

COVID-19: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea: White Paper II

– Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions,
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A White Paper by CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions,
Torino, Italy – HRWF (Human Rights Without Frontiers,
Brussels, Belgium)

Full Report:
<https://www.cesnur.org/2020/shincheonji-second-white-paper.htm>

1. 1. It Is About COVID-19... or Is It?

Why This Report

The name of Shincheonji (a name meaning “New Heaven and New Earth”), Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji) was known in the West only to a few scholars of new religious movements before February 2020, when the church was accused of being largely responsible for the spread of COVID-19 in South Korea.

In March 2020, the authors published a first White Paper (Introvigne, Fautré, Šorytė, Amicarelli and Respinti 2020) distinguishing facts from fiction in the accusations against Shincheonji. The repression of Shincheonji in South Korea has now escalated to what can be described, without exaggeration, as an attempt to suppress a religion, close its places of worship, arrest its leaders, and scare members so that they

will leave the movement out of fear of losing their jobs. A second White Paper, dealing with the persecution, is thus necessary. We will, however, summarize in this introduction some essential points about Shincheonji discussed in the first White Paper, and add some further general comments.

What Is Shincheonji?

Why is Shincheonji Persecuted?

Is It Really About Covid-19?

2. Is Shincheonji “Responsible” for the Virus Outbreak in Daegu?

Patient 31

The Alleged Wuhan Connection

The Case of the Cheongdo Daenam Hospital

Did Shincheonji Create the Outbreak in Daegu?

3. Did Shincheonji Refuse to Cooperate with the Authorities?

Shincheonji Stopped Services Immediately

Why Are Leaders Prosecuted?

Legal Background

Which Lists?

4. A Disproportionate Reaction

Mistakes Punished As Crimes

Disproportionate Measures

Private Vigilantism

Conclusions

References

READ THE WHOLE WHITE
PAPER: <https://www.cesnur.org/2020/shincheonji-second-white-paper.htm>

COVID-19 and the destruction of a religious movement in South Korea

CESNUR (15.07.2020) – <https://bit.ly/30FtcBB> – On July 20, a webinar on a new religious movement in South Korea, its political, religious, and social dimensions, and its discrimination during the COVID-19 crisis was organized by CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, and Human Rights Without Frontiers. International scholars in the fields of religion, international law, and human rights discussed the theme, “COVID-19 and Religious Freedom: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea.”

The webinar addressed the history of what participants defined as an attack by politically powerful conservative and fundamentalist Protestant churches in South Korea, supported by some politicians, against a fast-growing Christian new religious movement known as “Shincheonji (New Heaven and New Earth) Church of Jesus,” founded in 1984 by Chairman Lee Man Hee.

Rosita Šorytė, a former Lithuanian diplomat and author of [a study of the international peace organization HWPL](#), also

chaired by Chairman Lee, and J. Gordon Melton, distinguished professor of American Religious History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, introduced the webinar by observing that, in times of crisis, minorities that have powerful enemies are easily scapegoated. "Cult," Melton observed, is a dubious label often used by majorities to discriminate against minorities they do not like.

Massimo Introvigne is an Italian sociologist of religion who studied Shincheonji before and after the COVID-19 pandemic and [published the first accounts of the religious group in English](#). He summarized the history of Shincheonji, and said that it has become a target of "persecution by fundamentalist Protestants" because of its spectacular growth. "Conservative and fundamentalist protestants see Shincheonji as an unwelcome competitor and want to destroy it".

Alessandro Amicarelli, a London-based attorney and chairman of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief, pointed out that some South Korean politicians scapegoated Shincheonji as "the" cause of the COVID-19 crisis in South Korea, yet their real aim is to shut down the church to please conservative Christian voters. He examined in detail the case of Patient 31, the female member of Shincheonji in Daegu who, before being diagnosed with COVID-19, set in motion a chain of events leading to thousands of Shincheonji members being infected, and the accusations that Shincheonji did not cooperate with the health authorities. He observed that, before Patient 31, Chinese tourists had already spread the virus in Daegu, and that accusations of criminal misbehavior against Shincheonji leaders, some of them were arrested, are not sustained by the facts. In a difficult situation, they cooperated with the authorities as promptly and completely as reasonably possible.

Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), said that the recent attack on Shincheonji can be viewed as an attempt by fundamentalist Protestant groups in South Korea to weaken and destroy a competitor in the

religious market. He added that human rights violations against Shincheonji through [coercive conversion programs \(deprogramming\)](#), i.e. by kidnapping and confining its members to “de-convert” them, have been going on for more than a decade, and show that Shincheonji’s fundamentalist opponents have always been ready to resort to violence.

Ciarán Burke, professor of International Law at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, said that how Shincheonji was treated, in comparison with other churches that also had cases of COVID-19, is evidence of religious discrimination forbidden by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that South Korea ratified in 1990. Because of its experience with MERS, Burke observed, South Korea has a law authorizing the government to take extraordinary measures during a pandemic. However, the case of Shincheonji shows that how its provisions are applied may create a contrast with human rights guaranteed by international law, as evidenced by the fact that the government asked the church to disclose the names of members who had no direct or indirect contacts with Patient 31 and even of members abroad.

WEBINAR: COVID-19 and Religious Freedom: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea

– A webinar organized by the **Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR)** and **Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)**

Date/Time: Monday, July 20, 2020, 17:00 (UTC +2, Brussels time)

The fact that one member of Shincheonji, a Christian new religious movement in South Korea, was not timely diagnosed with COVID-19, attended church services, and set in motion a chain of events where thousands of her church's members were infected, led to the government's requests for lists of all members of the group and massive testing.

While it is possible that mistakes were made by Shincheonji, health and police authorities acknowledged that the movement submitted substantially accurate lists of its members, and tried to cooperate as it could. Shincheonji, however, is at the receiving end of an aggressive hostility by conservative Christians, who have tried for decades to have the movement, which has been very successful in converting Protestants, banned in South Korea.

Based on doubtful accusations that lists were not totally complete, or were handed to the authorities some days later than requested, leaders of Shincheonji have been arrested, most of its churches in South Korea have been closed, its cultural and charitable activities have been stopped, and thousands of members have been discriminated against in schools and workplaces.

What we are witnessing, well beyond any reasonable virus-related concern, is an attempt to destroy a new religious movement whose main sin is to have been successful as an unwelcome competitor for the politically powerful conservative and fundamentalist Protestant churches.

The Webinar will examine the current situation, raise international awareness, and call for appropriate action.

Introducing and Chairing:

Rosita Šorytė, president of the International Observatory of

Religious Liberty of Refugees (ORLIR), Vilnius, Lithuania.

Panelists:

J. Gordon Melton, Distinguished Professor of American Religious History, Baylor University, Waco, Texas

Massimo Introvigne, sociologist, managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy

Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

Alessandro Amicarelli, attorney and president of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB)

Ciarán Burke, Professor of International Law, Friedrich-Schiller University, Jena, Germany

Respondent: Jae Heung So, lawyer and Head of Legal Department of Shincheonji Church of Jesus Temple of Tabernacle of Testimony

The webinar is held on Zoom and is open to all interested. To join this webinar, please click the link below at the designated time:

Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89163553658>

Webinar – COVID 19 and

Religious Freedom: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea (20.07.2020)

A webinar organized by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) and Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

Date/Time: Monday, July 20, 2020, 17:00 (UTC +2, Brussels time)

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Thank you.

EU-China Summit: Europe can, and should Hold China to Account

– In Dealing With China, The ‘European Way’ Should Be One Of Courage And Integrity

By Yang Jianli & Aaron Rhodes

FOREF (20.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2YhzyHq> – As human rights advocates, we are appealing to European Union member states to condition trade relations with China on specific improvements in China’s human rights practices, and on transparency as regards the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. China’s economy depends on European imports; trade between the two entities exceeds over one billion Euros per day. In this situation, Europe has a historic opportunity, and a responsibility to the moral principles upon which it was founded. The EU should use its immense soft power to help China stop persecuting religious, ethnic and political minorities, and start working with the international community to protect global public health.

China is the world’s greatest threat to religious freedom and other basic human rights. Despite years of dialogue with the European Union, and increasing trade cooperation, human rights

have deteriorated precipitously. China incarcerates and pressures its Muslim citizens, persecutes Christians, Falun Gong practitioners and other religious minorities, is ethnically cleansing Tibet, and persecutes human rights defenders; China has abrogated an international treaty guaranteeing freedoms to the people of Hong Kong. China has pushed an authoritarian approach to human rights in the UN system, one that degrades the sanctity of basic individual rights and freedoms. China is ranked 177 out of 180 countries in press freedom, and censorship allowed Covid-19 to get out of control. We can't even assess the loss of human life due to China's cynical malfeasance in suppressing, rather than dealing openly with the virus, and we need China's transparency to stop the crisis China created.

The episode has vividly confirmed that a state that mistreats its own citizens is not likely to respect the dignity and rights – and health – of others. But in the face of these threats, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell's call for a "big, positive agenda for EU-China cooperation" without mention of human rights issues dividing Europe and China is discouraging.

Josep Borrell, EU High Representative to Foreign Affairs

Trade imbalances need to be addressed. But the main challenge for Europe should not be to cut a better deal and assume an equidistant posture between the United States and China, as Borrell emphasized. Instead, it is to use the EU's huge moral and economic leverage to put China on notice that the regime cannot violate human rights, and the very idea of human rights, without consequences; that the people of Europe cannot have normal relations with a dictatorial, human rights-abusing

government. The EU's failed, German-inspired "Change through Trade" policy needs to be transformed into a policy of no trade development without change.

More mercantilism and naiveté on the part of the EU will make the Union into an enabler of human rights atrocities. The Chinese Communist Party's grand strategy seeks to avoid direct confrontation with the United States, and to use global "rural areas," including Europe, to encircle the US. It wants to join the EU in a united front against the US, a Maoist strategy. The EU is thus a main battle-ground in China's cold war for world dominance. China is pretending to be a peace loving, benevolent authoritarian ruler to get a foothold in relations with the EU and to expand its political and economic influence. Central Europe is a particular target because the CCP believes it to be a weak link in the chain, where democracy has not firmly rooted – a region where China can achieve a breakthrough.

Since its formation, European Union leaders have claimed it to be a "community of values," that is, "European values," diametrically opposed to the totalitarian ideologies the EU was founded to protect citizens against. In fact, the European Union's basic political principles of individual human rights, democracy, and the Rule of Law are considered universally applicable in the international human rights framework. But the Chinese Communist Party subverts these principles at every opportunity, claiming that human rights are a gift from the state, and defending oppression as "human rights with Chinese characteristics." China is a one-party, essentially fascist state, and increasingly aggressive in its efforts to stamp out any dissent at home, while confronting opposition to its land-grabs in the South China Sea with bullying and violence.

To make a significant, not merely symbolic stand against these fearful trends will require moral discipline and a willingness to sacrifice. Referencing the Frank Sinatra song, High Representative Borrell spoke of the virtue of a European Way. Let that be the way of integrity and courage. Europeans, and people around the world, need the EU to stand firm for human rights, and refuse to be China's puppet against America.

Dr. Jianli Yang, a survivor of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, is President of Citizen Power Initiatives for China. Dr. Aaron Rhodes is President of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe and Human Rights Editor of Dissident Magazine.

Missed opportunities for religious freedom in the time of Corona (Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy)

– **Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, PhD**, is an affiliated scholar at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She is also a China and Korean Peninsula consultant at Human Rights Without Frontiers and was a political advisor at the European Parliament, Brussels (2008–20). She tweets at @zsuzsette.

Providence (18.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3fEvR4E> – After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in China in December 2019, the world has been turned on its head, as former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd recently [wrote](#). As of the writing of this essay, the pandemic has caused over 430,000 deaths worldwide, infected close to eight million, and deepened already impossible economic conditions for millions. It worsened hunger and the spread of other infectious diseases while postponing indefinitely the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The pandemic is also putting at risk basic civil liberties for populations around the world. For religious minorities, the future is more uncertain than for most: it can be truly an existential crisis. As a consequence of authoritarianism advancing on a global scale, public policies failing to address development needs across the world, rising extremist violence by non-state actors, and growing social hostilities—religious minorities are now more exposed and vulnerable. In what follows, I argue that freedom of religion and the freedom to enjoy material wellbeing are linked to economic empowerment.

Uncertainty Ahead

As the pandemic forced economies into lockdowns globally, the world has become anxious and fragmented, leaving the global order's future uncertain. The pandemic will likely have a devastating impact on not only the developing nations but also developed Western countries, who will struggle to [maintain the social safety net](#). A fracture in traditional alliances will likely lead to a global realignment, with implications for the distribution of global power and the projection of influence. This will challenge efforts to safeguard Western liberalism, at the core of the post-war world order. Fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, risk fading into

irrelevance.

How relations among established powers like the United States or the European Union on one hand, and emerging actors like China and developing countries like India will change remains to be seen. These actors' ability to shape one another will be crucial in shaping the global order. So will the future unfold along liberal values of political and economic openness, democracy, rule of law, and multilateralism? Or will the global order reject open economies and societies that respect fundamental freedoms, and instead stress sovereignty and non-interference?

Living on the Edge

In times of crisis, the most vulnerable are most at risk: the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the economically marginalized. The most vulnerable are not a homogenous group, but diverge by age, gender, ethnicity, or location, which suggests that equity-sensitive economic policies are indispensable to break down the barriers of their exclusion. Yet the politically marginalized religious minorities, a significant part of numerous countries, are often at an even higher risk. Religious minorities also face discrimination, social stigma, hostility, or extreme violence in both free and authoritarian societies.

So politically marginalized religious minorities will likely continue facing a "double-layered discrimination." Their access to economic growth will remain restricted. Pushed into the informal and unregulated sectors of the economy, they will

live in uncertainty while dependent on social safety nets if they exist, or outside any social protection, including access to essential healthcare services. In low-income countries, around one in five of the poor lacks a safety net. With the global health crisis, the future for the most vulnerable looks rather bleak. Therefore, as victims of the pandemic, both the economically impoverished and the religiously oppressed need protection and support.

Freedom of Religion under Threat

Freedom of religion or belief was in peril globally for decades. Research by the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation [shows](#) religious restrictions and hostilities adversely affect business activity and investment, indicating a positive correlation between religious freedom and economic growth. The 2020 report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [recommended](#) that Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan be re-designated as countries of particular concern (CPC). The report further recommended that India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam be designated, too. These CPCs are where the government engages in or tolerates “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. Except for democratic India, the list of CPCs includes authoritarian governments that consider minorities a threat to their rule.

Some authoritarian regimes demonstrate growing readiness to promote their domestic policies abroad, shaping the international human rights discourse. The Chinese leadership, for example, [claims](#) it developed better solutions for mankind’s problems, including its model of fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism at home. Beijing’s attempt to build

a community of common destiny for mankind presents more a challenge than a viable alternative in the eyes of democratic leaders. Moreover, Beijing tried to [shift](#) the international narrative by claiming that strong centralized leadership, rather than democratic governance, performs better in a pandemic. Amid these developments, there is only one certainty: more hardship for religious minorities looms on the horizon.

Hostility on the Rise

During the pandemic, religious discrimination has to be viewed in conjunction with three elements: (1) the nature of the political system, (2) the extent of social and cultural harmony in the given society, and (3) the level of influence non-state actors have to shape social harmony, particularly entities committing extremist acts against religious minorities. These factors influence the authorities' capacity to address the pandemic and discriminated groups' readiness to cooperate. Finally, religious minorities' trust of the government, or lack thereof, plays a central role in dealing with the pandemic.

As authoritarian governments become increasingly repressive at home and more assertive abroad, political freedoms face limitations, often in violation of constitutional guarantees. Non-state actors, such as Boko Haram or Islamic State (ISIS), continue to commit violent extremism and terrorism, targeting religious and ethnic minorities and forcing governments to strengthen national security. In some cases, this has led to a [competition](#) between religious freedom and national security, increasing discriminatory practices that target particular faiths perceived to be linked to terrorism, to the detriment

of a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two.

The pandemic, portrayed as both a public health and security threat, brings a new excuse to increase control. Socially, authoritarian regimes' restrictive policies increase discrimination. Yet hostilities have increased in non-authoritarian regimes, too. Often embracing racism, nationalism has risen and affected democratic states. Interreligious tension, such as sectarian clashes between Hindus and Muslims, has occurred in India, the world's largest democracy.

Lives at Stake

In China, the Uighur religious ethnic community in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) remains vulnerable under the pandemic. One to two million Uighurs remain in detention camps, undergoing communist patriotic education and suffering conditions that make them especially vulnerable to the virus. President Xi Jinping reportedly uses the pandemic to increase persecution, with [reports](#) that the authorities have used Uighur slave labor to keep factories running in other Chinese provinces, because "Uighur lives don't matter."

The situation of the forcibly displaced Rohingya has become more difficult, adding to the persecution they began facing in 2016 from the Myanmar government, described as a textbook example of [ethnic cleansing](#). Hundreds remain [stranded](#) at sea without access to food, water, and medical assistance, reminding us why the world must fight the root cause of their stateless situation, which is on religious grounds. Afghanistan's already dwindling Sikh and Hindu minority communities, part of the country's multicultural tapestry,

continue living between [terrorist violence and an exodus](#), intensified under the pandemic. In Iran, up to 100 [imprisoned](#) Baha'is have become more vulnerable under the threat of the virus, having their human rights already violated by being wrongfully imprisoned for practicing their beliefs. The regime considers the nation's estimated 300,000 Bahai's heretics with no religion.

Longstanding Islamophobia exacerbates anxiety over the virus in India. The Tablighi Jamaat Muslim group faces increased violence from nationalist Hindu groups, who accuse them of spreading the virus. Islamophobic hashtags, such as #CoronaJihad, [proliferated](#) across social media, further dividing an already fragile society. In Sri Lanka, the pandemic fuels [ethno-religious tensions](#), linked to antipathy toward minority Muslims, who are accused of spreading the virus. The Christians of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Cameroon are [vulnerable](#) and face new forms of persecution because of their faith and the pandemic. In Uganda, extremists even blame Christians for the pandemic, and in Nigeria's Middle Belt, Christians live in a survival culture. In South Korea, a healthy democracy, [resentment](#) against members of the Shincheonji church challenged the authorities' efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. Fearing social stigma, members of the religious group hesitated to identify themselves, revealing the fragility of democracies.

The Missing Link – Economic Growth and Freedom of Religion

Addressing the root cause of the double-layered discrimination that religious minorities endure is vital to ensuring inclusive economic growth. Any reflection on exit strategies must consider the relationship between economic growth that

benefits all, and freedom of religion. For sure, the economic costs of COVID-19 are very high. The [macroeconomic impact](#) is believed to be larger than any other catastrophic event in the past four decades. But the human cost might just be higher. The time is now to link economic growth for all and freedom of religion.

Research demonstrates that respect for religious freedom has positive social and economic outcomes, including [economic growth](#). Putting freedom of religion or belief into practice reduces corruption and increases peace and growth because normal economic activities are not vulnerable to disruption and foreign direct investment can contribute to sustainable growth. As religious populations play an increasing role in public life, government and social initiatives to integrate them are vital, as well as corporate engagement that promotes their inclusion. Research [shows](#) a robust connection between the lack of government respect for religious freedom and higher levels of social hostilities involving religious freedom.

Fighting religious discrimination during the pandemic requires an economic and socio-political focus at once. The objective should be an equitable distribution of economic opportunities, which guarantees that everyone can sustain an acceptable level of basic human development. Economic assistance that reduces poverty is vital to help both the economically and politically marginalized. Such assistance must also contribute to long-term sustainable goals, coupled with public policies aimed at promoting food security, eliminating preventable diseases, or ensuring basic education for all. To maximize the impact of sustainable growth on poverty, however, containing inequality must be a policy objective. This means introducing economic relief measures that benefit all, irrespective of religious

beliefs. Investing in social protection programs for all will allow embracing the economically and politically marginalized at once. Fighting religious persecution also means addressing Islamophobia in India, ending the persecution of Uighurs in China, releasing the unlawfully imprisoned Bahai's of Iran, welcoming the forcibly displaced Rohingya, accepting the Christians in Nigeria, and embracing members of the Shincheonji church. It means ending the persecution of all religious minorities.

In a blink of an eye, the pandemic upended everything. But the crisis is an opportunity to reconsider everything that was upended. The pandemic must not be used to further curb freedom of religion. It must be used to embrace, integrate, and educate. The responsibility falls as much on governments that restrict freedoms as on societies that reject "the other." Most importantly, the biggest responsibility lies with democratic governments and societies, who must resist the authoritarian advance and champion freedom of religion while investing in global health security for all. Leaders must acknowledge that what's good for public health and human dignity is not only good but also vital for the economy. The world needs an economy that promotes public health and the ability of all to flourish.