

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Lesson from the Shincheonji Case in South Korea: Monitoring Without Scapegoating

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On February 19, 2020, I received the first phone calls from media about a South Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji, which was somewhat related to the spread of COVID-19 in its country. I was the only Western scholar who had studied Shincheonji, published about it, and interviewed its founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee.

In the following days, all hell broke loose. On the one hand, during my study of Shincheonji in South Korea, I had met many intelligent and articulated women and men who were part of the movement, and I was concerned about their health. On the other hand, I was horrified in reading so much nonsense about Shincheonji in international media. Reporters who had never heard the name of Shincheonji before became amateur theologians overnight, or simply relied on low-level Internet sources.

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I felt a responsibility to correct inaccurate information that were spreading 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 the man who founded the movement in 1984, 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.

Some media confused Shincheonji's idea of the Millennium with its attitude to the present world. No hospitals will be needed in the Millennium, because illnesses will disappear. However, we are not yet in the Millennium, and until we enter this glorious kingdom, we will need doctors, tests, and hospitals. Some members of Shincheonji work in hospitals as doctors and nurses, and it is totally false that Shincheonji's devotees regard themselves as invulnerable to sickness or refuse modern medicine or medical tests when needed.

It is also false that Shincheonji regards illness as a sin. As many Protestants (and Catholics), its members believe that illness entered the world because of sin, and that the Bible symbolically teaches this through the story of Adam and Eve. But this concerns humanity in general, and does not mean that each individual illness is connected to an individual sin.

Why were so many fantasies about Shincheonji believed by some Korean and international media? The answer is connected with the history of South Korean Protestant Christianity, where for historical reasons connected first, with what groups sent more missionaries from the West, and then with the Korean War, arch-conservative and fundamentalists, who are marginal in other countries, came to be the majority of local Protestants. They also learned from

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their American counterparts how to vote as a bloc and exert a decisive influence on some politicians and media.

Their seemingly unstoppable growth found an obstacle in Christian new religious movements, among which Shincheonji is the fastest growing. Rather than asking themselves why a significant number of their members were converting to Shincheonji, they explained its growth with the usual laundry list of accusations against the “cults,” and tried to have it banned well before the coronavirus. They also took the law into their own hands. Parents kidnapped and detained their adult sons and daughters, and fundamentalist pastors tried to “deprogram” them and “de-convert” them from Shincheonji. The persistence of deprogramming, a practice deemed illegal by American and European courts more than twenty years ago, in South Korea attracted international condemnation when, in 2018, a female Shincheonji member was killed by her father when she tried to escape the deprogrammers. In a book just published by the Belgian NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), the sad story of thousands of attempted deprogrammings of Shincheonji members is told in detail.

HRWF also teamed with my own organization CESNUR to investigate what exactly happened with respect to Shincheonji and COVID-19, and published a white paper on Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction. 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

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again and tested positive to the virus. Patient 31 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. At the urge of the Mayor of Seoul, a well-known opponent of Shincheonji, the church's premises were raided, and the lists of members seized there compared with those Shincheonji has supplied. The authorities concluded that discrepancies were minor, and that Shincheonji had not been guilty of supplying incomplete or false data.

It is true that some members tried to hide their affiliation with Shincheonji in schools and workplaces, 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. We have examined reports of more than 7,000 instances of discrimination against members of Shincheonji during the coronavirus crisis. Two female Shincheonji members “fell” from the windows of their apartments and died, while “discussing” with their husbands, who were hostile to their belief and had a story of domestic violence. These incidents are still being

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investigated, and are cause for serious concern. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has also expressed concern about the scapegoating of Shincheonji.

Did Shincheonji make mistakes? Yes, and Chairman Lee admitted them publicly in a press conference on May 2, when he kneeled to ask for forgiveness in a typical Korean style. 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. Jews were blamed for the plague epidemics in Europe, and we have seen elsewhere religious groups criticized for the virus outbreak. Certainly, religions should be monitored during epidemics, as religious gatherings, just as sport events or popular feasts, may create opportunities for viruses to spread. Monitoring and scapegoating, however, are very different attitudes.