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Shincheonji: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Thousands of media articles were published throughout the world about a Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, after one of its members was infected with the virus responsible for COVID-19. This set in motion a chain of events leading to thousands of her co-religionists being infected, and to an unprecedented assault against Shincheonji by Christian counter-cultists and some politicians. Most of these articles were hastily written, and included serious mistakes about the history and theology of Shincheonji. The article deals with the emergence of Shincheonji within the context of Korean Christian new religious movements, and discusses its main doctrines and practices.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, Lee Man Hee, COVID-19 Epidemics in South Korea, South Korea Christian New Religious Movements.

Lee Man Hee and Shincheonji: A Short History

Reporters who had never heard its name before discovered overnight a South Korean new religious movement known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji) on February 19, 2020. At that date, news spread that one of its members in Daegu, South Korea, had been infected with COVID-19. She had been wrongly released from the hospital after having been diagnosed with a common cold, and allowed to participate in her religion's gatherings. This set in motion a chain of events that resulted in thousands of her co-religionists testing positive to the virus, and a media and political outcry against the "secretive cult" allegedly responsible for the spread of the epidemics in South Korea. Few articles about Shincheonji were

accurate, and some spread, based on hostile or low-level Internet sources, what can only be called fake news. Few independent scholars had studied Shincheonji before the COVID-19 crisis, and even fewer had interviewed his founder, Lee Man Hee. I am part of this small minority, and had written the first English-language monographic account of Shincheonji, in the shape of an entry for the online encyclopedia *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, on which this article is largely based (Introvigne 2019).

Accounts by outsiders and by insiders about the origins of Shincheonji, as it often happens in the world of religions, may present the same events in different terms, depending on whether they are told from the emic point of view of the members or the secular perspective of outside observers. The emic story, in turn, cannot be ignored by scholars, as it offers crucial elements on the self-perception of the members. We learn from emic accounts, and may identify what in each tradition devotees regard as essential, which may well coincide with what makes a new religion successful (Stark and Finke 2000, 257–58).

Lee Man Hee was born on September 15, 1931, at Punggak Village, Cheongdo District, North Gyeongsang Province, Korea (now South Korea). In 1946, he was among the first graduates of Punggak Public Elementary School after the Japanese left Korea. Lee did not receive any higher education, but is proud of his level of knowledge and understanding of all books in the Bible, which he attributes to revelations he received from Heaven.

Lee started his life of faith by praying fervently with his grandfather, who was a devout Christian (Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 3–4; I also rely on personal interviews with members of Shincheonji conducted in Seoul and Gwacheon in March and June 2019, including one with Chairman Lee in Gwacheon on June 6, 2019; I interviewed again Chairman Lee, together with other scholars, on December 2, 2019). Lee served in the South Korean Army's 7th Infantry Division during the Korean War and, when the war ended, settled in his native village of Hyeonri-ri, Punggak-Myeon, Gyeongsang Province as a farmer. He later reported that he started experiencing visions and revelations from divine messengers and from Jesus himself. For ten years, between 1957 and 1967, he participated in the religious activities of the Olive Tree, founded in 1955 by Park Tae-seon (1915–1990), which had a religious village in Sosa District, Bucheon, Gyeonggi Province, and was at that time the most successful Christian new religious movement in Korea,

with an estimated 1,500,000 followers. Although repeatedly arrested and tried for fraud, Park managed to achieve what many regarded as a phenomenal success (Moos 1964, 1967).

During the 1960s, Park's message evolved into a direction that positioned the Olive Tree far away from traditional Christianity. He started claiming that he was God incarnate and had a position higher than Jesus Christ (Kim 2007, 222–23). The number of members rapidly decreased, and several senior pastors and laypersons left the Olive Tree, including Lee.

In 1966, under the leadership of Yoo Jae Yul (b. 1949), eight people (seven “messengers” and one “elder”) gathered on the Cheonggye Mountain, where they remained for 100 days, feeling they were learning the Bible guided by the Holy Spirit. Following what they believed was the will of God, they established the Tabernacle Temple. Lee was among its first members.

The seven “messengers” had not received a formal theological education, but their sermons appeared as persuasive to many who gathered around the Tabernacle Temple. However, corruption and divisions soon developed. Yoo was arrested for fraud. In first degree, in 1976, he was sentenced to five years in prison, but his sentence was shortened to two and a half years with four years probation on appeal (*Dong-A Ilbo* 1976; *Kyungghyang Shinmun* 1976).

Giving voice to many members, Lee wrote to the seven denouncing the corruption prevailing in the Temple and calling them to repent. As a result, he was repeatedly threatened and beaten, until he gave up his attempts at reforming the Temple. The Tabernacle Temple, in the meantime, had collapsed.

In 1980, when General Chun Doo-hwan (b. 1931) led a military coup and became President of South Korea, the government launched an anti-cult campaign known as the “religious purification policy” (part of a broader program of “society purification”). An institution called the Stewardship Education Center, originally created to educate pastors in the mainline Christian churches, joined the “purification” movement and coordinated the churches’ action against the “cults.” In order to avoid the consequences of the anti-cult campaign, Oh Pyeong Ho, an evangelist of the Tabernacle who had a certificate as pastor from the Presbyterian Church, was appointed as the new head of the Tabernacle, replacing Yoo. Oh introduced the Stewardship Education Center into the Tabernacle, which eventually caused the whole of the Tabernacle to merge into

the Presbyterian Church, with all its members and assets. Yoo willingly gave up his position as leader of the Tabernacle, and eventually left for the United States in the late 1980s, claiming he will study theology there, and escaped dangerous accusations of being a “cult” leader by the Korean authoritarian government.

Lee continued to visit the Tabernacle Temple when the latter was in the process of joining the Presbyterian Church. He denounced the corruption prevailing in the Temple to its members. Having listened to his testimony, several members came out of the Temple and followed Lee. With them, Lee founded his own separate organization, Shincheonji (“New Heaven and New Earth”) on March 14, 1984. Since then, Lee continued to expose the corruption of the Temple and what he believed to be the destructive role performed by the Stewardship Education Center. Finally, the Stewardship Education Center closed its doors in 1990.

All these events, according to Shincheonji, were not coincidental, and represented the fulfillment of key prophecies in the *Book of Revelation* (Lee 2014, 176–278). The Cheonggye Mountain in Gwacheon, Shincheonji argues, is the location where these prophecies were physically fulfilled, and for this reason God commanded Lee to join the Tabernacle Temple. As foretold in the Book of Revelation, first seven stars and seven lampstands (corresponding to the seven angels of the seven churches, *Revelation* 1:20: the seven leaders of the Tabernacle, whose representative was Yoo) appeared, then the heretic “Nicolaites” (*Revelation* 2:6 and 15: those in the Tabernacle Temple who corrupted the doctrine), seven destroyers (the Presbyterian pastors, some of them associated with the Stewardship Education Center, or the destroyers of the Tabernacle from outside), led by “a beast coming out of the sea” (*Revelation* 13), a “great prostitute” (*Revelation* 17: Tak Myeong Hwan as the head of the Center), and a “chief destroyer” (*Revelation* 13 and 17: Oh Pyeong Ho, the destroyer of the Tabernacle from inside, described as “the beast coming out of the earth” of *Revelation* 13 and the “eighth king” of *Revelation* 17). Finally, the “one who overcomes” manifested himself (*Revelation* 2–3: Lee), fought and was victorious over the Nicolaites and the chief destroyer, and became the “promised pastor of the New Testament” Jesus had announced (according to Shincheonji’s interpretation of *Revelation* 12 and 22:16). As the time when the new heaven and the new earth (Shincheonji) were created, 1984 according to the movement also

represents the year when the universe completed its orbit and returned to its point of origin (see Kim and Bang 2019, 212).

The first temple of Shincheonji was opened in June 1984 in Anyang, Gyeonggi Province, South Korea. The beginnings of the new church were not easy. Branch churches were opened between 1984 and 1986 in Busan (now Busan Metropolitan City), Gwangju (now a Metropolitan City, then in South Jeolla Province), Cheonan (South Chungcheong Province), Daejeon (now a Metropolitan City, then in South Chungcheong Province) and in the Seongbuk district of Seoul. However, the total membership in 1986 did not exceed 120 (Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 8).

A key event for the expansion of Shincheonji was the establishment of Zion Christian Mission Center in Seoul in June 1990. Members started being prepared through courses and exams. The first graduation ceremony, in 1991, involved twelve graduates. In South Korea, the work progressed through the territorial division of the members into Twelve Tribes, formally established in 1995. The South Korean tribes were also assigned responsibility for missions abroad, which led to the inauguration of the first church in a Western country in 1996, in Los Angeles, the first in Europe, in Berlin, in 2000, the first in Australia, in Sydney, in 2009, and the first in Africa, in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2012.

In 1999, the headquarters were moved from Anyang to Gwacheon, an area with great spiritual and prophetic significance in Shincheonji's theology. Shincheonji became also known to the public through the activities of the Shincheonji Mannam Volunteer Organization (established in 2003) and the Shincheonji National Olympiads, started in 1993. By 2007, membership had reached 45,000, and the growth accelerated in subsequent years. According to the movement's own statistics, there were 120,000 members in 2012, 140,000 in 2014, 170,000 in 2016, and 200,000 in 2018 (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2019a, 8).

This growth could not go unnoticed from mainline Christian churches, particularly because most new members of Shincheonji were converted from among their flocks. They started increasingly vocal campaigns against Shincheonji, and 2003 saw the first cases of deprogramming (see Fautré, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

Controversies, however, did not stop Shincheonji's growth, nor the development of its peace and humanitarian activities. In May 2012, Chairman Lee conducted his first World Peace Tour. On May 25, 2013, he proclaimed a "Declaration of World Peace," and Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL), an NGO also including non-members of Shincheonji, was incorporated (Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light 2018). One of the main events HWPL organized was the HWPL World Peace Summit in Seoul, on September 18, 2014. On March 14, 2016, the Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW) was proclaimed. In 2017, HWPL was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Chairman Lee continued to conduct world tours and visiting heads of states, religious leaders, and chiefs of international organizations (see Lee 2018; Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

For several years, Lee was accompanied in his tours by Ms. Kim Nam Hee, a close disciple whom critics argued may become his "successor" in leading the movement. Shincheonji, however, dismissed these as mere rumors, and stated that there are no projects for electing a successor of Chairman Lee. In fact, it seems it was Ms. Kim herself who was fueling the rumors. When it became clear that Shincheonji would not accept her as leader or "successor," Ms. Kim started creating her own splinter group, which met with limited success. She was expelled from Shincheonji in January 2018, and had to face a trial at the Seoul Central District Court, on charges of embezzling 1.4 billion won from the Shincheonji-owned SMV Broadcasting and occupying the broadcasting station by force. On July 26, 2019, the Seoul Central District Court sentenced her to two years in prison, with three years of probation, for embezzlement. Some congregation members of Shincheonji also accused her of having fraudulently collected 16 billion won from church devotees. When the coronavirus crisis hit, Ms. Kim emerged as one of the most vocal critics of Shincheonji, accusing Lee of all sort of wrongdoings while conveniently ignoring her own judicial misadventures.

Shincheonji's Theology: An Overview

Shincheonji insists that, strictly speaking, it does not have a "doctrine," as doctrines are created by humans while Shincheonji's teachings are all found in the

Bible. The Bible is interpreted allegorically and through the method historians of Christianity call “typology,” where events of the Old Testament are considered as “types” to which parallel “antitypes” correspond in the New Testament. Shincheonji believes that, although the Bible records historical facts, prophecies are expressed through parables. These prophecies are the promises that will be fulfilled in the future. Shincheonji teaches that, when the prophecies are physically fulfilled, the true meaning of the parables can be understood (Shincheonji 2019b, 8). For example, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden were not real trees, but symbols referring to two types of pastors and spirits working with them, coming respectively from God and Satan.

Regarding the content, the Bible according to Shincheonji is divided into history, moral instruction, prophecy, and fulfillment. Shincheonji teaches that promised future events in the Bible are announced in prophecies, and these prophecies are presented in parables. When the events develop according to the prophecies, the true meaning of the parables becomes known. According to Shincheonji, there is a consistency between the Old and the New Testament. The prophecies in the Old Testament were fulfilled during Jesus’ first coming, and the prophecies of the New Testament are fulfilled during the Second Coming. The Second Coming is today, and the fulfillment of the New Testament prophecies is Shincheonji itself.

Shincheonji believes that God created both the spiritual and the physical realm. Because in the spiritual realm Satan sinned and separated from God, in the physical realm two seeds, the seed of God and the seed of Satan, were sowed in the heart of humans (Lee 2014, 289–304). “The parable of the two seeds [*Matthew* 13:24–30] is the first parable we should understand out of all the parables Jesus told” (Shincheonji Church of Jesus 2019b, 3), and the two spiritual seeds reappear through the whole of human history. In the Garden of Eden, the two seeds correspond to God, who is the tree of life, and the devil, who is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Lee 2014, 377–83).

In *Daniel* 4, the evil King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is also described as a tree, and represents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, while God’s chosen people represents the tree of life (Lee 2014, 379–80). In the Gospels, Jesus is the tree of life, the true vine (*John* 15:1–5), and the Pharisees are the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the Lord's Prayer, whose interpretation is also crucial for Shincheonji (Lee 2014, 314–23), Christians ask God that his “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (*Matthew* 6:10). God's will is done in heaven, but after Adam's sin, it was not done on earth. God acted on earth for the restoration of his will through several providential figures or “pastors,” including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. A scheme of salvation (through a covenant with God) after betrayal and destruction was repeated throughout the different eras. Among the people God chooses, some betray and destroy his covenant until a new covenant is fulfilled (Lee 2014, 55–6).

Shincheonji views the Bible as a succession of covenants between God and groups identified as the “recipients” of each covenant. The covenant God established with the Israelites in the era of the Old Testament was not faithfully kept by the recipients. God thus changed the recipients of the covenant, substituting the Physical Israelites with the Spiritual Israelites (i.e. the Christians) in the new covenant that was established by Jesus. Today, Christians need to keep the new covenant made with Jesus' blood (*Luke* 22:14–20) and join the New Spiritual Israel.

Jesus saved humans from their sins by carrying the cross (*Matthew* 1:21). God's spirit came and dwelt with Jesus. At the first coming of Jesus, the Physical Israel came to an end and was replaced by the Spiritual Israel. However, Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot (just as one of the Twelve Tribes, Dan, had betrayed the Physical Israel), and, after Jesus left this earth and ascended to heaven, his message was gradually betrayed by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Shincheonji interprets *John* 9:4–5 as predicting that the world will become dark as long as the “promised pastor” working with God is not present on earth. Shincheonji teaches that the New Testament and the Book of Revelation prophesy that the promised pastor will come, overcome the false pastors representing the group led by Satan (the “Nicolaites” of *Revelation* 2 and 3), and establish the third Israel, the New Spiritual Israel.

The promised pastor of the New Testament, however, could only appear after a figure, or figures, performing the role of John the Baptist would manifest themselves, and after a new process of betrayal and destruction (*2 Thessalonians* 2:1–4). Shincheonji teaches that the events prophesied in the Book of Revelation were physically fulfilled in Korea in the 20th century (Lee 2014, 176–278). The role of John the Baptist was performed (at the second coming of Jesus) by the

seven messengers of the Tabernacle Temple, the seven lampstands (*Revelation* 1:20), holding lamps that burned in the night for a time until the promised pastor came. As mentioned earlier, according to Shincheonji, the betrayal prophesied in different books of the New Testament (*2 Thessalonians* 2:1–4; *Matthew* 8:11–12; *Matthew* 24:12), in addition to the Book of Revelation, was fulfilled through the corruption of the Tabernacle Temple, and Oh Pyeong-Ho was the chief destroyer who persuaded many in the Tabernacle to receive the mark of the Beast (*Revelation* 13), i.e. the false teachings of the mainline Christian churches.

At that time, just when Satan's Nicolaites had invaded the tabernacle where the seven messengers worked (*Revelation* 2 and 3), "one who overcomes" appeared, defeated Satan's pastor, the destroyer, and received authority from God and Jesus as the promised pastor. He received an opened book from an angel coming from Heaven (*Revelation* 10) after Jesus had broken the seven seals (*Revelation* 6 and 8) of the sealed book of *Revelation* 5, which corresponds to the sealed book mentioned by prophet Isaiah (*Isaiah* 29:9–12). The scroll is now open, and the promised pastor can testify the words of prophecy recorded in the book and their physical fulfillment.

The promised pastor of the New Testament that Shincheonji announces is Chairman Lee. This teaching is often misunderstood by critics, who claim that Shincheonji regards Chairman Lee as God or Jesus. This is not the case. Chairman Lee is regarded as a man, not as God, although in the last days God works through Chairman Lee, who is the pastor and teacher announced by the prophecies of the New Testament, serves as the "advocate" for humankind, and ushers in the Kingdom of God (Lee 2014, 78–85). In *John* 14:16–17 and 26, the "advocate" is the Holy Spirit. This, Shincheonji teaches, refers to a "spiritual advocate" whom Jesus sends to earth in the last days. However, the "spiritual advocate" works and speaks through a physical advocate (*John* 14:17), i.e. Chairman Lee. Shincheonji teaches that Jesus was also the physical advocate at his first coming, as he worked with the Holy Spirit, and indicates *Ezekiel* 1–3 as prophecy and *1 John* 2:1 and *John* 17:8 as fulfillment.

Having conquered the evil Nicolaites, the promised pastor established the new heaven and new earth (Shincheonji) as the New Spiritual Israel, and restored the Twelve Tribes. From the new Twelve Tribes, 144,000 saints (*Revelation* 7:2–8 and 14:1–5), the sealed 12,000 from each tribe, will participate in the "first resurrection," unite with the souls of the martyrs who will descend from Heaven,

and reign on earth with Jesus for 1,000 years as priests and kings. The return of the martyrs is not intended as a sort of “possession” of humans by the martyrs’ souls. The martyrs will resurrect in spiritual, heavenly bodies (*I Corinthians* 15) and will reign together with the 144,000 saints in a family relationship of sort.

Today, Shincheonji has more than 144,000 members. However, it was anticipated that some would betray and form their own “apostate sects.” Some tribes have not yet completed their quotas of 12,000 “priests.” And not all members of Shincheonji will be part of the 144,000. Some will belong to the “Great White Multitude” (*Revelation* 7:9–10). Satan “will be locked up during the 1,000 years, but he will be set free again when the 1,000 years are over,” although “those inside the holy city [Shincheonji] will not be harmed” (Lee 2014, 141). After the 1,000 years and this final temptation, Satan and those corrupted by him will be thrown into hell (*Revelation* 20:7–10), while those belonging to the seed of God will live forever in the new heaven and new earth.

Prophecies, Shincheonji claims, indicate that the promised pastor will not die and will enter the millennial Kingdom of God with his body, together with many others who are alive today and will survive until the Millennium will come. However, when asked what would happen if Chairman Lee, who turned 89 in 2019, will die, Shincheonji members simply answer that everything will happen according to the will of God, who until now has fulfilled every promise he made.

Shincheonji’s Ritual Life

Shincheonji’s services are offered twice a week, on Wednesday and Sunday. Shincheonji members kneel during the services, therefore, there are no chairs (except for the elderly and infirm) in their churches. This is, of course, not unique to Shincheonji: mosques and Hindu or Buddhist temples normally do not have chairs or pews. Churches are often located in large buildings where other floors serve different purposes. This happens both because securing government permission for Shincheonji places of worship is difficult, and land prices in some metropolitan areas are extremely high and exceed the financial possibilities of the local congregations.

Devotees wear white shirts (an allusion to *Revelation* 7 and 14) and signs of different colors corresponding to their affiliation to one or another of the Twelve

Tribes (*Revelation* 21:19–20). The services mostly consist of singing hymns and hearing a sermon, often preached by Chairman Lee himself and broadcast all over the world. The themes come from the entire Bible, but the Book of Revelation is emphasized.

Once a month, a Wednesday meeting includes the sharing of information about Shincheonji's main activities in the month. Once a year, a General Assembly reports on the year's activities in Shincheonji and includes a statement about the church's finances.

Special services are held four times during the year, for Passover (January 14), the Feast of the Tabernacles (July 15), the Feast of Ingathering (September 24), and for commemorating the day when the church was founded in 1984 (March 14).

Shincheonji does not hold events celebrating Christmas or Easter, as it believes they are not appropriate celebration in the time of Jesus's second coming. Rather than celebrating Jesus' birth, it is time to greet Jesus at his second coming. Furthermore, instead of celebrating Jesus' resurrection, it is now time to participate in the "first resurrection." Shincheonji believes that its teachings reveal the true meaning of Christmas and Easter, making their celebration unnecessary.

Joining the Tribes: Courses and Exams

Shincheonji regards itself as the only church where one enters not through baptism, but by completing a Bible study course (for which it refers to *Revelation* 22:14). This is an extremely serious matter for the members. They should follow through Zion Christian Mission Center, across all South Korea and abroad, a course of at least six months divided in beginners', intermediate, and advanced stages, and prepare for the exams. The courses can now be followed also via Internet, in different languages.

The exams, in written form, are uniformly described by members as difficult and severe. They consist of three questionnaires with a total of 300 questions about the *Book of Revelation*. It is not uncommon to repeat them several times (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2018). On average, women score better than men. The highest scores for age

cohorts are by those in their 40s, but there are cases when students older than 80 graduated with a high score (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2018:54–5). The graduation is celebrated in style, as the graduates are regarded as “walking Bibles,” ready even for the harshest missionary fields. Although there are few full-time missionaries, each Zion graduate is expected to devote some time to proselytization activities.

All the organization of Shincheonji is articulated through the Twelve Tribes, each with a tribe leader: John, Peter, Busan James, Andrew, Thaddeus, Philip, Simon, Bartholomew, Matthew, Matthias, Seoul James, Thomas. The Twelve Tribes oversee 128 churches in 29 countries (71 churches in South Korea, 57 overseas). As mentioned earlier, missions outside South Korea are also distributed among the various Korean tribes.

Shincheonji’s rapid growth largely happened by converting members of other Christian churches. They reacted by accusing Shincheonji of “sheep stealing,” “heresy,” and being a “cult” (see e.g. Kim 2016). South Korea is a country where old stereotypes about “cults” survive, promoted by both secular media and conservative and fundamentalist Christian churches.

Apart from “heresy,” an accusation liberally traded between Christians since the times of the Apostles, Shincheonji has been accused of dissimulation and “brainwashing.” The idea that new religious movements use “brainwashing” has been debunked decades ago by Western scholars of new religious movements (Richardson 1996, 2014, 2015), but is still used by popular media and seems to maintain supporters among Korean mainline Christian churches. Because they were “brainwashed,” opponents of new religious movements claimed in the 20th century in North America and Europe, “cultists” needed to be “deprogrammed,” i.e. kidnapped, confined, and submitted to intensive anti-cult indoctrination (Bromley and Richardson 1983). By the end of the 20th century, deprogramming had been declared illegal in most Western countries (Richardson 2011). It survived for some years in Japan, until courts there reached the same conclusions. The only democratic country where deprogramming is still largely practiced is Korea, and Shincheonji’s members account for the largest cohort of victims (Fautré, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

The issue of dissimulation reemerged often during the coronavirus crisis. Indeed, Shincheonji does admit that Christians and others invited to its meetings are not immediately told that the organizer is Shincheonji, that some of their

street stalls do not use the name Shincheonji, and that members do attend incognito meetings and services of other churches, hoping to make friends there and invite them to Shincheonji courses. The movement justifies this by explaining that opponents of Shincheonji spread derogatory information through seminars organized by conservative and fundamentalist Christian churches and media outlets, thus causing a vicious circle. Because of the media slander and conservative-fundamentalist propaganda, few would attend events if the name Shincheonji would be mentioned, as the movement is described negatively as problematic to society. In turn, the fact that the name of the church is not immediately advertised is used by critics to claim Shincheonji is a “cult” that practices “dissimulation.”

There is also, Shincheonji claims, a Biblical justification for this behavior. Apostle Paul in *1 Thessalonians* 5:2 prophesied that at his second coming Jesus will come “as a thief in the night,” which Shincheonji interprets to the effect that the harvesting will be very difficult due to organized opposition, which suggests a cautious approach. And it is also true that introducing religious movements on the streets, particularly when they have been slandered by the media, without disclosing their name or by presenting first their non-religious cultural activities, is comparatively common in South Korea and not unique to Shincheonji.

Be it as it may be, in these times of quick access to information via the Internet, alternative names are easily connected to Shincheonji through a simple two-minute Google search. Opponents claim that most converts to Shincheonji are “deceived” into joining it. They insist that they did not know they were going to a Shincheonji meeting the firsts times they were invited to a Bible study course. However, even those who accepted to attend a service or meeting without realizing the organizer was Shincheonji, obviously realized which religious movement they had encountered once they started listening more carefully to sermons and messages. By the time they “joined” Shincheonji, which happens after completing the courses and passing the exam, they obviously *did* understand what organization they were joining. It remains that the “covert” proselytization strategy offers continuous ammunition to the critics, and Shincheonji is now increasingly switching to “open evangelism,” mentioning the name Shincheonji in its invitations and activities.

Although the threat of deprogramming is a serious problem for Shincheonji members in South Korea, the international protest against the practice, before

the COVID-19 epidemics hit South Korea and the movement, was growing (see CAP-LC and others 2019; U.S. Department of State 2019), and it was becoming difficult for South Korean authorities to ignore it. While the coronavirus crisis, discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, may change the situation, the international attention remains high on possible violation of Shincheonji's religious freedom in South Korea (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020, 2–3). Whether the massive anti-Shincheonji campaigns connected with the epidemics will be able to slow its growth, is something that remains to be seen.

APPENDIX – SHINCHEONJI: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1931 (September 15): Lee Man Hee was born at Punggak-myeon, Hyeonri-ri, Cheongdo District, North Gyeongsang Province, Korea (now South Korea).
- 1946: Lee was among the first graduates of Punggak Public Elementary School after the Japanese left Korea.
- 1950–53: Lee served in the South Korean Army's 7th Infantry Division during the Korean War.
- 1957–67: Lee participated in the religious activities of the Olive Tree movement.
- 1967: Having left the Olive Tree, Lee joined another Korean Christian new religious movement, the Tabernacle Temple, in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi Province.
- 1979–83: Lee repeatedly wrote letters to the leaders of the Tabernacle Temple, denouncing the corruption in the movement and urging them to repent. As a result, he was threatened and beaten.
- 1984 (March 14): After leaving the Tabernacle Temple, Lee founded Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony.
- 1984 (June): The first Shincheonji temple was opened in Anyang, Gyeonggi Province, South Korea.

- 1986: Branch churches were established across South Korea. Shincheonji counted some 120 members.
- 1990 (June): The Zion Christian Mission Center was established in Seoul.
- 1993: Missionary activity was started in China. The first Shincheonji National Olympiad was organized in Seoul.
- 1995: The Twelve Tribes of Shincheonji were formally organized.
- 1996: The first church in the West was inaugurated in Los Angeles.
- 1999: Headquarters were moved from Anyang to Gwacheon.
- 2000: The first church in Europe was inaugurated in Berlin, Germany.
- 2003: Mannam Volunteer Organization was established.
- 2003: First cases of deprogramming of Shincheonji members in South Korea.
- 2007: Shincheonji membership reached 45,000.
- 2007 (October 12): Shincheonji member Ms. Sun Hwa-kim (1959–2007) was killed by her husband in connection with her attempted deprogramming.
- 2012: The first church in Africa was inaugurated in Cape Town, South Africa. Worldwide membership reached 120,000.
- 2012 (May): Chairman Lee conducted his first World Peace Tour.
- 2013 (May 25): Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) was established. The Declaration of World Peace was proclaimed.
- 2014 (September 18): HWPL organized the HWPL World Peace Summit in Seoul.
- 2016 (March 14): The Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW) was proclaimed in Seoul by HWPL.
- 2017: HWPL was granted special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).
- 2018 (January 9): Shincheonji member Ms. Gu Ji-in (1992–2018) died, eight days after having been hospitalized during her second attempted deprogramming.
- 2018 (January 28): More than 120,000 gathered in Seoul and other Korean cities to protest deprogramming and the death of Ms. Gu.

2018: Worldwide Shincheonji membership reached 200,000.

2019 (June 20): A statement asking South Korea to put an end to the deprogramming of Shincheonji members was submitted by the NGO CAP-LC at the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council and published on the United Nations' Web site. An oral statement followed on July 3.

2020 (February 18): A Shincheonji female member from Daegu, South Korea, which had been hospitalized after a car accident on February 7, diagnosed with a common cold, and sent home, was tested and identified as the "Patient 31," infected with COVID-19. In the meantime, she had attended Shincheonji services, setting in motion a chain of events that led to the infection of thousands of her co-religionists, and to an unprecedented assault against Shincheonji by opponents and some politicians.

2020 (March 2): Shincheonji founder Lee Man Hee held a press conference, at which he apologized for possible mistakes and delays in supplying information to the government and promised ongoing full cooperation.

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