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South Korea's COVID-19 Church scapegoat is fighting back

As mainstream denominations see their own outbreaks, Shincheonji members say they were unfairly targeted. — BY — DAVID VOLODZKO

— Foreign Policy (20.08.2020)
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/19/south-korea-coronavirus-scapegoat-shincheonji/> — South Korea faced a crisis early in the pandemic, when a 61-year-old woman with a fever attended several Shincheonji Church of Jesus events in the city of Daegu. The area subsequently became the largest epicenter of

the coronavirus outside China. South Korea successfully flattened the curve and became a world leader for its pandemic response. Shincheonji, meanwhile, became infamous as the Christian cult supposedly responsible for the country's outbreak. But the way the group has been treated brings up tough questions of religious freedom, pandemic responsibility, and media scapegoating.

One of the reasons Shincheonji has been blamed for the spread of the virus is the testimony of former members who say that even when they were sick, they were expected to attend services where they were "packed together like sardines." There have also been reports that say church members believe their faith protects them from illness, or that illness is a sin. This, South Koreans will tell you, is why Shincheonji members gathered in groups of more than 1,000 even as a pandemic was underway. This is why South Korea only recorded about one new case per day in its first month—then jumped from 31 cases to 6,767 over the next two and a half weeks, with 63.5 percent of those cases tied to the church.

Shincheonji has also been blamed for the difficulty authorities faced in obtaining the secretive church's membership records, which made it hard for health officials to track the spread of the virus in the crucial early days of the outbreak. Initially, Shincheonji said it was difficult to provide a complete list because some individuals were not yet full members. Busan's then mayor, Oh Keo-don, threatened to sue if Shincheonji was found to have provided a false list, while Daegu's mayor, Kwon Young-jin, said he planned to press criminal charges for the church's repeated refusal to hand in a list of trainees living in the city. The church's founder, Lee Man-hee, was questioned by prosecutors on charges that he deliberately misled authorities about the number of

worshippers and places of worship. On Aug. 1, he was arrested for allegedly giving health officials false information and embezzling about \$4.7 million.

But when the late mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, who recently committed suicide following accusations of sexual abuse, ordered the a raid of Shincheonji headquarters in the nearby city of Gwacheon to obtain a complete list of members, forensic analysis ultimately found that the church had not lied. Moreover, in the days leading up to the Daegu outbreak, the Korean government had recommended against canceling large-scale events because of the coronavirus, saying it was time to return to daily life, albeit with safety protocols. President Moon Jae-in himself assured the public the epidemic would soon end, but that quarantine efforts would continue. The church had done little more than follow the government's lead.

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The backlash against the group has nevertheless been severe. An online petition filed with the presidential office to disband the church collected hundreds of thousands of signatures within days. When a Shincheonji representative posted a YouTube video asking viewers to end their hatred of its members, the video sparked mostly anger. (The representative also argued that because most cases in Korea were church members, the church was therefore the biggest victim.) One person wrote in the comments section, "We should call it 'Shincheonji-19,' instead of 'COVID-19.'"

In another case, a man wrote a Facebook post after he, his mother, his wife, and his two children contracted the virus, asking people to show his family mercy. "I didn't know my mother was a follower of Shincheonji," he wrote, explaining that his wife, who had been heavily criticized for visiting several places during her incubation period, was a nurse whose job was to accompany people with physical disabilities to clinics. "It is true my wife moved around a lot," he added, "but please stop cursing her. Her only fault is marrying someone like me, and having to work and take care of the children."

Roughly 56 percent of Koreans are nonreligious, while 28 percent are Christian and about 16 percent are Buddhist. Heterodox groups are therefore not the norm any more than in the United States, and even among the devoutly religious, they are viewed askance: 20 percent of Koreans are Protestant (mostly Presbyterian), about 8 percent are Catholic, and most Korean Buddhists belong either to the Jogye or Taego order, which are both types of Seon, or Korean Zen. This puts groups like Shincheonji far outside mainstream Korean society, which may partly explain why they were vilified.

Park Won-soon repeatedly claimed the group was responsible for the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea and sued 12 of its leaders for murder. Daegu city officials sued the group for \$82.3 million, or more than two-thirds of the city's pandemic-related spending. In early July, prosecutors arrested three Shincheonji officials for allegedly giving health authorities false information about its followers.

Efforts at redemption have fallen on deaf ears. In July, 4,000 members who have recovered from the coronavirus promised to donate blood plasma to help develop treatments or possibly a vaccine, but the event looked too much like an engineered photo-op. Shortly after the outbreak in Daegu, Lee held a press conference, got down on his knees, and offered up an apology. But few were moved. In fact, several reporters focused instead on his wristwatch, a gift from imprisoned former President Park Geun-hye—who fell from power in part because of her involvement with the leader of a shamanistic cult. Lee was, after all, the same man who had recently claimed the pandemic was the devil's attempt to stop the church's growth, and that victims of the pandemic were "saints in Shincheonji."

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The church says it has been unfairly singled out for persecution. At one point, for example, the Seoul city government banned all Shincheonji gatherings—but not other religious services. Church services have been vectors for the coronavirus worldwide, including in the United States, chiefly thanks to singing, which projects the virus strongly.

Weeks later, in fact, in mid-March, 46 churchgoers became infected after attending the River of Grace Community Church outside of Seoul. Also in mid-March, officials in Gyeonggi province threatened to shut down some 140 churches that had failed to implement preventive measures, following news that Manmin Central Church in Seoul had infected 22 people during a meeting to prepare worship materials for lockdown. South Korea continues to report upticks in coronavirus cases, mostly tied to churches.

Shincheonji members themselves say one reason they have been singled out is because mainstream Christians, in particular the Christian Council of Korea, revile the group. This is interesting, because the group is not actually the crazy Korean cult one might expect. It's certainly no Christian Gospel Mission, also known as Providence or Jesus Morning Star, the Korean movement that allegedly teaches followers to worship Adolf Hitler alongside Jesus, and whose founder is an anti-Semitic serial rapist who tells young women the only way to salvation is through having sex with him. (He served 10 years in prison for sexual assault and was released in 2018.)

Yes, Shincheonji followers believe Lee is a messianic prophet inspired by God, or even that he is an immortal savior himself. Yes, in his book *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, Lee writes, "anyone who opposes Shincheonji is evil." But such beliefs are not so strange when set beside the basic tenets of Korea's largest Christian denomination: Presbyterianism. Or its second-largest, for that matter: Roman Catholicism. Presented straightforwardly, the beliefs of most religions can seem startlingly odd (though to be fair, not many claim to have a living Messiah, much less one who in his youth was himself a member of another cultlike Christian group, Olive Tree). Rather, what offends the mainstream Christian community is the group's secrecy and dishonesty. According to Tark Ji-il, a professor of religion at Busan Presbyterian University and an expert on heretical Christian groups, the problem is not just that the group lied to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but that "their lies are deeply connected with their doctrine that religiously justifies the lies." This, he said, is why the church is "isolated by not only the church but also Korean society."

One thing Shincheonji members are honest about is their propensity for lying. Members are known to infiltrate other congregations to convert their followers, in a practice known as “sheep-stealing” or “harvesting,” and they openly admit they are dishonest about their affiliation when they do so. They even instruct members to lie to friends and family members about it. In video footage of an internal Shincheonji lecture, one instructor reportedly explained that traditional evangelism “is too expensive, takes too much manpower and is too time-consuming” and that it is therefore “better to swallow existing churches.”

Shincheonji justifies its dishonesty by pointing out that its members are persecuted, citing cases of brutal deprogramming and forced conversions back to mainline Protestant groups. In December 2017, for example, a 27-year-old woman suffocated to death when her own parents bound and gagged her to keep her from escaping. They had been holding her captive at a secluded lodge in the southern county of Hwasun, trying to forcibly convert her from the Shincheonji faith. Commenting on Shincheonji’s persecution after the Daegu outbreak in a March report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited forced conversion of Shincheonji members, saying South Korea provides a “vivid example of how public health emergencies can increase the risk to marginalized religious groups.”

“Parents, family members, and husbands pay thousands of dollars to Protestant pastors to unconvert Shincheonji members,” Abby, a Shincheonji member who lives in Washington and asked to use only her first name, told *Foreign Policy*. “That’s something that we’ve brought up as a violation of human rights, but Korea has not recognized this as a problem.”

This is how the secretive Christian sect ended up making common cause with the LGBTQ community, through its support of South Korea's anti-discrimination bill. Mainstream Korean Christian groups vehemently oppose the bill and have compared LGBTQ members to Nazis, warning that if the bill is passed, Korea will become a "gay dictatorship." As Ji Young-jun, a lawyer at the law firm Justice, put it, "Shincheonji is responsible for indiscriminately spreading the coronavirus with their lies. They try to avoid responsibility by using the term 'hate tactics,' which is very similar to the strategy used by male homosexuals who indiscriminately spread AIDS, which is deadlier than COVID-19."

When I asked Abby about Shincheonji's position on the bill, she said, "We fully support it," but later added that the church has no official position. When I asked about the group's position on the LGBTQ community, she said that as Christians, their position is "conservative," but that they oppose discrimination against any and all groups. Like the LGBTQ community, Shincheonji members have been stigmatized because a virus spread among their ranks. Also like the LGBTQ community, Shincheonji members fear persecution, feel the need to lie about their identity, are broadly hated by mainstream Christians, and hope to see protective legislation passed. But there's one more similarity: Their identity itself has become pejorative.

On July 30, Justice Minister Choo Mi-ae was deflecting criticism from conservatives over the Democrats' push for prosecutorial reform. Choo suggested that the opposition's tireless attacks and Shincheonji's own opposition to her reforms could be related. In other words, all she had to do to

attack her conservative opponents was associate them, however loosely, with an almost universally hated religious minority.

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