

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

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**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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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