



# diritto & religioni

**Semestrale**  
**Anno XV - n. 1-2020**  
**gennaio-giugno**

ISSN 1970-5301

**29**



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PELLEGRINI  
EDITORE**

# Diritto e Religioni

Semestrale  
Anno XV – n. 1-2020  
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Tel. 0984 795065 – Fax 0984 792672  
E-mail: info@pellegrinieditore.it

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Autorizzazione presso il Tribunale di Cosenza.

Iscrizione R.O.C. N. 316 del 29/08/01

ISSN 1970-5301

# *Coronavirus and Religious Minorities, between Witch-Hunt and Scapegoating: The case of Shincheonji in the Republic of Korea*

## *Coronavirus e Minoranze Religiose, tra Caccia alle Streghe e Capro Espiatorio: Il Caso Shincheonji nella Repubblica di Corea*

ALESSANDRO AMICARELLI

### RIASSUNTO

*Shincheonji è un nuovo movimento religioso in Corea del Sud, che, per lungo tempo, è stato accusato di lavaggio del cervello e assoggettato a deprogrammazione. La pandemia del Covid-19 ha causato l'intensificazione del pregiudizio e della persecuzione nei confronti del gruppo e dei suoi membri fino a raggiungere un livello senza precedenti. Shincheonji è stata accusata di essere responsabile della diffusione dell'infezione e di aver causato il disastro da pandemia in Corea del Sud.*

*Notizie false create ad hoc, e l'attività di lobbying svolta da parte delle organizzazioni anti-sette hanno tentato di provocare la messa al bando del gruppo in Corea del Sud. Un Libro Bianco ha fatto luce sugli avvenimenti per distinguere i fatti dalla fantasia.*

### PAROLE CHIAVE

*Shincheonji, Repubblica di Corea, Covid-19 -Coronavirus, Minoranza Religiosa, Persecuzione, Liste di Proscrizione, Fake News (Notizie False), Falsificazione della Realtà, Organizzazioni Anti-sette, Caccia alle Streghe, Arresto di membri di minoranze, Libertà Religiosa, Diritti Umani, Diritto alla Verità, Libro Bianco su Shincheonji*

### ABSTRACT

*Shincheonji is a new religious movement in South Korea, which, for long time, has been accused of brainwashing and has been victim of deprogramming. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the prejudice and persecution of the group and its members to an unprecedented level. Shincheonji was accused of being responsible for spreading the infection and causing the pandemic disaster in South Korea. Fabrication of fake news and the lobbying by anti-cult organisations have tried to ban the group in South Korea. A White Paper has shed some light to sort facts from fiction.*

KEY WORDS

*Shincheonji, Republic of Korea, Covid-19, Coronavirus, Religious Minority, Persecution, Lists of Proscription, Fake News, Fabrications, Anti-cult Organisations, Witch-hunt, Arrest of minority members, Religious Freedom, Human Rights, Right to Truth, White Paper on Shincheonji*

The coronavirus Covid-19 has turned the world upside down, it has created panic, and activated survival mechanisms in the world's population.

Scenes of consumers stockpiling, sometimes inexplicably, have characterised the lives of many in different countries around the world.

Together with the fight for survival, we have witnessed and continue to witness the search for the responsible or suspect for causing of the pandemic, which recalls the witch hunt against plague-spreaders discussed in the novel "The Betrothed" (*"I Promessi Sposi"*) by Alessandro Manzoni.

Recently, China accused the United States of causing the pandemic, while the United States, along with many other states, has accused China, and so on in a continual bounce of responsibility, while the world questions who actually caused the pandemic and where it really originated.

The accusations have also been raised at local level, with accusations levelled at individuals or against groups, including religious groups.

So there have been attacks against Jewish Orthodox groups in the United States and elsewhere, and Islamic communities and individual Muslims, for instance in India. Roma communities in some countries have been targeted, and above all there have been attacks against a minority religious community in the Republic of Korea, accused of having triggered the mechanism that caused the coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic, the *Shincheonji* religious community. *Shincheonji* was singled out as a group and made victim of a real defamation campaign on the media based on forgery, a campaign that is still going on.

According to Reuters, the first official case of coronavirus was found in a Chinese woman who arrived in Korea on January 20, 2020. The 31<sup>st</sup> patient, "Patient 31," was a member of *Shincheonji*.

She was originally accused of spreading the coronavirus after being contaminated by a fellow believer who attended a religious meeting organised by the *Shincheonji* community in Wuhan.

That alleged religious meeting in China, however, never took place because of the well-known positions of the Chinese government on religious matters, and specifically because of the firm opposition against *Shincheonji*

and other groups in the country.

It is true, however, that a total of 88 Chinese members of *Shincheonji*, travelled from China to Korea from December 1, 2019, but none of them came from Wuhan.

In order to collaborate with the Korean institutions, *Shincheonji*'s organisation made available to the authorities a list containing the names of all its members, and in particular those who had travelled between China and Korea, showing great responsibility towards the country and the national authorities.

No one can prove when and how Patient 31 contracted the coronavirus and how she spread it, but the certain element is that some degree of responsibility could be ascribed to the *Saerongan Korean Medicine Hospital* where Patient 31 had been hospitalised after a minor traffic accident on February 7, 2020, and where she developed a strong cold which, was however attributed to the current of air caused by a broken window in her hospital room.

The main points of this issue are, in our view, two; first, whether Patient 31 refused to get tested for the coronavirus when she was in hospital, as later claimed by hospital staff, which she strongly denies and there is no evidence to the contrary, and the second point is how *Shincheonji* reacted to the news of Patient 31's infection.

Given that she had not been tested at the hospital, between February 7 till February 18, when she was actually diagnosed positive to Covid-19, Patient 31, completely unaware that she was infected and that she could infect others spent 11 days in her town, Daegu, in total tranquillity and normally attended some religious meetings, where unfortunately she infected other members of *Shincheonji*. This set in motion a chain of unfortunate events, leading to thousands of *Shincheonji* members being infected.

The meetings she attended however do not include the funeral of the founder's brother, a large national event which she could not attend, despite low-level gossip speculations according to which she attended it even though there was no evidence of this, as lately confirmed.

Responsibly, as soon as it was confirmed that Patient 31 was positive, the *Shincheonji* community ordered the immediate closure of all *Shincheonji* centres and places of worship in Daegu and progressively in the rest of the country and also abroad, inviting its members to self-isolation.

The political significance of the *Shincheonji* case in Korea, and of the struggle against the group by some militant organisations, such as the National Association of the Victims of *Shincheonji* Church, has also to be noted.

On February 19 the Korean President Moon Jae-in himself intervened in *Shincheonji*'s case, asking to get its membership lists and anti-cult groups, often linked to churches of fundamentalist tradition, took advantage of this

situation by calling for the immediate dissolution of the *Shincheonji* organisation in Korea with an increase in fabrications of unfounded accusations that were also spread by organisations linked to non-fundamentalist churches.

During this pandemic, anti-*Shincheonji* sentiments in Korea were also fuelled and accentuated by members of the government, in particular by the Minister of Justice (*sic!*) who, while stating that there was no evidence that would justify the dissolution of the organisation in the country, however, citing a poll that indicated that most of the South Korean respondents were opposed to *Shincheonji*, she wished a ban on the organisation in Korea, with good peace for the primacy of law and religious freedom and other fundamental freedoms.

It's clear that in addition to being accused of spreading the coronavirus in Korea and of not collaborating with the authorities, *Shincheonji* was also victimised and intimidated by anti-cult organisations and even, in some way, by public officials.

The reality is that *Shincheonji* has reacted to the accusations and threats in a responsible manner, for example by promptly closing all of its centres, banning all activities and meetings, and actively collaborating with institutions, despite the unconcealed threat of a ban.

When President Moon Jae-in himself asked to get a list of members of *Shincheonji*, the organisation immediately took action to compile the list by providing it to the authority on 25 February, after receiving assurances, due to the fear that these lists could be used as lists of proscription against its members or for a ruthless fight against the organisation.

Despite the early cooperation of *Shincheonji* with the institutions, it was still accused of not collaborating and even of lying to and opposing the institutions, and the pretext for saying so was a manual, that came out at some point, explaining how to interact with public authorities without disclosing one's membership in *Shincheonji*, which however was not the work of the church but of a single member of the church, against whom the church itself, among other things, took action by disapproving the text.

Following the revision of the list of members handed over on February 25, the authorities complained that the number of faithful on the list was too low compared to the official statistics reported by *Shincheonji* in its religious literature, thus accusing the group of lying to institutions.

The management explained that the list provided did not include the international members of the group, but only the Korean members as requested by the authorities, and that the list did not include the "students", namely those who have approached the group but are not officially members. The complete list, including the "students", was delivered two days later, on February 27, after the government reassured the group that the confidentiality of the data



would be respected and that the lists would not be used against actual members and students.

Soon after, *Shincheonji* was asked to provide a list of properties, which the State would be able to access by itself without having to make such a request, and so the organisation provided a list showing 1,100 properties, but was then accused of providing an incomplete and inaccurate list and of intentionally doing so; after clarifying the nature of the content required to be included in the list, the community provided a new list containing this time 1,903 properties.

Of course, there is no evidence that the group had intentionally provided imprecise or inaccurate data, while it is quite understandable that there may be inaccuracies or mistakes in a list of 1,100 properties or 1,903 properties as in the new list – which also included other assets, whether rented or just used by the community, while owned by some of its members – especially when such a list is produced, on demand, within a few hours, more than ever in an inquisitional environment such as the one described above.

In Daegu, in June 2020, the leader and several members of *Shincheonji* were accused of having supplied a local list of members (before *Shincheonji* supplied a national list) that include intentional omissions, and arrested. They deny that omissions, if they were there, were intentional. *Shincheonji* is also investigated for tax and zoning violations, and for health, zoning, or tax reasons almost all its churches in South Korea have been closed, and there is no indication that they will be reopened anytime soon, unless *Shincheonji* prevails in some of the pending lawsuits. At the time of its writing, almost all religious services in South Korea are conducted only via the Internet.

We can therefore say that *Shincheonji* in general has shown consciousness and responsibility in dealing with the coronavirus emergency, closing all of its centres as soon as they learnt that Patient 31 had been tested positive, and also great respect for the institutions by acting promptly to compile the lists requested by the authorities. Also, in June 2020, it has asked all its members who were infected with the virus to offer to donate their blood plasma to local hospitals for scientific research and possible use in therapy and prevention.

*Shincheonji* did the above despite the spirit and climate of persecution against the group, which has been ongoing in Korea for some time, where *Shincheonji* is accused of brainwashing, manipulation and is victim of de-programming (forced conversion) as well as being the victim of many other fantasies artfully created to exacerbate feelings towards the group, often instigated by other Christian groups that do not accept the fact that *Shincheonji* continually attracts a number of conversions in South Korea.

It is paramount that the international community, non-governmental orga-

nisations, human rights activists, scholars, teachers and jurists, and ultimately anyone who cares about the individual freedoms, freedom of choice and religious freedom, take action to end the witch-hunt, the spreader-hunt and the exploitation of lists of minority groups accused of misdeeds, which are often not proven or non-existent at all.

In the case of *Shincheonji*, the intensification of the fabrication of falsehoods towards this group and its members, reinforced in the coronavirus emergency by exploiting human fear and weakness at such a delicate time, suggests the urgent need for prompt action – including by international organisations and countries that are more attentive to the issue of the respect for the right to religious freedom – towards the Republic of Korea to stop hate campaigns, kidnappings for the re-conversion or deprogramming, which is very frequent in that country and which the authorities have historically tolerated as “family or private affairs”, and to stop and prevent the fabrication of lies against *Shincheonji* and other minority groups, rather than being its promoter or at least complicit of anti-cult groups, as sadly demonstrated, on this occasion<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed study on the case of *Shincheonji* and coronavirus, see “Shincheonji and Coronavirus in South Korea: Sorting Fact from Fiction – A White Paper” by Massimo Introvigne, Center for Studies on New Religions, Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers, Rosita Šoryte, International Observatory of Human Rights of Refugees, Alessandro Amicarelli, attorney, European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Marco Respinti, journalist – published by Human Rights Without Frontiers, Belgium and CESNUR, Center for Studies on New Religions, Italy and available at <https://www.cesnur.org/2020/shincheonji-and-covid.htm>