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Committed to a psychiatric hospital by her family



LEE Su-ran

HRWF (17.12.2020) – LEE Su-ran lives in Busan Metropolitan City, Suyeong-gu with her husband and ten-year-old daughter. She had no previous religious affiliation before she joined the Shincheonji Church in March 2019.

She was 38 years old when her family tried to kidnap her for her beliefs, and then admitted her into a psychiatric hospital before forcing her to undergo a coercive de-conversion programme.

Here is her account:

Before the kidnapping

“I was in the process of trying to evangelize my husband when he found out that I was a member of the Shincheonji Church. He told my parents and my sister and her husband, who are all Buddhists. Soon I realized that they were making the necessary arrangements to force me into a de-conversion programme.

My family would usually meet to celebrate my birthday on 18th January, but this year my mother told me to do it on my own, which was strange. My husband also said that he could not celebrate with me as he was going to a funeral. However, he didn't wear any funeral attire which was even more strange.

I happened to look at my husband's phone and I found a screenshot with the address of the Busan Sae Jang Hak Presbyterian Church, known for conducting coercive de-

conversion programmes. One of their pastors, Hwang Ui-Jong, is a deprogramming pastor. It was then that I realized that my family was preparing for my deprogramming.”

18 January 2020

“On 18 January 2020, my husband left the house as if he was going to work but around 11pm, he came back unexpectedly with my parents and my younger sister. They came in abruptly and my sister told me, ‘I’m doing this because I love you.’ As they tried to restrain me, I implored them that this was not the right way, but my sister grabbed my hair, and we got into a physical fight.

As the fight became more emotional and violent, my father slapped me across the cheek and tried to knock me down. I resisted but, in the chaos, my mother and sister managed to take my cell phone and my daughter, and to leave with them. Terrified, I pleaded with them to bring my daughter back and to give me back my cell phone, but they would not listen. Eventually I took a blunt knife and threatened to hurt myself, and so my husband called my mother and sister to reassure me. This was likely planned to calm me down.

My mother then called the police and they arrived at around 1am. My husband was holding me down and I was frantically trying to break free. My husband had been threatening to divorce me and insulting me. The police talked with my family and then placed me in handcuffs and put me in the ambulance without ever asking me what had happened. At that point, I gave up fighting as it was clear the police weren’t going to listen to me. My husband rode with me in the ambulance as we were taken to Busan Municipal Psychiatric Hospital.

The doctor and nurses informed us that if two family members gave their consent, I could be held in the hospital for 72 hours. My mother and husband both agreed to do so.

I was held in a solitary room and monitored by a CCTV. The doctors asked me how I came to be here, and I told them everything. They believed me and said I would be discharged, but they couldn’t discharge a patient on the weekend.

I called a close friend from church using a public telephone and told her what had happened.”

21 January 2020

“The doctor discharged me and contacted my family. My sister, mother, and uncle were waiting for me in front of the hospital. Some people from my church were also there which led to a confrontation between my family and them. My mother began shouting that Shincheonji had caused this and that I needed to go to a coercive de-conversion programme. Church members reported this to the police.

When the police came, they made snide remarks that our family is now ruined. One of the officers asked me what I wanted to do and I told him I wanted to go to a women’s shelter. However, as soon as my family told them that I was a member of Shincheonji, they stopped helping me and turned me back over to my family. My mother, uncle and sister drove me to the Sae Jang Hak Church for a pre-scheduled five-day coercive conversion programme.

During the programme, I would ask questions about the bible after everything the missionary said. My sister and mother would hit me, saying that I was crazy and that I needed to just listen. I would fight back when they assaulted me.

After about three days of this, my family gave up and ended the programme earlier than scheduled.

I was then taken to my uncle's house nearby. During the two days that I stayed there, I was constantly monitored by my family and had many violent interactions with them. My husband continued demanding that we get a divorce and using abusive language with me.

However, I had done nothing wrong, and so I fought back. It seemed there would be no compromise, and so finally they allowed me to leave. I stayed at my friend's house for three weeks. During this time, my family held demonstrations at the Shincheonji Church and its theology centres."

18 February 2020

"Eventually, I returned home to repair ties with my family and be reunited with my daughter. My family welcomed me back with tears and were very regretful.

The long-term negative impact of this traumatic incident on myself and my family has been immeasurable. One example is that my parents had been self-employed but closed their business while preparing for the coercive de-conversion programme. I found out that at that point in time, Pastor Hwang of the Busan Sae Jang Hak Church also demanded **700 USD** in the form of donations from my husband and mother.

During the coronavirus pandemic, my husband and I still fight but we are trying to save our marriage for the sake of our daughter."

Kim Ju-hye: Kidnapped and forced into a coercive de-conversion programme for 51 days by her family



Kim Ju-hye

HRWF (12.11.2020) – Kim Ju-hye, a university student, joined the Shincheonji Church in 2018 after growing up in a Presbyterian household. Her father is a reporter for a newspaper company owned by the Christian Council of Korea and her mother is currently working as a nursery teacher.

She was 24 years old when her family drugged and kidnapped her for her beliefs, and then held her in a house for 51 days while she was forced to undergo a coercive de-conversion programme.

Here is her account:

The night of the incident

“On 29 March 2020, I was having dinner with my family at our home in Goyang City, Gyeonggi Province. We were eating pork stew that my mother had bought, but the stew tasted very bitter to me. I mentioned this to my mother, and she looked oddly embarrassed. Something felt wrong, and so I threw up what I had eaten and texted my friend from church.

After I threw up, my mother pressured me into taking a solution that she claimed was anti-nausea medicine. Upon taking it, I immediately became unconscious. When I came to around 11 p.m., I looked for my cell phone, but I could not find it. My family said that they needed to take me to the hospital, and my father and younger brother then carried me out of the house.

My uncle was waiting with his car in front of our house. He took us to an underground parking lot where we all got into a rental car. I was still weak from the solution my mother had given me and so was unable to question this or resist.

After an hour of driving, we arrived at a house. I later learned that we were in Siheung City, Gyeonggi Province, which is a common location for forced confinements due to its remote nature.

My parents held both of my arms and brought me inside. There were about 30 CCTVs installed inside the house, and all the windows were locked. There was an alarm system linked to the windows that would make loud noises when they were opened and notify the owner of the house. My family members did not say a word to me to explain any of this. They took turns keeping watch over me all night.”

Forced to sign de-conversion agreement

“When I woke up the next day, my father forced me to sign a two-page agreement, saying that the pastor would not come until I did. The content of the agreement stated that I, as a member of Shincheonji Church, wished to receive conversion ‘education’ and gave my consent for a de-conversion programme.

I told my parents that my signing the agreement involuntarily while under forced confinement made it null and void. My father re-read the agreement, claiming that I didn't read it properly. My parents had already heard a lot of groundless slander about Shincheonji and began berating me. They told me that I was crazy because I was brainwashed into attending Shincheonji. That night and every following night, my family took turns staying awake to ensure I couldn't run away.”

The start of the de-conversion programme

"On 31 March 2020, my parents woke me up early because an evangelist was coming. This evangelist, a woman in her late 50's, had me write an agreement related to COVID-19 as soon as she arrived. It stated that if she was infected with the virus, I was wholly responsible for my exposure to her. The evangelist made all my family members sign it as well. Everyone was wearing a face mask, except her.

After the 'education' session, the evangelist pulled my parents aside to discuss something in secret. When I asked my mother later what they talked about, she said that the evangelist told my mother to stop treating me so well and instead to follow the advice of the counselling centre. Then she told my mother to make lunch and to prepare the evangelist's toothbrush, toothpaste, and towel separately. The evangelist did this to emphasise that my family should be waiting on her during her stay.

When my father mentioned returning to work after taking this month off, the evangelist objected. She told him he must take a second month off. My mother had quit her job in anticipation of the time needed to prepare and implement this plan, but my father had hoped to be able to continue working."

1 April – 3 May 2020

"My father was about to leave for his office to extend his leave from work when the evangelist yelled at him, claiming he had not listened to her instructions. She said that anyone who left could not return. As a result, my father went back to work and lived at home, leaving my mother and younger brother at the rented property with me.

Three to four evangelists, including Evangelist Kim Choong-il and Evangelist Ju Eun-hye, took turns visiting me each day. Since there were no 'classes' on Sundays or Mondays, I was forced to watch over eight hours of videos slandering Shincheonji on a laptop provided by the counselling centre with my family. If my mother or brother believed that I was not paying attention, I was forced to re-start the videos entirely.

During the duration of my confinement, my family and I began to tire mentally. My mother would cry and bang her head against the wall, and my brother would throw things when he could not control his anger. On days that I didn't obey my family, I was not given any food."

4 - 18 May 2020

"There were so many coercive conversion programmes occurring at this time that evangelist Ju Eun-hye couldn't keep coming to our location. She instructed my family to bring me to the counselling centre during the week for 'classes' and then take me to Sunday services at Sangrok Church. Pastor Jin Yong-sik, the head pastor of this church, is a part of the deprogramming scheme.

My family were to transport me using a small rental car. They were told not to open the car doors from the inside (the doors of the car could not be opened from inside) in case I tried to escape."

Escape from my confinement

"On 19 May 2020, the counselling centre said that there were many upcoming coercive de-conversion programmes so we should vacate the property and instead commute to the counselling centre from home. I had been held in that room from 29 March to 19 May 2020 for a total of 51 days.

Soon after, one day after going to the counselling centre, my mother, younger brother and I stopped by an IKEA store. I realised this was my opportunity to escape and so, when they were not watching me, I managed to run away.

I am now living with a friend in Seoul, as I am too scared to live at home with my family again. Initially, I experienced extreme insomnia and was very traumatised. I went to several places including the Yeongdeungpo Police Station and the Women's Counselling Centre for protection and counselling. However, the police and service providers I met treated me unfairly because I am a Shincheonji member.

After some time had passed, I felt safe enough to be in touch with my family again. Now, I am in contact with them often and, in October, I met with my parents in person. They sincerely apologised for everything they subjected me to during the coercive conversion programme. I am still healing from this experience and we are in the process of reconciliation.

About three weeks after my escape, I called the National Human Rights Commission of Korea to discuss my case. However, rather than helping me, the person I spoke to asked why I had become a member of such a religion in the first place. They did not counsel me on my rights to legal recourse, and instead criticized the Shincheonji Church.”

In South Korea, draft resisters still go to prison. But now it's a job.

A court ruled that conscientious objectors must be allowed to serve their country in other ways. The government says they'll still have to do so behind prison walls.

By Choe Sang-Hun

New York Times (24.10.2020) — <https://nyti.ms/37QOKAP> - Like thousands of other Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to join the military because of their religious beliefs, Lee Seung-ki will serve time in a South Korean prison.

But unlike those before him, Mr. Lee will not enter as a convicted criminal. He will be among the first conscientious objectors in South Korea allowed to perform alternative service — jobs like cook, janitor and clinic assistant — behind prison walls.

For three years starting on Monday, Mr. Lee and 63 others will work, eat and sleep in prisons, though they will live apart from the inmates and will be allowed several weeks of leave. And unlike Jehovah's Witnesses who served prison terms for their beliefs, they will have no criminal record to trail them for the rest of their lives.

Alternative service is a seismic shift in a country that considers conscription crucial to its defense against North Korea, with which it is still technically at war. Military duty is seen as a revered rite of passage for able-bodied young men, who are required to spend 21 months in uniform, usually between the ages of 18 and 28.

South Korea has imprisoned more conscientious objectors than any other country. Its Military Service Act requires up to three years in prison for those who refuse the draft without “justifiable” reasons. For decades, hundreds of young men, almost all of them Jehovah's Witnesses, were put behind bars each year, usually for 18 months. As inmates, they did much of the same work that Mr. Lee will be doing.

"The difference is that the old objectors did it for 18 months wearing a prisoner's uniform, but we will do it for three years as legalized conscientious objectors," Mr. Lee said. "I am grateful that I am finally given this chance to serve the country without violating my conscience."

A historic 2018 ruling by the Constitutional Court found that imprisoning conscientious objectors was unconstitutional because there were no alternative forms of service, and it ordered the government to create some. In December, Parliament passed legislation that allowed for civilian service in prisons "and other areas of public interest" — though for now, at least, prison work is the only option the government is offering.

Human rights groups were critical, saying that the three-year requirement made South Korea's alternative service the longest in the world.

Conscientious objectors "are confronted with little more than an alternative punishment," Arnold Fang, an East Asia researcher for Amnesty International, said in December. "Confining people to work in a prison — and for almost twice as long as the typical military service — does not respect their right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief."

Still, for Jehovah's Witnesses, alternative service is a hard-won victory.

In the decades after the Korean War, when South Korea was ruled by military dictators, male Jehovah's Witnesses of draft age who refused to serve were dragged into military boot camps and stockades, where they were vilified as "traitors," beaten and in some cases killed, according to reports from a presidential commission in 2008.

One member of the church, Kim Keun-hyeong, 27, said he knew from an early age that he would end up in prison unless he abandoned his beliefs. His older brother, also a Jehovah's Witness, was imprisoned for refusing military service. When Mr. Kim disobeyed his enlistment order, he, too, was put on trial on charges of dodging the draft.

But his case was suspended in 2013, when he joined 27 others to mount the legal challenge that led to the Constitutional Court's ruling.

"I respect the decision of those who join the military," Mr. Kim said. "But I also wanted my decision not to join the military for my religious conviction to be respected, as well."

After the court's ruling, officials and lawmakers weighed various forms of civilian service, like working in nursing homes, fire stations or hospitals. Some argued that if alternative service was not long and rigorous enough, young men would try to evade the draft under the pretext of ethical principles, compromising the country's ability to deter North Korea's 1.1 million-strong military.

In their prison work, conscientious objectors will be exempt from guard and prisoner-escort duty, which involves carrying firearms. But like soldiers, they will live together in barrackslike facilities.

The question of who should be excused from military service has long been a sensitive topic in South Korea.

"It's a sacred duty to defend our country, but that doesn't mean that everyone has to carry a weapon," Noh Woong-rae, a senior lawmaker in the governing party, said this month. He floated the idea that K-pop stars, like members of BTS, should be exempted from the draft.

For decades, top athletes have been excused from military service on the grounds that they enhanced national prestige. K-pop fans say it is unfair that world-class pop stars are denied that privilege.

In a report to Parliament this month, the Military Manpower Administration, which oversees the draft, offered a compromise: It would let top K-pop stars postpone their service so that they could perform for a few more years at the peak of their careers.

Such a revision would be a godsend for the oldest member of BTS, Kim Seok-jin, who turns 28 in December and must enlist within the following year.

But South Korea cannot afford too many exemptions. After decades of low birthrates, it will soon lack enough young men to maintain its conscript military at 620,000 members, defense officials say. (The military accepts female volunteers — about 13,000 are now serving — but there has never been serious discussion of drafting women.)

There is still much hostility in South Korea toward men seen as draft dodgers. Yoo Seung-jun, 43, once one of the most popular K-pop singers, saw his career crash and burn in 2002, after he was accused of evading military service by becoming an American citizen. He has since been barred from entering South Korea.

As for Kim Keun-hyeong, his travails did not end with the Constitutional Court's ruling.

His original case in a lower court was reopened, with prosecutors focusing on whether he was a genuine conscientious objector. Trying to debunk his argument that he had lived according to pacifist biblical teachings, they asked online gaming companies if Mr. Kim had ever played games involving guns and violence.

It was not until last month, eight years after he first disobeyed his draft order, that Mr. Kim was acquitted and recognized as a legitimate conscientious objector.

The ripple effects of his ordeal still linger.

When he got married last year, the couple had to cancel their honeymoon to Malaysia because he had no passport. He had been denied one because he was still on trial.

Mr. Kim must now apply to a government panel that selects conscientious objectors for alternative service.

He and his wife are bracing for years of living apart once his prison job begins.

"We wept together when we discussed how we were going to live separated for three years," said his wife, Kim Seo-young, who is also a Jehovah's Witness. "But we promised each other to travel around the world together when he finally gets free."

Kidnapped by his family at the age of 29



HRWF (19.10.2020) - Kyoung-joon currently works as a baker in Gangneung City, Gangwon Province, and had been living independently from his divorced parents. He was kidnapped by them on a family trip together to forcibly de-convert him from the Shincheonji Church. When he was a minor, he accompanied his parents and his sister to the Presbyterian Onnuri church. In 2011, he was 22 when he decided to join the Shincheonji Church. Here is his account:

1 August 2020: Family kidnapping

“My family planned a summer vacation from 1 to 3 August 2020. This was my first time seeing my family in a while, and so I was very excited. On 1 August, I arrived at a relative’s house in Suwon at around 4pm. I was surprised to see that one of my uncles whom we had not seen in a few years was there as well. My family told me that we would go to a restaurant first and had me get into my uncle's car. My uncle, who is well-built, squeezed into the back seat with me while my sister was in the front seat and my father drove. I was made to sit in the middle of the back seat with my mother on the other side of me.

I later found out that the car we took did not belong to my uncle but was rented to avoid detection.

During our trip, my uncle asked me to call his wife because she wanted to speak to me. However, my uncle then asked me to put him on the phone and, when I did, he hung up and handed it to my sister in the front seat. It was strange and so I asked my sister to return my phone, but she didn't respond. I asked again and my uncle said, "we can't give you back your phone, everyone knows you're attending Shincheonji Church. You have to be educated [take coercive conversion programmes] and first you must sign the written agreement”. With that I realized that I was being kidnapped. I was overwhelmed with feelings of betrayal, embarrassment, and fear.

My father was driving without a GPS in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, and my mother covered my eyes anytime there was a direction sign or when I tried to look around.

For two weeks prior to this incident, I had been going to the hospital for treatment for gastrointestinal issues. On the day of the abduction, I had an upset stomach, which my family knew about. During the drive, I asked my father to stop for a bathroom, but he retorted, "you're asking me to pull over for a bathroom as a trick - just like Shincheonji has been teaching you."

The car stopped in front of an apartment complex near the Ansan Sangrok Church where the head pastor, Yong-sik Jin, holds coercive sessions of de-conversion and re-conversion to the mainline Presbyterian religion.

As we exited the car, my mother and uncle each held onto one of my arms. I tried to run away, but all four of them grabbed me, forcing me into the building.

I was overpowered, but I continued to struggle. As I was being dragged, I shouted to the people nearby to call the police. My family tried to cover my mouth and told the people around me not to report, saying "this child is from Shincheonji." It took about 20 minutes for my family to drag me through the entrance and up the stairs into the studio apartment they had rented. During that time, my father and uncle hit my face repeatedly and I sustained injuries on my arm from being forced up the stairs.

Luckily, someone did report this incident and the police arrived just after 5pm. The police have seen many such cases in the area and so they knew what was happening. They asked me for my age and what was going on, and then separated me from my parents. My family had been threatening to hold me in that apartment for a month, and so I was very scared. I requested to go to the Ansan Local Police Office and be separated from my family. My family also went to the police station."

After the incident

"After arriving at the Ansan Local Police Office at around 5:30pm, I wrote a statement. However, my family still had my phone and were trying to force me into agreeing to the coercive conversion programme. When I refused, my parents presented me with a document to sever familial ties. I told them I didn't have any reason to end our relationship, but my parents continued threatening me, trying to force me to sign the document.

Finally, my family left the police station, cursing me. They blamed me for my mother losing her job, which she had quit so as to oversee the coercive conversion programme. She was working at a private corporation and has now found work again at the Occupational Safety Authority. My father continues to work as an administrator at a hospital.

When leaving the police station, I was afraid of being kidnapped again, and so I asked an acquaintance to pick me up. After that, I moved into an acquaintance's house because my family knew where my previous apartment was.

After this kidnapping attempt, I was so afraid that my family might try to stalk me or abduct me again. It impacted my health issues, as I was so worried that my family would come to the hospital I was visiting for treatment that I didn't go for some time.

Eventually, I finished my treatment at the hospital and got a new job at a bakery. Before the incident, I had lived independently but had kept in touch with my family and would

visit them. However, now, every time I receive a call from my parents, I cannot forget what happened. I still live in fear and worry constantly, but I decided not to sue my family because I could not bear to do so.”

Saving lives by donating plasma: Why are Shincheonji's good deeds ignored?



By Massimo Introvigne & Rosita Šorytė

CESNUR (05.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nICfT0> - Eileen Barker, Europe's most senior scholar of new religions, notes in her entry "New Religious Movements" in the 2020 *SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religions*, that "one does not often see reports of the charitable work in which many of the NRMs engage," even if it is sometimes "outstanding." That this happens, is evidence of the phenomenon social scientists call "gatekeeping." For different reasons, the media filters out news that do not correspond to certain agendas or established stereotypes. New religious movements, derogatorily identified as "cults" are by definition malignant, and cannot do anything good.

There are two ways gatekeeping works in this field. First, charitable deeds performed by new religious movements are ignored, or get much less coverage than their alleged wrongdoings. Second, when their good work is just too visible to be ignored, it is reluctantly reported, but immediately interpreted as motivated by a hidden agenda.

The media often claim that humanitarian activities carried out by new religious movements are "fronts" for public relations, or for converting others under the false pretext of helping. This "paradigm of suspicion" may be criticized on two accounts. First, it is in turn suspicious that critics do not raise these objections when good deeds are performed by the Catholic Church, the Methodists, or other mainline religious organizations. In these cases, it is understood that their good work is done in good faith, out of a sincere desire for a better world, rather than for self-promotion purposes. Only the activities of new religious movements are accused of dissimulating hidden motivations.

A vicious circle is thus created. If new religious movements only spend their time in missionary activities, it is objected that this is typical of “cults,” which devote all their energies to proselytization, while “real” religions help suffering human beings. But, if new religious movements engage in charitable, social, or health activities, it is argued that these are only “fronts” and public relations exercises.

In the case of Shincheonji, one of the largest Korean Christian new religious movements, the “paradigm of suspicion” was constantly used to dismiss and criticize [the activities of Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light \(HWPL\)](#), the humanitarian and peace organization created and led by Shincheonji’s founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee. Although most speakers at international events organized by HWPL, rather than members of Shincheonji, are political and religious leaders with no interest in converting to new religions, opponents maintain that Lee uses HWPL as a proselytization tool, which is demonstrably false. The campaigns HWPL promoted in the field of peace education, cooperating with UN agencies, were non-sectarian and certainly not aimed at proselytization on behalf of Shincheonji, and the same is true for other HWPL campaigns and events.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Shincheonji was accused of negligence in cooperating with the authorities after one of its female members in the South Korean city of Daegu, before being diagnosed with the virus, infected directly or indirectly thousands of co-religionists. This set in motion a chain of events that eventually led to the arrest of Chairman Lee and other Shincheonji leaders. As [we have argued elsewhere](#), the reaction by the authorities has been so disproportionate that the suspicion that COVID-19 was used as a pretext to hit a movement unpopular among both fundamentalist Protestants, an important electoral constituency in South Korea, and the current South Korean political leadership, which is afraid of criticism by Christian churches in general for both its domestic and foreign policy, is difficult to escape.

Late August and September 2020 saw a new and significant development. The plasma of those who have been infected with COVID-19 and have recovered contains naturally formed antibodies and may work as a “natural vaccine,” which would at least lower the risk of death among those hit by the virus. In South Korea, [this possibility has been identified and studied early](#), yet not many donors have been willing to cooperate. On July 12, [media reported](#) that, “out of some 12,000 recovered COVID-19 patients who could donate blood for the cause, just 361 have so far shown interest and only 171 had volunteered.”

In March already, Shincheonji had announced that his members who had contracted the virus and had recovered were ready to become plasma donors. At that time, the offer was ignored. In September, however, when plasma of recovered COVID-19 patients was both in high demand and scarce, the availability of Shincheonji members to donate plasma met with gratitude. As of September 6, [more than 1,600 Shincheonji members](#) who went through the cycle of infection and recovery had donated their plasma.

This generous availability was mentioned by some domestic and international media, [including the BBC](#), but the number of media reports was low when compared to the hundreds of articles that in March had exposed Shincheonji, [quite inaccurately](#), as a cult of plague-spreaders.

Slowly, however, the story became too newsworthy to be ignored. While very few recovered COVID-19 patients in South Korea had volunteered to donate plasma, those from Shincheonji willing to cooperate were in the thousands and growing. Opponents, thus, mobilized the second tool of gatekeeping. While the Shincheonji plasma donation

story was impossible to ignore, critics argued that it was a public relations exercise, and a way to divert attention from the previous alleged non-cooperation with the authorities. It is true that some Korean media changed their attitude after a new wave of COVID-19 cases hit the Sarang Jeil Church in Seoul, a conservative Evangelical church led by Pastor Jun Kwang-hoon. They confronted the attitudes of Sarang Jeil and Shincheonji, and correctly concluded that the latter had been much more cooperative with the health authorities than the former. Other media, however, continued to dismiss Shincheonji's plasma donations as propaganda.

This was grossly unfair, and indicative of the critics' prejudice. As the meager results of previous appeals proved, South Korean citizens (as it happened in other countries) are generally reluctant to donate plasma. Side effects such as fatigue, dehydration, and dizziness may exist. Also, in times of COVID-19 hospitals and health facilities in general are often regarded as dangerous places.

Confronted with this situation, why did so many Shincheonji members who had recovered from COVID-19 volunteer to donate plasma? It is true that we cannot exclude a willingness to publicly state that they are good South Korean citizens, unfairly maligned and depicted as anti-social and sinister by the media and some politicians. But there should be more.

Shincheonji teaches that we live in the times described in the Bible in the Book of Revelation, and will soon enter a glorious Millennium. While God would be able to usher in the Millennium without human help, he prefers to seek our cooperation. Acts of charity and kindness, Shincheonji devotees believe, have cosmic consequences, well beyond the limited mundane aim of improving the image of their religion.

It is for this reason that thousands of them have volunteered for the peace education and other campaigns of HWPL. And it is also for this reason that thousands rush to donate their plasma. One of the negative effects of gatekeeping applied to unpopular millenarian religions is that it leaves out the essential. Those who believe that the Millennium is at hand, and that God asks our cooperation in creating his kingdom, do not need other motivations to perform charitable, humanitarian deeds that benefit society in general, including those who regard the Millennium as a delusion.

Conservative church claims South Korea's government is persecuting them by blaming members for coronavirus spread

The church contends that it is the scapegoat for a virus it had little control over

By **Hollie McKay** | Fox News

Fox News (21.08.2020) - <https://www.foxnews.com/world/south-korea-church-coronavirus-spread> - In the beginning days of the coronavirus pandemic, the South Korean government first pointed fingers at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus for igniting the virus' spread in the country.

Now, members of the conservative church are hitting back, saying not only were they used as a scapegoat for the government's mismanagement, but that they are enduring persecution and public shaming as a result.

"This negative stigma is already deeply set in Korea, and by extension, in Korean immigrant [communities](#) abroad in countries like the United States. For this reason, Shincheonji has been an easy target for people's blame and outrage regarding COVID-19," Michelle Lee, a California-based Shincheonji member, told Fox News. "Members have suffered damage to them mentally, emotionally, professionally, socially, and physically because of this unfair persecution against Shincheonji."

In February – early in the disease's onslaught, which emanated from Wuhan, China – South Korea President Moon Jae-in's government offered something of a stagnant response, which critics have condemned as being both naïve and an attempt to stay in good shape ahead of scheduled April parliamentary elections. Opposition parties decried that a travel ban from China should have been put in place in late January.

As the death toll rose, authorities pointed the finger at the Shincheonji Church – often characterized as a mysterious cult-like sect – claiming that 80% of the cases of the then-1,800 infections all stemmed from the doomsday followers.

However, devotees say that the blame game has only escalated and is an attempt to deflect.

Korean Justice Minister Chu Mi-ae has been accused of targeting Shincheonji for condemning of her prosecutorial policies, and South Korea's vice-health minister, Kim Gang-lip, decried the church's top-brass for a lack of cooperation in passing on contact information of members for tracing and testing purposes.

Yet church members argue that when fingers were pointed in their direction, very few health orders had even been issued. On its official website, Shincheonji [contends](#) that "all worship services are being held online, and gatherings and meetings are suspended entirely until the new coronavirus epidemic is over."

Representatives vow that their headquarters was closed down on February 18 – before a multitude of other institutions – and pre-planned events slated for later that month were all abruptly canceled.

"General social distancing rules were not in place in South Korea at the time of the outbreak. At the time of the outbreak, it was uncertain to the government whether COVID-19 would be any more contagious than MERS, and the president had urged citizens to carry out normal economic lives," Lee vowed. "Even two days after the confirmation of the 31st COVID-19 patient, President Moon held a [celebratory party](#) for the director and cast of the movie 'Parasite.'"

Nonetheless, Shincheonji remains on Seoul's radar. Earlier this month, the church's leader – 88-year-old Lee Man-hee – was [arrested and charged with "murder by wilful negligence"](#) for purportedly giving incomplete and late reports to the government for contact tracing, and an incomplete list of church properties, as well as embezzlement. Lee Man-hee is currently in prison, awaiting the case's prosecution, and it remains undetermined if and when he will go to trial.

The government claims that it requested a comprehensive list of facilities and members, which were allegedly falsified by Lee Man-hee. Authorities have also underscored that since the first member tested positive for the novel pathogen, more than 5,000 cases were connected back to the religious group.

However, Michelle Lee and Shincheonji officials have denied any wrongdoing and insisted that they have cooperated with law enforcement – even in the face of steep privacy concerns and growing public backlash.

"When the government requested a full membership list, the list was provided by the church despite concerns about members' privacy and safety if their affiliation was exposed," Michelle Lee insisted. "However, the contact list was leaked and shared very quickly through online community boards, city bulletin boards, social media, and messaging platforms. This led to cases of discrimination and persecution, including receiving unwanted contact from strangers, unfair dismissal from workplaces, and university students being told to leave public areas like dormitories if they were Shincheonji congregants."

She also noted that it is "difficult to say that all numbers and addresses were current as members' information is self-provided and reported by individual congregants," which "could've led to some members being unreachable."

In addition, a civic organization has accused Lee Man-hee of embezzling church funds, and in July, a further seven high-ranking church officials were indicted in the Suwon district court in late July for violating South Korea's infectious disease control law.

The Shincheonji – which translates to "new heaven and earth" – claims to have around 210,000 members in South Korea and a further 40,000 abroad. Its full name is The Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony. It was founded by Lee Man-hee in 1984, who is touted as the "Promised Pastor."

According to Michelle Lee, the persecution problems, while seemingly exacerbated by the novel outbreak, started several years ago.

"Shincheonji Church is considered to be a cult by many mainline Protestant denominations. This stigma is the result of Protestant denominations' hostility towards Shincheonji due to a large number of people leaving Protestant denominations to attend Shincheonji instead," she said. "This has led to discrimination and persecution in the form of verbal harassment, workplace discrimination, physical assaults, domestic violence, kidnapping, forced isolation, and being forced into mental institutions."

In June, the church purported to alleviate some of the blowbacks by offering to donate the plasma from the 4,000 members who had recovered from coronavirus to assist in the vaccine development. According to the Wall Street Journal, at the time, only 200 survivors in South Korea had volunteered their blood post-recovery.

As it stands, South Korea – a nation of 51 million – has recorded just over 16,300 cases of the pathogen and 300 deaths. And while Shincheonji has borne the brunt of much blame over the past six months, other religious institutions are now also coming under fire.

On Sunday, Sarang Jeil Church – led by Rev. Jun Kwang-hoon, a conservative pastor and staunch anti-Moon activist – was accused of defying the country's self-isolation regulations and impeding contact tracing, leading to an uptick in the infection rate with some 240 cases reported to have stemmed from churchgoers.

Moon has vowed to take "stern and strong measures" against religious groups seen as "threatening public lives," prompting both support and suspicion that the targeting of religious outfits is centered on those who politically oppose their leader and his left-leaning stance.

"Blaming a minority religious group only aggravates the problem and is a clear infringement on individual freedom of religion. It also does not help with prevention or quarantine efforts, as stated by health officials," Michelle Lee added. "Instead of spending

time accusing one another, we should join together as fellow human beings suffering in this crisis and work together to end it.”

South Korea’s U.S. Embassy did not respond to a request for further comment.

Hollie McKay has been a Fox News Digital staff reporter since 2007. She has extensively reported from war zones including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Burma, and Latin America investigates global conflicts, war crimes and terrorism around the world. Follow her on [Twitter](#).

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



Lee Man-hee, the leader of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, bows during a press conference at a facility of the church in Gapyeong, South Korea, on March 2. POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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.

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.

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."

Efforts at redemption have fallen on deaf ears.

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.

David Volodzko is an editor at the technology and information company *Brightwire*.

Can unpopular sect expect justice?

The Korea Times (09.08.2020) – <http://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=293834> - The current investigation into Lee Man-hee, founder of the Shincheonji sect, moved a step forward last week with prosecutors applying to the court for an arrest warrant.

As readers will recall, the issue here goes back to February when a large number of sect members in Daegu caught the coronavirus. At the time, news reports claimed that efforts by health authorities to map the extent of the cluster were held up because of the church's unwillingness to hand over lists of its members.

The church argued that it was fully cooperating but needed time to verify and update its lists. But prosecutors are convinced that Lee conspired with other church officials to conceal the identity of members and provide false information about them and places where they worshipped. This, they say, amounted to deliberate obstruction of government, which is illegal in an emergency like COVID-19.

Given the 97 percent conviction rate in criminal cases in this country, the future doesn't look good for the 89-year-old religious leader. He'll probably end up in jail. If he does, will justice have been served?

Well, that depends what you mean by justice. 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.

But, sticking to the specific charge, here is a follow-up question: would justice be served if prosecutors were to go after others suspected of having similarly obstructed efforts to fight the pandemic? (And, given the overwhelming conviction rate, "going after" means they're guilty). How about the owners of the Itaewon clubs, where the next cluster was? Are they to be jailed because they allowed customers in without recording their identities? What about the patrons? Could they be done for conspiring with the club owners?

I ask these questions for two reasons. One is that I fear this is a witch-hunt. It seems obvious to me that the only reason prosecutors are going after the Shincheonji founder, or that they would go after the Itaewon clubbers, 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. They found that Lee had apparently used 5 billion won of church funds for the construction of his own house. Even if the church can show it paid Lee this money legitimately, or if indeed the church owns the house, the court is almost certain to accept this as embezzlement if the prosecutors say it is. (That was fortunate for the prosecutors because embezzlement really is a crime.)

My second reason for questioning all this is that I wonder what such an application of justice says about our society. We're in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. Health authorities are doing a wonderful job. The Korean government, the home delivery companies and the cooperative citizenry are being benchmarked around the world.

If you tell people overseas now that young Koreans call this place Hell Joseon, they don't get it.

Certainly, on the way, there has been misjudgment. There have been mistakes. But what does it say about this society that we now working up our arguments to criminalize them and throw an 89-year-old man behind bars?

Michael Breen is the author of "The New Koreans" and CEO of Insight Communications

Korean Justice Minister Choo accused of exploiting arrest of Shincheonji leader Lee Man-hee

The embattled justice minister is trying to leverage the arrest of the unpopular religious figure to defend herself from criticism over her alleged interference in the public prosecutors' office

by **Mitchell Blatt**

The National Interest (08.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2QhBSK0> - The arrest of Shincheonji leader Lee Man-hee on July 31 did not create sensation nor celebration in South Korea but more of a collective shrug. Nonetheless, embattled Justice Minister Choo Mi-ae is trying to leverage the arrest of the unpopular figure to defend herself from criticism over her alleged interference in the public prosecutors' office.

The reason for the muted response is because Korea has already gotten coronavirus pretty well under control. With only about thirty or forty new cases a day, the cover-up by the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, at once a national scandal and international news in February, does not seem such a significant event in hindsight. The global spread of coronavirus shows that, one way or another, coronavirus was going to make its way to South Korea. Comparatively speaking, Korea has not been hit too hard.

The ruling Democratic Party is, however, trying to use their case against Shincheonji as a shield against criticism of their prosecutorial policies. Minister Choo has suggested criticism against her prosecutorial reform plan is being pushed by Shincheonji and its sympathizers.

After United Future Party (UFP) Rep. Jang Je-won aggressively questioned Choo in a video that went viral, Choo [fired off a tweet thread suggesting a conspiracy](#). The broadcast video was made three days after the arrest warrant for Lee was issued, she wrote.

"I am now working hard to complete the big task of prosecution reform. However, prosecution reform is facing constant resistance and attack from the conservative media and the UFP. . . . Religious groups joined in there. Whether this is simple coincidence or an organized attack is something we should consider with the public," [she wrote](#) in summation.

Jang responded by [accusing Choo of pushing a made-up conspiracy theory](#). "Minister Choo is cleverly tying the press and the United Future Party to a religious group that is facing widespread criticism," he said.

Jang's line of questioning dealt with the scandal over [Choo's son allegedly receiving special treatment while carrying out his mandatory military service](#). In 2017, when Choo was serving as chairperson of the Democratic Party, her son failed to show up to his base on time, making him AWOL. Choo reportedly contacted the military and had them extend his leave.

Controversies over family members of officials profiting or receiving special treatment are commonplace in Korea. A financial scandal involving relatives of the former justice minister, Cho Kuk, caused Cho's resignation last year. Now some UFP members are calling for Choo Mi-ae to resign.

Lee Jong-eun, an adjunct instructor at American University's School of International Service, said the Choo controversy could develop into a similar scandal if proven conclusively. "But, as of now, it does not seem there is 'smoking gun' evidence, so it seems to have turned into a muddled allegation," he added.

The UFP's displeasure with Choo runs deeper, however. They are fundamentally opposed to her prosecutorial reform plan and her attempts to control the prosecutor general. The Democratic Party has passed a bill to create a new office to investigate allegations against prosecutors and judges, taking power out of the hands of prosecutors. The conservative party, then the Liberty Korea Party, tried to block the bill.

Now, Kwan Gi-won, a legislative aide for a conservative party, says Choo will likely be able to get the new office created since her party has a supermajority in the Assembly: "Choo Mi-ae is a very strong and powerful person."

At the same time, the UFP has sided with current Prosecutor General Yoon Suk-yeol in his feud with Choo. Yoon has been investigating a number of Democratic Party members and allies of the Moon administration, including the aforementioned Cho Kuk, Democratic Party Mayor of Ulsan Song Cheol-ho, comfort women activist and Democratic Rep. Yoon Mee-hyang, and former Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon, also a Democrat, who committed suicide after the claims of sexual harassment against him were made public.

Choo responded in January by [reassigning many of the prosecutors](#), including some of those who investigated Cho Kuk, and she has continued to up the ante all year. In fact, Democratic Party leaders have demanded Yoon resign his position as a prosecutor. The Seoul prosecutor's office has initiated its own [investigation to one of Yoon's top allies](#), fellow prosecutor Han Dong-hoon, who is [accused of attempting to smear a pro-Moon intellectual](#).

Yoon warned in August that Choo's interference in the office of the prosecutor [could lead to "dictatorship."](#) The editorial boards of some of Korea's leading newspapers agree with Yoon and the UFP's perception that Choo's actions constitute illegitimate

interference, including [the Korea Herald](#), [the Korea Times](#), and [the JoongAng Daily](#). The media hasn't exactly reported very favorably on Shincheonji.

But it's not a surprise that Shincheonji is also angry with Choo since the arrest of their leader. They have also [issued a petition calling for Choo to resign](#). Collusion? By that standard, you could say almost anyone who is charged with a crime by the existing government and pleads innocence is in collusion with each other.

That two groups with different agendas would oppose the same justice minister for different reasons sounds like an easy case of coincidence.

Lee Jong-un said the suggestions by Choo of "organized attack" is just an arrow to be wielded in her continuing battle with the opposition. "It's not her main strategy . . . just another distraction."

Mitchell Blatt is a former editorial assistant at the National Interest, Chinese-English translator, and lead author of Panda Guides Hong Kong. He has been published in USA Today, The Daily Beast, The Korea Times, Silkwinds magazine, and Areo Magazine, among other outlets. Follow him on Facebook at [@MitchBlattWriter](#).

Breaking News: Chairman Lee has been arrested

HRWF (31.07.2020) - 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

31 July 2020

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

COVID-19: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea

A Second White Paper

Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

Rosita Šorytė, International Observatory of Human Rights of Refugees

Alessandro Amicarelli, European Federation for Freedom of Belief (president)

Marco Respinti, Journalist

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers, Brussels, Belgium

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

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?

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COVID-19 and the destruction of a religious movement in South Korea: International scholars raise concern in a webinar

July 15, 2020



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.

COVID-19: Twelve NGOs call upon UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion to address the scapegoating of a church in South Korea



By Willy Fautré

EU Political Report (10.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cRbPID> - As UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, solicits submissions from NGOs for the upcoming Report on the Elimination of Religious Intolerance and Discrimination and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), 12 European civil society organisations have co-signed a document denouncing the scapegoating of the Shincheonji Church in South Korea.

On 7 February 2020, a female member of Shincheonji from Daegu, South Korea, was hospitalised after a car accident. While in the hospital, she presented with symptoms of what was identified as a common cold. She insisted that no one mentioned coronavirus as a possibility at that point in time, nor suggested she test for it. Only on 18 February, after her symptoms worsened, was she diagnosed with pneumonia, then tested for COVID-19. She tested positive and was designated as Patient 31. However, before she had been diagnosed, she had attended several functions of Shincheonji. As a result, she became the origin of hundreds of new infections, most of them involving fellow members of Shincheonji.

Consequently, throughout this health crisis, fundamentalist Protestant Churches, media and politicians in South Korea have demonised the Shincheonji Church for allegedly being responsible for the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

A 30-page White Paper published by human rights activists, a lawyer, a journalist and a scholar in religious studies in April 2020 debunked a wide range of myths and biased and false stories about Shincheonji, but that has not stopped the stigmatisation campaign.

The first reason for this scapegoating is religious tensions. With its 250,000 members, Shincheonji has been a fast-growing religious movement at the expense of the mainstream Protestant Churches. Under the guise of fighting against “heresies”, they are desperately trying to recover and maintain their followers.

The second reason is political. The fundamentalist Protestant Churches are politically conservative, aligning closely with the parties opposed to President Moon. The weight of Protestant voters during elections in South Korea is significant. While campaigning for the legislative elections in spring, fundamentalist Protestant groups instrumentalised the COVID-19 crisis by accusing Shincheonji of deliberately spreading the virus in South Korea. Consequently, they asked for the ban of Shincheonji Church and pressed local prosecutors to charge the 89-year-old leader of the Church, Lee Man-hee, with homicide by 'willful negligence.'

Neutral observers of discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief have denounced this hostile campaign of fundamentalist Presbyterian Churches attempting to get rid of a competitor in the free market of religions and beliefs.

In their submission, the civil society coalition refers to an assessment of the situation by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan body whose members are appointed by the President of the United States and the congressional leaders of both political parties.

USCIRF confirmed that: "Shincheonji was suffering harassment from the South Korean government and society. Although some government measures appeared to be driven by legitimate public health concerns, others appeared to exaggerate the church's role in the outbreak."

USCIRF also received reports of individuals encountering discrimination at work and spousal abuse because of their affiliation with the Shincheonji Church.

The submission of the coalition of NGOs to the UN Special Rapporteur documents in detail the stigmatising dynamic triggered by various societal actors, their hidden agenda, and the negative impact this all has on the daily lives of members of the Shincheonji Church.

The Author, Willy Fautré is the Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

The Journal of Cesnur: Special issue about the Shincheonji Church

[Volume 4, Issue 3, May–June 2020](#)

[\(View full issue\)](#)

Shincheonji: An Introduction

Massimo Introvigne

(pp. 3–20) DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.3.1

"Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light": Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies

Rosita Soryté

(pp. 21–34) DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.3.2

Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church

Willy Fautré

(pp. 35–56) DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.3.3

"People Trapped Inside Shincheonji": Broadcasting the Darker Side of Deprogramming

Raffaella Di Marzio

(pp. 57–69) DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.3.4

Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction

Massimo Introvigne, Willy Fautré, Rosita Šorytė, Alessandro Amicarelli, and Marco Respinti

(pp. 70–86) DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.3.5

"Persone intrappolate dentro Shincheonji". La messa in onda del lato più oscuro della deprogrammazione

Raffaella Di Marzio

Supplement to Volume 4, Issue 3, May–June 2020

Deprogramming in South Korea

Excerpt from Willy Fautré' paper "Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church" published in the Journal of Cesnur

HRWF (16.05.2020) - As a member state of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the ICCPR. Therefore, the authorities are bound to enforce the prohibition of any form of coercion intended to force followers of religious denominations to recant their faith, but the reality is different. In South Korea, adults converting to a new religious movement (NRM) are kidnapped by their families and forcefully confined for weeks and even months to be submitted to a de-conversion program carried out by fundamentalist Protestants. This is what scholars of religious studies call "deprogramming."

The phenomenon of coercive change of religion in South Korea is exclusively carried out by fundamentalist Protestant Churches associated with the CCKK. Their victims are primarily, although not exclusively, members of the Shincheonji Church, hereafter referred to as Shincheonji.

Shincheonji is an NRM that stems from Protestantism but has developed its own theology (Introvigne 2019), like several other movements, which gravitate on the fringe of the Protestant family.

Statistics about the extent of this phenomenon are non-existent. The only available numbers are those of known victims who escaped from their confinement and de-conversion program or confirmed their beliefs in Shincheonji after pretending to be de-converted to escape.

Shincheonji has collected their testimonies over the years, but it is very likely that there are many victims of kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of forceful change of religion who have never been identified. The infographic that follows was published by Shincheonji. The numbers represent the victims who could not be de-converted. The total number of victims, which should also include "successfully" de-converted individuals, must be much higher than what is currently known.

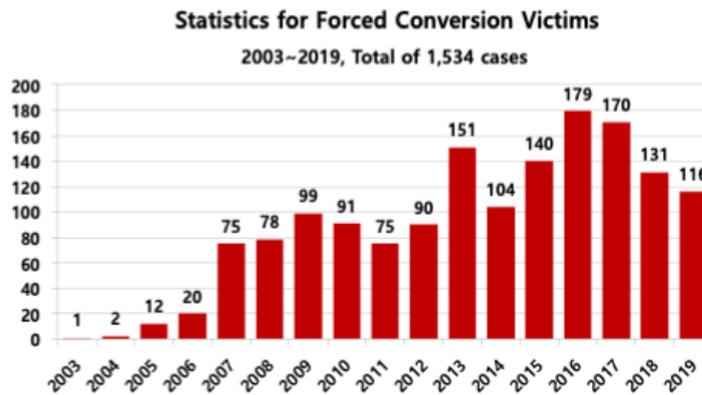


Figure 1: Total number of cases from 2003 until 2019 (September): 1,534 (source: Shincheonji)

According to an analysis of statistics provided by Shincheonji to HRWF, the main victims of this practice are young women in their 20s (77%), while young men of the same age group only account for 23%. The rates of coercive de-conversion are much lower for older people: 10% for thirty-year-olds, 5% if they are in their 40's or 50's and 2% for sixty-year-olds.

The consequences of this practice are dire. These kidnappings and confinements for forced de-conversion have resulted in two deaths, thirteen admittances to psychiatric institutions, and forty-three divorces.

I personally interviewed a number of these victims and their relatives in 2019. A dozen cases were published in March 2020 as part of a 60-page report titled *Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea* (Fautré 2020), published by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF).

HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, nor align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any specific religion or belief system, but instead defends the right of all persons to have the beliefs of their choice, as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.

Willy Fautré

Last Jehovah's Witness in prison as conscientious objector

[JW.ORG](https://bit.ly/35GgrZC) (10.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35GgrZC> - After a struggle spanning nearly seven decades, Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea rejoiced over the happy events of February 28, 2019. On that day the last of their fellow believers imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service was released. Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful that South Korea's judiciary now recognizes an individual's right to conscientiously refuse military service and have the option to accept alternative civilian service.

Nearly a year later, the Supreme Court began clearing its postponed cases on conscientious objection. On February 13, 2020, the Court acquitted 108 of Jehovah's

Witnesses, and on February 27, it acquitted 210 more Witnesses. It came as a surprise, though, that it found one Witness, Jin-seong Bang, guilty of evasion of military service.

Mr. Bang was not yet one of Jehovah's Witnesses when he completed basic military training in 2015 and was assigned to the Social Service Personnel (a form of alternative service). When he began a study of the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses in 2016, he determined that he could not conscientiously continue to serve in the Social Service Personnel, since this work was supervised by the Military Manpower Administration Office. As a result of his conscientious objection, he was found guilty of evading military service by trial and appellate courts. When the Supreme Court finally decided on his case on February 27, it dismissed his appeal and allowed the guilty verdict of the lower courts to stand. Thus, on the same day that the Supreme Court determined that refusal of military service for reasons of conscience was no longer a crime, it reasoned that Mr. Bang's refusal of military service was not based on a deep, firm, and sincere religious resolve as required by its jurisprudence.

On March 10, 2020, Mr. Bang began serving his 18-month sentence in the Seoul Detention Center. He is the only one of Jehovah's Witnesses in prison in South Korea.

Implementation of Alternative Civilian Service

As for future conscientious objectors, the legislature passed the new law on alternative civilian service in December 2019. It should be implemented in the coming months and intends to allow young Christian men who are conscientious objectors the opportunity to perform a service that can contribute to Korean society in a meaningful way. According to international standards on alternative service, it must be "civilian in nature" and not under military control or supervision. The appropriate implementation of the law will be crucial to ensure that conscientious objectors have the opportunity to perform a genuine alternative civilian service.

Furthermore, according to international standards, alternative service should not be punitive. This was highlighted in the decision by the Constitutional Court in 2018 when it stated: "If the duration or severity of alternative service is excessive to the extent that even conscientious objectors find it difficult to perform such service, this would defeat the purpose of alternative service or degrade it to a mere form of punishment."

If the law allows for control or supervision by the military, conscientious objectors who are Jehovah's Witnesses would likely feel compelled to refuse this kind of alternative service. On the other hand, if the alternative service is not under the control and supervision of the military, every individual conscientious objector who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses will decide for himself whether to accept that service.

COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to demonise and stigmatise a religious minority

By Martin Banks

International Policy Digest (08.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2wtRyn6> - The terrible death toll wrought by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has naturally hogged international headlines as of late.

But another facet of the tragedy – the dissemination of fake news – has not gone unnoticed.

The European Union has, in recent days, ratcheted up its efforts to counter disinformation during the still unfolding pandemic.

The European Commission launched a special website where people can fact check information, while the European External Action Service, the EU's foreign policy body, has warned of the "proliferation of significant quantities of news, myths, and disinformation" about coronavirus.

Evidence of such proliferation is not confined to Europe, though, with concerns currently being raised about disinformation being spread on the other side of the world in South Korea about the Shincheonji Church. This religious movement dating back from the 1990s has its roots in Protestantism. It accounts for over 200,000 members, most of them coming from mainline fundamentalist churches which combat it for allegedly being "heretical."

The pandemic, as the world now knows, originated in China but it quickly expanded to South Korea where Shincheonji Church was demonized for allegedly spreading the virus throughout the country.

The motive for this might, at first, appear unclear until you consider that South Korea is on the eve of legislative elections (15 April) and the fear is that scapegoating the Shincheonji Church is an act of blatant political opportunism.

While the South Korean authorities have, generally, been lauded for keeping the death toll caused by the disease to a manageable level (as this article went to press, there were just over 10,000 cases and 174 deaths), the country's record on religious tolerance is rather less commendable.

A 30-page White Paper that reviews the management of the COVID-19 crisis by the South Korean authorities has just been published in several languages by a scholar in religious studies, human rights activists, a lawyer, and a journalist, all from various European countries.

In February, the South Korean media were enraged about the alleged role played by the Shincheonji Church in the acceleration of the spread of COVID-19.

The authors of the White Paper "de-construct" about 20 of what they insist are biased and false stories and, instead, present the facts.

Their report contains a whole list of "debunked myths" about the Shincheonji Church and COVID-19 in South Korea.

Shincheonji was accused of not being concerned about the epidemic and of delaying the closure of its religious services.

The fact is that on 25 January 2020, and again three days later, Shincheonji's leadership issued orders that no Shincheonji members who had recently arrived from China could attend church services.

Another example is that it is claimed that sitting next to each other on the floor during religious services is unhygienic and more conducive to spreading bacteria and viruses.

But, says the report, it is simply not true to suggest that Shincheonji's religious services are uniquely unhygienic because participants sit on the floor rather than on chairs or benches. In fact, this is common in many religions, such as mosques and Buddhist places of worship.

It has also been claimed (wrongly) that Shincheonji teaches its members to reject any medical treatment, which the White Paper denies.

So, why is the Shincheonji Church apparently being scapegoated during a global public health emergency?

Well, one clue is that legislative elections in South Korea are scheduled for 15 April and, as one would expect, politicians are currently embroiled in a competition for voters.

In this context, it is argued that members of the government and ruling coalition have found an easy way to thwart opposition candidates who heavily criticise their management of the health crisis: they scapegoat an unpopular movement and then use the media to strengthen this position.

According to several rights groups, including the respected Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), another factor is at play. Shincheonji has been targeted because it is a fast-growing movement that threatens their membership and many of the false stories and biased news have primarily been created and circulated by fundamentalist Protestant churches that now use them to call for the banning of Shincheonji.

The problem for Shincheonji is that, while those same fundamentalist churches may be regarded as conservative and anti-liberal, they represent a powerful majority in South Korea.

In the meantime, hundreds of Protestant churches across Korea went on holding services on the last Sundays of March in spite of government orders against large public gatherings.

No politician demonised those fundamentalist churches or called for them to be banned. Politically, this makes sense considering that the votes from the Protestant Churches, the majority religion in Korea, are vital for the political parties.

On 6 February 2020, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal government entity, issued a declaration stating: "USCIRF is concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members have been blamed for the spread of #coronavirus. We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak."

International rights organisations are now appealing to the South Korean authorities not to use COVID-19 as an excuse to violate the human rights and religious liberty of hundreds of thousands of believers.

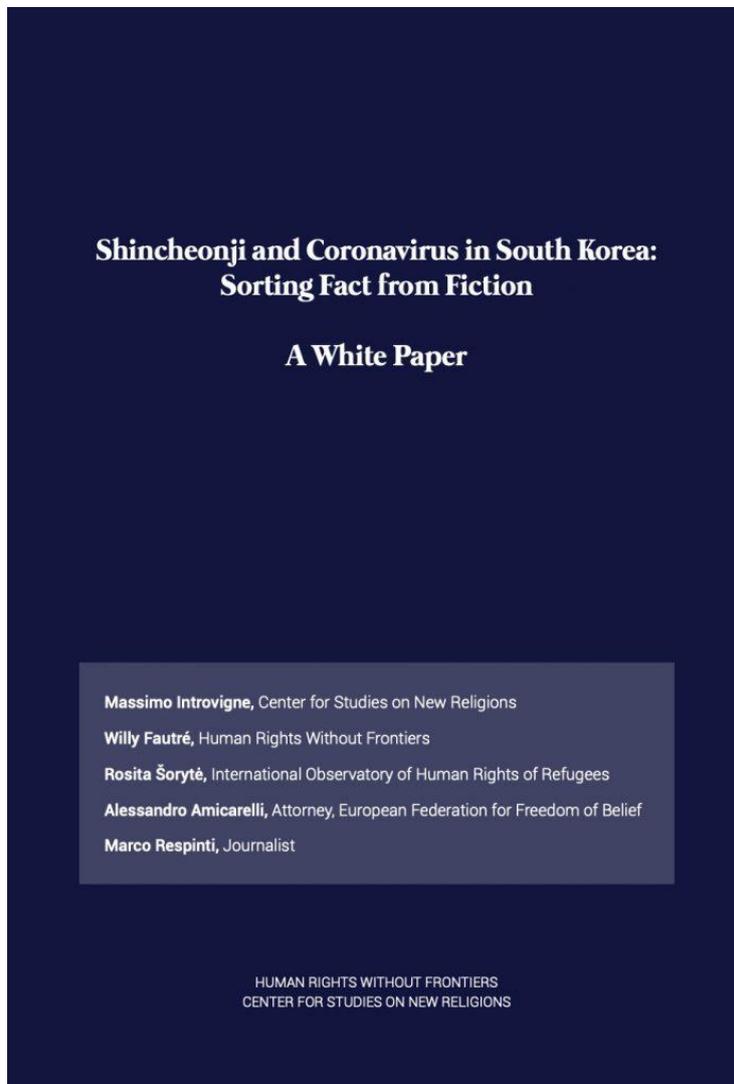
Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, declared "COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to demonise and stigmatise a religious minority and its members."

COVID-19 and the Shincheonji Church in South Korea: A White Paper reveals the truth

"USCIRF is concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members have been blamed for the spread of #coronavirus"

By Willy Fautré

EU Political Report (27.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3aAfgEj> - A 30-page [White Paper](#) that reviews the management of the COVID-19 crisis by the South Korean authorities has just been published in several languages by [a scholar in religious studies](#), human rights activists, a lawyer and a journalist, all from various European countries.



[Read the white paper here](#)

In February 2020, the media in South Korea were in an uproar about the alleged role played by the Shincheonji Church in the acceleration of the spread of COVID-19.

This White Paper analyses the national and international media reports as well as the political and religious context that has fuelled social panic about this situation. Most of the fake news circulated around South Korea were simply copied and pasted by foreign media without any cross-checking, and so this allegation became the dominant narrative.

The authors of the White Paper de-construct about 20 of these biased and false stories and present the facts. Here are some debunked myths about the Shincheonji Church and COVID-19 in South Korea:

Fiction: Shincheonji is a heretical movement and should be combatted.

Fact: The authors of the White Paper do not take any position on such interreligious conflicts. They do not consider the merits of religions or beliefs or defend them, nor align themselves with any specific religion, theology or worldview. They do not take sides in competitions between various Protestant theologies and other interpretations of the Bible or between the various theologies inside Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions.

Fiction: Shincheonji has been accused of teaching its members to reject any medical treatment.

Fact: Like millions of other Christians, Shincheonji believes that human beings all experience sickness, suffering and death because of the original sin. Shincheonji teaches that while praying can be useful, it does not replace medical treatment and it is recommended to seek the help of physicians and hospitals. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, this church's message to its members has been to follow the instructions of health officials and political authorities.

Fiction: Sitting next to each other on the floor during religious services is unhygienic and more conducive to spreading bacteria and viruses.

Fact: It is not true that Shincheonji's religious services are uniquely unhygienic because participants sit on the floor rather than on chairs or benches; in fact, this is common in many religions, such as mosques and Buddhist places of worship. Since the official ban on public assemblies and meetings, including religious services, Shincheonji has suspended all of its services.

Fiction: The woman who was identified as Patient 31 in South Korea with COVID-19 is a member of the Shincheonji congregation in Daegu. She has been accused of refusing to be tested twice because of her religious beliefs and, consequently, infecting many others within her church and the general public. She was also alleged to have assaulted a nurse.

Fact: On 7 February 2020, the person in question was admitted to Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital after a minor car accident. There, she developed a cold that she attributes to an open window at the hospital. She insists that no one mentioned coronavirus as a possible concern to her, nor suggested a test. It was only during the following week, after her symptoms worsened and she was diagnosed with pneumonia, that she was tested for COVID-19. The allegation that when she was quarantined she started screaming and assaulted the nurse in charge in the hospital has been denied by both her and the nurse.

Why is the Shincheonji Church being scapegoated during this public health emergency?

Legislative elections in South Korea are scheduled for 15 April 2020, and so politicians are currently embroiled in a competition for voters. Members of the government and the ruling coalition have found an easy way to thwart opposition candidates who are

criticising their mismanagement of the health crisis: they scapegoat an unpopular movement and then use the media to strengthen this position.

Another factor is at play. Many fictitious stories and biased news have primarily been created and circulated by fundamentalist Protestant Churches that now use them to call for the banning of Shincheonji. For years, they have been vainly fighting against Shincheonji under a crusade against theological heresies, but in reality, Shincheonji is targeted because it is a fast-growing movement that threatens their membership. Those fundamentalist churches are both conservative and anti-liberal and represent a powerful majority in South Korea on the eve of the legislative elections. They organise rallies and occasionally resort to violence against groups they label as "cults," LGBTQI people, or Muslim refugees seeking asylum in South Korea. They consider Islam to be a demonic religion that is inherently inclined to terrorism.

On 6 February 2020, the U.S Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal government entity, issued a [declaration](#) stating: "USCIRF is concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members have been blamed for the spread of #coronavirus. We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak."

The authors of the White Paper second this conclusion and appeal to the South Korean authorities. COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to violate the human rights and religious liberty of hundreds of thousands of believers.

The Author, Willy Fautré, is the director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

The Coronavirus and the Shincheonji Church: A White Paper

EU Reporter (24.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2WPcBv7> - ***The whole world is currently facing a coronavirus pandemic that originated in China and quickly expanded to South Korea where a church was demonized for allegedly spreading the virus throughout the country, writes Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.***

In the international media cacophony that has been raging for a couple of months on this issue, there is a lot of fiction and fake news about it. A 30-page [White Paper](#) has just been published in five languages by a prominent scholar in religious studies, human rights activists, a reporter and a lawyer who have researched this phenomenon in South Korea. Distinguishing fact from fiction was their sole objective. After a thorough investigation, they have de-constructed about 20 biased and false stories, among many others, to which they have opposed facts. Here are some of these debunked fake news circulated in South Korea:

Fiction: The so-called Patient 31 identified as a Shincheonji member from Daegu has been accused of refusing to be tested twice because of her religious beliefs, of attacking a nurse and of hereby infecting many other coreligionists.

Fact: On 7 February, she was admitted to Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital for a minor car accident and developed a cold that, she says, was attributed to an open window in the hospital. She insists that nobody mentioned coronavirus as a possibility to her, nor suggested a test. Only the following week, after her symptoms worsened, she was diagnosed with pneumonia, and then tested for COVID-19. That, when quarantined,

she started screaming and assaulted the nurse in charge in the hospital, was reported by some news but denied by both her and the nurse.

Fiction: Shincheonji has been accused of teaching its members to rely on the sole protection of God and to reject any medical treatment.

Fact: Shincheonji does not teach its members that they are immune from sickness and should reject medical treatment when it is needed. On the contrary, its message to its members has been to follow the instructions of health officials and political authorities in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. It is also not true that Shincheonji's religious services are uniquely unhygienic because participants sit on the floor rather than on chairs or benches; in fact, this is common in many religions, such as Buddhism or Islam.

Fiction: Shincheonji was accused of not being concerned about the epidemic and of delaying the closure of its religious services.

Fact: On 25 January 2020, and again on 28 January, Shincheonji's leadership issued orders that no Shincheonji members who had recently arrived from China could attend church services. Moreover, the same day that the patient was tested positive, Shincheonji suspended all activities in its churches and mission centers, first in Daegu and within a few hours throughout South Korea.

Fiction: Shincheonji was accused of dragging its feet when the authorities asked for the list of all their church members. It was also reproached that it delayed the compilation and submission of this list, and that it was intentionally incomplete.

Fact: There is no such evidence that Shincheonji deliberately tried to hamper the authorities' efforts. Shincheonji has more than 120,000 members and so it took time to collect such information. Shincheonji complied as quickly as it could. The Catholic Church or Protestant Churches might have been unable to provide such information or might have refused on privacy grounds. Unfortunately, after Shincheonji submitted this list, the identities of a number of its members were leaked to the public. This had catastrophic consequences for many of them, such as public stigmatisation and job loss.

The question is: Why is there an anti-Shincheonji campaign in South Korea and who is behind it?

The fictitious stories and biased news have primarily been created and circulated by fundamentalist Protestant Churches that use them to call for the banning of Shincheonji. For years, they have been vainly fighting against Shincheonji under their crusade against theological heresies, but in reality, Shincheonji is targeted because it is a fast growing movement that threatens their membership. Those fundamentalist churches are conservative and anti-liberal, and represent a powerful majority in South Korea. They organise rallies and occasionally resort to violence against groups they label as "cults," LGBTQI people, and Muslim refugees seeking asylum in Korea. They consider Islam to be a demonic religion that is inherently inclined to terrorism.

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The authors of the White Paper second this conclusion and appeal to the South Korean authorities. COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to violate the human rights and religious liberty of hundreds of thousands of believers.

Willy Fautré is director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

[Read the white paper here.](#)

CESNUR and Human Rights Without Frontiers release a White Paper on Shincheonji and Coronavirus



" We are scholars, human rights activists, reporters, and lawyers, all with a substantial experience in the field of new called "cults" by their opponents). Some of us have studied the Korean Christian new religious movement known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji).

We are concerned with the vast amount of inaccurate information circulating about Shincheonji and its involvement in the coronavirus crisis in South Korea. We have interviewed members of Shincheonji and Korean scholars, and examined documents from

both the South Korean government and Shincheonji. We have prepared this white paper to help international organizations, the media and other concerned parties to better understand the situation. None of us is a member of Shincheonji, nor do we adhere to its theology. But theological criticism should not be confused with discrimination or violation of human rights.

Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

Rosita Šorytė, International Observatory of Human Rights of Refugees

Alessandro Amicarelli, attorney, European Federation for Freedom of Belief

Marco Respinti, journalist

South Korea: Was the Shincheonji Church really responsible for the spread of COVID-19? CESNUR and Human Rights Without Frontiers publish a study

Brussels, 17.03.2020 (CESNUR/ HRWF) - With a virtual press conference (due to the restrictions to public events in Belgium), CESNUR, the Center for Studies in New Religions directed by Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne, and Human Rights Without Frontiers, the Belgian NGO led by Willy Fautré, presented [a white paper on Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction](#). The study is signed by

Introvigne,

Fautré,

London-based human rights lawyer Alessandro Amicarelli,

Italian journalist Marco Respinti,

and former Lithuanian diplomat and religious liberty activist Rosita Šorytė.

"It was a new experience, [explained Introvigne](#), due to the virus we had to interview members of Shincheonji and scholars of Korean new religions via Skype. Personally, I was the only Western scholar who had published about Shincheonji and felt a responsibility to correct inaccurate information that spread from one media to the next. Shincheonji's theology is certainly distinctive, as it believes that some of the events described in the Bible's Book of Revelation already happened in South Korea and that its founder, Chairman Man Hee Lee, is the 'promised pastor' who will guide humanity into the Millennium. However, it is *not* distinctive in its theology of the Millennium, a thousand-year kingdom without illness or death, an idea shared by millions of conservative Protestants. And it teaches that, since we are not yet in the Millennium, hospitals, doctors, and medicine are needed. Some members of Shincheonji work in hospital themselves, and it is totally false that Shincheonji's devotees regard themselves as invulnerable to sickness or refuse modern medicine or medical tests when needed."

[Šorytė](#) and [Fautré](#) stated that Protestant fundamentalism is strong and politically active in South Korea, and very much disturbed by the growth of Shincheonji, a movement they regard as "heretic" and that grows mostly by converting Korean Protestants. "Well before the coronavirus, Šorytė explained, they have tried to have Shincheonji banned in South Korea." "And they have taken the law into their own hands, added Fautré. Parents have kidnapped and detained their adult sons and daughters, and fundamentalist pastors have tried to 'deprogram' them and 'de-convert' them from Shincheonji. The practice attracted international condemnation when, in 2018, a female Shincheonji member was killed by her father when she tried to escape the deprogramming." Fautré also introduced [a book he just published](#) on the practice of forced conversion in South Korea.

[Amicarelli explained](#) that what is certain about Shincheonji and the virus is that Patient 31, a female Shincheonji member from Daegu, was hospitalized after a minor car accident on February 7, diagnosed with a common cold, and sent to her normal life, where she attended several Shincheonji services and set in motion a chain of events leading to thousands of her church's members being infected. Only on February 18, as her symptoms got worse, she was hospitalized again and tested positive to the virus. "Patient 31, Amicarelli said, claims that nobody told her about a possible virus infection before February 18, and that the claim by the hospital's doctors, who understandably try to cover themselves, that she was offered the test twice before and refused, is false. The

doctors could have forcibly quarantined her before February 18, but didn't. At any rate, in hours after it learned about Patient 31, Shincheonji closed all its churches in the country."

The White Paper also goes into details about the lists of more than 200,000 members of Shincheonji that the government requested from Shincheonji and that were handled within six days. It quotes the statement by Korean deputy minister of Health, Kim Kang-lip, that there is "no evidence that Shincheonji supplied incomplete or altered lists," although they did include some mistakes, as it is normal in such huge compilations.

"It is also true, Fautré stated, that some members tried to hide their affiliation with Shincheonji, although the movement's instructions were to cooperate with the authorities. But we should consider that in South Korea admitting that you are a member of Shincheonji may get you beaten or fired from your job."

"Did Shincheonji make mistakes? Introvigne concluded. Yes, and Chairman Lee admitted them publicly. Shincheonji may have been slow to realize the magnitude of the problem, that threatened its very existence as well as Korean public health. But these mistakes do not amount to criminal negligence, and scapegoating an unpopular movement for an epidemic is something we have already seen in history.

Fundamentalist Christians hope that the virus may do what they failed to achieve for decades, put a halt to Shincheonji's growth that happens at their expenses."

The authors noted that the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) expressed yesterday similar concerns about the scapegoating of Shincheonji.

Another cluster from church

By Yonhap

The Korea Herald (16.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bfw2kN> - Another cluster transmission of the new coronavirus has infected 40 followers of a protestant church in Seongnam, just south of Seoul, municipal government said Monday, raising an alarm bell on the steady spread of cluster infections in the capital area.

The city government of Seongnam said 40 members of Grace River Church, including the pastor and his wife, have tested positive for COVID-19 after attending a Sunday service about a week ago.

Six other people who had come into contact with the infected church members have also been confirmed as coronavirus patients, it noted.

The Seongnam church became the second-largest cluster of infections in the capital area after a Seoul insurance call center, which has so far reported 124 infections.

According to Seongnam officials, coronavirus infections of the church's pastor, wife and other members who attended the same service on March 8 have been confirmed over the past week.

The city government made the announcement after testing all of the church's 135 followers, including about 90 who attended the March 8 service.

The Seongnam church case came after several cluster infections have been recently reported across the Seoul metropolitan area amid a steep decline in the number of new COVID-19 cases in South Korea, as well as in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province at the center of the nation's coronavirus outbreak.

South Korea on Monday reported 74 new cases of the coronavirus to total 8,236, marking the second consecutive day the number of new cases has fallen below 100.

Authorities, however, are still on high alert over new clusters of infections, including at a call center in Seoul's Guro district and the country's government complex in the administrative city of Sejong.

A total of 124 cases in Seoul, Incheon and Gyeonggi Province have been linked to the Guro call center, while the oceans ministry based in the central city of Sejong, around 130 kilometers south of Seoul, has reported 27 confirmed cases.

According to Seoul's metropolitan government, a cluster infection originating from a church and an internet cafe in Dongdaemun Ward has also infected 24 people.

The authorities have urged local churches and other religious organizations to refrain from holding physical worship services, but some of them have failed to heed the request.

Seoul has so far reported a little over 250 confirmed cases, while Gyeonggi Province's coronavirus patients have topped 230.

Being called a cult is one thing, being blamed for an epidemic is quite another

How one mysterious church became a lightning rod for South Koreans' anger over the coronavirus outbreak

By Raphael Rashid

The New York Times (09.03.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/3b5IenM> — The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in South Korea [neared 7,400 on Monday morning](#). As many of them have been traced back to the mysterious Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the organization has become a lightning rod for the public's wrath and a ready outlet for longstanding prejudice.

The outbreak has centered on Daegu, a city of about 2.5 million in the country's southeast, after a 61-year-old Shincheonji congregant — known as Patient No. 31 — is believed to have [infected](#) many [other worshipers during services](#). The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that as of Saturday, [63.5 percent of all confirmed cases](#) in the country were "related to Shincheonji."

The government, after a sluggish and naïve initial response — and President Moon Jae-in's ill-advised comment in mid-February that Covid-19 would "[disappear before long](#)" — is now going full throttle trying to contain the epidemic: Parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 15.

The authorities have begun a vast, fast program to test potential Covid-19 patients. It is open to all ([including undocumented immigrants](#)) and free of charge for anyone who displays telltale symptoms or has a doctor's referral. Special [drive-through clinics](#) have been set up. More than 196,000 people had been tested as of Monday morning.

But anger is still running high — South Korea has the second-largest number of confirmed Covid-19 cases of any country, after China — and Shincheonji, which has become so closely associated with the outbreak, is taking much of the blame.

Some of [Shincheonji's practices](#) — secrecy, the banning of health masks, praying in close proximity — are said to have helped spread the disease among congregants. The church's leaders have been accused of deliberately withholding information about its membership, stymying the health authorities' efforts to trace and test every person who might have come into contact with someone infected with the virus. Shincheonji's founder could [face murder charges](#).

The church has [refuted](#) all [accusations](#). In a "[letter of appeal](#)" posted on its website on March 4, it also claims that "some 4,000 cases of injustice against Shincheonji congregants" had been reported since the beginning of the outbreak. Some members were fired by their employers for belonging to Shincheonji, it alleges; others were abused by their spouses. The church's website maintains a page under the header "[Covid-19/Fact-checker](#)."

[The Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony](#) — as its full name goes — was founded in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, now 88, whom it presents as the "[Promised Pastor](#)" sent by Jesus and a man uniquely capable of deciphering the Bible's Book of Revelation. Shincheonji claims that it has [more than 245,000 followers](#).

About 27 percent of South Koreans identified as Christian in [the 2015 national census](#). The country counts dozens of Protestant megachurches, including [some of the largest in the world](#); in and around Seoul alone, there are [15 with over 10,000 members each](#). Last year, [more than 28,000 missionaries from South Korea went on missions to 171 countries](#).

Mainstream Christian groups, many of which are Protestant, reject Mr. Lee's teachings and [call Shincheonji a cult](#). The Presbyterian Church of Korea claims that Mr. Lee's views — including, for example, that Jesus is not God incarnated — are "[heretical](#)" and "[anti-Christian](#)."

But being called a cult is one thing, and being blamed for starting an epidemic is quite another. Yet some members of the public, the media and the political class have, in effect, equated the two charges, out of fear, confusion or political expediency.

With no clear front-runner to take over after Mr. Moon, the president, is set to leave office in [May 2022](#), a raft of contenders are hustling to establish their credentials for his position or a top job in the future. With all the seats in the National Assembly in contest next month, the election is also something of a gauge for that other big race.

On Feb. 25, Lee Jae-myung, the governor of Gyeonggi Province and a member of the ruling Democratic Party, made a show of going to Shincheonji's headquarters [along with 40 public servants](#), ostensibly to retrieve, and forcibly if necessary, the list of the church's members. "[This is a state of war](#)," the governor is reported to have said.

Within days, Minister of Justice Choo Mi-ae, an ally of the president, [instructed prosecutors to investigate Shincheonji](#) if it obstructed or refused to cooperate with the

authorities. This, even though prosecutors in Daegu have said that they needed more time to decide [if a search warrant was in order](#).

Then, it was the mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, who called on prosecutors to press charges against Shincheonji's leadership, for "[murder through willful negligence](#)." Mr. Park briefly ran for the presidency in 2017, and this gambit seemed designed to project authority and attract media attention.

Never mind, apparently, that Kim Kang-lip, the vice minister of health, has publicly stated that Shincheonji has been [cooperating and providing](#) the data requested of it. Mr. Kim has also warned that taking forceful measures against the church could scare its members into hiding and complicate efforts to contain the outbreak.

People are anxious, understandably. Some coronavirus patients [are said to have died at home](#) after being turned away from hospitals that had [run out of beds for patients](#). But then some hospitals have also reported [turning away people displaying symptoms of Covid-19](#) if they had not recently traveled to China — or because they were not members of Shincheonji. This, too, singles out and stigmatizes the church, breeding resentment against it.

In a survey released on March 2 by the local pollster Realmeter, [more than 86 percent of respondents said they wanted Shincheonji to be searched](#) so that the authorities could check its membership. [A petition](#) calling on Shincheonji to be dissolved — which was uploaded to the president's official website — has received more than 1.25 million signatures.

Then again, there is also a [petition calling for Mr. Moon's impeachment](#), and it had garnered the support of more than 1.4 million people by March 5, when the drive ended. (The country's total population is close to 52 million.)

Opposition parties have criticized Mr. Moon's administration for its handling of the epidemic, arguing that it should have blocked all arrivals from China [as early as late January](#), well before the cluster of cases linked to Shincheonji broke out in mid-February.

Of course, none of this absolves Shincheonji of potential wrongdoing. Shincheonji is secretive, and its leaders sometimes are deliberately provocative: Mr. Lee initially said that the epidemic resulted from "[the evil who got jealous of Shincheonji's rapid growth](#)" — before calling it "[a great calamity](#)" at a news conference at one of the church's buildings near Seoul last week.

Outside that building, a woman holding up placards denouncing the church's "pseudo-religion" said she was searching for her daughter, a Shincheonji member, whom she had not seen for years. This mother is hardly the first person to accuse the church of indoctrinating a relative, or of forcing members to break off ties with their families.

But even if the worst of these claims is true, Shincheonji also has been, quite simply, unlucky to catch the coronavirus in its own way. And now it is paying a heavy price for public prejudice and political opportunism.

Raphael Rashid ([@koryodynasty](#)) is a journalist based in Seoul.

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Coronavirus: US International Commission on Religious Freedom denounces scapegoating of Shincheonji by the South Korean government

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..."

Coronavirus and Shincheonji Church: What is true and what is fake news?

MEPs to debate current outbreak of Coronavirus this Thursday and EU reaction

HRWF (05.03.2020) – This Thursday morning 5 March, Environment and Public Health Committee MEPs will discuss the current Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak with the European Commission. Recently, the CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions) sent a letter to:

H.E. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights

H.E. Ambassador Sam Brownback, US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

to share with them true facts and fake news about the Shincheonji Church and the Coronavirus.

HRWF thinks that this letter, which was endorsed by a dozen NGOs, could be useful for all MEPs to learn more and better about this religious movement that was investigated by Dr Massimo Introvigne, a, Italian sociologist of religions and managing director of the CESNUR.

Shincheonji Church and Coronavirus

"Shincheonji is a South Korean Christian new religious movement, founded by a Korean preacher called Lee Man Hee. Chairman Lee, as its members call him, is not regarded as God nor as the second coming of Jesus, but as the promised pastor who will lead humanity into the kingdom of peace that many Christians call the Millennium. Shincheonji has experienced a rapid growth in the last decades, and now has more than 200,000 members.

Arch-conservative and fundamentalist Protestantism, marginal in other countries, is the largest segment of Protestant Christianity in South Korea and a powerful voting bloc. It has promoted virulent campaigns against minorities it has labeled as “cults,” as well as against Roman Catholics, homosexuals, and Muslim immigrants and refugees. Shincheonji has been particularly targeted, for the good reason that its growth has largely happened by converting members of conservative and fundamentalist Protestant churches.

Several thousand Shincheonji members have been kidnapped by or on behalf of their parents and detained in order to compel them to renounce their faith through deprogramming. After, on January 9, 2018, a Shincheonji member, Ms. Gu Ji-in, was strangled while she tried to escape deprogramming and died, more than 120,000 Koreans took to the street, calling for an halt to the practice. The protests were mentioned in the 2019 U.S. State Department Report on Religious Freedom, including violations of religious freedom in the year 2018. However, deprogramming continues, and the opponents have also succeeded in creating a demonized image of Shincheonji in some South Korean media.

As a result of these campaigns, most members of Shincheonji in South Korea do not disclose their membership in Shincheonji in their workplaces and schools, and certain activities of Shincheonji were advertised by using alternative names. This led to accusations of dissimulation, and more recently Shincheonji has switched to “open evangelism,” disclosing its name when organizing religious and other events. On the other hand, members of Shincheonji when known as such have been discriminated in various ways and some have lost their jobs.

Patient 31 in the coronavirus crisis in South Korea is a female member of Shincheonji from Daegu. She was not aware of her condition and was diagnosed as positive to the virus only when hospitalized after a car accident. Meanwhile, she had attended several Shincheonji events, which led to spreading the virus to co-religionists, who now account for a significant percentage of those infected in South Korea. Coronavirus had spread to South Korea before Patient 31, and Daegu had just welcomed 1,000 Chinese students in school trip, notwithstanding widespread appeals by the medical community to prevent travelers from China from entering the country.

After Patient 31’s condition became known, Shincheonji halted its religious gatherings all over the country, and supplied to the authorities the list of all its more than 200,000 members in South Korea. It also tested all its members at its own expenses. Some authorities have complained that lists were not complete, and some misunderstandings occurred. Foreign members were not included, and originally Shincheonji supplied what was requested, i.e. a list of its *members*, not including persons, called by them “students,” who have expressed an initial interest in Shincheonji and visit its centers, but are not members. When the authorities requested the lists of students too, they were supplied.

All this happened in a chaotic climate characterized by widespread panic, and it is well possible that mistakes happened. However, some Korean politicians scapegoated Shincheonji for the virus epidemic, perhaps to dodge accusations against their own mishandling of the crisis. South Korea will have general elections on April 15, and blaming Shincheonji is a convenient way both to avoid a wider debate on how the authorities handled the epidemic and to court the bloc vote of fundamentalist Protestants, for whom combating Shincheonji is high on the agenda.

Fundamentalist Protestants are also spreading fake news about Shincheonji and the virus. They include claims that infected Shincheonji members were told not to report to the hospitals (the opposite is true), that the church believes that its members cannot

really be infected as they are protected by God (in fact, this has rather been claimed by some of the very fundamentalist churches that attack Shincheonji), that devotees regard infection as something good as the suffering can be offered to the Lord (a position found in some forms of old Catholic mysticism, but totally foreign to Shincheonji's Protestant background), and even that infected Shincheonji members go around and try to infect others. These are all fake news, and the latter is an old claim against minorities in times of epidemics often used against the Jews, but spreading them is dangerous and irresponsible and may lead to violence.

In Daegu, government workers who were distributing masks were beaten, after a SMS chain told the population that they were Shincheonji members trying to infect others. In Ulsan, on February 26, a Shincheonji female member died after "falling" from a window on the 7th floor of the building where she lived. The incident occurred where her husband, who had a history of domestic violence, was attacking her and trying to compel her to leave Shincheonji. The police is investigating possible foul play.

The lists of Shincheonji members supplied to the authorities have been partially leaked, and Shincheonji devotees have been publicly insulted and beaten, and some have been fired from their jobs.

Rather than apologizing for their responsibilities in all this, fundamentalists call for the dissolution of Shincheonji and the criminal prosecution of its leaders, with the (pre-electoral) support of some politicians.

The hysteria is growing every day, further violence is easy to predict, and we believe that the only way of stopping it is internationalizing the crisis. We call on the United Nations, the United States, and all friends of religious liberty internationally to ask that the South Korean government, while continuing its efforts to contain the coronavirus crisis, takes appropriate measure to prevent intolerance, discrimination, and violence against members of Shincheonji."

Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist of religions, is managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), and the author of some 70 books on religious pluralism and new religious movements. In 2011, he served as the OSCE Representative for combating racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance. From 2012 to 2015, he was the chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty created by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Intolerance against the 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>

Seoul has a legal obligation to put an end to coercive change of religion

HRWF (10.02.2020) - The Republic of Korea has committed to abide by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which says in article 18.2: "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

Consequently, the South Korean authorities are legally bound to prohibit any type of coercion exerted by a group or an individual forcing converts to a new religious movement to recant their faith. They are bound to prosecute anyone who is:

- violating the right for an individual to have or not to have a religion or beliefs, to change and retain the religion or beliefs of his/her choice;
- using hate speech and instigating hatred towards a religious or belief community and its members;
- using illegal means to forcefully bring back converts to their previous religion or beliefs;
- or inducing others to kidnap and confine a family member for the purpose of coercively de-converting him/her.

The authorities must also ensure that there are appropriate remedies available and accessible for victims of such cases.

However, for two decades now political and judicial authorities in South Korea have turned a blind eye to forced change of religion operations masterminded almost exclusively by Presbyterian Churches.¹ The purpose of these Church-backed programs is to combat what they label 'heresies' and 'heretics,' by any means, including illegal ones, and at any cost. Under cover of this doctrinal conflict, a theological cleansing campaign has been gaining momentum since the beginning of this century.

How did Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) become involved with the issue of forced change of religion in South Korea?

HRWF became involved in South Korea's issue of forced change of religion in 2018 when it received a call for assistance. Someone in Seoul had discovered HRWF's report "[Japan: Abduction and deprivation of freedom for the purpose of de-conversion](#)" which was published in the early 2010's. This report described a similar phenomenon of coercive de-conversions that had affected thousands of members of the Japanese

¹ The Presbyterian Church comprises several denominations, such as Hap-dong, Tong-hap and Kosin. This fragmentation is the result of several schisms. The Presbyterian Church in Korea (Hap-dong) is an Evangelical Presbyterian denomination, which is the biggest Christian church in the country.

The pastors, evangelists and missionaries active in the "Korea Christian Cult Counselling Association" are mainly from the conservative Hap-dong and Kosin Presbyterian Churches.

See cases in our database of news:

<https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SouthKorea2019.pdf>

<https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/South-Korea-2020.pdf>

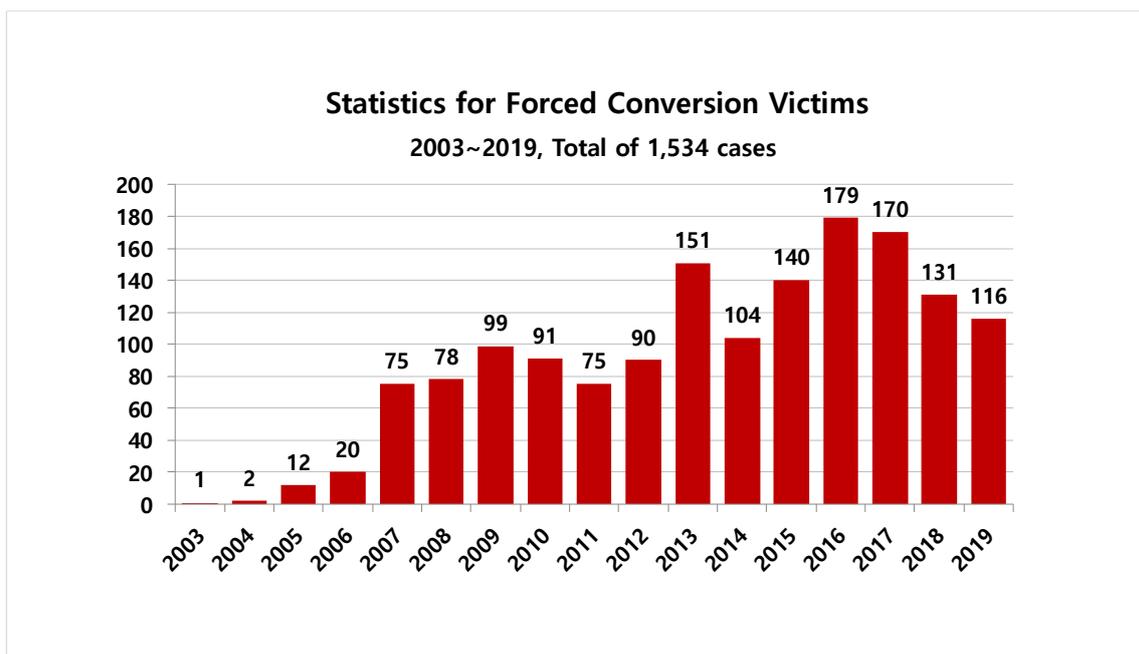
Unification Church (UC) over the course of 40 years. This is what scholars in religious studies labeled 'deprogramming.'

Through intensive advocacy efforts, HRWF was the main contributor to the eradication of this evil practice despite the passivity of Japan's legislative, executive and judicial authorities, and the silence of the Japanese media and international human rights organizations.

In 2019, Willy Fautré, director of HRWF, traveled twice to South Korea to meet with about 15 former Presbyterian Protestants who had converted to the new Bible-based religious movement of the Shincheonji Church.

Family kidnappings and coercive de-conversion in prison-like conditions

Statistics about the extent of this phenomenon in South Korea are non-existent. The only available numbers are those of known victims who escaped from their confinement and de-conversion program or confirmed their beliefs in Shincheonji after pretending to be de-converted to escape. The Shincheonji Church has collected their testimonies over the years, but it is safe to say that there are likely a large number of victims who have never been identified. The infographics that follow were published by the Shincheonji Church and provide some clarity as to the extent of the phenomenon.



Total number of cases from 2003 until 2019 (September): 1,534

2003 (1), **2004** (2), **2005** (12), **2006** (20), **2007** (75), **2008** (78), **2009** (99), **2010** (91), **2011** (75), **2012** (90), **2013** (151), **2014** (104), **2015** (140), **2016** (179), **2017** (170), **2018** (131), **2019** (116).

It is evident that the pattern of family kidnapping and confinement for the purpose of coercive de-conversion is now well established.

In most cases, Presbyterian parents² discover that their adult son or daughter, still living under their roof, has changed religion and joined the Shincheonji Church. The theology of the Shincheonji Church has been deemed heretical or cult-like by mainline Churches.

When family members research the Shincheonji Church online they find 'anti-heretical' and 'anti-cult literature' demonizing the Shincheonji Church and other new religious movements. They are then filled with anxiety and fear, and often look for help. They can easily find 'cult exit counseling centers' online that are organized by Presbyterian evangelists, missionaries and pastors. These individuals are working to bring 'lost sheep' back to the Presbyterian Church because there is a lot of competition between religions in South Korea.

This misinformation fuels panic in the minds of family members and, consequently, they begin preparations for a de-conversion program. Information sessions are held to train the parents on necessary steps, which include illegal activities such as kidnapping and confinement. These services are not free.

Incitement to illegal activities

During the first phase of the operation, parents are informed that they will have to organize the kidnapping of their son or daughter and choose a well-equipped place where no escape is possible. Afterwards, they will have to extort a signature from their son or daughter on a statement declaring that they have willingly asked for the de-conversion services of a 'cult counseling center' and are voluntarily joining a so-called 'religious de-conversion program.'

The Presbyterian activists working within this national network of 'cult counseling centers' have a policy to never intervene if the individual has not signed this agreement.

The Presbyterian Church adopted this policy after the Shincheonji Church started to sue some of their de-conversion activists. They now train their evangelists to organize meetings and consultations with parents so as to distance themselves from legal liability. Sometimes the de-conversion sessions are conducted with former Shincheonji members.

In concrete terms, Presbyterian pastors at a higher level are THE masterminds behind the scenes of these kidnapping, confinement and coercive de-conversion operations. They never participate directly in these activities, which are illegal and prosecutable under the criminal code. They leave this to family members.

The agreement that must be signed before beginning a de-conversion program is also left to family members to obtain. The pastors turn a blind eye to the way this is accomplished, which can include: blackmail, threats, psychological and physical pressure, violence, and detention.

When the de-conversion program can 'officially' start, the work is assigned to lower-ranking activists specifically trained for that purpose. The higher-level masterminds of these operations ensure they cannot be prosecuted.

Why is forced change of religion 'tolerated' in South Korea?

The first reason is religious. Shincheonji has been a fast-growing movement at the expense of the Presbyterian Church since the beginning of the century. The fight against

² There are also cases when the husband organized the kidnapping and confinement before the de-conversion program.

a 'heretical' group by Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors was first tolerated and then encouraged behind the scenes by the leaders of their denominations.

The second reason is cultural. Parents in South Korea, and in other countries in East Asia, feel entitled to some level of authority and control over their adult children, despite their age, competency or social status.

The third reason is political. The Presbyterian Church is politically conservative and opposed to the Communist regime of North Korea. The weight of Presbyterian voters in elections in South Korea is significant. Turning a blind eye to the illegal activities of a number of their leaders is politically safer than challenging them publicly.

Serious breach of human rights

In light of international human rights law, the individual right to freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of movement have been and still are grossly violated on this issue in South Korea.

The religious, cultural and political context cannot justify actions such as kidnapping, confinement and forced change of religion of adults. The argument of so-called 'family discussions' to justify such actions or of 'protective custody' to de-convert them under physical and psychological coercion has been unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles.

In 2012, the Concluding Observations of the *UN Human Rights Committee* (HRC) about Japan's Universal Periodic Review played an important role in conveying a strong message to the authorities in Tokyo. The same practice had enjoyed total impunity for four decades, resulting in thousands of victims. The HRC declared that: "The State Party should take effective measures to guarantee the right of every person not to be subject to coercion which would impair his or her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief."

Human Rights Without Frontiers recommends

HRWF therefore recommends a multi-dimensional strategy to eradicate this phenomenon in South Korea:

- raise awareness within the international community of scholars in religious studies, national and international human rights organizations, as well as national and international media;
- highlight the responsibility of the Presbyterian Churches which tolerates, endorses and appears to encourage such practices and urging it to put an end to them;
- develop advocacy at the UN and in organs defending freedom of religion or belief within the EU institutions, national institutions in Europe created for that purpose, the US Department of State, USCIRF, etc.;
- prosecute those who encourage people to perpetrate an act of abduction and confinement;
- and prosecute hate speech and hate crimes.

HRWF does not debate the merits of religions or beliefs, or align with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF defends the right of all people to have the beliefs of their choosing as guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Sun Hwa KIM killed by her ex-husband



Sun Hwa KIM

HRWF (20.01.2020) - In December 2018, Hwa Baek SEO was released from prison after serving a ten-year sentence for the murder of his wife, Sun Hwa KIM, in 2007. HRWF met Sun Gyeong KIM, the victim's younger sister, in Seoul.

On 7 October 2007, **Sun Hwa KIM** was beaten with a blunt object by her former husband Hwa Baek SEO at her home. This brutal attack caused a stroke that necessitated her hospitalization in Dong Gang hospital at Tae Hwadong. Two days later, she needed brain surgery. Unfortunately, Sun Hwa KIM did not survive the operation and passed away on 12 October 2007. She was 48 years old.

Her abduction and confinement in 2006

Sun Geong KIM, who joined the Shincheonji Church after her sister, testified to *Human Rights Without Frontiers* that:

"My sister's husband was a short-tempered person. Before their divorce, he had already been convicted on charges of assault and sentenced to a prison term of one year.

My sister had always been a devout Christian, even before her marriage. Originally, she was Catholic, but became Presbyterian later on. After leaving the Catholic Church, she would attend early morning prayers almost every day and evangelize her family as well.

She told her husband about her religious commitment and her activities with the Shincheonji Church. One day, he followed her to the church located in Shin Jeon-dong and attacked her. After this incident, her husband contacted a Presbyterian pastor from a 'cult counselling center' who advised him to enroll Sun Hwa KIM in a de-conversion program. The pastor outlined the required steps for his program: abduction of Sun Hwa KIM, confinement and then obtaining her signature on a 'voluntary request' to follow a de-conversion program.

The abduction took place on 9 June 2006. Sun Hwa KIM's youngest sister called her for help, saying that she was kidnapped by her boyfriend. However, that was a lie to lure

Sun Hwa KIM to a secluded place. Instead, they took her to a motel in Bulgyo, South Jeolla Province, where she was confined and submitted to a de-conversion program.

Three Presbyterian pastors took turns "re-educating" Sun Hwa KIM every day for 10 hours, showing her videos slandering the Shincheonji Church. These pastors are:

- Jong Han KIM, former pastor of the Presbyterian Beol Kyo Dae Gwang Church, now a pastor in "A church with a dream," a Presbyterian church in Sun Cheon city, in South Jeolla Province;
- Yong-Sik JIN, pastor of the Presbyterian Sang Rok Church in An San City;
- And Ui Jong HWANG, pastor in the Presbyterian Sae Jang Hak Church in Busan city.

After three days of detention, Sun Hwa KIM managed to shout for help through a window and was subsequently rescued by the police. After this incident, she filed for a divorce and custody of her two sons. However, she was always afraid of being abducted again."

Her murder in 2007

On 19 February 2008, the Ulsan District Court, 3rd Criminal Panel, sentenced Hwa Baek SEO to 10 years of imprisonment. Included in that decision were the 135 days he spent in pretrial detention. The facts were described as follows by the court:

"The defendant was married to the victim (KK female, 48) in 1984. While living a married life with two sons, they divorced by mutual agreement in September 2006. The defendant wished to be reunited with the victim and harassed her, but the victim avoided the defendant's phone calls and refused to meet him. Meanwhile, the defendant believed that their marriage ended in divorce because the victim joined the Shincheonji Church and neglected her family. The defendant decided to try to change the victim's mind by any means, including violent ones. Around 04:30am of 7 October 2007, the defendant wrapped a gourd-shaped metal bar, approximately 29cm in length and 6cm in diameter, with green tape while he was inside his Atoz car. He was parked at the entrance of Wawa Park in Samho-Dong, Nam-gu, Ulsan. Then, he took a taxi with an unknown license plate number to the victim's rented house in Okgyo-Dong, Jung-gu, Ulsan.

Around 05:25am on 7 October 2007, the defendant arrived at the victim's house and entered through the back door. He went into the victim's room by going through the attic window, and he found the victim praying. When the victim saw the defendant, she spoke in a defensive manner and took the metal bar from the defendant. Enraged, the defendant took the metal bar back by force, causing the victim to fall. While she tried to get up, the defendant struck the victim on her head with the metal bar several times. She died from traumatic subdural hemorrhage resulting from blunt force trauma on 12 October 2007 at Dongkang Medical Center in Taehwa-dong, Jung-gu, Ulsan. In conclusion, the defendant is responsible for the death of the victim."

The connections between the murderer and Pastor Ui Jong HWANG

Two weeks after Sun Hwa KIM's death in 2007, Pastor Hwang visited the murderer at a detention center in Ulsan. Pastor Hwang then transferred 500,000 won to Hwa Baek SEO to pay for his legal fees and promised to send 1 million won to him in early November of the same year.

The lawyer's fees cost a total of 4 million won. This was provided by: raising funds in Pastor Hwang's church, which were then given to Hwa Baek SEO's second son (1 million

won); personal funds given to Hwa Baek SEO's younger brother (1 million won); and funds raised by downsizing the house where Hwa Baek SEO's children lived (2 million won).

This clearly demonstrates that the pastor was closely involved in Sun Hwa KIM's case and invested in the outcome, including Hwa Baek SEO's criminal proceedings.

Change of religion: Psychiatric internment of Hye-won SON

Hye-won SON was forced to spend 81 days in a psychiatric hospital.

HRWF (06.01.2020) – Hye-won SON was about 20 in May 2016 when she joined the Shincheonji Church.



Hye-won SON

When her parents found out, they contacted a Presbyterian 'cult counseling center' which advised them to abduct Hye-won and confine her for a de-conversion program.

2 February 2017: Hye-won was kidnapped by her parents but managed to escape. She went to the police for help, but they refused to intrude on what they considered a family matter. Her parents then had her examined by a psychiatrist, but she was declared psychologically sane. Her parents were dissatisfied because they had hoped she would be diagnosed as suffering from religious delirium.

Hye-won's parents insisted to get the name of another psychiatric hospital outside of Seoul where it would be easier to intern her 'without too much trouble'. They finally got a name and an address: the mental hospital in Cheongsong, four hours' drive from Seoul. There was no psychological evaluation administered at admission, instead she was interned on the sole basis of a conversation between the doctor and her parents. This was the start of Hye-won's 81-day forcible psychiatric internment.

Hye-won was unable to have any contact with the outside world except for her parents' visits twice a month. Every time, they threatened that she would stay there until she promised to stop attending the Shincheonji Church.

A nurse in the hospital was moved by her situation and tried to help. She discreetly advised Hye-won to write to the authorities about her forced internment. Hye-won did so, sending a letter of petition calling for help to two city councilors. They answered and sent two officials to visit her on 21 March. However, they did not ask about her hospitalization and instead asked about her life in Shincheonji. After the visit, there was no change.

On 25 April, Hye-won wrote a letter to the court requesting her release but, before she sent it, her doctor tried convincing her not to. The next day, she was released without any explanation. She believes that her calls for outside help prompted the hospital to release her so as to avoid legal trouble.

For 81 days, she had been illegally interned in a psychiatrist hospital and had undergone a forced medical treatment.

After her release, she went back to the mental hospital to ask the doctor, Hyun-soo KIM, why he had interned her. He confessed that he knew she was sane, but despite that, she had been prescribed sedatives, anti-depressants, and antipsychotic medicine for bipolar depression. His confession was recorded.

This case is reminiscent of the misuse of psychiatry against political and religious dissidents in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and later.

Hye-won also claimed to have the right to religious dissent.

Presbyterian 'cult counseling' activists and abuse of psychiatry for religious purposes

The Presbyterian Church in South Korea has established so-called 'Cult Counseling Centers' all over the country (see the map below). These centers track and stigmatize all forms of religious doctrines and movements deemed to deviate from the alleged "true" Christian theology that they spread.



Such centers are the masterminds behind the abductions and confinements currently being undertaken by Presbyterian families. Cult Exit Counseling Centers are then paid to de-convert family members that are part of other religious communities.

The leader of one such center, **Pastor JIN Yong SIK**, was the head of the Cult Counselling Center of Ansan. In 2007, he was prosecuted for sending a member of the World Mission Society Church of God to a psychiatric institution.

He was found guilty of conducting a coercive de-conversion program to a believer of the Church of God by forcibly confining her in a mental institution. When the investigation revealed that he had earned more than one million dollars through the implementation of his program, it caused an uproar.

Despite this controversy and the evident violations of human rights, his Cult Counselling Center continues to be a highly profitable business.

This system of Inquisition has developed due to intra-Christian competition within the market of religions in South Korea. It must be brought to an end.

There are criminal laws forbidding abduction, sequestration and forced change of religion in South Korea. There are international standards protecting the right of an individual to

opt for and retain the religion or beliefs of his/her choice. The Presbyterian Church in South Korea must respect national laws and the Republic of Korea must abide by its international commitments.

In its work to defend FoRB, HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, or align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any religion or belief system but defends the right of a person to have the beliefs of her/his choice as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration.