

Providence Church and the Festinger Syndrome

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ABSTRACT: When President Jung Myung-seok, the founder of the Korean Christian new religious movement Providence (also known as Christian Gospel Mission) was sentenced to ten years in jail, opponents believed the group would disappear. In fact, not only did it survive but actually grew during and after Jung’s detention. The article presents the history and theology of Providence and related controversies. It argues that not only “when prophecy fails” but also “when the leader is convicted” the prediction that a movement would collapse may in several cases be wrong.

KEYWORDS: Providence, Christian Gospel Mission, Jung Myung-seok, New Religious Movements in South Korea, New Religious Movements and Sexual Abuse.

Introduction

On February 18, 2018, President Jung Myung-seok, as followers of its South Korean Christian new religious movement Providence called him, was released from jail, where he had spent ten years for sexual abuse. In 2009, when the Supreme Court of South Korea confirmed the verdict, Korean anti-cultists, for which Providence had been for years a main target, believed that the movement would soon disappear. To their astonishment, during the decade in which Jung remained in detention, Providence not only did not collapse, it actually grew, both in South Korea and in other countries such as Taiwan.

While sociologists might have warned anti-cultists that it should never be taken for granted that, when a leader is jailed and sentenced, a religious movement would disappear, opponents of Providence were understandably disappointed. After President Jung was released and resumed his role as leader of Providence,

they multiplied articles and TV shows against Providence and its leader, and members of the movement continued to be discriminated in various ways and abducted to be deprogrammed, a phenomenon that has targeted several new religious movements in South Korea and has never been seriously repressed by the authorities (Di Marzio 2020; Fautré 2020).

With the exception of a doctoral dissertation, a book, and some articles by French anthropologist Nathalie Luca (1994, 1997, 1998, 1999–2000), which were written some 25 years ago and reflect a different phase in the history of the movement, I am the only Western scholar who systematically studied Providence and interviewed President Jung at length after he was released from jail, in March and June 2019.

It was never my purpose to take a stand on whether President Jung was guilty or innocent of the crimes for which he spent ten years in jail. This is not the task of scholars, while it is part of their job to analyze how different narratives of the same events interact and create social effects.

It was, however, my purpose to do something those that focus only on President Jung's court case normally omit. It is impossible to understand both the controversies and the reason they failed to destroy Providence without analyzing the biography of President Jung and the history and theology of the movement. This article will explore these subjects in detail, but will start with a comment on the sociological dynamics that may be at work in the Providence case.

When Prophecy Does Not Fail

Opponents of groups they label as “cults” and the media they influence are always very much surprised that the movements they attack do not disappear. In several cases, however, as media slander increases, so does the number of members of the so-called “cult.” Even sentencing the leader and putting him in jail in democratic countries, as the case of Providence proves, does not necessarily “kill” a movement, and is compatible with its continuing growth.

This case is similar to the one whose sociological study was inaugurated in the 1950s by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1919–1989) and his colleagues (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). He considered the fact that when a movement has announced a date for the end of the world, and obviously the world

had not ended on that date, it often happens that the group, rather than disappearing, in fact gains more members. “When prophecy fails,” Festinger argued, those who had believed in it do not abandon their faith, but proselytize with even more fervor, trying to solve the “cognitive dissonance” and to find in conversions by others a confirmation of their endangered beliefs. The “Festinger syndrome” theory was discussed in the last sixty years by leading sociologists including Joseph F. Zygmunt (1921–2008), J. Gordon Melton, Lorne L. Dawson, Diana Tumminia, William H. Swatos, Jr. (1946–2020), and several others (Zygmunt 1972; Melton 1985; Dawson 1999; Tumminia 2005; Tumminia and Swatos 2011).

They concluded that Festinger was right in arguing that religious movements may not be destroyed when an event they had predicted fails to occur, but wrong in explaining this through cognitive dissonance. In fact, the very title of Festinger’s and his colleagues’ acclaimed book, *When Prophecy Fails*, may be misleading. For the true believer, *prophecy never fails*. As Melton argued, most groups confronted with what the outside world sees as prophetic disconfirmation claim that the prophecy in fact did not fail but was fulfilled in ways visible only to the eyes of the believers (Melton 1985, 21).

As proved by the history of both the Millerite Adventists (whose larger branch later became the Seventh-day Adventists) after 1844 and the Bible Students (whose larger branch later became the Jehovah’s Witnesses) after 1914, movements reaffirm their beliefs by “spiritualizing” them, claiming that the predicted event really occurred, but was invisible to human eyes. Based on the calculations of William Miller (1782–1849), early Adventists expected the end of this world and the second coming of Jesus Christ for the year 1844. When this did not happen, the faction of the Millerite Adventists that eventually gathered around Ellen Gould White (1827–1915) “spiritualized” the prophecy into the Sanctuary Doctrine. They claimed that in 1844 Jesus Christ had entered the most holy place of the Heavenly Sanctuary and started the “investigative judgement” of all the living and the dead (Adams 1981). Millions eventually accepted their claims, giving rise to the very successful denomination of the Seventh-day Adventists.

Similarly, early Bible Students had expected the end of this world for the year 1914. After the predictions of their founder, Pastor Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), failed to materialize, the date of 1914 was reinterpreted as the year in

which Jesus Christ was installed as God's Heavenly King, thus opening the way for those who are part of the 144,000 "anointed" to go to Heaven and reign with Jesus forever (Chryssides 2016, 223–244). The prophetic disappointments of 1844 and 1914 did not lead to the demise of the Adventists and the Bible Students, but opened the way to their metamorphosis into global movements such as the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses that gathered millions of members.

The case of a leader venerated by his (or her) followers as a prophet and a godly man (or woman) who is arrested, charged, sentenced, and jailed for common crimes—indeed, sexual abuse is in our days the most common accusation against leaders of groups labeled as "cults" by their opponents—is different from the case of a prediction about the end of the world that ostensibly fails to come true. Yet, there are similarities. Movements such as the Adventists in 1844 and the predecessors of the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1914 did not expect the end of this world to come invisibly and spiritually. They expected it to come visibly. Followers of Providence did not expect that the way their leader, President Jung, would fulfill his mission was through accusations of sexual abuse, a very public trial, and a long jail term. They expected him to be recognized by a growing number of followers as a good, compassionate, and reliable religious leader, as they fully believed he was.

Just as the fact that a prophetic date seems not to come true, the fact that a leader's career seems to take a different course than it was expected does not, in most cases, change the basic beliefs of the followers. If their faith is strong enough, if a leadership of committed devotees is able to guide them, if the leaders continue to "be with them" from prison, they may carry on and even grow. For the opponents, prophecies "fail" and leaders are "unmasked." For the believers, prophecies do not fail and leaders go through a course of suffering that is needed to fulfill their mission.

Within Christianity, of course, this is nothing new. The apostles fully expected that Jesus will triumph in Jerusalem and will make them dignitaries in his glorious kingdom. When he was arrested, tried, and executed, they had to re-adjust their beliefs, or to understand them in a different way. As we know, they succeeded in doing this admirably. Not only did Christianity not disappear, it grew to become the world's largest religion.

How survival and expansion happened, obviously on a much smaller scale, in Providence can only be explained through a survey of its history and theology.

Providence: A Short History

Jung Myung-seok (also transliterated as Jeong Myeong-seok) was born in Seokmak-ri, Jinsan-myun, Kumsan-gun, South Chungcheong (Chungnam) Province, South Korea on March 16, 1945. He was the third of seven children of a couple of impoverished farmers. His parents were only able to support his education in a primary school, after which he had to help with the family farm (Akimoto 2019; I also rely on two interviews with Jung conducted in Wolmyeongdong in March 19 and June 5, 2019).

At age six, he first encountered Christianity through missionaries in Seokmak. He reports that he became interested in the Bible and, despite his poor education, read it in its entirety several times, and re-read it more than 2,000 times in his life. After several mystical experiences, at age 20, in 1965, while attending a local Presbyterian Church where he also served as Sunday school teacher, Jung decided to devote its free time to street evangelism. He claims his work was non-denominational, as he urged those he evangelized to join whatever Protestant church might be convenient for them.

Jung's life changed dramatically on February 22, 1966, when he was drafted to serve in the South Korean 9th Infantry Division in the Vietnam War. He remained in Vietnam until August 26, 1967, and was called again there for a second tour of duty between February 18, 1968, and April 15, 1969. Critics do not dispute that he served with honor, earning several decorations, including an Order of Military Merit medal. Jung also claims that, during his two Vietnam campaigns, he managed to remain faithful to what he considered the Christian imperative not to kill anybody, not even enemies in war. This claim is supported by testimonies from some of Jung's comrades in Vietnam (Jeong 2020).

Upon his return from Vietnam, Jung resumed both his farming and evangelistic activities, and decided to devote a substantial part of his savings and time to rebuilding the Presbyterian church in Seokmak, which was in a destitute state. The new church was inaugurated on July 20, 1971. However, from several years he had harbored doubts on the Presbyterian teachings. He began asking friends

to draw diagrams representing his understanding of the Bible, which put him at odds with the Presbyterians, and for the best part of the decade of the 1970s visited several mainline and new religions, not only Christian, as they included Daesoon Jinrihoe and Won Buddhism (Christian Gospel Mission 2017, 95).

He explored both mainline Christian denominations, such as the Methodists, Baptists, and Roman Catholics, and new religious movements, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and Yongmunsan Kidowŏn, established by Na Un-mong (1914–2009). Na had a special influence on Jung, who later regarded it as a “major prophet” (Christian Gospel Mission 2017, 103–5). Na had been expelled from the Presbyterian Church for heresy in 1966, although after his death his son led his movement to merge with the Methodists (*Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* 2014).

In 1973 and 1974, Jung attended a Holiness church in Gwangju, which did not prevent him from exploring other religions and movements. He also read the works of independent Christian theologian Han Enoch (Han Jin-gyo, 1887–1963), whom Jung also came to regard as a prophet (Christian Gospel Mission 2017, 105–06).

In November 1974, Jung came into contact with the Unification Church. On March 20, 1975, he was registered as a member of the church founded by Reverend Moon Sun Myung (1920–2012). Jung's church is often presented as a “schism” of the Unification Church. Jung claims that it was quite easy to be registered as a “member” of Moon's church in the 1975—to inflate their numbers, they registered as members all those who attended their meetings. Jung, however, admits that he occasionally delivered speeches at Unification Church's events until 1978, and in an interview with me he compared Moon's relation with himself to John the Baptist's with Jesus.

Jung also reports that in 1978, he heard a voice from Heaven telling him, “Do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal.” These are locations mentioned in the Bible, and Jung interpreted Bethel to mean the mainline Protestant churches, and Gilgal to mean the Unification Church.

On June 1, 1978, Jung moved to Seoul, determined to launch his own independent ministry. He claims he came to the capital with only the equivalent of US \$300, but he had his diagrams, and trusted they will attract interest. Through street evangelism, he gathered a handful of followers, who grew to a few hundreds

and then to a few thousands. In 1982, he established the MS Gospel Association, which was later called Christian Gospel Mission and popularly known as Providence.

Jung found some friends among the capital's Protestant ministers. Despite his limited education, they managed to have him accepted in the Methodist Wesley Theological Seminary, where he obtained a degree in 1983. Jung toured Korean universities, and gathered a sizeable following among college students. Some of them also went to preach abroad, which allowed Providence to establish its first church overseas in January 1987, in Los Angeles, and in January 1988 the first church in Taiwan, where the movement will grow rapidly, again, mostly among college students. Japan, Australia, and New Zealand are other countries where Providence expanded with some success. In 1989, Jung started realizing his dream of a "natural temple," i.e. a temple in the nature without walls but with statues and other sacred artifacts, Wolmyeongdong, built in Jung's hometown of Seokmak. His followers started calling him "President Jung."

In the 1990s, while Providence expanded in South Korea and throughout the world, reaching some 70 countries with tens of thousands of members, it was targeted by the highly active Protestant Korean anti-cult movement (on which see Kim 2007) as "heretic." The presence of thousands of young women (although there were young men too) also raised suspicions. Rumors of abuse of female followers by Jung started circulating in the late 1980s, and were regarded as believable by anthropologist Nathalie Luca in her 1994 doctoral dissertation (Luca 1994) and 1997 French book *Le Salut par le foot* (Salvation Through Football), following a participating observation in South Korea, although she reported she had not been personally molested (Luca 1997, 20–1). The few members I interviewed who remember Luca claim that it was not clear to them that she was conducting a participating observation, and indeed she was registered as a "member" of the church. Not unexpectedly, they also strongly disagree with the conclusions of her book.

While Luca's book had almost no impact in South Korea, a 1999 exposé by the TV network Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) put the sexual abuse allegations in the national spotlight. Jung left South Korea and preferred to conduct missionary activities abroad only, for the next seven years, while the media campaigns continued, until he was arrested in China in 2007, and had to go back to South Korea in 2008, where he was ultimately sentenced to a term of

ten years in jail. These events are discussed below, in my final paragraph that deals with the court case.

Remarkably, during the ten years when Jung was in jail, Providence continued to grow, to the astonishment of its critics. He continued to lead the movement from jail. Ms. Kim Ji-seon, who went under the name Jung Jo-eun, was appointed as the “representative disciple,” and delivered to the church the messages written by President Jung while he was abroad and, later, in jail. When he was released, on February 18, 2018, President Jung returned to Wolmyeongdong and was able again to preside on an expanding church. I attended functions in Wolmyeongdong, Seoul, and Taipei, and interviewed several members, as well as reporters and critics. All confirmed that the attendance at Providence’s gatherings has not diminished but, after an initial moment of confusion, had increased during and after Jung’s detention.

Life Within Providence

Providence does not release statistics, but acknowledges its membership is in the tens of thousands, and this is accepted even by critics.

The formal name of the church is Christian Gospel Mission. Like “Mormon” for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or “Quakers” for the Society of Friends, “Providence” was initially used mostly by critics, but is now a common designation of the movement. The church is, or was in its earlier years, sometimes also known as “Jesus Morning Star” (JMS). The same letters JMS are the full initials of President Jung (Jung Myung-seok).

Each country where Providence is present in significant numbers has an autonomously incorporated organization, although an international missionary center at the South Korean headquarters coordinate all of them. The two largest foreign organizations, in Japan and Taiwan, enjoy considerable autonomy. Local churches are led by one or more pastors, who can be male or female. There are seminars preparing pastors in different countries, including South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan.

Some members decided to remain celibate, to be able to devote more time to the church. They are called “stars of faith,” and appears to be at the origin of the media scandalous rumors about a female-only group allegedly called

“Evergreen.” According to Providence, the claim is totally fantastic, the nickname “Evergreen” was never officially used for celibate members, and the “stars of faith” are both male and female.

Among the ancillary activities, Providence has a sport department. It does organize soccer events, including the National Peace Tournament in 2017, but it also promotes baseball, softball, volleyball, and basketball. The insistence is on team sports, as they teach team spirit and are seen as a metaphor of Christian cooperative life.

An Arts Group includes departments devoted to the visual arts, music, dance, design, and fashion. President Jung himself is an accomplished painter, and exhibitions of his work took place in various countries, including during his detention. Taiwan’s Peace Symphony Orchestra, established in 2013, has performed in several countries and is regarded as the most professional outcome of the movement’s love for music.

The Christian Gospel Mission Volunteer Group performs public services, such as the ecological cleaning of mountains and beaches, and assists the poor and the elderly (not only if they belong to Providence). Given the number of high school and college students in the movement, the Volunteer Group also offers services of school and career orientation.

As other observers have noted since the early days of the movement (Luca 1997, 28), the worship services of Providence are rich but somewhat unconventional. College students and others attend Bible studies or clubs, where they read Jung’s messages, study the lessons, and discuss lively between themselves. Services (some of which I attended) featuring President Jung in Wolmyeongdong include a sermon by him, speeches by other ministers, and a significant amount of music.

Providence recommends that members intermarry with other members and organizes “networking events” where male and female members, including from different regions or countries, can meet each other and eventually decide to date and marry. Providence reports that the divorce rate in these endogamous marriages is less than 1%.

In her 1997 book, whose title translates as “Salvation Through Soccer,” Luca insisted on the ritual nature of the soccer games played within Providence. The French anthropologist was very much fascinated by these games. She explained

that Jung's team "were supposed to always win, but narrowly," and that matches were often interrupted by philosophical commentaries on the games by Jung himself. "These comments were built in a way similar to the Thirty Lessons, where new members are encouraged to reexamine their lives. Slowly, as matches continue one after the other, and the founder continues to speak, the gaze directed on the game changes, and the ball becomes a symbol of the human being. His destiny depends both on the moves of the players and on the audience that influences the game" (Luca 1997, 25). The emphasis on the audience as part of the game allowed to include in the experience female members as well, since, at least at the time of Luca's observation, only males played the games (as it was common in the 1990s, when female soccer was under-developed or even unknown outside of the United States and some countries of Northern Europe).

Evaluating Luca's comments (see also Luca 1998, 1999–2000) more than thirty years after she published her book is difficult. Jung told me he still plays soccer at age 75, and the central part of the Natural Temple in Wolmyeongdong can be adapted and serve as a soccer field. On the other hand, I saw other sports, such as baseball, volleyball, and basketball, practiced and emphasized not less than soccer in contemporary Providence. The few members who have read Luca's book (published in French only) disagree not only with her general approach, but with what they believe is an excessive emphasis on soccer, which never had such a central role.

On the other hand, Luca's participant observation dates back to 1990 (Luca 1997, 9). She mentions the special climate created in South Korea by the Seoul Olympics in 1988, as well as the public financial support available for sport clubs in these years (as South Korea had also been selected to host in 2002 the World Cup of soccer, together with Japan). Providence appears to operate, like other new religious movements, through a revolving doors system: members leave, and new members come. Only a handful of those I were able to interview (including, of course, Jung himself) were there in the early 1990s. At any rate, the role of soccer in the 21st century, perhaps also because of the long detention and the aging of Jung, seems to be different from the one described by Luca.

Providence's Theology

As usual with religious movements, members are not interested in comparative studies of their doctrine or discussions about its origins. For their emic point of view, all comes from divine revelation, and Jung reports daily conversations with the Holy Trinity that accompanied most of his adult life. From the etic perspective of scholars, questions about sources are not irrelevant, nor do they deny the importance of the founders' own mystical experiences.

Critics maintain that Jung's core teachings (the so-called "Thirty Lessons") are remarkably similar to the *Divine Principle* of the Unification Church. The relationship has been constructed as plagiarism, or at least as "a sort of updating of the Unification Church" (Luca 1997, 31). Local Korean critics have also accused Jung of "plagiarizing" Na Un-mong and Han Enoch. Jung would say that Moon, Na, and Han had all their own prophetic missions announcing his own, although Moon betrayed his mission under the influence of his wife.

Although there are similarities, I disagree with the general assessment that Jung "plagiarized" Moon or simply "updated" the *Divine Principle*. A careful reading of the "Thirty Lessons" shows both similarities and important differences.

The "Thirty Lessons" are based on the idea that Christianity should conform to reason and science and, when miracles and other events in the Bible appear to violate the laws of nature, they should be interpreted symbolically. Biblical interpretation in Providence is based on four principles: analogy ("the Bible interprets itself"); historical context; double interpretation from the respective points of view of "spirit" and "flesh;" and numerology.

President Jung teaches that human beings consist of three components, body, soul, and spirit (a teaching he claims to derive from *1 Thessalonians* 5:23), in the image of the Trinity. The mind is not a component of the human being, but is part of the body. There are different soul levels: the physical soul is related to physical body, while the spiritual soul allows connections with spiritual beings and the spiritual world. Animals have a body and a physical soul, but not a spiritual soul nor a spirit, which according to Jung shows that the theory of evolution is false, since spiritual soul and spirit cannot evolve from body. The universe progresses through a law of nature designed by God.

The soul acts as a mediator between body and spirit. When we see ourselves in dreams, we see our “soul body.” There are other spiritual techniques to access the “soul world” outside of our dreams, an exercise that is useful, as in the soul world we can discern in a better way our own and other people’s thoughts and, to some extent, predict the future.

At death, the body dies but the soul, which includes all the memories, survives, just “as a memory drive [which] is taken out of a computer,” and unites with the spirit (Jeong 2019, I, 21; I also rely on interviews of members of Providence, and Jung himself, conducted in South Korea and Taiwan in 2019, and was allowed to consult material in the church’s archives in Wolmyeongdong, including texts such as *Christian Gospel Mission 2017* that are normally reserved for members only). While we are alive, according to our good or bad deeds, the spirit dwells either in the domain of life or the domain of death; there is also a middle level domain (Jeong 2019, I, 22).

Heaven and Paradise, according to Providence, are not the same. Actually, the world is divided in six main levels (although, from a more complex perspective, these levels can in fact be millions): Hell, Abyss, Hades, the Good Spiritual World, Paradise, and Heaven. Heaven in turn is divided in the three levels of servants, children, and brides of God (which also correspond to the Old, New, and Complete Testament). The Good Spiritual World and Hades (also called the evil spiritual world) are on earth, all the other levels are destinations for our souls after this life. In almost all cases, where we will go is determined by what we did in life, although in some special circumstances the spirit is able to lift itself up in the spiritual world. Spirits can visit their own and lower levels, but not upper levels. While on earth, we cannot see the spiritual worlds, but we can receive information about them by “becoming spiritual,” understanding the Bible, receiving spiritual dreams, and learning from spirits who come on a mission from Heaven (Jeong 2019, IV, 78–83).

God (regarded as male in Providence’s theology) created human beings to be his brides (irrespective of whether they are male or female), and exchange love with him. “God’s purpose of creation is only love” (Jeong 2019, II, 17). Archangel Lucifer opposed God’s creation of human beings, as he was envious that they would be closer to God than the angels. God could have thrown him into Hell immediately, but instead exiled him to earth, giving him an opportunity to repent. But he continued to oppose God, and induced Eve to fall. The fruit of the

Tree of Good and Evil is the female sexual organ (Jeong 2019, II, 75), and eating it for Eve meant making love with Adam after having been spiritually corrupted by the serpent (Lucifer). Those familiar with the Unification Church would recognize here one of the elements of similarity. The fact that the original sin had a sexual component does not mean that sex is regarded as evil by Providence. What is evil is becoming addicting to sex, or indulging in its practice before having achieved the necessary spiritual maturity.

As a consequence of the Fall, Lucifer became Satan, and Eve, Adam, and their descendants could not become brides of God, only servants. The Trinity could have created human beings as perfect and incapable of sinning. But it did not, because a love for God conquered by overcoming imperfections and temptations is more valuable than a love imposed by God and practiced without effort.

Because of the Fall, humans need to be saved. In due time, the Holy Son, through Jesus, opened the path of salvation. We are saved through the mission of the Holy Son, the second person of the Trinity. However, it is a key teaching of Providence that the Holy Son and Jesus “are not the same person” (Jeong 2019, I, 54). The Holy Son is a divine being, with no visible body. He “came upon Jesus” (Jeong 2019, I, 55), a human being, allowing him to become the Messiah. It was the spirit of Jesus, not his body, that resurrected, as the bodies of human beings do not resurrect. After manifesting itself to the disciples, the spirit of Jesus ascended to Heaven, while the Holy Son, having worked through Jesus, sat “on the right hand of God” (*1 Peter* 3:22). It is not Jesus who seats at the right hand of the Father, it is the Holy Son (Jeong 2019, I, 57).

Thanks to Jesus’ mission, humans were able to become children of God rather than servants. But not yet brides of God, a higher position. In order for humans to become brides of God, the Second Coming was needed. Many Christians believe that Jesus will come back in the Second Coming, but in fact it is not Jesus. The Holy Son works in different times through different human beings, who are persecuted and suffer. Jesus was the “standard of sons.” Now, the “standard of brides” should come (Jeong 2019, III, 20–9). Just as he used Jesus in the First Coming, the Holy Son appears again in the Second Coming by using “a worthy person,” which will assume a key role in the history of salvation, yet remain a human being, “a person of the earth like Jesus of Nazareth” (Jeong 2019, I, 59).

Several Christian denominations also expect the Holy Son physically “coming on the clouds” (*Matthew* 24:30) at the Second Coming. But in fact, according to

Providence, the “clouds” are the “cloud of witnesses” of *Hebrews* 12:1, i.e., a “cloud” of human beings who will believe in the Second Coming. In a miniaturized version, the “cloud” is the “man-of-mission” himself, in a “magnified” version it represents those who believe in his mission. Providence believes that this man-of-mission is President Jung, and we can know and believe this as certain through numerology and logic.

The Trinity works in history through the key numerological principle of “a time, times, and half a time,” which appears twice in *Daniel* (*Daniel* 7:25 and 12:7) and once more in *Revelation* (12:14). It can mean three and a half days, three and a half years (1,260 days), or 1,260 years (according to the principle “one year for one day” of the Adventist tradition, on the history of which, see From 1946–1954). This numerology is part of a “miniaturized” version of the principle (Jeong 2019, I, 77). There is also a large-scale version, where the principle is connected with the number 40 of *Ezekiel* 4:6 and *Numbers* 14:34, and can refer to periods of 40, 400, or 4,000 years—40 for the individuals, 400 for the nations, 4,000 for the world.

The 400 years passed four times (1,600 years) between Adam and Noah. Then, there were 400 years between Noah and Abraham and between Joseph and Moses. The Old Testament globally is a period of 4,000 years preparing for Jesus, who came 400 years after Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament. The New Testament lasts for half the years of the Old Testament, i.e. 2,000 years, and the man-of-mission in the Complete Testament should come 400 years after Martin Luther (1483–1546), who is regarded by Providence as the last prophet of the New Testament, and in turn came 1,600 years after Jesus (Jeong 2019, I, 79 and III, 89). Since Luther died in 1546, the man-of-mission used by the Holy Son should be born in 1945, which points to Jung and rules out other candidates. Also, 1945 comes at the end of a 40-year period relevant for Korea, the Japanese occupation from 1905 to 1945.

The 1,260-day (or year) period of *Daniel* 7:25 and 12:7 is also related to the 1,290 days of *Daniel* 12:11, and the 1,335 days of *Daniel* 12:12, making Providence’s numerology even more complicated. Only the man-of-mission was able to break the seal and unveil the mystery of *Daniel* 12:7, which is “God’s heavenly law” and “the clock of history” (Jeong 2019, III, 108), and he did it at an appropriate numerological time.

Jung admits that the principle “a time, two times, and half a time” was already discussed by Han Enoch in the 1940s. He stated that, “Han Enoch unraveled half of the secret about ‘a time, two times, and half a time’,” which confirms that he was a true prophet. However, Han only disclosed “half of the secret,” as some of his interpretations were wrong (Christian Gospel Mission 2017, 105).

Daniel 12:11 also mentions 1,290 days from the “abomination” in the place of the holy sacrifice. For Providence, the “abomination” is the mosque built in Jerusalem where the Temple once stood, in 688 CE, and 688 plus 1,290 makes 1978, which is when Jung started preaching the Word of the Complete Testament. From 1999 to 2012 there were four three-and-a-half-year times, “grave periods” for Providence preceding “resurrections.” Providence believes that 1999 was also prophesied by Nostradamus (1503–1566), who is probably more read and well-known in East Asia than he is in Europe or North America, as “a time of the last days” (Jeong 2019, I, 95). All kind of signs and expectations of the end happened in the world in 2012. From 2013, Providence became completely independent from the New Testament and entered into the era of the Complete Testament (Jeong 2019, III, 89).

Numerology, Providence teaches, also attests the connection between Jung’s mission and world peace. 1945, the year Korea was delivered from the Japanese and Jung was born, is also the year the United Nations were founded. In the year when Jung started its peace activities in Europe (1999), the euro as a common European currency was introduced. When he was visiting Italy, the Holy Son directed Jung to go and pray in the Cathedral of Milan on October 31, 1999. He came from a Protestant tradition, and did not understand why he should pray in a Catholic Church. However, he later learned that on that day Catholic and Lutheran representatives had signed in Augsburg the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (Lutheran World Federation and Catholic Church 1999), a historical step in the reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants (Jeong 2019, I, 96–7).

Numerology offers one proof that Jung is the man-of-mission for the Complete Testament. His life and ministry, Providence teaches, provide additional evidence. Jung acquired his position gradually by totally reciprocating the Holy Son’s love, becoming the bride of the Holy Son, and preaching to thousands who would also become brides of God (no matter whether they are female or male).

A part of Protestant Christians believes in the Rapture, i.e. in the theory that at some stage in the Last Times faithful believers will be “raptured” to be with Christ in Heaven. According to some interpretation of the Rapture, they will thus be spared the apocalyptic disasters predicted in the *Book of Revelation*, while others believe the Rapture will happen after these disasters. Providence has a different theory of the Rapture. It teaches it is a spiritual event, not an event of the flesh, and it already happened, on March 16, 2015.

Although in 2015 Jung was in jail, Providence believes that crucial spiritual events happened on that date. Jung turned 70, and 6,000 years from the beginning of salvation history were completed. March 16 (3/16), besides being Jung’s birthday (or perhaps because of this), has a numerological significance, 3 representing the Trinity, 1 Pastor Jung, and 6 a “miniaturized version” of 6,000 years, but ultimately the date of the Rapture was decided by God. On that date, the Holy Son ascended to Heaven (Jeong 2019, III, 72–3).

From that date, March 16, 2015, “a time, two times, and half a time,” i.e. 3-and-a-half years started, where those raptured were able to raise their level. The 3-and-a-half-years before March 16, 2015, were also important, as Providence members were called to remain loyal to their persecuted leader and follow his instructions. Those who failed to do so were not raptured (Jeong 2019, IV, 118), although as long as Jung is alive there are still possibilities to join the Rapture. More precisely, Rapture means entering the Golden City of Heaven. There are four conditions for this: to defeat Satan by obeying God’s word; defeat those who slander Providence; succeed where Adam and Eve failed by loving God unconditionally, and not falling sexually in the body; believe absolutely in the Savior sent by God, i.e. Jung. Like the resurrection of Jesus, the rapture is spiritual. Bodies are not involved. But the spirits become beautiful (Jeong 2019, III, 60).

After March 16, 2015, Satan, who was further enraged by the Rapture, tries to interfere acting through human bodies and causing suffering to those raptured, in order to falsely persuade them that “they have not raptured.” Some fall, others manage to defeat Satan.

Providence believes in the Trinity, but teaches it consists of three “separate entities.” While the Holy Son is male, the Holy Spirit is female, and is also known as Mother God. Pastor Jung Jo-eun, was identified as “the symbolic entity of the Holy Spirit,” who is female (Jeong 2019, IV, 39), and in 2009 assumed the role

of “revival preacher for the Holy Spirit.” Pastor Jung Jo-eun, according to Providence, assumed her mission related to the Holy Spirit because of her great efforts aimed at testifying God’s words in the new era, comparable to the Apostles’ efforts after they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As mentioned earlier, she also led Providence during Jung’s detention and transmitted his messages to the church.

But What About the Court Case?

Although the main Providence controversies are about sexuality, the movement has also been accused of dissimulation in its proselytization, and of anti-Semitism. The first criticism is commonly directed against many if not most Korean Christian new religions. Like other groups, Providence uses a variety of different names. While they may reflect different organizational models in different countries where the movement is active, there is little doubt that the name “Providence” is often avoided because of its media notoriety after President Jung’s court case. As it happens with other Korean movements, this perpetuates a vicious circle (see Bromley and Shupe 1980, 231–33 for the Unification Church; Introvigne 2020 for Shincheonji). The more Providence is attacked in the media, the more it tends to use other names when first inviting potential converts to its activities, which in turn results in more media criticism against its dissimulation strategies.

In 2016, the Australian edition of the British tabloid *Daily Mail* reported that, according to one ex-member, Providence is anti-Semitic and the pastors “praise Adolf Hitler in their teachings,” although it also mentioned that a spokesperson for the church firmly denied that this was the case (Groom 2016). My perusal of the writings, sermons, and messages of Jung did not find any reference to Hitler. I did find, however, references to the Jews being punished for the persecution of Jesus and the first Christians, but the punishment came in the shape of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD. The theme is still common in Providence (Jung 2020a, 2020b), but is a common interpretation in conservative Protestantism of *Luke 21:5–6*, where Jesus predicts that the Jerusalem Temple will be destroyed, and “the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.” The most negative comments about the Jews are found in a 2014 Sunday Message by Jung, where he said that

those who were personally responsible for torturing and killing Jesus are all in Hell, and one consequence was that Christians for the 2,000 years of New Testament history “did not mix” and “did not intermarry” with the Jews (Jung 2014). However, this implies that in the era of the Complete Testament the preclusions against the Jews will be overcome.

While thousands of college students are familiar with Providence mostly because of its student clubs and on-campus activities, the public opinion in South Korea and some other countries only knows the movement because of the high-profile trial of President Jung.

After the media campaigns of 1999, Jung left South Korea for his world tour, but his enemies pursued him abroad, and he was also investigated in other countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. An anti-cult organization called Exodus was formed to actively oppose Providence, and it organized press conferences in South Korea and abroad, where masked women appeared and told how Jung had molested them. On May 1, 2007, following a request by South Korean authorities, Jung was arrested in Anshan, China. He had to return to South Korea in February 2008, according to his lawyers after complying voluntarily with a summons by the South Korean authorities rather than as a result of a formal extradition by China.

On August 12, 2008, the Seoul Central District Court sentenced Jung to six years in jail on three counts of rape. As usual in South Korea in “cult” cases, he was also sentenced for embezzling money belonging to the movement, although the distinction between the funds of Providence and the private funds of Jung was not easy to establish. On February 10, 2009, the Seoul High Court overturned the part of the first-degree decision that had recognized Jung not guilty of a fourth count of rape, and sentenced Jung to a total of ten years in jail. On September 24, 2009, the South Korean Supreme Court upheld the Seoul High Court verdict and Jung remained in jail, until February 18, 2018, when he ended serving his term.

It is perhaps appropriate at this stage to reiterate that it is not my intention nor, I believe, the task of scholars of new religious movements to determine whether Jung was guilty or innocent. It is, however, important to describe as clearly as possible the positions of the prosecutors and the defense, what courts exactly decided, and on which arguments Providence members rely to affirm their persuasion that their leader was innocent. I am aware of the fact that, in times of

“Me Too,” not only anti-cultists but also well-meaning feminist scholars believe that mentioning the arguments members of a religious movement use to assert that their male leader convicted for sexual abuse of female followers was innocent is disrespectful towards the women who accused him. This position is, I believe, wrong. If we do not ascertain why followers continue to believe, notwithstanding a conviction, that their leader was innocent, we cannot understand whether they remained in the movement and caused it to resist and even grow.

There are, in fact, three irreconcilable narratives about the charges of sexual abuse. The court’s narrative is that Jung sexually molested four South Korean women in countries other than South Korea after 1999. The decision did not take a position on whether “sexual initiations” were practiced or not within Providence, as opponents maintained, but regarded the women as believable, and the context of a “cult” where members were “psychologically manipulated” by the leader reinforced the judges’ opinion.

In fact, the Korean Criminal Act distinguishes between three different crimes, rape (Section 297), sexual assault (Section 298), and “quasi-rape” and “quasi-sexual-assault” (Section 299). The latter section refers to cases where the perpetrator takes advantage of the victim’s “condition of unconsciousness or inability to resist.” In Jung’s case, all victims (which I would designate with letters for the sake of privacy) were Korean women. A and B claimed to have been molested in Hong Kong, C and D in Anshan City, China, and E in Malaysia. In the case of A and B, Jung was found innocent of rape, as the court did not believe there had been violence or intimidation, but guilty of “sexual assault” in the form of unsolicited “indecent touching,” and of “quasi rape” because, although not physically coerced or threatened, A and B psychologically were “in a state of inability to resist.”

C eventually became a main public voice for the anti-cult association Exodus. D eventually withdrew her accusations, saying C had coached her to lie. C was a forceful accuser at trial, and the judges believed her claim that she had been physically raped while taking a shower. The defense argued (and Jung’s followers insist) that C was a martial art champion, and could have easily resisted a 61-year-old man, but her testimony stood.

In the case of E, the judges of the lower court found Jung innocent of all charges, concluding that from E’s own account no violence or threat had emerged. The appeal court, however, reversed the decision and argued that, since

E “thought that Jung was Jesus,” she was in a status of “inability to resist,” and Jung was found guilty of “quasi-sexual-assault.”

The defense also argued that the accusers had participated in “camps” organized by Exodus, where they had been indoctrinated by the anti-cultists. This was regarded as true but not relevant by the first degree and appellate courts. Indeed, the question whether a woman who believes that her male spiritual leader has a special divine mission is, for this reason, in a condition of “inability to resist” sexual advances by him, has been frequently discussed in “cult” cases. The positive answer involves the usual accusations of brainwashing and mind control, which would allow the conclusion that a “quasi-sexual-abuse” occurred even in a consensual event, where the consensus was allegedly created through mental manipulation. According to the court, this was the case for A, B, and (in the appellate case) E, while C successfully alleged full-blown rape.

There is a second narrative, common in South Korean and other media, claiming that the four cases for which Jung was sentenced were just the tip of the iceberg, with some tabloids claiming that “hundreds” or even “thousands” of “beautiful college girls” had been involved (see the article by Tsai and Peng in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Nathalie Luca also regarded these accusations as believable (Luca 1997). Apart from the legal qualification of what allegedly happened as consensual or otherwise, in several cases South Korean and Taiwanese courts found these accusations excessive, including when Jung was serving his term in jail. Providence won lawsuits against different media, as courts allowed details of the trial to be published but still regarded generalizations and allegations about hundreds or thousands of alleged sexual abuse cases as defamatory. They also found that, in some cases, media had doctored photographs and audio recordings of Jung to make them appear more sinister or incriminating than they in fact were. Some journalists and media had to publish apologies (Christian Gospel Mission 2017 discusses these cases at length; I have been supplied with copies of the corresponding court decisions and settlement agreements: they show that not all defamation suits were successful, but some of the most high-profile cases were indeed won by Providence).

The third narrative, which is passionately believed by members of Providence, is that a cabal of slanderers and anti-cultists created the whole legend of the “sexual initiations,” and that these never happened. Later, this narrative goes, the anti-cultists found some vindictive ex-members and women whose main purpose

was to extract money from Jung, which led to the trial and the convictions, which happened in a South Korean cultural climate where somebody branded by the media and the powerful mainline churches as a “cult leader” could not expect to be treated fairly by the judges. Jung himself has always denied all charges.

As I mentioned earlier, outside observers obviously cannot determine which narrative is true, although I may add three general comments. The first is that most, if not all, Korean Christian new religious movements come from a common matrix, the so-called “Jesus Churches,” a cluster of Christian Korean new religious movements including the Holy Lord Church, the “Inside Belly Church” (*Bokjunggyo*), the Israel Monastery, and the Wilderness Church. These movements became notorious for their practice of *p'ikareun*, a “blood exchange” between the leader and the followers involving, at least in some cases, sexual intercourse (Choe 1993, 140–45; Chryssides 1991, 91–103). Both Reverend Moon and Elder Park Tae Son (1917–1990), the founder of the Olive Tree movement, which is at the origin of a whole lineage of Korean Christian new religions, had contacts with the Jesus Churches, and were accused of practicing *p'ikareun*. What was practiced, or not practiced, in each movement is a matter of controversy, but because of these precedents it became a matter of course for Korean anti-cultists and mainline churches to accuse all “heretic” movements of performing “sexual initiations.”

Second, Providence’s membership consists mostly of college students. There is a majority of female students, although a good 40% consists of males. The women are undistinguishable in their dressing style from the average college student in their respective countries, a style that is far away from the conservative habits of most mainline South Korean Protestant churches. What would be regarded as normal in a college party may easily appear as scandalous to conservative South Korean Protestants.

Third, Providence teaches that there is a relation between internal (spiritual) beauty and external beauty. Although spiritual beauty, not easily visible to human eyes, is more important, external beauty is a metaphor and a symbol of internal beauty. Accordingly, in the visual and performing arts of Providence there is no trace of a puritanical restraint about the human body, and fashion, both traditional Korean and modern-Westernized, is regarded as a valid form of art and culture.

While these elements may help in understanding the context, the conflict between Providence members' firm belief in their founder's innocence, which was essential for the movement's resilience and growth while Jung was in jail, and the different narrative emerging from court decisions and prevailing in most Korean media remains irreconcilable.

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