

COVID-19: Scapegoating Shincheonji in South Korea

A Second White Paper

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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?

South Korea is home to a record number of new religious movements, generally called “new religions” there. Between the First and the Second World Wars, new religions in Korea had more members than mainline religions. While most of these new religions were not Christian (Lee 2016), some derived from Christianity, and flourished particularly after the Korean War (Kim and Bang 2019).

The most successful Korean Christian new religion was the Olive Tree, founded by Park Tae Son (1917–1990). Reportedly, in the mid-1960s, it had some two million members (Baker and Kim 2020). For a number of reasons, Korean Protestantism came to be dominated by conservative and fundamentalist churches (Kim 2007). They were taken by surprise by the success of the Olive Tree, and organized a powerful anti-cult movement, which still exists today. They also managed to mobilize political allies and have Park arrested. The Olive Tree reacted to repression

through what sociologists call “amplification of deviance.” It shifted to a theology that moved further away from mainline Christianity, until Park proclaimed that Jesus was an impostor, “ninety-eight per cent” of the Bible consisted of lies, and he, Park, was God incarnated (Baker and Kim 2020).

The new theology led the majority of members to abandon the Olive Tree, although branches of the movement still exists today. Among the devotees who left was Lee Man Hee (b. 1931), who had joined the Olive Tree in 1957 and abandoned it in 1967. Lee then joined another Christian new religion, the Tabernacle Temple, founded by Yoo In Gu (1928–1984) in 1966, and later taken over by his son Yoo Jae Yul (b. 1949). In turn, the Tabernacle Temple collapsed under accusations of corruption raised against its leaders, and ended up merging with one branch of the Presbyterian Church. Having tried unsuccessfully to promote a reformation of the Tabernacle Temple, Lee left it and on March 14, 1984, founded Shincheonji (see, for more details, Introvigne 2019, 2020a).

According to Lee, all these events were not coincidental, and were predicted in the Bible’s Book of Revelation. They prepared the rise of a Promised Pastor, i.e. Lee himself, who will lead both 144,000 saints and a larger “White Multitude” into the Millennium, a kingdom of peace without death that will last for 1,000 years. The belief in the Millennium is shared by many Protestant denominations, but what is peculiar to Shincheonji is the idea that the Bible predicts it as imminent. In fact, members of Shincheonji believe that Lee, who is now 89, will live to see the Millennium. On the other hand, they do not believe that Lee (whom they call Chairman Lee) is God or the second coming of Jesus Christ. He is a human being, although one called by God to a special mission as the Promised Pastor.

Since this is relevant for the COVID-19 crisis, it is worth mentioning that Shincheonji views illness in a way similar to most Christian denominations. It teaches that illness and death appeared on Earth because of human sin, as symbolically taught in the Bible through the story of Adam and Eve (Lee 2014, 94–5). However, this does not mean that each individual illness is directly connected

to an individual sin, nor that good Christians or good members of Shincheonji are immune from diseases. Shincheonji members go to hospitals and seek the assistance of doctors when they are ill. In fact, some of them work themselves in the medical professions.

Shincheonji had a spectacular growth in South Korea and an expansion in several other countries. It went from 45,000 members in 2007 to more than 250,000 in 2019. This growth occurred mostly (although not exclusively) by converting Korean Protestants.

There is little doubt that Shincheonji is a proselytizing religion. As is the case in other new religions, the zeal for proselytization is supported by an enthusiasm typical of young movements, and may appear excessive to outsiders. Shincheonji is accused, in particular, of “covert” evangelism. In some circumstances, Bible study courses are advertised without mentioning the name Shincheonji, including by members of Shincheonji who attend the services of other Christian churches without disclosing their identity, and the new recruits meet fellow students who initially do not tell them that they are members of the movement. Shincheonji does not deny that this is the case. Its justification is that, given the violent media campaigns against the movement, if the name Shincheonji would be used since the beginning, potential converts would not accept to attend the meetings.

Shincheonji is not the only East Asian religious movement that has practiced “covert” evangelism, and indeed the strategy appears to be common when a movement is controversial. In 2019, a Korean civil court ruled that Shincheonji’s “covert” evangelism is not protected by the Constitutional principle of freedom of religion, and awarded damages, although in a small amount, to one of three plaintiffs who had sued the movement about it. The decision has been appealed, and it is in fact unclear on what legal provisions a claim for damages may be based in such a case (see Introvigne 2020b).

It should be considered that one does not become a member of Shincheonji through baptism. Devotees proudly state that theirs is the only religion one joins through an exam. After a course, an exam should be passed that is by no means

a mere formality. Some have to repeat it twice or more. As a consequence, it is obviously impossible that somebody may “join” Shincheonji without fully knowing what kind of movement it is, and what is its theology.

“Covert” evangelism perpetuates a vicious circle. Opponents find there fuel for their anti-Shincheonji campaigns, which in turn make the movement even more reluctant to immediately disclose its name to potential converts. As outside observers, we do not believe that “covert” evangelism benefits the image of Shincheonji. Several congregations of the movement were in fact switching from “covert” to “open” evangelism, where the name of Shincheonji was immediately disclosed, when the COVID-19 crisis hit, putting all Shincheonji evangelistic activities to a halt.

Why Is Shincheonji Persecuted?

In short, Shincheonji is persecuted because it is successful. It grows, and it grows (mostly) at the expenses of conservative and fundamentalist Protestants who, having successfully destroyed the original Olive Tree and the Tabernacle Temple, and contained the growth of other Korean Christian new religions, focused their anti-cult efforts on Shincheonji (although other groups are targeted, too).

For those living outside South Korea, it is difficult to imagine the virulence of the campaigns against Shincheonji there. Anti-cult activities in other democratic countries pale in comparison. There are fundamentalist Protestant organizations with full-time personnel devoted exclusively to fight Shincheonji. Street demonstrations are regularly organized, and there have been thousands of cases of attempted deprogramming, where members are kidnapped by their parents and detained in facilities where fundamentalist “counselors” try to compel them to renounce their faith. Two female Shincheonji members were killed within the context of deprogramming, generating widespread protests (Fautré 2020a, 2020b). Periodically, conservative and fundamentalist Protestants petition the government to dissolve and ban Shincheonji, within a political context where,

voting as a bloc, radical Christians have a considerable electoral and political power.

The climate generated by this hammering attacks created a situation where being “exposed” as a member of Shincheonji means being bullied in school, being at risk of losing one’s job, and even being beaten. NGOs have collected thousands of instances where devotees of Shincheonji have been harassed and discriminated. This is an important point to understand why during the COVID-19 crisis members of Shincheonji were reluctant to be identified as such.

Is It Really About COVID-19?

Ostensibly, the actions filed against Shincheonji in 2020 are aimed at punishing those who made the containment of COVID-19 in South Korea more difficult. In the next chapters, we will discuss these actions in detail.

Here, we want to raise a doubt whether COVID-19 is really at the core of this matter. Even assuming that some Shincheonji leaders breached provisions of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (and we doubt they did), a principle of proportionality should apply. The legal reaction is without proportion with the mistakes some Shincheonji leaders might have made. Closing all places of worship of the religion, arresting leaders, dissolving its legal corporations, trying to bankrupt the movement through multi-million-won civil suits, all this clearly indicates that the aim has little to do with justice, or even with COVID-19.

The aim is destroying a religion that is hated with a vengeance by an important electoral constituency that politicians cannot ignore, conservative and fundamentalist Protestants. These attempts at destroying Shincheonji started long before COVID-19, and that the aim is the total eradication of the movement has been clearly stated by its opponents, including prominent politicians (*Korea Economic Daily* 2020).

The only difference is that, before COVID-19, threats and violence were remarkably unsuccessful in stopping the growth of Shincheonji. Opponents are persuaded that COVID-19 now offers the opportunity, or the pretext, for the final solution of the Shincheonji “problem” they had been seeking for years. What we are witnessing is not a reasonable discussion of what went wrong in the COVID-19 epidemic in South Korea, and Shincheonji’s possible role in it, but a consistent campaign determined to kill a religion, whose sin was to convert thousands of members of vindictive and intolerant fundamentalist and conservative churches.

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

Patient 31

One person who has *not* been subject to criminal proceedings is Patient 31. We know that, for reasons scientists have not fully identified, some individuals act as “superspreaders” of COVID-19. Patient 31 in South Korea has been repeatedly mentioned as the ultimate superspreader. As of the end of June, 5,213 cases of COVID-19 in South Korea, or 40.7% of the total cases in the country, concerned Shincheonji members, and were attributed directly or indirectly to Patient 31 as a single superspreader (Statista Research Department 2020).

As mentioned in our first report, rumors that Patient 31 originally refused to be tested for COVID-19 were spread by some media, but are denied by Patient 31 herself and are unsubstantiated. The truth of the matter seems to be that, when she was first hospitalized on February 7, her symptoms were misinterpreted as those of a common cold. She was sent home, and attended several Shincheonji gatherings, where she infected others, before her symptoms worsened. She was finally tested and diagnosed with COVID-19 on February 18. The fact that, unlike in the case of Shincheonji leaders, there is no criminal investigation against Patient 31 confirms that she did not breach any law. At that time, religious gatherings in general were not forbidden by Korean authorities, although Shincheonji promptly halted them when it learned of Patient 31’s situation on February 18.

Nobody wants or likes to become a superspreader. Patient 31 and those infected by her are victims, not criminals.

The Alleged Wuhan Connection

How was Patient 31 infected? The simple answer is that we do not know. Some authorities have accused Shincheonji members from Wuhan to have infected her after having attended church gatherings in that city. This is impossible, as there are no Shincheonji “gatherings” in Wuhan. Shincheonji does have members in China, but they cannot organize “gatherings,” as the church is not allowed to operate legally there, and is often criticized as a “cult.” Participating in the activities of a

“cult” is a crime in China, punished with heavy jail penalties (Introvigne, Richardson and Šorytè 2019).

There are individual members of Shincheonji in Wuhan. Only one of them entered South Korea in January (before testing was introduced for travelers from Wuhan) and returned to China, without having attended any church gathering in Daegu. When problems emerged in Korea, he was told to get tested in Wuhan but, because he had no symptoms, local authorities there did not test him until May, when massive tests of the population were organized in the city. He tested negative.

On February 21, Shincheonji sent to the health authorities the list of its members in Wuhan and a list of the 88 members from China who had visited South Korea in 2020, including details of their movements in the country. None of them had met Patient 31. Local authorities recognized that there was “no identified correlation” between Shincheonji members from China, or who visited China, and the outbreak of the virus connected with Patient 31 (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2020).

The Case of the Cheongdo Daenam Hospital

Korean media discussed as a possible vehicle for the infection the funeral services of Chairman Lee’s brother, who died on January 31, 2020, at Cheongdo’s Daenam Hospital, in North Gyeongsang Province, where several COVID-19 cases were later detected (Kim 2020).

Shincheonji provided to the authorities between February 26 and 29 the lists of its members who attended two funeral services at Daenam Hospital. 49 attended the first service, and 52 the second one. They did not include Patient 31.

Tests revealed, however, that those patients in the hospital who contracted COVID-19 were infected with a different variation of the virus with respect to the one found in Patient 31 and other members of Shincheonji in Daegu (*Newsis* 2020). Accordingly, Shincheonji members were not responsible for the virus outbreak in the hospital.

Did Shincheonji Create the Outbreak in Daegu?

On June 22, the City of Daegu sued Shincheonji and Chairman Lee seeking damages of KRW 100 billion (US\$82.3 million), more than two-thirds of the city's total virus-related spending of KRW 146 billion (*The Korea Times* 2020b). Parenthetically, on June 26, Shincheonji announced that 4,000 church members who had recovered from COVID-19 will donate the much sought after plasma including antibodies to the virus, noting that the monetary value of this plasma is much higher than the sum Daegu is claiming from the church (*San Francisco Examiner* 2020).

The lawsuit considers Shincheonji responsible for the virus outbreak in Daegu, which is logically untenable. The label "Patient 31" means that there were 30 other patients diagnosed with COVID-19 before her. Since she could not have been infected by a co-religionist from Wuhan, as explained in the previous paragraph, she was infected by somebody else.

There are several possibilities, and there were clusters of infections in Daegu outside Shincheonji. For example, in January, in connection with the Year of Tourism event, 1,100 Chinese students visited Daegu (Ryu 2020). A cluster of infection developed in a club in the city, where three young people in their 20s were infected (*JoongAng Ilbo* 2020). Probably, there were "hidden" clusters as well, with asymptomatic or non-tested patients (MBC 2020). Health authorities clearly stated that Patient 31 was not the first person to be infected with COVID-19 in Daegu (*Yonhap News* 2020).

Justice Minister Choo Mi-ae was criticized at that time for not imposing a travel ban from China. She was the same politician who insisted for prosecuting Shincheonji. She was criticized for this in the Parliament, with the opposition claiming that Choo was both trying to shift blame for the virus outbreak from herself to Shincheonji and preparing a presidential bid by exciting hatred against an unpopular minority (Lee H. 2020).

3. Did Shincheonji Refuse to Cooperate with the Authorities?

Shincheonji Stopped Services Immediately

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several religious groups were blamed throughout the world for refusing to suspend their worship services, thus spreading the virus (Consorti 2020). This is not what Shincheonji is accused of. Other churches in South Korea continued their gatherings through the pandemic, yet they were not treated as harshly as Shincheonji.

Shincheonji reacted very promptly when it learned that Patient 31 had tested positive to COVID-19. In fact, it acted even before. On January 25, and again on January 28, Shincheonji's leadership issued orders that no Shincheonji members who had recently arrived from China to South Korea should be allowed to attend church services.

The same morning when they learned that Patient 31 was infected, on February 18, Shincheonji leaders ordered all centers in Daegu closed. They also recommended that all its members there avoid also private gatherings and meetings, and went into self-quarantine. Later in the day, orders were issued to close all churches and mission centers throughout South Korea. Services abroad were also suspended on February 22 and all forms of meetings, activities, or gatherings in all countries ceased on February 26.

Why Are Leaders Prosecuted?

Before the City of Daegu sued Shincheonji, the Mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon (1956–2020), announced on March 1 that he had reported to the Seoul Central District's Prosecutor's Office the national leaders of Shincheonji for "murder, injury and violation of prevention and management of infectious diseases" (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2020; Choudhury 2020). He also launched a civil suit against Shincheonji for damages, although he asked for a less astronomical sum than his homologue in Daegu, as the claim was limited to KRW 200,000,100 (\$161,000), with the 100 KRW on top of the 200 million added to allow an investigation by a panel of three judges.

Mayor Park was an old foe of Shincheonji, and another South Korean presidential hopeful before committing suicide on July 9, 2020, after a former secretary had sued him for sexual harassment (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2020). Obviously, this “Me-Too”-style incident had nothing to do with Shincheonji. However, it shows how important reputation is in South Korea, and how public shaming may lead to fatal consequences in a country known for its record suicide rates.

This is, again, relevant in understanding why Shincheonji members resisted to be publicly identified as such, a matter that is at the core of the accusations against Shincheonji, and led to the arrest first of two leaders and four members of the church in Daegu (*The Hankyoreh* 2020), and then of three headquarters officials on July 8. At the time of this writing, prosecutors threaten to arrest other leaders. Chairman Lee himself was interrogated on July 17 for four hours until he collapsed, which is not surprising considering his age (*The New York Times* 2020). Anti-Shincheonji fundamentalist Christian media continue to announce (and hope) that he may soon be arrested (Lee J. 2020).

This massive set of criminal actions is justified by prosecutors with the allegation that Shincheonji leaders were requested by the authorities to supply full lists of their members, students, and properties, both in South Korea and internationally, but the lists they handed were not complete.

Legal Background

Because of the MERS epidemic of 2015, South Korea reinforced its legal tools to deal with virus outbreaks. The Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act granted to the health authorities extraordinary powers in the case of an epidemic, including, as mandated in Article 18 of the law, the collection of personal data of those at risk. Refusing to submit these data, or providing false information, is a criminal offense. Article 18 mentions data about persons, rather than properties, and Korean legal scholars discuss its interaction with the Personal Information Protection Act, which protects the privacy of Korean citizens.

Clearly, during epidemics, Korean law authorizes the government to collect data it would not be allowed to collect in normal times according to the Personal Information Protection Act. However, the principles of proportionality and of minimizing privacy risks mentioned in Article 3 should still apply. South Korea has also signed and ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose Article 18 protects religious liberty. The United Nations have clarified that Article 18

is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, no. 2).

The same United Nations document, known as “General Comment no. 22,” admits that freedom of religion may be limited, *inter alia* for reasons of “public health,” but calls for Article 18 to be “strictly interpreted.”

Limitations may be applied only for those purposes for which they were prescribed and must be directly related and proportionate to the specific need on which they are predicated. Restrictions may not be imposed for discriminatory purposes or applied in a discriminatory manner (United Nations Human Rights Committee 1993, no. 8).

These are international obligations South Korea should respect. It is reasonable that during an epidemic the authorities may go beyond privacy laws and collect personal data about “infectious patients and persons of concern for the infection,” according to Article 76(2) of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act. However, they are not free to “discriminate” members of one religion, as they did by compiling and publishing special statistics about Shincheonji members who tested positive to COVID-19 (while they did not do it for devotees of other religions).

And the notion of “persons of concern for the infection” cannot be expanded ad infinitum. It is doubtful whether, considering both its domestic and international legal obligations, authorities were justified in requesting national lists of members and students of Shincheonji, including those who had not attended any meeting or service in 2020, or had no possible direct or indirect contact with Patient 31. And it surely goes against these obligations to request Shincheonji to supply the list of foreign members, including those who have never set foot in South Korea.

Which Lists?

Actually, local and national authorities bombarded Shincheonji for weeks with requests for lists of members, one after the other. First came on February 21 the request to submit the list of all members who had visited Shincheonji premises in Daegu during the previous month, followed by a request for the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of all Daegu church members (9,294, according to the movement). On February 24, this was followed by a request to submit a full list of all members, both in South Korea and internationally. On February 25, Lee Jae-Myung, the Governor of Gyeonggi Province, where Shincheonji has its headquarters in Gwacheon, and a politician who has called for a “war” against the movement (*Korea Economic Daily* 2020), asked for a list of those who attended services, and of all members, in Gwacheon and Gyeonggi Province.

On February 27, national and international lists of “students,” i.e. of those who are not yet members of Shincheonji but are studying to take the corresponding exam, were also requested. On March 13, the authorities asked for a final list, including the personnel working at South Korean Shincheonji premises other than members or students. Meanwhile, at various stages, they had asked for a list of all real estate properties owned by Shincheonji at the national and local level.

The relationship was always one of distrust. The authorities did not believe that the lists handed by Shincheonji were complete, and sent the police to raid its premises, seize documents and computers, and reconstruct lists based on

the seized documents. At first, it did not seem that this exercise had generated significant results, except some publicity for politicians eager to court the anti-Shincheonji fundamentalist Protestant voting bloc in view of the legislative elections of April 15, 2020 (*The Korea Herald* 2020b). On March 2, South Korean vice-minister of Health, Kim Kang-lip, told the media that, “no evidence has been found that Shincheonji supplied missing or altered lists,” and that between the list collected and checked by the government and those supplied by Shincheonji “there were only minor differences,” which could be explained with different ways of counting members, and whether minor children of members were included or not (Kang 2020; Lee M. 2020).

However, the prosecution went on, pushed by political personalities such as Governor Lee of Gyeonggi Province and Justice Minister Choo (plus Mayor Park of Seoul, before he committed suicide). Eventually, some leaders and members of Shincheonji were arrested, based on four accusations.

First, prosecutors claimed that in the first list submitted by the local leaders in Daegu, 132 names were intentionally omitted, of members who had explicitly requested their leaders not to be included. The exact number of omitted names, and why they were omitted, is disputed. These names were included in the national list submitted by the headquarters, but not in the initial list supplied by the Tribe of Thaddeus in Daegu, which is one of the 12 “tribes” through which Shincheonji is organized. The leaders of the Tribe of Thaddeus claim that they told the authorities that the initial list was not complete, as some members had raised legal objections against being included and the matter was being discussed.

Second, with respect to the national list, Shincheonji leaders are accused of having submitted incorrect birth dates for 24 members, and of having omitted the full resident registration numbers for 105,446 members. Shincheonji claims that the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act does not require the release of the full resident registration numbers. Besides, at the end of the exercise Shincheonji had submitted nearly 300,000 names, including of members no longer active or with whom contact had been lost. It is normal that in such lists there would be

4. A Disproportionate Reaction

minor inaccuracies, and many organizations, religious or otherwise, would not be able to supply data in a week or so in such an accurate way as Shincheonji did.

Third, in Gwacheon, where the church has its headquarters (and where the local governor has vowed to destroy Shincheonji), there were two congregations with separate worship services, at the 9th and the 10th floor of the same building. Since there had been one case of COVID on the 9th floor, the church submitted promptly the list of all those who had attended services there, and added a 10th floor worshiper who had developed symptoms and tested positive, but only after services in the 10th floor had been suspended. So, Shincheonji did not believe it was necessary to also submit a list of all 10th floor worshippers. Authorities claim that the list of the 10th floor congregation should have been immediately submitted, and this is another ground to prosecute leaders at the headquarters.

Fourth, prosecutors claim that the list of real estate properties owned by both Shincheonji General Assembly and each of the twelve tribes was incomplete. This is true, but Shincheonji claims that it has submitted a full list of premises where worship services and other meetings were held. Asking for all properties, including those rented to persons or businesses outside of Shincheonji, is not within the scope of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act, which in fact authorizes the government to collect information about persons and does not even mention properties. Nonetheless, Shincheonji tried to humor the authorities and submitted additional lists of properties, which again had some omissions and mistakes. They were compiled in a short period of time, and properties (which are slightly less than 2,000) belong to many different organizations, making the compilation difficult.

Mistakes Punished as Crimes

We do not claim that Shincheonji did not commit mistakes. It did, and Chairman Lee publicly apologized for them in a press conference on March 2 (*Deutsche Welle* 2020). However, the reaction was contrary to the principle of proportion mentioned both in Korean and international law.

One should always consider that being exposed as a member of Shincheonji may lead to serious consequences in South Korea. The tragic incident of the Mayor of Seoul confirms how dramatic public shaming is in the country. Shincheonji has evidence that, at least with respect to 406 members, data submitted to the authorities were leaked to the media and to the businesses where the persons worked. Some of them lost their job. There were even cases where, having been identified as members of Shincheonji, some were refused admissions into hospitals and medical treatment. Shincheonji has documented 82 such cases, after personal data of the church members were disclosed to hospitals and pharmacies. Some local authorities also publicly incited citizens to report members and facilities of Shincheonji, something normally done with respect to criminals.

Shincheonji did ask its members to cooperate with the authorities. That some tried not to disclose that they were part of Shincheonji depend on their personal choices, and is understandable. The leaders of the Thaddeus Tribe in Daegu were placed between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the authorities wanted a complete list of their members. On the other hand, some members, fearful of losing social status and perhaps their jobs, told the leaders in Daegu that their names should not be included. The Thaddeus Tribe leaders started by giving the authorities a partial list, waiting for a solution of the problems by the headquarters. The latter included the names of the recalcitrant Daegu members in their national lists. As for the latter, the fact that some details were not entirely accurate (but most were) is evidence of clerical and other mistakes unavoidable in such circumstances, not of an intent to commit a crime.

Disproportionate Measures

Going to jail for these mistakes is already bad enough, but other disproportionate measures were taken that are clearly unrelated to any reasonable preventive anti-virus measure. A nation-wide tax audit of Shincheonji and its local branches was conducted. Both Shincheonji missionary center and the large humanitarian organization founded by Chairman Lee, known as Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) were stripped of their registered legal status in Seoul. In the case of HWPL, it was claimed that it had conducted “religious” activities going beyond its by-laws, and Mayor Park characterized it as an “anti-social religious organization” (*The Korea Herald* 2020a). However, HWPL does not conduct religious activities (Šorytè 2020). It does promote interreligious dialogue, which is a normal part of what an organization devoted to the peaceful encounter between different cultures is supposed to organize.

The most disruptive measure was the closing of all Shincheonji places of worship in South Korea. They were “temporarily” closed to prevent the spread of the virus, a measure Shincheonji accepted (even if other Christian churches did not), but they have not been allowed to reopen to this date. In fact, violations of zoning regulations and other claims were quoted by the local authorities to declare the facilities as permanently closed. In Gwacheon, Shincheonji was ordered to demolish several buildings of its headquarters due to the alleged violation of zoning regulations, and fined KRW 27 million. The demolition was completed by July 15, and the buildings reduced to a pile of rubbish (Noh 2020). They had been used by Shincheonji for 13 years without complaints by the authorities, just as supposed violations of the by-laws of HWPL and Shincheonji missionary center were “discovered” all of a sudden after the case of Patient 31, while these organizations had been active in Seoul for several years.

Private Vigilantism

During the COVID-19 epidemic, private fundamentalist vigilantes continued in

their violent assaults against Shincheonji members, which had continued for years without sufficient reaction by the authorities (Fautré 2020a, 2020b).

According to documents submitted to us by Shincheonji, between February and July, 2020, there were 143 new cases of deprogramming. Hate speech spread by fundamentalist anti-cultists and some politicians led to more than 5,000 cases of harassment and discrimination.

Two women died in suspicious circumstances, one in Ulsan Metropolitan City and one in Jeongeup, North Jeolla Province, “falling” from the windows of their apartments while discussing with their husbands, who had a history of hostility to Shincheonji and domestic violence. Apparently, the police believed the husbands, who told them that their wives had committed suicide (*The Korea Times* 2020a).

Conclusion

Authorities have the right to take extraordinary measures during an epidemic, but this right is not unlimited. It is certainly limited by human rights provisions embodied in international conventions. Measures should be proportionate and reasonable. Religious liberty can also be restricted for the sake of public health, but these restrictions should be kept to a minimum.

It seems self-evident that South Korean authorities exceeded the limits of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They collected data about Shincheonji members that were not needed to prevent the pandemic, including members abroad who had never visited South Korea. They were unable or unwilling to prevent the leaking of some of these data to the media and others hostile to Shincheonji, with the result that human rights of the members were violated. They discriminated against Shincheonji members, by singling them out as scapegoats for the epidemic, and adopting measures that were not adopted for members of other churches. They continued not to react adequately to private vigilante violence against members of Shincheonji. They reacted disproportionately to

mistakes made by some Shincheonji leaders and members. They used COVID-19 as an opportunity to settle old scores with Shincheonji, dissolving its legal corporations (and even HWPL, which is not part of the religious movement), closing its places of worship, and ordering the group to raze its buildings at the headquarters. Local politicians sued Shincheonji for exorbitant sums calculated to bankrupt the movement.

All this, in our eyes, is evidence enough that what is happening is not about COVID-19. It is the last chapter in a decade-long attempt to destroy Shincheonji, and the fruit of an unholy alliance between fundamentalist and conservative Protestants and politicians who need their votes.

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