

Who Is Afraid of Chairman Lee? The Crackdown on Shincheonji in South Korea: A Third White Paper

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1. Who Is Afraid of Shincheonji?

In 2020, our team published two White Papers on the crackdown on Shincheonji in South Korea after incidents related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Introvigne et al. 2020a, 2020b). We feel that a third White Paper is now needed, as we continue to collect documents and interview witnesses (via Zoom, due to the pandemic's restrictions), and new developments have followed the arrest and detention of Shincheonji's founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee.

We have also granted interviews to various media, and the most frequent question has always been how is it possible that a democratic country such as South Korea cracks down on, and tries to destroy, an entire religious movement, if, as we maintain, Shincheonji may have committed mistakes but is not a criminal organization and has not committed any crime.

This is an important question, and one we believe we need to answer. Who is afraid of Shincheonji? Who is afraid of Chairman Lee?

The answer is made more complicated by the fact that Shincheonji has been attacked both by the ruling Democratic Party, to which President Moon Jae-in belongs, and by Protestant fundamentalists who oppose the Democratic Party and regard President Moon as "soft" on North Korea if not pro-Communist. They make strange bedfellows, and the fact that they are both against Shincheonji does not prevent them from being also against each other.

However, this is not a unique South Korean phenomenon. In 2020, USCIRF, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan commission of the United States whose members are designated by the congressional leaders of both political parties and appointed by the President, published an important document identifying the international anti-cult movement as a main threat to religious liberty (USCIRF 2020). The document focuses on anti-cultism in Russia, but goes beyond it, to identify the anti-cult ideology in general as one of the most serious threats to religious freedom internationally.

According the USCIRF report, the ideas of the "anti-cult movement [are] informed by pseudoscientific concepts like 'brainwashing' and 'mind control.'" The anti-

cult movement, according to the USCIRF, "describe[s] new religious movements as 'fanatic' or 'bizarre,' and portray[s] individual members as helpless victims without their own free will or ability to save themselves." As the USCIRF notes, while "claiming to be experts in academic fields like religious studies, psychology, and sociology, [the anti-cultists] are rarely qualified in any of them and often rely on discredited theories and methodologies to promote their ideological agenda."

The USCIRF Report confirms what scholars of new religious movements have observed throughout the years. Although supported by a handful of minority academics, the anti-cult movement is at odds with the mainline academic study of new religious movements, and relies on the discredited theory of brainwashing, which it euphemistically prefers to call "mind control," "mental manipulation," or "psychological abuse." It is also true that most anti-cult publications rely heavily on press clippings and testimonies by disgruntled ex-members, and rarely if ever are based on academic studies or fieldwork among the religious movements they criticize.

Academic scholars of new religious movements distinguish between a secular "anti-cult" movement, claiming that "cults" cause psychological and other damage to their members, and a sectarian "counter-cult" movement, promoted by religionists who accuse "cults" of "heresy" and "sheep-stealing." One of the authors of this White Paper first introduced the distinction in 1993—originally, in an article published in a "counter-cult" magazine (Introvigne 1993), later expanded as a chapter in a scholarly book (Introvigne 1995)—and it is now widely adopted.

The priorities of counter-cultists and anti-cultists were, and remain, different. Counter-cultists, most of them Christian, want to prevent "heretical" groups from converting members of their churches or religions. While the decline of the mainline Christian churches has multiple causes, they blame it largely on the proselytization efforts by "cults," and believe their growth should be slowed down by creating effective obstacles. Anti-cultists are not interested in protecting the interests of mainline religion, and are rather disturbed by the growth of what they see as a brand of conservative religion that runs counter their cultural and

political agenda.

In some countries, secular anti-cultists and Christian counter-cultists cooperated, but they never merged in one unified movement, for the main reason that Christians realized that the ideology of secular anti-cultists might also be used to criticize conservative Christianity. Even when they cooperated, their cooperation was tactical and directed against specific targets, rather than strategical and focused on long-term or global projects.

In this respect, South Korea is different from the United States or Western Europe, but is similar to Russia. In Russia, as the USCIRF document also noted, there are secular opponents of the "cults" but the main driving force in the anti-cult struggle is the Russian Orthodox Church. In order to achieve results, the Russian Orthodox counter-cultists should join forces with the state and use the state's courts, even if they are (at least officially) secular.

In South Korea, there is a Christian counter-cult movement whose strength and virulence are unknown in other countries. Weekly, if not daily, Christian groups organize street demonstrations against a variety of "cults," including Shincheonji, the World Mission Society Church of God, Falun Gong, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Almighty God, as well as against Christian supporters of LGBTQ rights (O 2019a) and Muslims (O 2019b), whose beliefs are also denounced as "heretical." The counter-cult Web site churchheresy.com regularly reports on these events. Organized by Christian ministers, deprogramming is still a widespread practice, with hundreds of cases reported each year (Fautré 2020a, 2020b).

South Korean criticism of new religious movements finds its deepest roots in a conservative and fundamentalist Protestant tradition that, unlike in other countries, became hegemonic in South Korean Protestantism (Kim 2007, 135). The Korean War led to the destruction by Communist forces of more than one thousand Protestant churches in North Korea. More than two hundred pastors were killed. More than one million Protestant refugees fled from North to South Korea. Most of them were "fanatical anti-Communists," and believed that Christians would only survive by actively supporting an authoritarian, non-democratic regime that would resort to violence to repress Communist and other dissident activities (Kim 2007, 152). These events are crucial to understand both fundamentalist and

conservative Korean Protestants' connection with politics, which continued in democratic South Korea, and their aggressive attitude against "heresies."

In the 1960s, fundamentalist and conservative Protestants (most of them Presbyterians) often boasted that liberal competition was never able to hinder their growth. What took them by surprise was what they perceived as a sudden explosion of Christian "cults" in the country. Choe Joon-Hyun argued in his 1993 doctoral dissertation that the main problem for conservative Protestants was not the highly publicized Unification Church, whose importance in South Korea may have been exaggerated by Western scholars because of its prominent role in "cult" controversies in the West. In fact, the Unification Church never had more than 50,000 members in the country, compared to some 10 million Presbyterians. If anything, the limited success of the Unification Church confirmed to Presbyterians that their vigilance against "heresies" had been successful, and "cults" based on heterodox Christianity had been confined to marginal segments of the Korean population (Choe 1993).

However, the situation was entirely different with another Christian new religious movement, the Olive Tree, founded by Park Tae Son (1917–1990) in 1956 (Baker and Kim 2020). Unlike the Unification Church, the Olive Tree was highly successful. Although statistics are a matter of controversy, it may have had some two million members by the mid-1960s, most of whom came from the different Presbyterian branches (Moos 1967).

In South Korea, the Christian counter-cult movement was mostly a Presbyterian affair. While it also attacked the Unification Church, it was largely created because of the unexpected hemorrhage of the Presbyterian Korean churches, some of which had lost as much as 20% of their members, to the Olive Tree. Presbyterians, and other conservative Christians, managed to organize in a few years an effective anti-cult machine, allying themselves with some mainline media, and with politicians eager to be supported by the well-disciplined Christian organizations (Kim 2007, 262–263). The Olive Tree founder, Park, was vilified in the media as "sexually abusive, politically corrupt, religiously fraudulent" (Kim 2007, 263), was accused of embezzling funds, and was repeatedly arrested between 1958 and 1961 (Baker and Kim 2020).

As a consequence of these events several leaders left the Olive Tree, and some went on to found separate new religious movements, who continued to convert members of the Presbyterian and other conservative churches. Shincheonji's founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee, had been a member of the Olive Tree, although his later participation in another religious movement, the Tabernacle Temple, was much more important in the path leading to the foundation of Shincheonji.

The success of Shincheonji was rapid and spectacular, and again it happened largely at the expenses of conservative Protestant churches. The latter, or their most radical, fundamentalist fringe, became so concerned that not only they spread all sort of fake news about Shincheonji through media campaigns whose virulence is hard to imagine outside South Korea, but resorted to physical violence in the shape of deprogramming, of which Shincheonji is the main target. Two members of Shincheonji were killed in connection with deprogramming activities (Fautré 2020a).

A perusal of Korean media shows that deprogrammers and other Protestant fundamentalists vehemently opposed to Shincheonji are a main source of information about Shincheonji and its founder Lee Man Hee. The latter is often depicted as a "heretic" operating a "cult" praying on unsuspecting young Protestant Koreans, and leading them from "good" to "evil," well before the COVID-19 crisis hit. Secular media are not familiar with religious issues, and are happy to take their clues from Christian counter-cultists, as they make for sensational stories.

Some politicians are eager to humor Protestant voters by multiplying the attacks against a religious minority these voters hate, and this became worse with the pandemic. However, Shincheonji has also been attacked by politicians from the ruling Democratic Party, which is in turn a target of criticism by conservative Protestants. For example, Lee Jaemyung, the Governor of Gyeonggi Province where Shincheonji has its headquarters, and a member of the Democratic Party, stated that its province is in "a state of war" against Shincheonji (Rachid 2020). The unprecedented overwhelming victory of the ruling Democratic Party in the general election in April, gaining 180 seats out of 300, gave it power to continue its policies. The two major parties—the Democratic and the conservative United Future Party with 103 seats—came to dominate the General Assembly, with 94 percent of its total membership, which made the voice of minority groups

represented by small parties almost inaudible (Seo 2020, 223–227).

The Democratic Party does not like conservative religion in general, which it views as a main source of criticism of both its domestic and foreign policy, and may easily see Shincheonji as a part of it. The Democratic Party dislikes both Shincheonji and conservative Protestantism, but it has no objections against using Protestant criticism as a tool to crack down on Shincheonji. As two South Korean scholars, Joseph Yi and Lee Wondong, noted, a "pandemic nationalism" led the government to "significant rights violations" against Shincheonji (Yi and Lee 2020). Fundamentalist Protestants play here a dangerous game. By invoking the wrath of the secular arm of the government (which is happy to oblige) against Shincheonji, they acknowledge that the state can and should regulate religion, something the state will and does use against them as well.

The case of the Sarang Jeil Church in Seoul and its leader Pastor Jeon Kwang-hoon is both paradoxical and a cautionary tale. Jeon is a vocal opponent of Shincheonji, and his organization applauded the crackdown on Shincheonji after the COVID-19 incidents. Yet, later in August, more than 800 cases of COVID-19 were traced to the Sarang Jeil Church and Jeon was accused, just as Shincheonji's Lee before him, of not cooperating with the authorities and not giving to them the complete list of his church's members. A member of Sarang Jeil told the British daily *The Guardian*, "We believe in freedom of speech and worship, and thought those freedoms were enjoyed by all South Koreans until the government decided to use us as scapegoats. It is intolerable that we are being persecuted in this way" (McCurry and Nemo 2020).

Obviously, Shincheonji was treated or mistreated in the same way or worse before Sarang Jeil, and to the applause of the network of fundamentalist churches of which Sarang Jeil is a part. From the point of view of Jeon, Shincheonji is a "cult" and his own is a legitimate Protestant organization. But from the point of view of the government, of which Jeon is a vitriolic critic, both Shincheonji and Sarang Jeil are part of "bad," conservative religion, whose resistance to "science," "progress," and the Democratic Party created problems connected with the pandemic.

This is a classic scenario already enacted in other countries. Christian counter-cultists join forces against a specific "cult" with secular authorities, only to

discover that the latter do not share their theological definition of “cult,” and would crack down on any religious group perceived as hostile to the dominant culture and the government.

2. Chairman Lee, Shincheonji, and COVID-19

South Korea has generally been praised for its quick reaction to the pandemic, although human rights issues have also been noted. This quick reaction derives from South Korea’s experience with another epidemic, MERS, in 2015. After MERS, a law called Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (IDCPA) was passed in 2016, which allows the government to derogate from certain provisions of other laws (including the Data Protection Act) in case of an epidemic.

The IDCPA is an example of emergency legislation, which comes into force in cases of national crises. Human rights scholars know that emergency legislation is dangerous, and while it can overcome other national laws, it cannot eliminate the basic guarantees offered to citizens by the national Constitutions and international law. South Korea has ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its Optional Protocol.

The IDCPA allows the health authorities to collect data they would not normally be authorized to collect under the South Korean Data Protection Act, including (IDCPA, section 76) (a) personal information, such as names, resident registration numbers, addresses, and telephone numbers; (b) prescriptions and records of medical treatment; (c) records of immigration control; and (d) other information for monitoring the movement of patients with infectious diseases. Article 76-2 of the IDCPA grants the Ministry of Health and the Director of the Korean Center for Disease Control (KCDC) legal authority to collect personal data, without a warrant, from those already infected or likely to be infected. Article 76-2(1) enables the authorities to require “medical institutions, pharmacies, corporations, organizations, and individuals” to provide “information concerning patients [...] and persons likely to be infected.”

One problem with the IDCPA is that key terms such as who is “likely to be infected” and what are “other information” are left undefined. This calls for an even increased vigilance about the effect of the law on human rights. Clearly, the IDCPA’s application should respect the general principles of non-discrimination and proportionality.

It is important to note that, under Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation and the existence of which is officially proclaimed, the States Parties to the present Covenant may take measures derogating from their obligations under the present Covenant to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, provided that such measures are not inconsistent with their other obligations under international law and do not involve discrimination solely on the ground of race, color, sex, language, religion or social origin.” However, in this case, “any State Party to the present Covenant availing itself of the right of derogation shall immediately inform the other States Parties to the present Covenant, through the intermediary of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, of the provisions from which it has derogated and of the reasons by which it was actuated. A further communication shall be made, through the same intermediary, on the date on which it terminates such derogation.” Article 4.2 explicitly states that, not even in a public emergency, derogations to the provision of Article 18, which guarantees freedom of religion and belief, are admissible.

In fact, during the COVID-19 emergency, several states notified the United Nations that they will apply temporary emergency measures that may supersede certain human rights as allowed by Article 4 ICCPR. However, South Korea did not (Seokmin 2020).

Probably, South Korea was persuaded that this was not needed, since the IDCPA is an ordinary law. However, it is an ordinary law for times of emergency, its enforcement may create human rights problems, and at any rate not even a communication to the United Nations would have allowed South Korea to violate the international provisions on religious non-discrimination and religious freedom.

These provisions also apply to new religious movements such as Shincheonji, no matter how unpopular they may be. In 1993, the Human Rights Committee issued a General Comment no. 22 as a set of guidelines for interpreting Article 18 of the International Covenant. Number 2 of General Comment no. 22 is particularly important, as it deals specifically with new religious movements, often discriminated as such, stating that, “The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous

to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community.”

In light of General Comment no. 22, number 2, states have no right to discriminate against members of minority religions claiming that they belong to a “cult,” or that “cults” are “not really religions” or are “pseudo-religions.” Apart from the questionable status of such claims, it is clear that the International Covenant protects beliefs not only of religions but about religion. It protects the right to be irreligious, i.e. atheism, and it also protects the right to be differently religious, or spiritual, or holding unpopular or non-conventional beliefs about religion that some, or even the majority, may regard as “heretic” or “not really religious.”

As Professor Ciarán Burke, a well-known human rights scholar at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, wrote about the IDCPA, “the legislation, drafted in the name of efficiency and flexibility, leaves too much room for interpretation by the state authorities, allowing them to employ the Act in a manner contrary to the ICCPR and Korea’s human rights obligations, and particularly the proportionality and non-discrimination principles (Burke 2020).”

Professor Burke (and we agree with him) concluded that the actions taken against Shincheonji violated both the principle of proportionality and the principle of non-discrimination, that are guaranteed by international law.

It would have been proportioned to apply the IDCPA and request from Chairman Lee and Shincheonji data about the church members who had been in contact with Patient 31, the first devotee to be infected, later identified as a “superspreader” of the virus, even if this would have been theoretically questionable under the Data Protection Act. But it was against the principle of proportionality to ask Lee and Shincheonji to supply full lists of all members, not only in Daegu but in all South Korea and even abroad, a full list of the church’s real estate properties (including those not used for worship), and additional data about each member. This was even less proportioned considering that in South Korea being “exposed” as a member of Shincheonji involves serious personal risks. Shincheonji is in fact so unpopular that members “exposed” as such have been fired from their jobs,

beaten, and even refused medical treatment in hospitals, both before and during the COVID-19 crisis (Introigne et al. 2020b).

Also, the actions undertaken against Shincheonji violate the principle of non-discrimination, as numerous other South Korean churches acted contrary to the provisions of the IDCPA, and in a more spectacular way than Shincheonji, as they continued their in-person worship services even after they were forbidden to do so (Fautré 2020c), yet their legal entities were not dissolved and their pastors were not arrested. As mentioned earlier, even the Sarang Jeil Church was treated less harshly than Shincheonji, although it had clearly been less cooperative with the authorities when a large number of its members became infected with COVID-19 (Lee 2020).

It is really difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 89-year-old Chairman Lee has been singled out and detained because he is the leader of an unpopular religious movement. As Professor Burke noted, this is an egregious example of “the political temptation to use flexible legislation in a non-impartial manner in order to scapegoat and pursue one’s enemies”: “arresting a church leader, let alone an 88-year-old one [88 at the time of Burke’s writing, now 89], for failing to co-operate with draconian measures undertaken on the basis of a broad and uncertain law seems, on the face of it, deeply suspect, and difficult to reconcile with Korea’s avowed respect for human rights” (Burke 2020, 80).

The COVID-19-related basis for arresting and detaining Chairman Lee, and other Shincheonji leaders, is also tenuous. The prosecutors claim that, when Shincheonji was requested to supply a full list of its real estate properties and members (including members abroad, and “students” who are in the process of joining Shincheonji but are not yet members), some names and properties were omitted, and some information was not complete.

More in detail, Shincheonji and Chairman Lee are accused of having supplied a list of 1,100 real estate properties owned by various Shincheonji organizations, while in fact the total number was 1,857, so that 757 were missing. However, the IDCPA, broad as it is, does not list information about real estate owned by an entity among the information that should be given to health authorities. It is difficult to escape the suspicion that the Korean authorities had ulterior motives,

not related to the pandemic, to compel Shincheonji to release information about its real estate, such as to use it in the parallel prosecution of the movement for alleged tax evasion, if not to share it with the counter-cult opponents of the movement (who, as we will see, actively cooperated in the crackdown).

Given the circumstances, the cooperation by Shincheonji went even beyond what was requested by the IDCPA, as it supplied the health authorities with a list of all places of worship and gathering with even a remote possibility of being connected with meetings where those who had been in contact with Patient 31 might have spread the disease. To supply the addresses of facilities rented for financial purposes, and others totally unrelated with the events set in motion by Patient 31 would not have served any useful COVID-19-related purpose.

As for the members, Shincheonji supplied lists of 212,324 domestic members and 33,281 overseas members (why the latter’s list was also needed is unclear). Chairman Lee and other Shincheonji officers are accused of having omitted, or intentionally deleted, eight names of members, and of not having supplied complete details for 105,446 members, whose social security numbers were not provided (although their date of birth was). The prosecutors also claimed that 24 dates of birth in the list were not correct. They claim they came to this conclusion after, since they did not trust the lists supplied by the movement to be correct, they had raided the headquarters of Shincheonji and seized computers and documents.

Shincheonji claims, and we have seen documents to that effect, that they were put under pressure to collect data in a few days, and they did the best they could to humor the requests. When they met the authorities, they agreed to supply the dates of birth, not the social security numbers. That 24 dates of birth out of more than 245,000 were not accurate is well within the average margin of error in large data bases, and is certainly not suggestive of any criminal intention to deceive the authorities.

While originally the media reported that a dozen or more names were omitted, the prosecutors in the end mentioned the number of eight, plus five whose names were intentionally changed in the list. Shincheonji’s answer to the accusation is that, although the prosecution has not clarified who the eight omitted names are,

3. Did Chairman Lee “Embezzle Funds”?

they believe that, of the eight missing people, six are in fact dead. The remaining two, on which the prosecution focused on the arrest warrant, are a local leader who, when the discussions about the lists happened, was in the process of leaving Shincheonji, and his wife. It is true that they asked for their names to be removed from the list of Shincheonji members, a request Shincheonji regarded as reasonable. They had not participated in any recent church activity.

As for the five whose names appeared as altered, they were former members who turned into opponents of Shincheonji. Altering the records concerning such persons is a way of protecting both their privacy and Shincheonji against claims that it keeps storing data about disgruntled ex-members. Obviously, this has nothing to do with an attempt to hinder the anti-pandemic efforts of the health authorities.

Summing up, requesting a full list of all members and students of Shincheonji, including those living abroad who never visited South Korea, and of all real estate owned by the movement's organizations, was unreasonable, disproportionate, and going beyond both the provisions of the IDCPA and what would be allowed under the country's international obligations. However, rather than simply refusing such unreasonable requests, Shincheonji tried to cooperate. It provided a list of most of its real estate, including all properties of possible epidemiological significance, and a list of all its domestic and foreign members. If two or even eleven names were incorrect or missing, in a list of more than 245,000, this cannot be constructed as a refusal to cooperate with the health authorities, and Shincheonji had reasonable motivations to omit these names.

As mentioned in the first chapter, it is a tradition of sort for South Korean authorities, when they crack down on groups labeled as “cults,” to accuse their leaders of “embezzling funds.” This is based on an anti-cult stereotype, easily accepted by the public opinion, that “cult” leaders prey on gullible followers and on their wallets. In fact, there is no evidence that new religious movements in general receive monetary contributions in amounts higher than traditional religions, nor that funds are administered with less transparency. In this very year 2020, scandals concerning the Vatican and international Buddhist orders have confirmed that problems in managing funds are not exclusive to “cults.”

Accusations of “embezzlement of funds” against leaders of new religious movements are, however, easier. When a religious movement is in its first generation, with the leader still alive, it is very much common that the assets of the movement and of the leader are somewhat confused. For members, it may be unclear whether they are donating to the leader or the movement. Most of them do not make such a distinction. The leader is the movement, and by supporting the leader, his or her travels around the world, and other activities, devotees believe they are supporting the religious organization.

Shincheonji is divided territorially into twelve “tribes,” and Chairman Lee was accused of embezzling funds received by the Matthias Tribe and the Peter Tribe. His defense is that he regarded these as donations to him, and the money was used to support his world tours on behalf of Shincheonji and Shincheonji-related organizations.

Chairman Lee is also accused of having embezzled funds from the peace and cultural association HWPL (on which more later). His defense is that the origin of these funds should be considered. Although deposited in an HWPL account, they were gifts by the devotees intended for Chairman Lee.

The most bizarre claim is that Chairman Lee embezzled funds belonging to Shincheonji to support the construction of the Palace of Peace in Gapyeong. Some of us have visited the Palace of Peace. It is true that Chairman Lee lives

there—in a modest apartment, far away from the luxury surrounding other religious leaders. However, the largest part of the Palace of Peace is used as a training and conference center for Shincheonji, and includes an exhibition and museum about the history of Shincheonji and its related organizations. Clearly, the Palace of Peace is not the “private villa” of Chairman Lee, but a key Shincheonji facility, for which Shincheonji funds have been rightfully used.

There are two other important points concerning the accusations of embezzlement. First, when he started hearing of these accusations, and in some cases before, Chairman Lee transferred back all the funds he had received to the Matthias and Peter Tribes, Shincheonji, and HWPL, either by wiring back money or transferring shares of properties. Whether gift or loan, all was fully repaid, although not only Chairman Lee regarded the accusations as ludicrous, but this was also the position of the alleged “victims” of the embezzlement, i.e. Shincheonji, its tribes, and HWPL, which had nothing to object against how the leader used the funds.

The second point is that these (and other) accusations are supported by statements by Ms. Kim Nam Hee. She is described by the procurator as the former “secret lover” of Chairman Lee (a definition copied and pasted from counter-cult anti-Shincheonji literature), and clearly played a key role in building the case against him. In fact, she is a typical apostate ex-member of Shincheonji with her own agenda.

For several years, Kim was perceived as Lee’s closest disciple and one some believed may become his “successor” in leading the movement. Shincheonji, however, dismissed these as mere rumors, and stated that there were no projects for electing a successor of Chairman Lee. In fact, it seems it was Kim herself who was fueling the rumors. When it became clear that Shincheonji would not accept her as leader or “successor,” Kim started creating her own parallel or splinter group, which met with limited success. She was expelled from Shincheonji in January 2018, and had to face a trial at the Seoul Central District Court, on charges of embezzling money belonging to the church. On July 26, 2019, the Seoul Central District Court sentenced her to two years in prison, suspending the execution of the sentence for three years (Seoul Central District Court 2019a). The decision was confirmed on appeal on December 6, 2019 (Seoul Central District Court 2019b).

It was Kim that, as a part of her campaign against Shincheonji, told the media that she and Lee had become romantically involved, although Lee was married, and she had divorced her husband to marry Lee in 2012 (Choi 2020). Christian counter-cultists hesitated to welcome her into their fold, and remained suspicious that Kim, who was a Roman Catholic before meeting Lee, may promote her own “imitation of Shincheonji,” rather than bringing Shincheonji members back to the Evangelical fold (Choi 2020). They also noted that Kim failed to produce a certificate or other document proving her marriage to Lee (see comments on “Gildicchia” 2020).

She offers as evidence a ceremony performed during HWPL’s World Peace Festival of 2012, during which she and Lee represented the Moon and the Sun, and united in a choreographed version of ancient Korean ceremonies. The video was made available by Shincheonji itself, and is still on YouTube (“Das Weltfriedensfestival, Lee Man-hee” 2012). Members of Shincheonji I interviewed, including some who worked closely with Kim in preparing the 2012 event, were surprised of her claim that this was a real “marriage.” “It was symbolic, one told me, it would be like an actress who married an actor in a movie and would then claim they are legally married” (Y.K. 2020).

Apart from her claims about an alleged romantic relation with Chairman Lee, it is clear that Kim, when she accuses Lee of embezzlement, is not a credible witness. She is involved in a number of bitter lawsuits against Lee and Shincheonji, and has been herself found guilty, by a final court decision, of embezzling the movement’s funds. It seems that, after she lost the criminal court case filed against her by Shincheonji, she is now engaged in a personal vendetta against Chairman Lee.

4. Did Shincheonji Organize “Illegal” Events?

Chairman Lee is also accused of having organized “illegal” events. Strangely enough, these accusations refer to events that happened before the Patient 31 case. How these events developed was clear, yet Chairman Lee was not prosecuted for criminal behavior before the COVID-19 crisis. Only after the case of Patient 31, were these incidents “rediscovered.”

Looking at these cases, it seems that Shincheonji was the victim rather than the perpetrator of any wrongdoing. The same scheme repeated itself: Shincheonji or one of its related organizations rented premises for an event; the rental agreement was cancelled due to pressures by the counter-cultists; Shincheonji deemed the cancellation illegal and held the event. The leaders and members of Shincheonji and related organizations did not enter the premises by force. Thousands of persons, including foreign dignitaries, attended the festivals, which took place peacefully and without incidents. Complaints by the rental agencies, which look as having been filed to appease the counter-cultists, were dismissed, or withdrawn. However, in 2020, these cases were revived, and cited as one of the reasons for arresting Chairman Lee.

The “illegal” events mentioned in the Chairman Lee cases were organized to celebrate the yearly anniversaries of the World Peace Summit, organized by HWPL on September 18, 2014, and were held respectively at the Olympic Park Peace Plaza in Seoul in 2015 (attendance: 57,000), at the Hwaseong Sports Town in 2017 (50,000), at the Ansan Wa Stadium in 2018 (40,000), and at the Suwon World Cup Stadium in 2019 (60,000).

In the case of the Peace Plaza, the lessor filed a criminal complaint against four directors of HWPL, but the case was dismissed, and the defendants declared innocent. In the 2017 case, under pressure from the counter-cult group National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji, the city of Hwaseong tried to cancel the agreement five days before the event, which the lessees did not accept. In the end, officers of the city of Hwaseong attended the event, were satisfied that the HWPL meeting was not a proselytization rally for Shincheonji, and asked for the payment of the rent (which followed shortly) to close the matter.

In Ansan in 2018, the city once again tried to cancel a valid agreement, candidly acknowledging that it was doing so because of the pressure of “local Christian groups” and the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji, which threatened to picket the stadium. In the end the event was held, the demonstrations by counter-cultists were kept under control by the police, and, following a complaint filed by the city, the local prosecutor decided not to press charges against HWPL officers.

In Suwon, the same familiar sequence of events took place. A contract was signed, and a deposit paid, then the city of Suwon tried to cancel the agreement a few days before the event, mentioning the (imaginary) risk of a typhoon but finally admitting that the reason for the cancellation was the pressure by the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji. The cancellation was abruptly announced by the local media before the official letter was officially delivered to HWPL. The day the news was reported was during the Chuseok holidays, which prevented HWPL to take official actions against the decision. Governor Lee Jaemyung of the Gyeonggi Province received complaints by HWPL, but never responded to them. In the end, the event was held, the city filed a complaint, then agreed to withdraw it, and the case was dismissed by the local prosecutor.

In all these cases, the counter-cultists had told the authorities that the stadiums will be used for religious ceremonies, which would be against the rental rules. However, the local authorities attended the HWPL events and agreed that they were not religious.

The four incidents do not prove that Shincheonji, HWPL, or Chairman Lee are anti-social, violent groups. In fact, they organized peaceful events with the presence of hundreds of foreign dignitaries, including leading politicians such as the former Presidents of Croatia, Stjepan Mesić, and of Romania, Emil Constantinescu. What emerges from the events is, on the contrary, that the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji and local fundamentalist Christian churches actively promoted discrimination against Shincheonji, and intimidated local lessors by threatening mass demonstrations. This discrimination was extended to HWPL,

5. A Religious Persecution Instigated by the Counter-Cultists

by falsely arguing that it was organizing religious proselytization events on behalf of Shincheonji, which was not the case.

In 2020, rather than acknowledging that Shincheonji and HWPL had been at the receiving ends of acts of intolerance and discrimination, the South Korean prosecutors blamed the victims, and filed criminal charges against Chairman Lee for cases where local authorities had already concluded that no crime had been committed.

Quite apart from any accusation concerning COVID-19, but after them, the Korean authorities conducted a nation-wide tax audit of Shincheonji, and stripped both the religious group's missionary branch in Seoul, and the large humanitarian organization founded by Chairman Lee, HWPL, of their registered legal status. This is particularly disturbing with respect to HWPL that, while chaired by Chairman Lee, conducts charitable and peace-promoting activities, which include interreligious dialogue, rather than proselytization on behalf of Shincheonji (Šorytè 2020).

Shincheonji's local churches were closed throughout the country, based on alleged health risks, tax problems, and zoning regulations. Buildings used for hosting religious services at the Gwacheon Headquarters were razed based on alleged zoning violations. At the time of this writing, all Shincheonji churches throughout South Korea remain closed, and hold religious services via the Internet only. On June 22, the City of Daegu sued Shincheonji and Chairman Lee seeking damages of 100 billion won (US\$82.3 million), more than two-thirds of the city's total virus-related spending of 146 billion won, in an obvious attempt to bankrupt the church based on the faulty argument that it was responsible for the COVID-19 epidemics ("Daegu Files Damage Suit Against Shincheonji for Mass Coronavirus Infections" 2020).

One particularly disturbing, yet crucially important, aspect of the whole set of actions is that they were instigated and "stage-managed" by the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji, a counter-cult organization that filed the original complaints. Of course, any citizen or organization has the right to file complaints. However, in these specific complaints there is an unhealthy confusion between theological and secular arguments, and one that was perpetuated by the authorities themselves.

For instance, in its request for the dissolution of HWPL, besides falsely arguing that HWPL carries out proselytizing activities on behalf of Shincheonji and that "the Pope has issued a warning against Shincheonji's missionary work" (all the documents and speeches of the Pope are published, and the name "Shincheonji" does not appear anywhere), the Association explains that "the chairman of

HWPL and head of the Shincheonji church is a religious fraud who calls himself the 'Second Jesus' and 'the Counselor.' Examples of similar religious frauds: a –Hells of churches: Park Tae-sun, Moon Sun-myung, Jung Myung-seok – Theological: Yoo Byung-un, Shin Ok-joo, Lee Jae-rok." The most important point here is not that both the founders of new religious movements and theologians the counter-cultists disagree with are called "religious frauds," nor that Lee never claimed to be "the Second Jesus," but that theological arguments are used to invoke civil and criminal sanctions. Even if it were true that Lee claimed to be the "Second Jesus," this would not be a crime.

The same complaint argues that, should it not act against Shincheonji, South Korea may have problems in the future with other countries in case Shincheonji organizes a "mass suicide." Perhaps the South Korean authorities are not aware of it but, after the mass suicides and homicides of the Peoples' Temple in Guyana in 1978 and of a handful of other religious movements in the subsequent decades, it has been a standard anti-cult tactic to accuse all groups labeled as "cults," from the Unification Church to the Luz del Mundo, of preparing a "mass suicide" (see Introigne 2018). Obviously, none of the accused groups ever imagined organizing a mass suicide, while the small movements who did had largely escaped the radars of the anti-cultists.

In its complaint against Chairman Lee, the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji laments that "Shincheonji has been identified as a cult, and a pseudo-religion by various denominations," has an unorthodox "eschatology," and is "a group that gravely harms the churches of Korea" by converting their members. All these are not crimes, and the language shows the attempt by the association to have secular courts protect conservative Christian churches from competition by Shincheonji.

Again, there are no laws against privates filing their own rambling diatribes as legal complaints. It is an entirely different matter when their arguments are taken seriously by governmental authorities. For example, the City of Daegu filed a complaint for (astronomic) damages connected with the COVID crisis. However, the city, which is obviously a secular entity, included in its complaint that Chairman Lee before founding Shincheonji "attended two protestant churches that were first to be labeled as a cult in the Republic of Korea" (the Olive Tree and

the Tabernacle Temple), that it "targets major domestic Protestant churches," and that the latter consider it a "cult." The complaint even tries to discuss Shincheonji theology, labeling it "a mixture of major beliefs by the Olive Tree, the Unification Church, and JMS [Jesus Morning Star, a nickname for Providence]." This is not accurate, as is the complaint's reconstruction of Shincheonji's eschatology, but is also totally irrelevant for a secular court.

The Daegu complaint mentions the National Association of the Victims of Shincheonji as a "representative organization," and it is clear that this association is the real author of the five lengthy pages of the document, describing the theology and organization of Shincheonji in standard Christian counter-cult terms, including accusations of "brainwashing." In turn, the complaints by the National Association offer as source counter-cult press clippings only, and they are quoted as authoritative and reliable in the authorities' briefs and indictments.

In all other democratic countries, using such sources and arguments about Shincheonji's theology would be strictly forbidden, based on the general principles of freedom of belief and the prohibition for secular authorities or courts to assess whether the theology of a religion is true or false.

On the other hand, these parts of the documents we examined are extremely useful. They confirm that, by taking advantage of the unfortunate incidents connected with Patient 31 and COVID-19, Christian counter-cultists instigated the prosecution of Shincheonji and Chairman Lee, hoping to get rid of a growing "heretical" movement that was "gravely harming the churches of Korea" by converting their members in great numbers.

On August 5, 2020, Michael Breen, a British-born journalist based in Seoul, and an authoritative commentator on religious and political issues in South Korea, wrote in the *Korea Times* that, "For a lot of people I know, Lee in jail equals justice. Like Al Capone finally being nailed for tax evasion, the actual charge is a pesky technicality. Among all the world's religions, it's normal to like only one. Most of us tolerate a few more. But nobody likes someone who starts one, even in civilized society. That's Lee's real crime." Breen commented that, given the 97 percent conviction rate in South Korea for criminal cases, being indicted is remarkably close to being sentenced there.

He went on to say that, "It seems obvious to me that the only reason prosecutors are going after the Shincheonji founder, or that they would go after the Itaewon [LGBT] clubbers [who were also accused for the pandemic], is because they are unpopular. Had the cluster been the main Jogye Temple or the Myeondong Roman Catholic Cathedral or at the Protestant Full Gospel Church in Seoul's Yeouido, this wouldn't be happening. For politicians and others who comment in public, Shincheonji is a safe target. You may remember that when media reported that Shincheonji was dragging its feet with the member lists, two presidential hopefuls, Gyeonggi Governor Lee Jae-myung and the late Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon attacked the church quite forcefully and found their approval ratings boosted for it. But the best evidence that this is a witch-hunt is that the prosecutors have thrown in a financial charge for good measure in case the obstruction of government charge doesn't stick," as they have historically done to get rid of "cult" leaders and did in the case of the Olive Tree, the Victory Altar (Introvigne 2017), and several others (Breen 2020).

We do agree with Michael Breen that the action taken against Chairman Lee and other Shincheonji leaders are a "witch-hunt," that they are really being punished because they established a new religion and antagonized Korean mainline Protestants, and that the unpopularity of Lee and Shincheonji is such that they cannot expect a fair trial in South Korea.

The situation we describe here is compatible with South Korea being a democratic country. There is a relevant precedent, a case decided by Swedish Supreme Court on October 21, 2005, concerning Gregorian Bivolaru (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005). A Romanian citizen, Bivolaru is the founder of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), a new spiritual movement that teaches, inter alia, Tantric esoteric techniques. Within the framework of a campaign against MISA instigated by anti-cultists and sectors of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bivolaru was arrested in 2004, accused of a sexual relation with a 17-year old, M.D. In Romania, the legal age of consent was 15, but the law punished sexual relations between teachers and their students, and Bivolaru was regarded as the yoga teacher of M.D. The crimes of which Bivolaru was accused of (and later sentenced for to six years in jail) were obviously not of a religious nature. However, Bivolaru argued that they were a mere pretext to censor his spiritual teaching, and part of a vendetta instigated by the Romanian Orthodox Church against minorities

it regards as "cults." M.D. herself testified before the Swedish Supreme Court that she was treated harshly by the Romanian police, and denied both any sexual relationship and the fact that Bivolaru personally taught her yoga.

In its landmark decision of 2005, the Swedish Supreme Court ruled that refugee status should be granted to a person accused of common crimes, when it can be presumed that his or her religious opinion or teachings motivated the prosecution, and that because of religious prejudice a fair trial could not be expected. In the case it examined, the Supreme Court concluded that "due to his religious conception, Gregorian Bivolaru runs the risk to be exposed to pursuits of evil character" in Romania, and he was granted political asylum in Sweden.

It is our conclusion that, just as in the Bivolaru case in Romania, those against Chairman Lee and other Shincheonji defendants in South Korea are, to borrow the words of the Swedish Supreme Court, "pursuits of evil character." They should be stopped in the name of the international human rights of South Korea, and in the case of Chairman Lee also of humanitarian concerns for an 89-year-old prisoner who appears to be in frail health.

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