sermons and messages. By the time they “joined” Shincheonji, which happens after completing the courses and passing the exam, they obviously *did* understand what organization they were joining. It remains that the “covert” proselytization strategy offers continuous ammunition to the critics, and Shincheonji is now increasingly switching to “open evangelism,” mentioning the name Shincheonji in its invitations and activities.

Although the threat of deprogramming is a serious problem for Shincheonji members in South Korea, the international protest against the practice, before

the COVID-19 epidemics hit South Korea and the movement, was growing (see CAP-LC and others 2019; U.S. Department of State 2019), and it was becoming difficult for South Korean authorities to ignore it. While the coronavirus crisis, discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, may change the situation, the international attention remains high on possible violation of Shincheonji's religious freedom in South Korea (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020, 2–3). Whether the massive anti-Shincheonji campaigns connected with the epidemics will be able to slow its growth, is something that remains to be seen.

APPENDIX – SHINCHEONJI: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1931 (September 15): Lee Man Hee was born at Punggak-myeon, Hyeonri-ri, Cheongdo District, North Gyeongsang Province, Korea (now South Korea).
- 1946: Lee was among the first graduates of Punggak Public Elementary School after the Japanese left Korea.
- 1950–53: Lee served in the South Korean Army's 7th Infantry Division during the Korean War.
- 1957–67: Lee participated in the religious activities of the Olive Tree movement.
- 1967: Having left the Olive Tree, Lee joined another Korean Christian new religious movement, the Tabernacle Temple, in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi Province.
- 1979–83: Lee repeatedly wrote letters to the leaders of the Tabernacle Temple, denouncing the corruption in the movement and urging them to repent. As a result, he was threatened and beaten.
- 1984 (March 14): After leaving the Tabernacle Temple, Lee founded Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony.
- 1984 (June): The first Shincheonji temple was opened in Anyang, Gyeonggi Province, South Korea.

- 1986: Branch churches were established across South Korea. Shincheonji counted some 120 members.
- 1990 (June): The Zion Christian Mission Center was established in Seoul.
- 1993: Missionary activity was started in China. The first Shincheonji National Olympiad was organized in Seoul.
- 1995: The Twelve Tribes of Shincheonji were formally organized.
- 1996: The first church in the West was inaugurated in Los Angeles.
- 1999: Headquarters were moved from Anyang to Gwacheon.
- 2000: The first church in Europe was inaugurated in Berlin, Germany.
- 2003: Mannam Volunteer Organization was established.
- 2003: First cases of deprogramming of Shincheonji members in South Korea.
- 2007: Shincheonji membership reached 45,000.
- 2007 (October 12): Shincheonji member Ms. Sun Hwa-kim (1959–2007) was killed by her husband in connection with her attempted deprogramming.
- 2012: The first church in Africa was inaugurated in Cape Town, South Africa. Worldwide membership reached 120,000.
- 2012 (May): Chairman Lee conducted his first World Peace Tour.
- 2013 (May 25): Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) was established. The Declaration of World Peace was proclaimed.
- 2014 (September 18): HWPL organized the HWPL World Peace Summit in Seoul.
- 2016 (March 14): The Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW) was proclaimed in Seoul by HWPL.
- 2017: HWPL was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).
- 2018 (January 9): Shincheonji member Ms. Gu Ji-in (1992–2018) died, eight days after having been hospitalized during her second attempted deprogramming.
- 2018 (January 28): More than 120,000 gathered in Seoul and other Korean cities to protest deprogramming and the death of Ms. Gu.

2018: Worldwide Shincheonji membership reached 200,000.

2019 (June 20): A statement asking South Korea to put an end to the deprogramming of Shincheonji members was submitted by the NGO CAP-LC at the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council and published on the United Nations' Web site. An oral statement followed on July 3.

2020 (February 18): A Shincheonji female member from Daegu, South Korea, which had been hospitalized after a car accident on February 7, diagnosed with a common cold, and sent home, was tested and identified as the "Patient 31," infected with COVID-19. In the meantime, she had attended Shincheonji services, setting in motion a chain of events that led to the infection of thousands of her co-religionists, and to an unprecedented assault against Shincheonji by opponents and some politicians.

2020 (March 2): Shincheonji founder Lee Man Hee held a press conference, at which he apologized for possible mistakes and delays in supplying information to the government and promised ongoing full cooperation.

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“Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light”: Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies

Rosita Šorytė

European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Vilnius, Lithuania

rosita_soryte@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: Many non-members of Shincheonji around the world are cooperating with the founder of the movement, Chairman Lee Man Hee, through the activities of an organization known as Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light, HWPL. The opposition to Shincheonji is rooted in Korean Protestant fundamentalism. It claims that HWPL and other connected organizations are simply fronts for Shincheonji’s proselytization activities. This seems, however, incorrect. Presidents and prime ministers, international organizations dignitaries, and leaders of different religions participate in HWPL initiatives. While it is correct to say that they increase the visibility of Chairman Lee as a global religious and humanitarian leader, obviously Shincheonji does not expect that these international luminaries will convert to its faith. Why, thus, is Shincheonji devoting so much efforts to non-proselytizing activities? The article suggests that, rather than on a mere promotional strategy, the answer is largely grounded on Shincheonji’s millenarian theology.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL), Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War, Lee Man Hee, Korean Millenarian Movements.

Introduction

On September 18, 2014, Jamsil Olympic Stadium in Seoul hosted the opening ceremony of something called the World Peace Summit. Thousands attended the event, and the Summit featured speeches by international politicians, including the former Presidents of Croatia and South Africa (“Controversial religious group holds int’l peace event in Seoul” 2014). Some 30,000 participated in the closing “Walk for Peace” on September 19. Several youth groups performed, with songs and dances. The video of the Summit shows well-choreographed public ceremonies, and what one may normally expect in international

conferences about peace (of which, during my 25-year career as a diplomat, I attended many). Some speeches were interesting. Some were boring. All in all, it was a very normal event that should have not offended or threatened anybody.

Yet, Korean media reported that angry, although not numerous, protesters picketed Jamsil Olympic Stadium. Some media, particularly the Christian ones, described the event as dangerous and sinister (“Controversial religious group holds int’l peace event in Seoul” 2014). One can only imagine the frustration of young people who had prepared their performances for months, and found themselves vilified rather than praised by the media.

We are confronted here with two opposite, irreconcilable narratives. For some, the World Peace Summit was a valuable contribution to international efforts for peace, or at least one among many similar events around the world, which are normally regarded with sympathy by the public opinion and the media. For others, the Summit was part of some sort of threatening conspiracy.

Nothing in the Summit itself explained the second narrative. It rested entirely on one feature of the event: that the main organizers were members of a Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji. The founder and leader of Shincheonji, Chairman Lee Man Hee, was also the founder and chairperson of the organization responsible for the Summit, known as Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL). This, and this only, lead some media to proclaim that a “cult” was “behind” the peace event.

Opposition to Shincheonji in South Korea

Opponents had succeeded in creating an exceptionally negative image of Shincheonji among many if not most Korean media. The campaign against Shincheonji was so aggressive and systematic that many Koreans now perceive it as a “dangerous cult”. Members I have interviewed in Korea told me that, to protect their reputation and professional opportunities, they do not reveal they are part of Shincheonji. Most of them hide their membership not only in their social life but also to close friends and family.

In the West, we are familiar with campaigns branding certain groups as “cults.” These campaigns, however, today are mostly secular, and use secular arguments. The Korean anti-cult movement is different. It originated with

Korean Protestant fundamentalism, although its propaganda managed to persuade even secular media, which parroted its arguments uncritically.

A significant number of foreign missionaries, particularly Presbyterian, who initially spread Protestantism in Korea identified themselves with fundamentalism. After the Korean War, in 1959, a conservative branch (called Tong-hap) and a radical fundamentalist branch (known as Hap-dong) of Korean Presbyterianism separated from each other. Other schisms followed. As Korean scholars have noted, even the less fundamentalist branch was conservative by Western standards (Kim 2007, 120–41). Those who sympathized for liberal Western theologians were investigated and expelled.

In the most radical branch, Pak Hyöngnyong (1897–1978) emerged as the most influential theologian. He was principal of the Presbyterian Theological School, then of the General Assembly Theological Seminary (Kim 2007, 170–71). Pak and his seminary received money from American fundamentalists, and did not refuse the label. Indeed, Pak wrote that, “Fundamentalism is Christianity itself” (Kim 2007, 172). He believed that Protestants who accepted modern liberal values, as well as Catholics, were in fact not Christians at all.

As one scholar noted, the tension with North Korea, and “the experience of Communism and the anti-Communist policies of authoritarian governments” created unique South Korean circumstances. While in most other countries fundamentalists are a minority within Protestantism, in South Korea fundamentalist Protestant groups “became predominant and mainstream, marginalizing moderate and liberal churches” (Kim 2007, 175). With the help of authoritarian politicians, radical fundamentalists also acquired an influence on politics, economy, and the media that, in a large part, they still maintain today.

However, successful as they are, fundamentalist Protestants had to confront a challenge they did not expect, new religious movements. Korea had a tradition of new religions dating back to the 19th century. Some believe that between World War I and II, new religions had more members than traditional religions in Korea. These were, however, non-Christian new religions with Buddhist and Taoist roots. They continue to this day as large non-Christian new religions, such as Daesoon Jinrihoe or Won Buddhism (Lee 2016). Christian fundamentalists occasionally criticized them as well, but did not perceive these groups as direct competitors.

From the point of view of the fundamentalists, an entirely different matter was the success, in some cases spectacular, of new religious movements originating within Christianity after the Korean War (although some smaller Christian new religions had been founded even before World War II: Pokorny 2018; Kim and Bang 2019). Shincheonji, although perhaps not the largest, became the fastest growing among such Christian new religious movements (Introvigne 2019a).

The fundamentalists reacted in a way typical of majority religions when they feel threatened by growing minorities (for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church had a very similar reaction in Russia). They accused successful minorities such as Shincheonji of “sheep stealing.” They also imported from Western anti-cultists, at times without exactly understanding the secular context in which they were born, theories claiming that “cults” do not grow through spontaneous conversions but because they master sinister and mysterious techniques of “brainwashing.” Just as it happened in the West, Korean scholars of religion largely denounced these theories as non-scientific, but fundamentalists successfully managed to spread them through the media (Kim 2007).

A more simple explanation of the success of Christian new religious movements in South Korea is that many Koreans did like Christianity but did not feel comfortable with the cold, judgmental atmosphere of the fundamentalist churches, while they found the denominations in the liberal minority as too intellectual and cold in a different way. But of course, the fundamentalists could not accept this explanation, as it implied that there was something wrong in their presentation of Christianity.

Instead, they formed organizations to fight “cults.” They used the word “heresy” (*idan*, 이단) to designate the groups they wanted to attack, although later they also adopted *sagyo* (사교), which is the Korean equivalent of the term *xie jiao* used in China to designate prohibited “heterodox teachings.”

Just as the Chinese term *xie jiao*, the Korean *idan* has been used for centuries. It designated groups that threatened the Confucian orthodoxy and the government, and should be banned. Fundamentalist (as well as conservative) Christians maintained the same point: heretic groups were a threat for Korean society and their activities should be prohibited. Although initially their main targets were the Unification Church and another Korean Christian new religion known as Olive Tree, soon Shincheonji became the paradigmatic villain for

Christian anti-cultists (Kim 2007; Kim and Bang 2019). Shincheonji was a victim of its own success. Since it grew while several Protestant denominations lost members, it was targeted as a particularly dangerous competitor by a vicious propaganda.

By the 21st century, also due to their contacts with American Evangelicals of similar persuasions, both conservative and fundamentalist Korean Protestants had learned the basic strategies of electoral politics and of forming broader coalitions. They are both anti-liberal and anti-cult, and the same agencies (often, the same persons) promote rallies, and occasionally resort to violence, against groups they label as “cults,” against homosexuals, and against Islamic refugees seeking asylum in Korea, Islam being considered by them a pagan and demonic religion, and one inherently inclined to terrorism (Kim 2007; Choe 2019).

Some among both the conservative and fundamentalist churches united in 1989 to form the Christian Council of Korea (CCK) as an umbrella organization, which for several years was at the center of the anti-liberal and anti-cult campaigns. However, the problem with heresy hunters is that nobody knows who the next pastor or church will be to be designated as “heretic.” In this milieu, one can be hailed as orthodox and a friend today, and declared heretic and a “cultist” tomorrow. These questions, and charges of corruption and bribery against leaders of CCK, led 20 denominations to leave CCK in 2012 and form the Communion of Churches in Korea (CCIK). Others formed the United Christian Churches in Korea (UCCK), currently an alliance believed to represent the majority of conservative and fundamentalist Christians in the country. While divided on other issues, all these coalitions promote anti-Shincheonji activities, including deprogramming or forced conversion.

Rev. Jun Kwang-hoon was elected president of the CCK in January 2019 and re-elected in January 2020. He vowed to pursue a re-unification with CCIK and UCCK (Kang 2020). He also became notorious for his strong-worded statements not only against “cults” but also against homosexuals, Muslims, refugees, and women who had an abortion. He gained international notoriety for his rallies calling Korean President Moon Jae-in (who is a Roman Catholic) a Communist and a North Korean agent, and praying that God may strike him dead (Choe 2019).

One paradoxical aspect that should be noted is that, while fiercely anti-Communist, this fundamentalist and conservative Korean milieu praised the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for its repression of “cults.” In fact, it sent delegations to China to establish a cooperation with CCP aimed at preventing Shincheonji from being established there, as well as fighting religious groups prohibited in China who have refugees seeking asylum in South Korea, such as The Church of Almighty God and Falun Gong (O 2019a; Kim 2019).

Two characters active in this cooperation between the anti-Communist Korean radical Protestants and the CCP deserve a special mention. The first is Pastor Shin Hyun Wook, who was expelled from Shincheonji in 2007. He was accused of spreading teachings regarded as heretic by the movement, as he claimed that Chairman Lee was God, while he is regarded by Shincheonji as a human pastor, although with an important prophetic mandate. He was also accused of embezzling Shincheonji’s funds, which was confirmed by a court decision in 2008. Shin later became a Presbyterian pastor active in the anti-Shincheonji campaigns, including those organized together with the CCP anti-cultists.

The second interesting character is Ms. O Myung-Ok, who runs an anti-cult magazine and the Web site churchheresy.com (the name already tells it all, implying that she represents “the Church” and those she disagrees with are “the heresy”). She promoted rallies, some of them in co-operation with Chinese state security agents, against Shincheonji, South Korea’s National Commission of Human Rights, Chinese refugees from The Church of Almighty God and Falun Gong living in South Korea, homosexuals, and Muslims (Introvigne 2019b). Just as she had published illegally the names and pictures of Church of Almighty God asylum seekers in South Korea (*Bitter Winter* 2019), she also published the list of Shincheonji churches in China, which is not public, together with equally confidential details about each of them, with the obvious aim of denouncing them to Chinese authorities (O 2019b).

Although easily ridiculed by Western media, Jun and his clique of radical fundamentalists were described by *The New York Times* as “a force to be reckoned with in South Korea” (Choe 2019). If it can reunite with the two other coalitions CCIK and UCCK, the CCK will become a voting bloc that conservative politicians cannot ignore, just as conservative and fundamentalist Protestants in the U.S. are important electoral allies for President Trump and the Republican Party.

The perception of Shincheonji as serious competition, the demonization of all religions other than conservative and fundamentalism Protestantism as not

genuine and potentially satanic, and the social political influence of these Christians explain (i) why Shincheonji is targeted, including through violent means, (ii) why those using violence against Shincheonji, who are connected with the most radical fringe of conservative Protestantism, may get away with it and indeed find supporters among politicians and the media, and (iii) why HWPL peace activities and other worthy humanitarian enterprises that have connections with Shincheonji are condemned rather than praised by several Korean media.

HWPL's Peace Activities

Despite the systematic and ferocious propaganda against Shincheonji, the movement is growing. As I have personally ascertained through my interviews in Korea, Shincheonji is also becoming increasingly attractive to several highly educated and professional Korean women and men, who claim they have found within this movement persuasive answers to their quest for truth and God. Many of them, besides their personal carriers, devote their time and professional skills on a volunteer basis to promote Shincheonji's religious views but also its visionary work on peace and other matters of global interest.

Shincheonji members and their exceptionally charismatic leader, Chairman Lee, not only were able to increase the membership of the movement, but also promoted peace and other social activities on an impressive scale inside Korea and around the world.

In fact, the major activities Chairman Lee was known for outside Korea (at least before the coronavirus crisis) was his very ambitious project to promote global peace and stop wars. For this purpose, Shincheonji has mobilized substantial manpower and financial resources, which they utilize to promote their ideas in massive campaigns in South Korea and abroad. It is said that Chairman Lee crossed the world 31 times and, from 2012 to 2019, completed dozens of "Peace Tours" around the globe, seeking to promote his ideals of peace and engaging with various world leaders, including kings, prime ministers, and presidents, former presidents, and religious authorities, including Roman Catholic cardinals.

In 2013 Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light organization (HWPL) was established. It is formally independent from Shincheonji and most

speakers and participants at his international conferences are not members of Shincheonji. Just in few years, HWPL achieved substantial results. In 2015, it has been associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communication, and in 2017 has achieved consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Based on my personal experience, I would underline that to achieve this status is not an easy task. First, the organization should prove that it has obtained certain practical results on the field, and, second, the member States of the NGO Committee and ECOSOC should give their approval.

Many groups founded by religious movements have the ambition to seek this status and fail, either because they cannot prove their practical results or because certain member states have objections against them. Most of the time, these objections are political. The achievement of consultative status demonstrates that, despite all the bad press and several cases of persecution against its members in Korea, Shincheonji was not perceived in a totally negative way by the Korean government, which did not object to HWPL's ECOSOC accreditation based on its connection with Shincheonji. It also means that the United Nations recognized that the good work done by HWPL was real.

The main ambition of HWPL and its leader is to achieve a global peace and to end all wars around the world. In that respect, on May 25, 2013, when Chairman Lee established HWPL, the Declaration of World Peace was proclaimed. On March 14, 2016, it was followed by the Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW). A monument commemorating the proclamation of the Declaration of World Peace has been erected in Korea. Replicas of the same monument in different languages have been erected in South Africa, India, El Salvador, and the Philippines.

To this date, HWPL claims to have engaged in peace activities in 170 countries around the world. It has 206 HWPL Peace Advisory Council members and 606 Publicity Ambassadors, including leaders of various sectors and nationalities. From 2015 to 2019, it organized the World Summits for the Commemoration of the World Peace, attracting thousands of people from around the world to events of a truly monumental scale and organization.

HWPL has various affiliate organizations, including the International Peace Youth Group (IPYG) and International Women's Peace Group (IWPG), both founded in 2013. They promote campaigns of letter-writing for peace, mass

peace walks, a program for journalists, and a large international project of peace education in schools and universities, advanced through memorandums of understanding signed with public and private schools all around the world, both secular or affiliated with a variety of religious denominations. Memorandums of understanding have also been signed between HWPL and regional organizations such as the Central American Parliament and the Pan-African Parliament, and with the Ministries of Education of nine countries, some of which are actively promoting HWPL peace education projects at the UNESCO. 214 schools in 36 countries have hosted HWPL peace education programs. IPYG promotes what it calls “Youth Empowerment Peace Workshops,” aimed not only at promoting peace values but also at teaching youth in areas of crisis practical skills, as it happens in South Sudan through “Peace Agriculture Education.”

In 2014, Chairman Lee initiated the World Alliance of Religions Peace (WARP) Office Meetings, where leaders and intellectuals of various religions try to promote a peaceful dialogue based on the idea that peace is mentioned in all the great holy scriptures of humanity. A main aim of HWPL is to “legislate peace,” i.e. to finalize the text of a legally binding treaty that would prohibit war and build a global peace around the world. Well-known legal experts, including Supreme Court Justices from various countries, have participated in HWPL’s “Legislate Peace Project” events. HWPL also expects that these activities will eventually favor a peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula.

Why Do They Do It?

Will an international treaty stating solemnly that war is prohibited achieve the noble aim and great ambition of ending all wars? Chairman Lee is not the first to believe this. The world leaders who crafted the statutes of the League of Nations in 1920 and the United Nations in 1945 were animated by the same ideal. However, the League of Nations could not prevent World War II, nor were the United Nations able to prevent the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and several other regional conflicts.

The root causes of conflicts do not lie only, nor principally, in the lack of well-written international treaties, and making an international system work in preventing wars has proved an enormously complicated, and so far, impossible, task. The problem is not that international law “allows” war; and, in the present

international political situation, it is unlikely that a declaration or project of a new legally binding treaty, no matter how well designed and crafted, would achieve the necessary support of the states and, even if signed, will be enforced. The fact that Chairman Lee has met so many world leaders was no mean achievement, but even they cannot change the present predicament of the international institutions.

I realize that the above comments come from the somewhat cynical experience I developed as a diplomat, and those Shincheonji members who admirably devote their lives to HWPL may have brighter hopes and more optimistic opinions. And I do recognize that the peace education in schools and the dialogue between religions promoted by HWPL, particularly in countries and regions where inter-religious tensions abound (such as the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, where HWPL did obtain results in promoting an agreement between Christian and Muslim leaders), may contribute to defuse risks of discrimination and violence.

However, for a deeper assessment of the motivations of those who devote so much of their time to HWPL, I believe we should realize that their effort is not political, but prophetic. While it uses the tools of international organizations such as ECOSOC, and is effectively and systematically organized throughout the world, it ultimately derives from spiritual motivations and places its trust in God, and in the role of Chairman Lee as the Bible's promised pastor for the last days, rather than in politics.

Shincheonji members know their Bible, and find there several statements proclaiming that God can always change the course of human history, and what appears as impossible to humans is never impossible for God. They read in *Isaiah* 52:7 that their work is precious in the eyes of God, irrespective of the visible results:

“How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him who bring good news,
Who proclaim peace.”

They quote *Luke* 19:42, where Jesus, having wept over the city of Jerusalem, said to his disciples: “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

Humans do not really know how to achieve peace, but God knows, and Jesus mentioned the work of peace as part of the work of God.

Shincheonji members believe that a world of peace, as God's creation, is possible only when God becomes involved in it, and works with people on earth ready to cooperate with God's work. Chairman Lee claims that it is part of his task as the promised pastor to carry on the work of peace that God mandated him to do.

Shincheonji is a millennialist Christian movement, which believes that we will soon enter a kingdom of peace (known in several Christian traditions as the Millennium) that will last for 1,000 years. American sociologist Catherine Wessinger, however, distinguished between a "catastrophic" millennialism, which believes that God will force the Millennium on humans through punishments and disasters, and a "progressive" millennialism, where the Millennium will come when a sufficient number of humans will cooperate with God seeking peace on earth and promoting peace with sincerity (Wessinger 1997). We may define Shincheonji as a millennialist movement of the second, "progressive" variety.

It is also worth noting that Shincheonji is a Korean millennialist group and, as is typical of the tradition of Korean new religions, believes that Korea has a special role, allusions to which can be found in the prophecies of the Book of Revelation, when they are understood correctly, in ushering in the Millennium. That Korea has a special role for promoting world peace is a theme present in the Korean culture in general. Korean President Moon himself quoted in 2018 the prophecy of a famous Korean political figure, who fought for Korean independence against the Japanese, Kim Gu (1876–1949), that Korea would one day become the "cultural powerhouse that leads world peace" (Moon 2018).

Conclusion

We may now be able to rephrase the question, why is Shincheonji devoting so many energies and resources to its peace activities, by evaluating the plausibility of the answers provided by anti-cultists and hostile media.

Theoretically, to the above question, three answers are possible. The first is that, as the opponents maintain, Shincheonji has created just another proselytization tool. Through HWPL, it can approach an audience that would not be immediately interested in its religious activities, yet may come to appreciate

the message of Chairman Lee and eventually convert to Shincheonji. However, a simple observation of HWPL and other peace activities promoted by Shincheonji, shows that this is extremely unlikely. Those invited to the peace activities are mostly political, religious and civil society leaders with well-established ideas and worldviews. They are as far away as possible from the ideal type of the “seeker” looking for a new religion. In fact, there are no stories of conversion through HWPL among the accounts of how they came to Shincheonji members are eager to share with visitors.

A second possibility is that, while not converting them to Shincheonji, the movement wants to promote its, and Chairman Lee’s image, among the VIPs who participate in the HWPL events. Opponents have built a very negative image of Shincheonji, and HWPL may serve as a public relations tool to make it better. This theory is, at first sight, plausible. Certainly, HWPL events promote the image of Chairman Lee as a global humanitarian leader. It is also true that all religions do not organize peace or charitable events for purely altruistic motives. The aim of promoting or improving their image may not be the main intent, but is rarely absent. This is not immoral or illegitimate, and many other organizations, outside of the field of religion, operate in the same way.

On second thought, however, the conclusion appears less probable. The name Shincheonji is hardly mentioned during the peace events. International participants meet Chairman Lee but many of them barely realize he is the leader of a religion. The politicians Chairman Lee met during his world tours have friends, but they also have enemies, and in some cases may have problems of international image themselves. Accordingly, theoretical advantages for Shincheonji would be balanced by disadvantages.

But the main argument contradicting the hypothesis that HWPL is simply a public relations tool for Shincheonji is a factual one. As we have seen, Shincheonji’s negative image has been created by conservative and often fanatical Korean Protestants who resent it as a competitor. They have some influence on Korean media and some capacity to export their views abroad through both conservative Protestant and anti-cult networks. These networks and milieus are totally impermeable to the peace message of HWPL. They are normally nationalist, intolerant, and suspicious of globalization. A message of peace and universal love is unlikely to appease them. In fact, it doesn’t. Years of HWPL initiatives have not softened the opponents. If anything, each HWPL event is used

by the Christian opponents and the media they influence or control as an opportunity for new attacks against Shincheonji.

We are thus left with the third hypothesis, one critics of Shincheonji are poorly equipped to grasp. Shincheonji members devote countless hours to HWPL activities for a spiritual reason. They are persuaded that the world as we know it will soon come to an end, and we will enter a new era of peace, whose features they find announced in the Book of Revelation as authoritatively interpreted by Chairman Lee.

God, they believe, would be perfectly capable to create a kingdom of peace without our cooperation, but his design and teachings are that we should cooperate in creating this kingdom. When we consider this point, we understand why Shincheonji members continue in their peace activities even if they do not achieve results in terms of eliminating conflicts, injustice, and war—nor do they persuade their opponents or the media of the legitimacy of their religion.

From their point of view, this is not crucial. Working for peace and relieving human suffering may not be rewarded by mundane success—but it is rewarded, Shincheonji members argue, by spiritual success. It is something those who do not believe are not able to see but that may have cosmic consequences, and eventually take this world from the present era to the next.

Or so Shincheonji members believe. From a materialistic point of view, their goal may appear as utopian and unrealistic. But the same may be said of the message of Jesus, “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (*Matthew* 6:33).

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Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church

Willy Fautré

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

w.fautre@hrwf.org

ABSTRACT: Deprogramming has been considered illegal in North America and Europe since the late 20th century, but is still practiced in South Korea by conservative and fundamentalist pastors, who try to “de-convert” adult members of new religious movements, after they have been kidnapped and detained by their parents. Shincheonji is the main, although not the only, victim of this illegal practice. The article discusses some specific cases, and what was the attitude of South Korean police and courts of law to them, asking the questions why reactions to these crimes are inadequate in South Korea, and what the international community can do to put a halt to them.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Deprogramming, Forced Conversion, Coercive Change of Religion, Deprogramming in South Korea, Forced Conversion in South Korea.

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right protected by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which proclaims that,

- (1) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
- (2) No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

(3) Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

As a member state of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are legally bound to prohibit any type of coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith. They are obliged to enforce this by prosecuting any person or group found to be:

- violating the right for an individual to have or not to have a religion or beliefs, to change and retain the religion or beliefs of his/her choice;
- using hate speech and instigating hatred towards a religious or belief community and its members;
- using illegal means to force converts back to their previous religion or beliefs;
- and inducing others to kidnap and confine an individual for the purpose of coercively de-converting him/her.

They must also ensure that there are appropriate remedies available and accessible for victims of such cases.

However, for years, political and judicial authorities in South Korea have turned a blind eye to forced change of religion operations, masterminded specifically by the Christian Cult Counseling Association of Korea (CCCK). The CCCK has a nationwide network of centers that combat what they label “heresies” and “heretic movements” or “cults,” by any means, including illegal ones, and at any cost. The pastors, evangelists and missionaries active in the CCCK are mainly from conservative or fundamentalist Presbyterian Churches.

Korea has 51.4 million inhabitants. According to the *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom* on Korea published by the U.S. Department of State, only 44% of the Korean population is religious while 56% is not. Among the religious population, the three main denominations are: Protestants (45%), Buddhists (35%), and Catholics (18%). Under “Others” (2%) are: Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, members of the Unification Church, Won Buddhism, Confucianism, Jeongsando, Cheondogyo, Daejonggyo, and Daesoon Jinrihoe. According to the Korean Muslim Federation, the Muslim population is estimated at 135,000 (U.S. Department of State 2019). The website for Jehovah's Witnesses reported about 102,000 members (JW.org

2018), while the only rabbi in the country released official numbers of approximately 1,000 Jews, almost all expatriates (U.S. Department of State 2019). In comparison, the new and fast-growing Shincheonji Church claimed to have 240,000 members, according to a March 18, 2020 article in the *Korea JoongAng Daily*, which was confirmed in the same article by the Ministry of Justice (Chung and Hill 2020).

Deprogramming in South Korea

As a member state of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are bound to enforce the prohibition of any form of coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith, but the reality is different. In South Korea, adults converting to a new religious movement (NRM) are kidnapped by their families and forcefully confined for weeks and even months to be submitted to a de-conversion program carried out by fundamentalist Protestants. This is what scholars of religious studies call “deprogramming.”

The phenomenon of coercive change of religion in South Korea is exclusively carried out by fundamentalist Protestant Churches associated with the CCKK. Their victims are primarily, although not exclusively, members of the Shincheonji Church, hereafter referred to as Shincheonji.

Shincheonji is an NRM that stems from Protestantism but has developed its own theology (Introvigne 2019), like several other movements, which gravitate on the fringe of the Protestant family.

Statistics about the extent of this phenomenon are non-existent. The only available numbers are those of known victims who escaped from their confinement and de-conversion program, or confirmed their beliefs in Shincheonji after pretending to be de-converted to escape.

Shincheonji has collected their testimonies over the years, but it is very likely that there are many victims of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forceful change of religion who have never been identified. The infographic that follows was published by Shincheonji. The numbers represent the victims who could not be de-converted. The total number of victims, which should also

include “successfully” de-converted individuals, must be much higher than what is currently known.

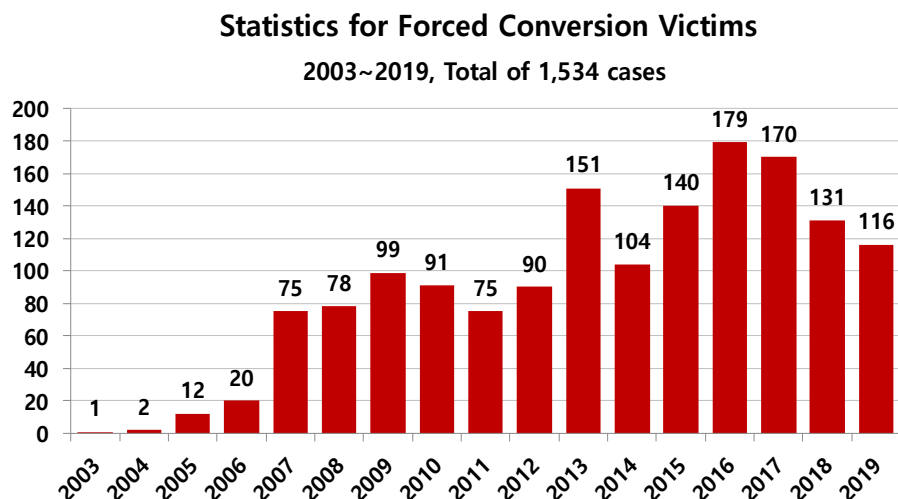


Figure 1. Total number of cases from 2003 until 2019 (September): 1,534 (source: Shincheonji).

According to an analysis of statistics provided by Shincheonji to HRWF, the main victims of this practice are young women in their 20s (77%), while young men of the same age group only account for 23%. The rates of coercive de-conversion are much lower for older people: 10% for thirty-year-olds, 5% if they are in their 40’s or 50’s, and 2% for sixty-year-olds.

The consequences of this practice are dire. These kidnappings and confinements for forced de-conversion have resulted in two deaths, thirteen admittances to psychiatric institutions, and forty-three divorces.

I personally interviewed a number of these victims and their relatives in 2019. A dozen cases were published in March 2020 as part of a 60-page report titled *Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea* (Fautré 2020), published by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF).

HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, nor align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any specific religion or belief system, but instead defends the right of all persons to have the

beliefs of their choice, as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.

Kidnapping, Confinement, and Coercive De-Conversion

In the majority of cases, parents discovered that their adult sons or daughters, often still living with them, had changed their religion by joining Shincheonji. The theology of Shincheonji has been deemed heretical or “cult-like” by mainline Churches. So, when family members research it online, they find “anti-heresy” and “anti-cult” literature demonizing the movement. They are then filled with anxiety and fear, and often look for help.

“Help” is easily found online from the so-called “cult counseling centers” that are organized by evangelists, missionaries, and pastors of fundamentalist Protestant churches, mainly arch-conservative Presbyterian branches. These individuals are working to bring “lost sheep” back to their churches.

This misinformation fuels the panic of family members and, consequently, they begin preparations for a de-conversion program. Information sessions are held to train parents on necessary steps, which include illegal activities such as kidnapping and confinement. These services are not free, and can sometimes cost parents a significant amount of money.

Incitement to Illegal Activities

During the first phase of the operation, parents are informed that they will have to organize the kidnapping of their son or daughter and choose a well-equipped place from where escape would not be possible. Afterwards, they will have to extort a signature from their son or daughter on a statement declaring that they have requested the de-conversion services of a “cult counseling center,” and are voluntarily joining a so-called “cult exit program.” The CCKK has a policy to never intervene if the individual has not signed this formal agreement.

The CCKK adopted this policy after Shincheonji filed lawsuits against their de-conversion program implementers. They now train their evangelists to organize meetings and consultations with parents to distance themselves from any legal

liability. Sometimes, the de-conversion sessions are conducted with former Shincheonji members.

In concrete terms, pastors at a higher level are *the* masterminds behind the scenes of these kidnapping, confinement, and coercive de-conversion operations. They never participate directly in these activities, which are illegal and prosecutable under the criminal code. They leave this to family members.

The agreement that must be signed by the kidnapped person before beginning a de-conversion program in most cases is also left to family members to obtain. The pastors turn a blind eye to the way this is accomplished, which can include blackmail, threats, psychological and physical pressure, violence, and continued detention.

When the de-conversion program can “officially” start, the work is assigned to lower-ranking actors specifically trained for that purpose. The higher-level masterminds of these operations remain behind the scenes, to ensure they cannot be prosecuted.

Why Is Forced Change of Religion “Tolerated” in South Korea?

The first reason is religious. The Shincheonji Church has been a fast-growing movement at the expense of the mainline Protestant Churches. The fight against a “heretical” group by conservative and fundamentalist pastors was first tolerated, and then encouraged behind the scenes by the leaders of their respective denominations.

The second reason is cultural. Parents in South Korea, and in other countries in East Asia, feel entitled to some level of authority and control over their adult children, especially women, despite their age, competency, or social status. This explains the high percentage of young women kidnapped for the purpose of de-conversion.

The third reason is political. The fundamentalist Protestant Churches are politically conservative, aligning closely with the parties currently opposed to President Moon. They are anti-liberal and represent a powerful majority in South Korea. They organize rallies and occasionally resort to violence against groups they label as “cults,” LGBTI people, and Muslim refugees seeking asylum in the

country. They consider Islam to be a violent religion that is inherently inclined to terrorism.

The weight of Protestant voters in elections in South Korea is significant. While campaigning for the legislative elections on 15 April 2020, fundamentalist Protestant groups instrumentalized the COVID-19 crisis by accusing Shincheonji of being the main propagator of the virus in Korea and, consequently, asking for the ban of Shincheonji. In March 2020, a prominent scholar of religious studies, human rights activists, a reporter, and a lawyer published a 30-page “White Paper” (Introvigne, Fautré, Šorytè, Amicarelli and Respinti 2020), debunking the fake news and fictional stories that stemmed from their campaign.

Another example of the power of fundamentalist Protestant Churches in Korea is an incident that took place in 2019. President Moon had not participated in the annual Korean National Prayer Breakfast, which has been attended by every President with very few exceptions since its launch in 1968. Following his absence, some Protestant groups criticized him fiercely, claiming he skipped the National Prayer Breakfast deliberately because it was largely attended by conservatives. Amid growing complaints, President Moon finally hosted a luncheon with Protestant leaders (Ser 2019).

This context has enabled the culture of impunity that the masterminds of forced de-conversions have benefited from for decades. Ignoring the illegal activities of several Protestant leaders is indeed politically safer than challenging them publicly, due to the influence of the Christian religious lobby in the country.

Serious Breach of Human Rights

Considering international human rights law, the individual right to freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of movement have been and continue to be grossly violated by coercive de-conversions in South Korea.

The religious, cultural and political context cannot justify actions such as kidnapping, confinement, and forced change of religion of adults. The argument of so-called “internal family discussions” or “protective custody” in attempts to

justify these crimes was used to justify deprogramming in other countries, but has been unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles.

In 2014, the *Concluding Observations of the UN Human Rights Committee* (HRC) during Japan's Universal Periodic Review set an important legal precedent for this issue. For four decades, thousands of believers of the Unification Church, as well as hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses, had been kidnapped, forcefully confined, and submitted to de-conversion attempts by pastors and evangelists in Japan. Their perpetrators had always enjoyed total impunity until the survivor of a 12-year captivity, Toru Goto, and HRWF united efforts (Fautré 2013) to put an end to this egregious practice. The HRC conveyed a strong message to the authorities in Tokyo by declaring that,

The Committee is concerned at reports of abductions and forced confinement of converts to new religious movements by members of their families in an effort to deconvert them (arts. 2, 9, 18, 26 [of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]).

The State party should take effective measures to guarantee the right of every person not to be subject to coercion that would impair his or her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief (U.N. Human Rights Committee 2014, 8, no. 21).

Case Study 1: A Young Woman Killed During a Coercive De-Conversion Attempt

Ji-in Gu (1992–2018) was a convert to the Shincheonji Church who lost her life during a de-conversion program masterminded by Presbyterian evangelists. This led to a mass demonstration on the streets of Seoul in 2018: 120,000 people protested the impunity of the perpetrators of coercive de-conversion of Shincheonji members.

First Kidnapping

On July 23, 2016, Ji-in Gu, then 24 years old, was on her way home in her parents' car along with her older sister when she was kidnapped by her family. Her sister, a teacher in an elementary school, was actively backing their parents' decision, and tied Ji-in Gu's arms to hers during the trip to prevent any escape attempt. They took her to the Catholic monastery of St. Clare's in Jangseong

county (South Jeolla Province), where she was held in confinement over the course of 44 days.

Concerned about the conversion of their daughter to Shincheonji, her parents had previously consulted a Presbyterian evangelist, Woong-ki Lim, about how to de-convert her. The advice had been to submit her to a so-called “exit counseling” program, which was to be carried out in confinement conditions.

Kidnapping and coercive confinement are illegal activities according to Article 276 (False Arrest and Illegal Confinement, Those in Lineal Ascendant) of the South Korean criminal code.

During her confinement, two Presbyterian evangelists, Woong-ki Lim and Jung-cheol Park, pressured her to sign a statement asserting that she would voluntarily follow their “cult exit counseling” program to renounce her belief in the teachings of Shincheonji. She signed the agreement because she thought that she would be unable to escape confinement otherwise, as she was being held under tight security. Therefore, it was not a decision she made freely.

During 44 days of coercive confinement, she was submitted to a forcible de-conversion program. The Presbyterian evangelists thought that they had been successful with their program, but, in fact, she had only acted as if she was de-converted. As soon as she was freed, she disappeared to escape the surveillance of her family and the post-deconversion program. This program included religious services and classes about the Presbyterian faith.

In 2017, her parents realized that she still believed in the teachings of Shincheonji and planned another kidnapping operation.

Second Kidnapping

New Year festivities are always a dangerous period for converts who fear a kidnapping attempt, because they cannot avoid family reunions. These celebrations are often misused by families to kidnap, confine, and conduct coercive de-conversion programs. For these reasons, Ji-in Gu was scared at the end of 2017, and she shared these fears with her closest friends.

On December 29, 2017, Ji-in Gu’s parents used a family trip as an opportunity to kidnap her again. During her coercive confinement and the

ensuing “exit counseling” program, she lost her life under unclear circumstances. A media account reported that,

A 27-year-old woman, Ji-in Gu, was killed while she was being held captive at a secluded recreational lodge in Hwasun (Jeonnam, South Jeolla Province). On January 18, the parents of the woman were held responsible for the murder. According to the police department of Hwasun, they bound and gagged their daughter, leading to suffocation. The autopsy revealed a high possibility of cardiopulmonary arrest due to hypoxic hypoxia. The death was ricocheted from a “family matter” to a national issue, with more than 120,000 people gathering in Seoul and the other major cities of South Korea on 28 January to protest against coercive conversion, of which the woman was a victim (Mathay 2018).

The outrage sparked by the murder of Ji-in Gu was also highlighted by the U.S. Department of State in its *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom*, in the section about Korea, published on June 19, 2019:

In January, following reports that parents killed their daughter while attempting to force her to convert from what the parents viewed as a cult to their own Christian denomination, 120,000 citizens gathered in Seoul and elsewhere to protest against coercive conversion, reportedly conducted by some Christian pastors. The protestors criticized the government and churches for remaining silent on the issue and demanded action (U.S. Department of State 2019).

In addition to this protest, more than 100,000 signatures were collected for an online petition demanding punishment for those promoting forcible programs of de-conversion on members of Shincheonji. This petition was posted on the Blue House website, which is the website of the residential office of the President of South Korea. However, it was deleted and, up until now, the Blue House has still not provided an official response.

After the death of Ji-in Gu, her mother, who had quit her job to implement the program of forced de-conversion, went back to her office as a social worker. She was not prosecuted. Her father was indicted, but was still on the run at the time of this writing.

Impunity: The Responsibility of South Korean Authorities

After this tragic case of kidnapping and attempted forced change of religion, several victims of these practices publicly called for the prosecution of the instigators and perpetrators. Although kidnapping, confinement, and

forcible change of religion are strictly forbidden by national law, there appears to be no political will by various South Korean authorities to tackle this issue.

In the case of Ji-in Gu, a civil complaint was submitted to the Office of the President of South Korea, but it was the police station of Gwangju Bukbu that was assigned to the case. The authorities replied that they tried to contact the family, but they were not at home, and their phones were all turned off. No further action was taken.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which is in charge of religious affairs, received a copy of the civil complaint, and answered in February 2018 by stating that,

the state cannot interfere with an individual's choice of religion, religious activities, or that of any particular religious organization, as the Constitution of the Republic of Korea guarantees freedom of religion and the separation between state and religious organizations in Article 20.

Additionally, on January 18, 2018, Hye Jung Lim, a former victim of kidnapping for the purpose of de-conversion, posted a letter about the violent death of Ji-in Gu on the website of the Blue House, the executive and official residence of the President of South Korea. In her post, which was quickly deleted from the website, she stated that on June 4, 2017, Ji-in Gu had called upon the government to prosecute Presbyterian pastors inciting illegal violent actions for the purpose of forced change of religion.

Case Study 2: 50 Days of Confinement for Forced De-conversion

Hyeon-jeong Kim was raised in a Presbyterian family. At the time of her kidnapping, she was 29 years old, and was working as a pharmacy assistant. She was living with her father, a retired teacher, and her mother, a housewife.

In 2015, at age 26, she started attending the religious services of Shincheonji. This was the beginning of serious problems with her parents.

Domestic Violence

Her parents heard about her membership through one of her friends, and put Hyeon-jeong Kim under strict surveillance. Knowing that her father could be

violent, she told him that she would not go to that church anymore. At that time, she was a pharmacy student and she managed to continue attending Shincheonji services secretly for the next three years.

In 2018, she accepted a job at a pharmacy. At the same time, her parents found out that she had not severed her relations with Shincheonji. On 8 April, during dinner, her father had an angry outburst about her change of religion. During this incident, her father tried to hit her with a glass container and her mother held her by the neck while her brother also tried to hit her. This familial abuse lasted for two hours.

Domestic Coercive De-conversion Attempt

In the aftermath of that horrific day, her parents did some research online about Shincheonji. They only found negative articles and misinformation spread by Protestant Churches as well as media influenced by them. After that, they took Hyeon-jeong Kim's phone away, and her father followed her to and from work every day as if she was a child. She was almost 30 years old at the time.

In the meantime, her parents had been told by Presbyterian pastors to show her films and articles denouncing Shincheonji as a heretic Christian movement. After work, she was not allowed to leave the house and was denied access to her cell phone. She was forced to watch and read Presbyterian propaganda about Shincheonji every day.

Detrimental Intervention by the Daegu Police

Life was becoming unbearable for Hyeon-jeong Kim. As there was a police station near the pharmacy with a Women and Youth Department, she decided to go to the authorities for help. She told them everything, including the reasons behind the domestic violence she was experiencing. The police response was catastrophic. They called her father, and told him to give her back her phone and to stop surveilling her. This only further fueled her father's anger towards her.

She told her boss and colleagues at the pharmacy that she feared she was at risk of being kidnapped and confined by her family because of her change of religion.

Kidnapping

A few weeks later, on April 27, 2018, she was kidnapped. Her father forced her into his car and, with the assistance of other family members, took her to a location that was about a two-hour drive. The whole operation had been premeditated and masterminded by Presbyterian pastors.

She was locked in a studio on the 7th floor of a building for 50 days, under the surveillance of both her parents and her aunt.

Renewed Domestic Violence

Family members visited Hyeon-jeong Kim regularly, and violently pressured her to stop believing in the teachings of Shincheonji. One day, her father strangled her because she was refusing to give up her faith and sign a “voluntary” request for “exit counseling” from an “anti-heresy” center. Her mother and her aunt intervened just in time. Otherwise, she could have been killed, like Ji-in Gu was a few months earlier.

The Deprogrammers Step into Play

During the 50 days that Hyeon-jeong Kim spent in captivity, there was no sign of a de-conversion pastor. This is because they do not want to be accused of complicity in a case of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion, which is illegal in South Korea. However, they were in regular contact with the family and instructed them on how to force Hyeon-jeong Kim to return to the Presbyterian faith. Whenever she clashed with her parents, one of them would leave the room to call the pastors for guidance.

For over seven weeks, she resisted the coercion and threats of her family and their Presbyterian advisers. She was alone against all of them, but she continuously refused to sign any agreement stating that she was freely asking to be de-converted.

Since her parents saw no solution in sight, a few evangelists from the Suyongro Presbyterian Church in Busan were sent to the apartment. This led to a combination of circumstances that provided Hyeon-jeong Kim the opportunity to attempt an escape.

On June 16, 2018, the 51st day of her confinement, Hyeon-jeong Kim was cleaning, when the evangelists from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church rang the doorbell. When her father opened the door, she rushed out, barefoot and calling for help. However, she was on the 7th floor of the building and so her parents were able to catch her. Her parents *and* the three evangelists dragged her back into the apartment. Two of these envoys were Hana Cho and Jin-wook Choo.

Once inside, she continued to scream and refused to do anything they tried forcing her to do. One of the neighbors came to the door and asked what was happening. Hyeon-jeong Kim cried out, “Please call the police!” before her father closed the door again. Fortunately, that neighbor did call the police.

Effective Assistance by the Police in Busan

The police arrived shortly after, and took everyone to the police station, including the three implementors of the de-conversion program. There, the evangelists of the Presbyterian Church in Busan—Hana Cho and Jin-wook Choo—declared that they were just average church members and began to slander Shincheonji. The police listened to their accusations and did not make any comments.

After several hours of discussion, the police brought Hyeon-jeong Kim to a women’s emergency shelter in Busan, despite the opposition of her family. Despite her absence for over two months, the pharmacy she worked for was happy to have her back.

While Hyeon-jeong Kim was at the women’s shelter in Daegu, her father sent a letter saying that she could return home and he would respect her religious choice. The local police, who had been informed of her situation by her boss, escorted her home. Now, Hyeon-jeong Kim is living with her parents again, but the aftereffects of this traumatic experience have not disappeared.

About the Perpetrators

The three de-conversion actors from the Presbyterian Suyongro Church that came to the location where Hyeon-jeong Kim was detained were aware that she was confined by family members. When she tried to escape, they decided not only

to deny assistance to a person in danger, but also to become accomplices in her further confinement.

Kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forced change of religion are criminal activities in South Korea. Her family members were prosecuted, but not the three individuals who helped them.

Judgment of Daegu Provincial Prosecutor's Office

On July 13, 2018, Daegu Provincial Prosecutor's Office published its ruling concerning the defendants: Sung-jo Kim, Eun-Su Kim, and Kyung-hee Kim. It is noteworthy that none of the Presbyterian pastors involved were on the list of the accused, despite being the masterminds of the operation.

The official charge was: "violation against the law on violent acts and punishment (Joint confinement)." In the section of the judgment titled "The result of the investigation and viewpoints," the defendants did not deny the facts—the kidnapping, the confinement and the coercive attempt of religious de-conversion—but instead argued that it was all for the well-being of the victim.

What follows is the section of the judgment (copy of which has been obtained by HRWF) outlining the facts admitted by all parties, the statements of each of the accused, and the review of the Prosecutor's Office:

➤ *Facts that are recognized*

The suspects, having the plan of giving the de-conversion program through religious counseling to the victim for being a member of the Shincheonji faith, booked a studio in Jadong Haeundaegu Busan in advance. On the morning of the incident (27 April 2018), they kidnapped the victim in a car, drove to Busan and confined her for 50 days in that studio. She was cut off from the outside world and was not allowed to exit until the day she was found on 16 June 2018 after running away. Everything appears to be true.

The victim is testifying that she was taken by force by her parents and aunt in a car to Busan and was confined in a studio for 50 days until she could finally escape.

Her testimony includes: she was with her parents and her aunt in the studio and was being forced to undergo a de-conversion program; she was threatened with not being able to leave until she promised to participate in the program; and the door was blocked with piles of water bottles and the shoe rack covered the door handle so that the victim could not leave the room (Record Page 197, Written Testimony).

➤ *Statement of the suspect Sung-jo Kim*

The suspect decided that the only way for his daughter (the victim) who had converted to the Shincheonji religion to return to the Presbyterian faith was through a “cult counseling program” (coercive de-conversion) in Busan. On the morning of the incident, he kidnapped the victim on her way to work and drove her to a studio in Busan that was already prepared. All phones were turned off and there were water bottles piled in front of the door. The shoe rack was used to block the handle of the door and so on. He admitted that the victim was held in captivity against the victim’s will for about 50 days and included the fact that he didn’t allow her to escape (Record page 213, Suspect interrogation report).

➤ *Statement of the suspect Eun-su Kim*

The suspect, charged with forcibly attempting to de-convert her daughter (the victim) together with the victim’s aunt (suspect Kyung-hee Kim), arrived in Busan the day before the incident. She signed a lease for a studio room one day in advance, and then moved the victim to Busan by force with her husband (Sung-jo Kim). She admitted that she held the victim in captivity for about 50 days against the victim’s will (Record page 229, Suspect interrogations report).

➤ *Statement of the suspect Kyung-hee Kim*

The suspect reports that she first received a request from her brother (suspect Sung-jo Kim) to get a studio for the de-conversion program for her niece (the victim) because her niece is deeply involved with the Shincheonji Church. The suspect co-signed a lease for a studio with another suspect (Eun-su Kim) the day before the incident. The suspect admits that she went to the parking lot of the World Cup Stadium later to pick up the victim and the other suspects in her Lacetti vehicle. She claims that she was there to help her niece and the other suspects with food, but that act was against the will of the victim. She also continued helping the suspects from 27/4/2018 to 30/5/2018 despite knowing the victim was in confinement (Record page 252, Suspect interrogation report).

➤ *Review*

The suspects claim that only the de-conversion program through a trained consultant had the potential to bring the victim back to the Presbyterian Church. Even though she was in a confined environment, the suspects argue that she was with her parents and it was all for the wellbeing of the victim. However, it is clearly recognized as an illegal confinement for kidnapping her in the car on the way to work and then taking her to Busan where she was completely cut off from the outside world and trapped for 50 days because the front door was blocked. All of this was against the will of the victim until the day of her escape.

The Opinion of the Prosecutor's Office was that, "the suspicion against the suspects has been confirmed, so they will be charged accordingly (indictment without detention)."

In this case, the perpetrators were officially charged for their crimes. However, since the accused were first-time offenders, who had confessed and "repented" for their crimes, and as the victim was able to resume her life, the prosecution's civic committee suggested a suspension of the indictment. For this reason, the court ruled that the charges are formally acknowledged, but the prosecution will be suspended for a probation period of seven years.

Hyeon-jeong Kim filed a petition with the Constitutional Court against the prosecutor of the Daegu District Public Prosecutors' Office, alleging that his decision was infringing on her basic rights, "including equal rights and the right to appeal in hearing proceedings." However, on June 28, 2019, the judges of the Constitutional Court unanimously dismissed her claim.

Case Study 3: 81 Days in a Psychiatric Hospital

Hye-won Sohn was 20 years old in May 2016 when she joined Shincheonji. When her parents found out about her change of religious affiliation, they contacted a Presbyterian "cult counseling center," which advised them to kidnap their daughter and to confine her for a de-conversion program.

From Failed Kidnapping to Psychiatric Internment

On February 2, 2017, Hye-won Sohn was kidnapped by her parents, but she managed to escape. She went to the police for help, but they refused to intervene on what they considered a family matter. Her parents then forced her to undergo an examination at a psychiatric hospital, but she was declared psychologically stable. Her parents were displeased, because they had hoped she would be diagnosed as suffering from "religious delirium."

Hye-won Sohn's parents asked the staff to recommend a different psychiatric hospital, preferably outside of Seoul, where they could commit her, as they said, "without too much trouble." They were referred to the mental hospital in Cheongsong, which is a four-hour drive from Seoul.

At this hospital, there was no psychological evaluation administered at admission. Instead, Hye-won Sohn was admitted solely based on a conversation between the doctor and her parents. This initiated Hye-won Sohn's 81-day forcible psychiatric internment.

Hye-won Sohn was unable to have any contact with the outside world, except for her parents' visits twice a month. Every time they came, they threatened that she would stay there until she promised to stop attending Shincheonji.

A nurse at the hospital was moved by her situation, and tried to help. She discreetly advised Hye-won Sohn to write to the authorities about her forced internment. Hye-won Sohn took her advice, and sent a letter to two city councilors calling for help. They responded and sent two officials to visit her on 21 March 2017. However, the officials were not interested in her hospitalization and instead inquired about her life as a member of Shincheonji. After their visit, there was no change.

On April 25, 2017, Hye-won Sohn sent a letter to the court requesting her release. Her doctor found out before she sent it and tried to convince her not to. The next day, she was freed without any explanation. She believes that her calls for outside help prompted the hospital to release her to avoid legal trouble.

For 81 days, she had been illegally interned in a psychiatric hospital, and had undergone a forced medical treatment despite having no diagnosis or mental health issue.

After her release, she returned to the hospital to ask the doctor, Hyun-soo Kim, why he had forced a treatment plan on her. He confessed that he knew she was sane, but had prescribed her sedatives, anti-depressants, and antipsychotic medicine for bipolar depression anyways. This conversation was recorded.

Pastors Recommend Forced Internment in Psychiatric Hospitals

The case of Hyun-soo Kim is not an isolated incident. Forced internment in a psychiatric hospital has been recommended in the past by "cult counseling centers." This is evidenced by the statistics from Shincheonji, which has documented 13 such cases.

In 2007, Pastor Jin-yong Sik, who was then the head of the "cult counseling center" of Ansan, was prosecuted and found guilty for sending a member of the

World Mission Society Church of God, another Korean Christian new religious movement (Introvigne and Folk 2017), to a psychiatric institution. According to a news story published in *Newshankuk* on 24 October 2008, he was sentenced to 10 months in prison with two years' probation for coercive de-conversion (Song 2008). In 2012, there was a public uproar when the investigation about his complaint against human rights activists revealed that Pastor Sik had earned more than one billion won (850,000 EUR) with his de-conversion business (Lee 2012).

Despite these controversies and undeniable human rights violations, his “cult counseling center” continues to be a highly profitable business.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of kidnapping, confinement, and attempted or “successful” forced de-conversion masterminded by pastors and evangelists of the CCKK has mainly targeted members of Shincheonji, although the World Mission Society Church of God and other groups have also been attacked.

The situation of Shincheonji in South Korea presents several similarities with the persecution of the Unification Church during 40 years in Japan. These human rights violations were investigated and condemned by HRWF, and the case of Toru Goto decided by Japanese courts put an end to them (Fautré 2011).

The common points identified are:

- the role of pastors and evangelists in a doctrinal competition between their church and NRMs in depicting it as a battle against so-called theological heresies;
- the de-conversion pastors and evangelists using hate speech against the religious movements that they are combating;
- the involvement of mainstream churches in training parents how to carry out kidnappings and detention;
- the same culture of patriarchal power relations between parents and children, which demands submission and subservience from children;
- the persistent authority of parents over their children into adulthood;
- the gender-based dimension, as many more young women than men were

kidnapped and detained;

- the institutional passivity, which created a culture of impunity;
- and silence from the media, including both national and foreign NGOs.

The main difference is that the pastors and evangelists in Japan were directly participating in the kidnapping and confinement of the victims, even escalating to the use of violence. In South Korea, the coercive de-conversion actors and their masterminds:

- are more numerous than in Japan, because they are trained by the CCKK under a specific missionary activity—“bringing lost sheep back home;”
- do not directly participate in the kidnapping and detention, and instead monitor it remotely;
- pressure parents to extort a signed statement from the abductee that he/she volunteers to follow a so-called “cult exit counseling program;”
- and only physically encounter the abductee when he/she has signed the “exit counseling program” statement, so that they cannot be prosecuted.

Despite these precautions, South Korean de-conversion implementers and their masterminds are clearly responsible for conducting illegal acts, when they provide guidance on how to organize a kidnapping or confinement operation and then train people for this purpose.

As in Japan, this devastating practice could be eradicated in South Korea only if a multi-dimensional strategy is implemented.

Firstly, there is a need to raise awareness within the international community of scholars in religious studies, national and international human rights organizations, as well as national and international media.

There is also a need to highlight the responsibility of the CCKK, which tolerates, endorses, and appears to encourage such practices, as well as urging the CCKK to put an end to them.

Additionally, there is a need to develop advocacy at the United Nations and in organs defending freedom of religion or belief within the European Union institutions, national institutions in Europe, the US Department of State, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and others.

There is a need to prosecute those who encourage people to perpetrate an act

of abduction and confinement.

Lastly, there is a need to prosecute hate speech and hate crimes against new religious movements and other targeted groups.

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“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji”: Broadcasting the Darker Side of Deprogramming

Raffaella Di Marzio

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience (LIREC)

raffaelladimarzio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article is an in-depth critical examination of the first two episodes of the TV show “People Trapped into Shincheonji” from a psychological perspective. The show was produced by the Christian Korean TV network CBS, which broadcast it in 2017. We see in the show the deprogramming procedure, captured with a hidden camera in Christian counseling centers, conducted with the aim of “rescuing” young women affiliated with Shincheonji, a Christian new religious movement experiencing a sustained growth in South Korea. The episodes are analyzed with reference to the vast literature on deprogramming, and the personal experience of the author, who interviewed a young woman deprogrammed in Italy in the late 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Mental Manipulation, Mind Control, Brainwashing, Anti-cult Movements, Margaret Singer, Deprogramming, Shincheonji, Forced Conversion.

“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji”

The episodes examined in this article are the first two of a series of eight, produced by the Christian Korean TV network CBS and aired in 2017. The aim of the CBS show was to document and, above all, to promote the deprogramming of members of the Church of Shincheonji, as if it were a “good practice.” The “counseling” shown in the episodes, and recorded through hidden cameras, presents all the characteristics of the deprogramming techniques, which were widespread in the United States in the 1970s and 80s (Anthony 1980; Galanter 1993; Hood, Hill and Spilka 2009), during the emerging phase of the anti-cult movement. They were subsequently also exported to some European countries. The practice of deprogramming was a violent and illegal reaction to the large

number of affiliations of young adults to minority religious and spiritual groups, which sometimes resulted in them abandoning their careers and families (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

Deprogramming, considered illegal everywhere, has unfortunately still been practiced in our century in Japan (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2012), and, as in the case under discussion, is still being practiced today in South Korea. The theoretical and practical roots of this type of “counseling,” which we will subsequently refer to as “deprogramming,” since it manifests itself in the same way and is based on the same assumptions of its American and European counterparts, can be found in the brainwashing theory, an explanation of religious conversion now abandoned by the vast majority of scholars (Hood, Hill and Spilka 2009; Anthony and Robbins 2004, Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Based on this theory (Singer and Lalich 1995), the reason for a young person’s religious conversion to a “destructive cult” is found in brainwashing, or mental manipulation, a technique supposedly practiced by the leader and the group. Changes in thinking and behavior are always interpreted as the result of mental manipulation, and not as a free choice: therefore, they must be “reversed.” Deprogramming is the procedure that should return members to the condition prior to their affiliation.

The history of deprogramming records many cases of failures, and often the “successes” were limited to a few cases taking place at the beginning of the affiliation process. In these cases, affiliation to a “cult” was considered a “disease,” and when the “symptoms” had first appeared, the new members, promptly discouraged and frightened by deprogrammers, had left the group before the conversion efforts and the decision to engage in the movement had been consolidated.

“People Trapped Inside Shincheonji: Revelation (Part 1)”

This is the case with the first girl, Hyo-eun, who had been affiliated with Shincheonji for only six months. During the episode (CBS 2017a), the young girl’s parents accuse Shincheonji of brainwashing their daughter by taking her away from the family. The same point is argued by all the family members who had approached the Sangrok Church Counseling Center and are interviewed in the episode. Their children and relatives changed since attending Shincheonji. They

blatantly proclaim their faith in Shincheonji’s leader Lee Man Hee, and are even displaying his image in their homes. The Sangrok Church counselors promise these alarmed family members to bring their loved ones out of the “cult.”

What happens in the Sangrok Church Counseling Center is perfectly in line with what happened around the world in other similar centers, established within majority denominations (as in this case), or within anti-cult movements without confessional links. The relatives of the believers go on to describe their loved ones’ changes in behavior and way of thinking, and claim they are creating problems in the family. The relatives express uncertainty and concern because they do not understand the causes of the change. The mistake that is made in this situation is to adapt the “case” to a pre-determined frame of reference, according to which the explanation of these changes is both simple and dramatic: the devastating influence of the “cult,” presented as a criminal group abusing and deceiving defenseless people. This is the stereotype dominating these episodes, perfectly summarized in the title of the series, “People Trapped Inside Shincheonji.”

Of further interest is the reconstruction of the moment when Hyo-eun’s mother learns about her daughter’s affiliation to Shincheonji. The woman says she had no fear or concern, until she received a phone call while she was at work, which alerted her and her whole family. This detail may appear to be secondary, but it is not, for it is also found in other similar cases that have occurred in other contexts. I personally interviewed a woman, subsequently referred to as A., who, at age 24, survived an attempt at deprogramming (Di Marzio 2016, 491–505). In her case, too, her parents had no problem or concern about her affiliation to a minority religious group, until they heard negative reports, calling it a “cult,” during a television broadcast. That alarming information set the subsequent events in motion, which led A.’s parents to make the same choice as the parents of Hyo-eun, to approach an anti-cult group and request the intervention of professional deprogrammers.

After learning that his daughter was a member of Shincheonji, the father said he felt “betrayed” by her, as if her choice was a form of contempt for everything he had done for her in the previous 25 years. In retaliation, he decided to take away her cell phone to prevent further contacts with the group. These punitive parental behaviors are often found in cases of conflicts due to unwelcome affiliations. Even in A.’s case, she was prevented from calling any friends in the

group by phone, because it was believed that blocking the flow of information from the “cult” was essential for the deprogramming to be successful. In fact, these actions arouse anger and frustration in the victims, with unpredictable outcomes, and do not always favor the success of the deprogramming, as it happened, for example, in the case of A. As far as Hyo-eun is concerned, her broken and violent (especially self-harm) reactions are interpreted by her parents as the actions of a deranged person, of a person who “is no longer the same.” Out of protest, she suddenly started “banging her head against the wall” and was constantly shouting the prayers she recited in Shincheonji.

One of the moments when the CBS episode shows abundant details of textbook deprogramming, is the transfer of the young woman to the counseling center with her parents. The reconstruction perfectly parallels the stories of many other young people kidnapped by deception, and sometimes violence, by their parents to be deprogrammed. Just to give an example, in the case of A., the young girl remembers being deceived by her parents, who took her to an isolated place. Realizing what was about to happen, she tried to escape, but was held against her will for days, suffering a fractured foot as a result of a fight with one of the deprogrammers (Di Marzio 2016, 491–92). The episode shows a very similar scenario in the case of Hyo-eun when, faced with the tenacious resistance of his daughter trying to leave the room shouting that she wants to return to Shincheonji, her father gets up, grabs her with force, and forces her to sit down again (CBS 2017a, min. 33.20 to 33.27).

As mentioned before, anti-cult organizations that practice deprogramming may have different characteristics. In this case, we are dealing with a “counseling center” promoted by a Christian church. For this reason, the whole process of “recovery” is based on religious assumptions. The deprogrammers try to refute the teachings the young woman learned in Shincheonji, that is, the interpretation that the leader of the movement gives to the Biblical texts. This setting of the show is evident from the very first images, when the narrator reads *Genesis* 11, on the construction of the Tower of Babel and its destruction by God. It is thus suggested that the deprogramming the audience is about to witness is a religious “crusade,” a defense of the true faith against the false belief professed by Hyo-eun as a member of Shincheonji. This false belief is taught by Lee Man Hee, presented as a proud, mendacious leader who, as it happened to those who built the Tower of Babel, will be severely punished by God.

Hyo-eun had only belonged to Shincheonji for six months. Her attitude at the beginning of the counseling is eloquent: she begins the meeting by kneeling and praying for her family, that they may understand they are in error (CBS 2017a, 16.28 et seq.). The counselor’s strategy is to convince the young woman that what she believes is false, and that she has been deliberately deceived. Hyo-eun’s reaction, which in turn accuses the counselor of misinterpreting the Bible, is interpreted by the commentator as “obstructionism.” Since the assumption is that the young woman is incapable of thinking clearly, and the only possible choice for her is to meekly submit to the truths that the counselor and her parents intend to convey to her during the sessions, her resistance is neither meaningful nor valuable, and should therefore be ignored.

This approach considers the victim subjected to deprogramming as a person without capacity for discernment, with a mind clouded by the manipulative techniques to which she has supposedly been subjected, incapable of choosing for herself. As a consequence, the deprivation of personal freedom and violation of human rights is regarded as justified by the situation, and even in the best interest of the “cult” member, as determined by her parents and the organization responsible for conducting the deprogramming. As in all cases of deprogramming, the violation of the most intimate and personal beliefs and the coercion of the inclinations and feelings cause intense suffering, which remains in the memories and nightmares of the victims throughout their lives.

In the interview I carried out with A., she described the attitude of the deprogrammers in this way,

the proceedings were basically a continuous denial of my personality because they considered me a subject who could be influenced outside of her will ... a fool who was brainwashed in some way and, after all, [they believed] this deprogramming would easily fool me again. As a result, they were claiming that I was a person who could be deprogrammed, which was particularly humiliating for me... (Di Marzio 2016, 493).

When asked to express her emotions during the deprogramming, she said that, after the first moments of astonishment for what was happening to her, she felt “terrified,” “humiliated,” “betrayed,” and “abandoned” by her parents. She believes that the greatest suffering for her was experiencing her parents’ attitude, from the first moments of the kidnapping until the end of the deprogramming, which, in her case, failed.

Returning to Hyo-eun's case, after a series of clashes with the counselor about the interpretation of some biblical passages, the procedure is abruptly interrupted because the young woman stops looking at the counselor, and starts to address first her father, and then her mother, showing them her suffering through continuous requests for help, interrupted by crying. Her non-verbal behavior speaks more than the words. Initially, she sits looking at the counsellor, then she moves her whole body first in the direction of her father, and then of her mother, sitting to her right and left. After asking for help without getting it, she folds back on herself, leaning on the table and continuing to cry, as if she could no longer find somebody to turn to. Abandonment, loneliness and fear take over, while, in a climate of growing coercion and violence, the young woman is subjected to a verbal bombardment by her parents and the counselor, with which they aim to convince her that the leader of Shincheonji is a liar, because what he teaches is in contrast with the Bible.

The young woman does not seem to be convinced and, in the end, tired and under great emotional stress, she begins to laugh. The counselor does not understand that the young woman's laughter is not a sign of derision, but a manifestation of great suffering and exasperation, and takes the opportunity to reproach her further. The irrational reaction of the young woman, being frustrated for the umpteenth time, is an extreme and desperate defense of herself: she says she only wants to return to Shincheonji, even if everything they taught her was a lie. The harsh opposition, the one-sided accusations, and the absolute lack of empathy lead to the emergence of an extreme defense of the girl's self and therefore of her faith, which, literally, cannot be reasoned with.

The counselor's attempt to lead the young woman to rationally accept her interpretation of the Bible, because it is "true," clashes with this wall of unilateral defense, not only of her own faith, but above all of her own identity and individuality (CBS 2017a, 22.08), since religious conversion is a fundamental and unifying aspect of the person. For Hyo-eun, Shincheonji is paradise, salvation, giving her certainty of escaping death. These convictions are expressed with strength and determination, despite the aggressive attitude and verbal violence of the counselor who stands before the young woman, leaning over the table above her, as if wanting to strike her, while the young woman remains seated and folded back on herself (CBS 2017a, 15.12).

The broadcast continues with images from the third, fourth, and fifth day of counseling. At a certain point, after listening for a long time to the refutation of Lee Man Hee’s teachings and the doctrine of Shincheonji, Hyo-eun begins to show some signs of uncertainty and claims to have some doubts. She expresses the desire to ask her leader for explanations, because she cannot convince herself that he is a liar without listening to his point of view (CBS 2017a, 27.03). Despite her fatigue, which is evident in her non-verbal attitude, her ability to concentrate remains strong. She understands that she has been presented with alleged discrepancies between her beliefs and the biblical text, and shows a desire to hear the other side, i.e. the explanation of the person who is being accused, by the counselor, of being a “liar.” Of course, her request is not taken seriously, and the deprogramming proceeds.

As the days go by, the young girl becomes more and more tired, weeping and often folding over the book; she appears weak and distressed (CBS 2017a, 27.56). These reactions are the desired outcome of deprogramming, since it is important to wear the victims out, through long and traumatizing sessions, accusations, and verbal violence, and, in some cases, even deprivation of sleep and food.

In such a frustrating and punitive context of isolation, the person reaches a critical point, and only wishes to somehow put an end to the painful situation. To do so, the victims can use different strategies, as is also shown by the experiences of other deprogrammed young people. In the case of A., whom I interviewed, the young woman used the technique of pretending that she had been deprogrammed successfully, which eventually allowed her to escape from the place where she was being held and to put an end to the deprogramming (Di Marzio 2016, 495–96). Hyo-eun, on the other hand, at a certain point seems tired and resigned, and changes her attitude towards the counselor and her parents. She no longer responds to explanations given to her about the alleged misinterpretation of the Bible, which would attest that Shincheonji’s teachings are false. Rather, she leans back in her chair, as if she could finally relieve some tension, and begins to communicate in a different way, shifting the focus from her beliefs to her emotions (CBS 2017a, 29.47).

She declares that her desire to return to the group will not change in the face of any theological consideration or reason, even if it were the threat of going to hell, formulated by her counselor, or her parents’ heartfelt calls to leave the movement.

Hyo-eun eloquently verbalizes her condition and emotions, looking at her parents and saying in a clear voice, with great conviction: “I was more happy when I lived there than in the 25 years I have lived with you” (CBS 2017a, 30.26, 30.30).

This is indeed a particularly important moment, as Hyo-eun finally reveals the most important reason why she has so enthusiastically embraced Shincheonji. It is not the resurrection doctrine that promises her eternal life, or the charisma of the leader, but rather the happiness she experiences when she is in the community. She probably feels understood and loved by all, committed to sharing a great mission that succeeds in giving meaning to her life, in a community where friendly people share the same faith. The persistent work of indoctrination carried out by the counselors, who do not care for the young woman’s emotional needs, have proved practically ineffective thus far. This psychological element is confirmed by an extensive range of scientific literature, discussing the factors influencing the decision to affiliate with a religious group. The most important factor is not the persuasiveness of the new beliefs, but rather the greater strength of the emotional ties developed with members already affiliated, compared to those already existing with people outside the group (Rambo 1993; Galanter, Rabkin, Rabkin and Deutsch 1979).

“People trapped inside Shincheonji: Youth (Part 2)”

In the second episode, Hyo-eun’s surrender is openly manifested on the seventh day of deprogramming, when she admits in tears that Shincheonji’s teachings are really wrong. Considering the level of stress, and the distressing emotional climate of the previous days, the young woman’s resistance and the strenuous defense of the group appear as almost “heroic,” and show how deeply rooted these beliefs were in a girl who had been a Shincheonji member for only six months. Hyo-eun’s surrender immediately provokes a change in the behavior of the counselor, who gets up to embrace her, and her mother. Both abandon the aggressive and punitive attitude taken in the previous days and show great joy and affection. This is a form of psychological “reinforcement,” a reward and encouragement to continue and consolidate the process of “recovery.”

The episode continues with an interview with Hyo-eun, one month after the deprogramming. The impression is of a different person: the young woman says exactly the opposite of what she had argued in the first few days of the

deprogramming. Now, she regards Shincheonji as hell, accuses the group of having brainwashed her, says she has been deceived and trained to lie. Parents’ interviews and expert comments confirm this version. In particular, the mother emphatically expresses her satisfaction to see that, thanks to the counseling, her daughter was back to her old self, smiling and happy.

The consequences that deprogramming had on Hyo-eun are like those resulting from a number of researches on other deprogrammed young people who left the movement they were affiliated with. Some of them have become bitter enemies of the group they left behind. In general, among ex-members, the differences in the way they perceived the abandoned group largely depends on how the disaffiliation occurred. Those who were forced to do so, following deprogramming, have a much more negative opinion of the movement than those who voluntarily disaffiliated or were expelled (Galanter 1989; Shupe and Darnell 2006; Bromley 2004).

In the final part of the second episode, we meet another young girl, Yoo Da-hye, who is dragged by her parents into the Heresy Counseling Center at Ansan Sang-rok Church. Yoo Da-hye’s reaction is even more resolute than in the case of Hyo-eun. The young girl wants to leave and accuses her parents, in front of the counselor, of having taken her to the Center by force. The counselor’s response to this accusation is eloquent: “Even if they dragged you here, they are still your parents” (CBS 2017b, 25.20).

This is a recurrent reasoning in cases of deprogramming. It is claimed that the illegal actions of the parents and the anti-cult organizations to which they turn are justified as “lesser evils,” simply because they are decided and implemented by those who have authority over the victims, the “children,” even if the latter are of legal age. In this context, it is as if human rights could be temporarily suspended in order to allow parents to carry out illegal actions and serious violations of the psycho-physical integrity of their “children,” in order to achieve an end that they regard as “good.”

As in the previous cases of Hyo-eun and A., Yoo Da-hye’s belief that she was betrayed by her parents is a cause of great suffering and bewilderment. For these young people, parents suddenly cease to be points of reference, capable of satisfying the need for protection inherent in the child-parent relationship. Yoo Da-hye, a young member of Shincheonji, clearly expresses this emotional state. During the counseling, she first openly disowns her parents, then stops talking,

completely turns her gaze away from her mother, refusing to look at her, and starts calling her “Mrs.” as if she didn’t know her. The counselor’s attempt to instill a sense of guilt in her for her attitude towards her parents, accusing the group of having caused this contempt for family ties, fails. The young woman declares that, since she is being held prisoner, she intends to call the police. And she manages to do it.

The video shows the arrival of the police at the counseling center and the start of the investigation, based on accusations of “confinement, assault, and forced counseling.” In Yoo Da-hye’s case, deprogramming has not even begun, but has led to two unforeseen outcomes for the parents and the counseling center: a judicial investigation, and the loss of contact with the young woman, who never returned home.

Deprogramming and Brainwashing

As already mentioned, deprogramming is a practice closely related to brainwashing theories. Cowan stresses that theories of brainwashing, used as the single explanation of conversion to the new religious movements (NMR), are essential to support the activities of the three main components of the anti-cult movement: friends and relatives of affiliated members, former members, and anti-cult groups. The brainwashing theory, in fact, for each of these subjects, functions as a “comfort,” “consolation,” and “measure of control”:

- comfort: the parents and friends of the young converts find a single explanation for a phenomenon that is mysterious to them, namely that a relative joined a new religious movement;
- consolation: the ex-members, in conflict with themselves in the face of the choices made when they were affiliated as if they were senseless, can resolve the conflict by attributing their choices to manipulative techniques, of which they were more or less unaware;
- measure of control: the anti-cult activists use the theory to justify their requests to increase social control over new religious movements, thus avoiding considering the enormous complexity of conversion processes, which can take very different directions and have very different outcomes, both at the individual and social level (Cowan 2014, 693).

Organizations that are part of the anti-cult movement present themselves to relatives concerned about their loved ones’ affiliation to a new religious movement as “educational or information services” (Wright 2014, 708). As such, the anti-cult activists provide alarming news about the NRMs the relatives of the people they serve have become affiliated with: for example, the fact that in NRMs people are supposedly being brainwashed, sexually abused, etc. It occasionally occurs that the relatives and friends of members still affiliated, in the wake of these worrying reports, decide to join themselves the network of organized opponents, committed to demand and obtain more control and repressive action against NRMs from the authorities. In these cases, the anti-cult social network, composed of social workers, psychologists, counselors, journalists and, sometimes, police or child protection agencies, join forces with the relatives. In this way, an investigation can begin, starting from the testimonies, spread by the media, of abuses perpetrated within an NMR, and can raise awareness of the “problem” among some representatives of the political world and law enforcement agencies, who may feel compelled to do “something” to prevent and combat the phenomenon.

The scholarly literature on the anti-cult movement helps to understand the meaning and purpose of the show produced by CBS, whose aim is to publicize and promote the deprogramming of young Shincheonji members. In kidnapping and deprogramming young people, the organizations that conduct the process and promote it through the media, paradoxically use the same techniques that they attribute to Shincheonji. They “trap” young people through deception, emotional blackmail, threats, violence, and massive “indoctrination” to wear out the believers and obtain their surrender. I believe that the most deplorable aspect of these broadcasts is their own publicity. They present themselves as “ethical” procedures, aimed at saving young people from the “trap” of Shincheonji under the umbrella of a Christian church which, in so doing, is not only acting against the law, but also in violation of all the evangelical values it professes.

These broadcasts represent a serious form of incitement to hatred and to the commission of crimes such as kidnapping and violence. Despite what the TV show wants us to believe, crimes remain crimes, even if committed by parents who are concerned about their children. At the end of the episodes, moreover, I believe that a question arises spontaneously: have the problems of the deprogrammed young people and those interviewed been resolved by the

deprogramming, even in the case of those who left Shincheonji? Have the reasons for their conflicts with their parents really been identified, or was Shincheonji just a scapegoat to hide previous and still existing problems in their families?

Based on my experience and studies, I can say that deprogramming does not solve relationship problems in families, and often aggravates them. One witness to these painful outcomes is A., the deprogrammed young woman I interviewed, who has had no contact with her family members or other relatives since the late 1980s. In her opinion, the interruption of family relations is primarily due to the parents' sense of guilt, for their betrayal, which, in her case, did not have the desired effect because the deprogramming failed. As for her brothers and sisters and other relatives, A. says: "I am astonished, I would not have thought such inhumanity was possible in my family, I tell you the truth."

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

Massimo Introvigne
CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)
maxintrovigne@gmail.com

Willy Fautré
Human Rights Without Frontiers
w.fautre@hrwf.org

Rosita Šorytė
International Observatory of Human Rights of Refugees
president@orlir.org

Alessandro Amicarelli
European Federation for Freedom of Belief
alessandro.amicarelli@gmail.com

Marco Respinti
The Journal of CESNUR
marcorespinti@marcorespinti.org

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 14th 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 16th and 17th 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 “TablighiJamatVirus,” 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 17th 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 Saerom 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 7th 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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