

South Korea: BREAKING NEWS/ Chairman Lee has been arrested

In the night between July 31 and August 1, 2020, Chairman Lee Man Hee, the founder and leader of the South Korean religious movement Shincheonji, has been arrested.

He is accused of having contributed to his movement's alleged lack of cooperation with the authorities after a member was infected with COVID-19, of having embezzled funds belonging to Shincheonji for building the Palace of Peace, and of having maintained an event in 2019 that the authorities had asked to cancel because of a "typhoon alert."

The charges are ludicrous. We have demonstrated [in our second White Paper](#) that there is no criminal negligence in how Lee and Shincheonji handled the COVID-19 crisis. The Palace of Peace is where three of us met Chairman Lee and is clearly used for Shincheonji events. The "typhoon alert" was a false pretext used by some politicians to prevent a duly authorized event—there was no typhoon.

We protest the arrest of an 89-year-old respected leader on obviously trumped-up charges, and we will promote all the appropriate initiatives to react against a travesty of justice, an attempt to destroy a religious movement, and a serious breach of religious liberty.

Alessandro Amicarelli, FOB, European Federation for Freedom of Belief

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

Massimo Introvigne, CESNUR, Center for Studies on New Religions

Rosita Šorytė, ORLIR, International Observatory for Religious Liberty of Refugees

Marco Respinti, journalist and co-author of the White Paper on Shincheonji and COVID-19

31 July 2020

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

– Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions, Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers, Rosita Šorytė, European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Alessandro Amicarelli, European Federation for Freedom of Belief (president), Marco Respinti, journalist

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, Šorytè, 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:

Coronavirus: US denounces scapegoating of Shincheonji by Seoul

– USCIRF (05.03.2020) – <https://twitter.com/uscirf?lang=en> –
Tweet :

“USCIRF is concerned by reports that Shincheonji Church members are being blamed for the spread of Coronavirus.

We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating Shincheonji and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak.

South Korea seeks criminal charges against Christian sect over coronavirus...”

South Korea: Intolerance against Shincheonji Church

after coronavirus incident

– By Massimo Introvigne

– CESNUR (28.02.2020) –
<https://www.cesnur.org/2020/shincheonji.htm> – Media all around the world are focusing attention on Shincheonji Church, a South Korean Christian new religious movement, after members of the church's Daegu congregation were infected by the coronavirus.

As a scholar [who has studied Shincheonji](#), I am concerned with the fact that international media that obviously know nothing about it have 'discovered' this church overnight because of the coronavirus incidents in Korea, and have repeated inaccurate information they found on low-level Internet sources.

Even of more concern is the fact that Shincheonji members who have contracted the virus, who are the victims in this story, are being treated unfairly by the Korean media and described as "cultists." Worse still, some Shincheonji members have been insulted, discriminated and forced out of their jobs, as scapegoats for what has become a national and international hysteria about the virus.

As far as I have ascertained, Shincheonji is cooperating with the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) to contain the coronavirus, complying with all the indication of the authorities, and even testing for the virus all its members at its own expenses. Some politicians and media in South Korea are scapegoating Shincheonji for the epidemics, in order to distract the public attention from widespread criticism leveled at them for the fact that, despite concerns voiced by the Korean Medical Association, South Korea did not prohibit entry into the country from China. The South Korean public news agency, Yonhap News, mentioned the possible

relationship between the arrival of 1,000 Chinese students in school trips to Daegu last month and the outbreak of the epidemics there. Instead, Shincheonji is unfairly blamed, even if, 24 hours after one of its devotees was identified as infected with the virus, it provided the authorities with a full list of its members. Members were also encouraged to tell co-workers and their bosses that they belong to Shincheonji—no small step, since because of the anti-Shincheonji campaigns normally they keep a low profile in the workplace and now they put themselves at risk of being insulted, threatened, and even lose their jobs.

The anti-Shincheonji sentiment in South Korea is fueled by fundamentalist Christian groups, which are much more influential in that country than elsewhere in the world and are disturbed by Shincheonji's rapid growth. These groups have a history of vitriolic propaganda and even physical violence against Shincheonji, whose members are routinely kidnapped and confined to be submitted to forced conversion (deprogramming), and now went so far to accuse Shincheonji to intentionally spread the virus and to call for the forced dissolution of Shincheonji. Spreading fake news in a moment of national crisis is dangerous and irresponsible.

Further poisoning the atmosphere is the fact that political elections will be held in South Korea on April 15, and that hate speech against new religious movements is used both as an electoral tool and a way to take the attention away from public criticism of politicians who handled the coronavirus crisis poorly, and the fact that Reverend [Jeon Kwang-hoon](#), the president of the Christian Council of Korea and the leader of the main anti-Shincheonji coalition in South Korea, [has been arrested on February 24](#) on charges of violating the law regulating electoral campaigns.

Some fundamentalist groups are using the virus epidemics as a pretext to increase their campaign against Shincheonji, in the hope that the virus may achieve what they failed to

accomplish, i.e. putting a halt to Shincheonji's spectacular growth, which largely happens at their expenses. While Shincheonji certainly has a peculiar theology, and it is normal that others disagree with it, fundamentalist anti-cult Korean Protestants are now engaged in a shameful form of profiteering. Responsible international media should be wary of inadvertently cooperating with it.

(*) **HRWF additional information**

See interviews of victims of deprogramming attempts in South Korea carried out by HRWF and published in 2019:
<https://bit.ly/2wVZMUQ>