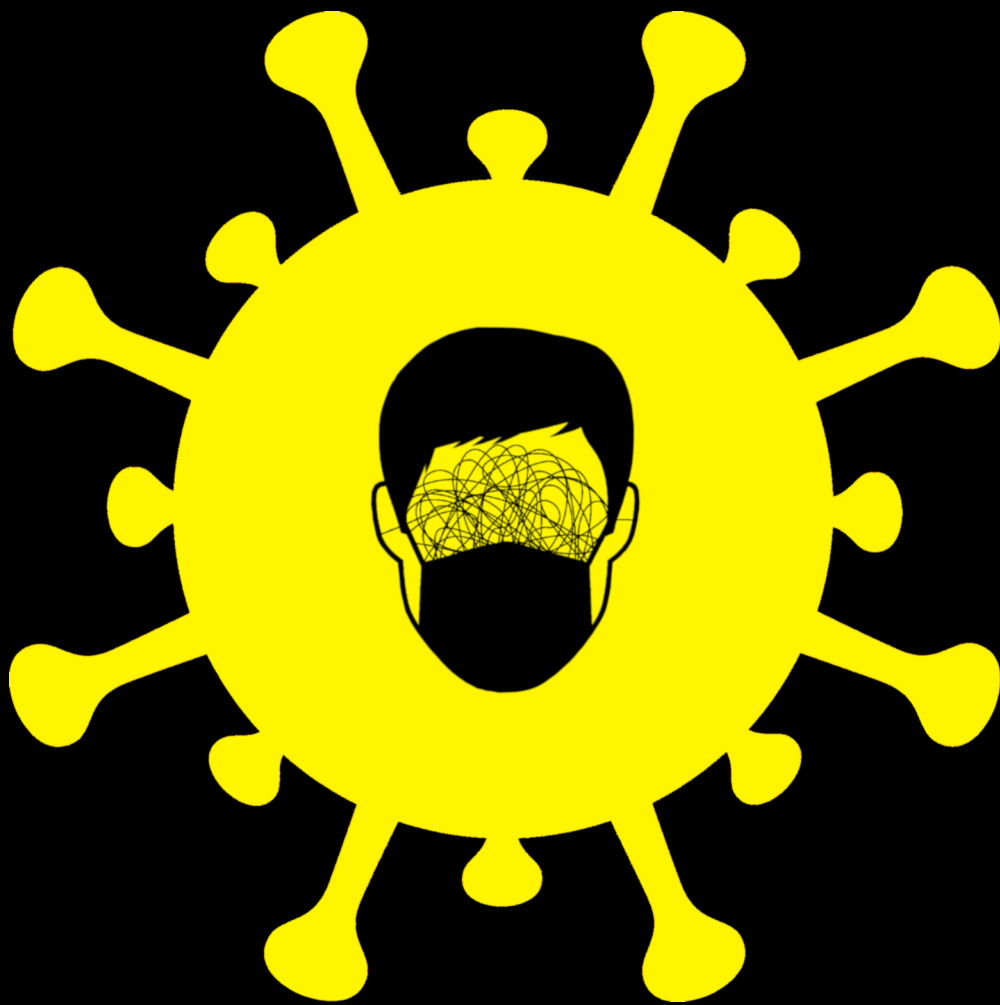


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# **Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World**



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# The Unsettled Church and State: The Case of Shincheonji and Covid-19 in South Korea

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## Abstract:

In February of 2020, news outlets around the world ran stories about how a new millenarian Christian church called The Shincheonji Church of Jesus was at the center of an outbreak of Covid-19 in the South Korean city of Daegu. The South Korean public demanded that the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (hereon referred to as Shincheonji) be held accountable for this public health crisis. Politicians and church leaders swiftly condemned the church and vowed to punish its leaders. Before the church's connections to South Korea's Covid-19 epidemic, Shincheonji had been a source of anxiety within South Korea, particularly in the Protestant community. In this paper, I approach the Covid-19 epidemic as an entry point to identify and examine one of these anxieties. By discussing the anxiety about Shincheonji's success as a millenarian Christian movement, I will demonstrate how Shincheonji is an unsettling force to the South Korean state and its Protestant community.

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**Keywords:** COVID-19, Religion, Christianity, Shincheonji, South Korea

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## Introduction

In February of 2020, news outlets around the world ran stories about how a new millenarian Christian church called The Shincheonji Church of Jesus was at the center of an outbreak of Covid-19 in the South Korean city of Daegu. The South Korean public demanded that the Shincheonji Church of Jesus (hereon referred to as Shincheonji) be held accountable for this public health crisis. Politicians and church leaders swiftly condemned the church and vowed to punish its leaders. Before the church's connections to South Korea's Covid-19 epidemic, Shincheonji had been a source of anxiety within South Korea, particularly in the Protestant community. In this paper, I approach the Covid-19 epidemic as an entry point to identify and examine one of these anxieties. By discussing the anxiety about Shincheonji's success as a millenarian Christian movement, I will demonstrate how Shincheonji is an unsettling force to the South Korean state and its Protestant community.

In the first section of this paper, I briefly introduce Shincheonji and their alleged connections to Covid-19. In the second section, I explain the intertwined nature of Protestant Christianity and the South Korean state to contextualize how Shincheonji is problematic to both Protestantism and the state in South Korea. In the third section, I explore why Shincheonji's growth is unsettling for South Korean Protestantism. To conclude, I reflect on the greater significance of the events surrounding Shincheonji and Covid-19 and offer points for further consideration.

## Shincheonji and Covid-19

The Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, which I refer to as Shincheonji from this point forward, is a new South Korean Christian millenarian sect. The word "Shincheonji" is an abbreviation of the phrase "new heaven and new earth" in Korean. The founder, Lee Man-hee, established Shincheonji in 1984 after having previously been a member of another new Christian millenarian sect known as Temple of the Tabernacle. At the time of writing, Shincheonji has an estimated 250,000 members worldwide, with the majority in South Korea (Kim and Bang 2019: 9; Kim 2007: 207-233). Shincheonji members understand that the prophecies contained in Revelation have already been fulfilled in the 20th century in South Korea during Lee Man-hee's life (Introvigne 2020: 6). Since these prophecies have been fulfilled, Shincheonji awaits the arrival of the new heaven and new earth, which cannot occur until humans work with God to create world peace (Šorytè 2020: 29).

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, a Shincheonji member went to a clinic in the city of Daegu after a car accident. She was not tested for Covid-19 and was sent home with an additional diagnosis of a common cold. After leaving the hospital, she attended Shincheonji services in Daegu on February 9<sup>th</sup> and February 16 (Introvigne 2020: 18; Kang 2020: 1). These two services each lasted at least two hours and had over 1000 attendees (Kang 2020: 1, Introvigne et al. 2020.: 10). She went to a hospital and tested positive for Covid-19 on February 18<sup>th</sup>. She became known as "Patient-31" as she had the 31<sup>st</sup> confirmed case of Covid-19 in the country. After her diagnosis, she informed her church, and Shincheonji ceased all church services across the country on February 18<sup>th</sup> (Introvigne et al. 2020.: 10). Patient-31 was identified as a "superspreader," and by March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Korean Center for Disease Control disclosed that 2,418 confirmed cases, which amounted to 57% of all confirmed Sars-CoV-2 cases in the country, were linked to the Shincheonji church in Daegu (Hankook Ilbo, 4 March 2020). At this time, South Korea had the worst outbreak of Covid-19 outside of China, and panic about Shincheonji and its links to Covid-19 rose to a fever pitch across the country.

On February 19<sup>th</sup>, President Moon Jae-in announced that the government needed a complete list of all Shincheonji members' names and addresses so that the Korean Center for Disease Control could test everyone who attended the same services as Patient-31 (Introvigne et al. 2020: 80; Kang 2020: 2). While the government's request to test everyone who attended the same services as Patient-31 was understandable, they also requested the names and addresses of members living abroad and those unable to participate in services as they had not graduated from Shincheonji's required educational program (Introvigne et al. 2020: 81). The request for information about both students and international members likely led Shincheonji's leadership to be suspicious about the true motives of the South Korean government.

After some hesitation, Shincheonji released a list of their South Korean members to the Korean government on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February (Introvigne et al. 2020: 80). Later that same day, Shincheonji's main headquarters in the Gyeonggi province were raided by the provincial governor, Lee Jae-myeong, 40 other public servants and a handful of camera operators and journalists. Governor Lee claimed that this raid was necessary because he suspected that Shincheonji leadership had not provided a complete

membership list and thus was intentionally hiding information critical to the interests of public health from the South Korean government. Although the results of this raid did not indicate any intentional deception, Governor Lee's claims about the fraudulence of Shincheonji's membership list were just part of a wider narrative about Shincheonji and its members as deceptive, secretive, and a danger to South Korean society (Introvigne et al. 2020: 82; Rashid 2020).

Although the start of the Covid-19 epidemic in South Korea was the first time Shincheonji had experienced such widespread international media attention, they had long been the subject of media attention and scrutiny in South Korea. Since the mid-2000s, news and entertainment media, politicians, conservative Protestant theologians, and pastors accused Shincheonji and its members of being secretive, deceptive, and detrimental to South Korean society. These accusations were also usually accompanied by descriptions of Shincheonji as a "cult" or as a "heretical" form of Christianity (Lee 2015; Byeon 2017). The news of Shincheonji's alleged connections to the not-yet-understood SARS-CoV-2 virus, when combined with long-held fears and resentment towards Shincheonji, generated widespread panic among understandably anxious South Koreans.

## Protestantism and the South Korean State

To understand why Shincheonji, a minority religion, is so unsettling to both the South Korean state and Protestant community, it is necessary to demonstrate their intertwined nature, particularly because Protestantism has been an important force in the South Korean state since its inception. When explaining the present impact of the historical ties between the South Korean state and Protestantism, sociologist Jin-heon Jung suggests that scholars view this history as "compressed layers" embedded into cultural consciousness and experienced by South Korean people today, not just as background information (Jung 2015: 258). Protestantism is an integral part of the South Korean state because it is embedded into these "compressed layers" of South Korea's history. After Protestantism arrived in Korea in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Christian communities engaged in nationalist and independence movements against the Japanese imperial regime. (Kim 2005: 315-317). After liberation from the Japanese imperial regime and the division of the Koreas in 1945, the US military government invited many Protestant church leaders, primarily Presbyterians and Methodists, to participate in government and hold influential positions (Park 2003: 111). During the First Republic (1948-1960), Christians represented less than 10% of South Korea's population but accounted for 40% of political leadership, including President Rhee Syngman (Park 2007: 1-2). The affinity between Protestants and South Korean politics cemented the connection between Protestantism and the new South Korean state.

The links between South Korean state power and Protestantism only grew stronger in the 1960s and through the 1980s, a period of rapid economic growth and industrialization, commonly referred to as "the miracle on the Han River" (Kim 2006: 319-320). This period saw not only the rapid growth of South Korea's economy but also its Protestant community. In 1960, Protestants made up just 4% of South Korea's population, but by 1997, 20.3% of South Korea's population identified as Protestant Christian (Lee 2005: 330). For some South Korean Protestants, this means that the "miracle on the Han River" was not simply an economic miracle but also a divine one. These Christians argue that while North Korea de-Christianized under Kim Il-Sung's secularization project and became impoverished, the South saw its wealth increase dramatically as Protestantism became more popular (Jung 2015: 259-260).

Nowhere is the legacy of the connection between the South Korean state and Protestant Christianity more visible than in the capital city of Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi province, with 65% of all religiously identifying people being Christians. Seoul is the political, cultural, and financial center of

South Korea, so its large population, wealth, and political power can make it seem as if it represents the whole nation (Han 2015: 134). According to the most recent Korean General Social Survey, as of 2015, 19.7% of South Koreans identify as Protestant, which means that they still represent a minority of the South Korean population (Korean Statistical Information Service 2015). However, the prevalence of Protestant Christianity in Seoul means that although Protestants are a minority in number, they are not necessarily a minority in terms of their power and influence.

## Anxiety Over Shincheonji's Success

One of the reasons Shincheonji may be such an unsettling force is that the church has been a relatively successful millenarian movement. Shincheonji was a small movement for about twenty years but started to grow significantly in the late 2000s. In 2007 Shincheonji had 45,000 members but as of 2019, that number had risen to 250,000 (Introvigne 2020: 7; Choe, 10 March 2020). At the time of writing, there were Shincheonji members in 24 countries, with most of these members in South Korea (Kim and Bang 2019: 7). When Shincheonji's numbers began to increase, so did the distrust of the Protestant community. In 2007, the Korean Christian Broadcasting Service (CBS) began reporting on the "Shincheonji problem" on various internet, radio, and television programmes. That same year, CBS presenter Byeon Sang-wook led the network to create the "Shincheonji Out!" campaign, with the ultimate goal of convincing the government to outlaw Shincheonji (Byeon 2017: 27). The fact that CBS and Byeon launched the "Shincheonji Out!" campaign right after the church experienced notable growth indicates rising anxiety within the broader Protestant community.

One of the common allegations levied against Shincheonji by their critics is that they are "sheep stealers," stating that they stole members from Protestant churches by befriending them and posing as members of mainstream Protestant churches (Šoryté 2020, 24; Tark 2007; 8). While some members may join after befriending a Shincheonji member who attended their church, the accounts of both current and former Shincheonji members tell a more complicated story. Shincheonji members also evangelize through "open acceptance," which involves introducing their friends to Shincheonji and inviting them to join their church (An 2020: 20). In my research, some Shincheonji members have joined the church after a period of "church shopping" or searching for a Bible study (Personal communications on July 21, 2021, and January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022). Shincheonji members also proselytized openly online through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, and personal blogs throughout the pandemic.

The feelings of hurt or betrayal that arise for the leadership and membership of churches when a member of their church chooses to leave to join Shincheonji and other faith communities are understandable. However, whether or not allegations about Shincheonji actively recruiting members within mainstream Protestant churches are true, Shincheonji cannot be held solely responsible for mainstream Protestantism's declining membership. Young South Koreans are increasingly choosing to leave their faith communities and identify as non-religious. The Korean General Social Survey data shows that in 2007, 45% of young South Koreans identified as non-religious, but by 2015 that number had risen to 56% (Song 2019: 2-3). I suspect that for many mainstream Protestants, particularly those already distrustful of Shincheonji, it has been painful to watch Shincheonji's membership grow while increasing numbers of young people leave their churches across the country. As previously discussed, Protestant success and the economic and industrial growth of the state have been so intertwined that a decline in Protestantism may strike many South Korean Protestants as a potentially troubling sign for the spiritual and economic condition of their country.

## Conclusion

Returning to South Korea in February of 2020, the combination of the connections between Covid-19 and Shincheonji and previous anxieties about Shincheonji created the ideal conditions to portray Shincheonji as a danger to the entire South Korean state. Even if the connection between Shincheonji and Covid-19 in South Korea was simply bad-luck, it strengthened the worries of those already wary of Shincheonji that this minority religion was a danger to South Korean society. For Shincheonji members, the backlash against them demonstrated the hostility of the South Korean government and society to their faith.

While Shincheonji is not unique in its experience of being a minority community blamed for spreading Covid-19, this case study contains important points for further consideration. The portrayal of Shincheonji members as a danger to South Korean society, which played out in media coverage, raises questions about what it means to be a good citizen in South Korea. The response of both the state and Protestant community to Shincheonji also illuminates anxieties about the future of South Korea, particularly regarding its changing religious landscape. As previously discussed, South Korea is becoming less Protestant, and there is reason to suspect that the South Korean government and society will be less suspicious of other new Christianities moving forward. For instance, many mainstream Protestant Christian denominations described the Yoido Full Gospel Church's Pentecostal style of worship as heretical or not Christian after its initial founding in 1958, but Yoido Full Gospel Church has now become the largest church in South Korea and is classified safely within the boundaries of Christianity (Kim 2018: 343; Harkness 2015: 336). The South Korean government and society may become less anxious about Shincheonji in the future, but in the meantime, Shincheonji members are left to navigate the double stigma of their religion and its association with Covid-19.

### Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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