

Shincheonji and Religious Policy in Singapore

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I. Introduction

On the 11th of November 2020, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued a press release titled "21 Members of Unregistered Local Chapter of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony Arrested Under the Societies Act."¹ Rendered in the curtness of bureaucratic language, the release indicates the arrest of Shincheonji members by police officers from the Criminal Investigation Department for "allegedly being members of an unlawful society under Section 14(3) of the Societies Act, Chapter 311."²

Of note is the fact that these arrests are the culmination of a 9-month long investigation of the group – in February 2020, five South Korean nationals holding key positions in the Singaporean chapter of Shincheonji (SCJ) were repatriated and the companies the group established, described by the police as "front entities", were dissolved. As the release details,

Members of the local chapter were issued warnings to cease further involvement in SCJ activities, or face further action from the authorities. In spite of the actions taken, the local SCJ chapter has resumed its activities covertly, under the direction of its South Korean parent chapter.³

The ministry's investigation was instigated by the chapter's "deceptive recruitment methods", which are described as "infiltrating and disrupting established Korean churches by using deception and secrecy to trick people into becoming involved with them", exerting "a controlling influence over Christian youths and young adults in Singapore" and "[concealing] its existence from family members and non-SCJ contacts."⁴ As the release concludes,

¹ "21 Members of Unregistered Local Chapter of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony Arrested Under the Societies Act," *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*, 11 November 2021. <<https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/21-members-of-unregistered-local-chapter-of-the-shincheonji-church-of-jesus-the-temple-of-the-tabernacle-of-the-testimony-arrested-under-the-societies-act/>>

² "Shincheonji Church," *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

³ "Shincheonji Church," *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

⁴ "Shincheonji Church," *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

MHA will not allow members of unlawful societies or persons associated with them to threaten Singapore's public safety, peace and good order.⁵

At present, Singapore is the only country to have taken steps to dissolve a Shincheonji chapter altogether. Across the world, the surreptitious tactics of Shincheonji have been criticized by Christian and non-Christian groups. Warnings have been issued by the Church of England, the New Zealand Korean Churches Association, and the Baptist Convention in Manipur, India, among others.⁶

Perhaps the most extensive response to the group came in South Korea itself, where under the pretense of contact tracing and stemming the spread of COVID-19, provincial governments and officials forced the shutting down of Shincheonji gatherings, demanded the release of the names of church members, and dispatched police to ransack the home of the group's leader Lee Man-hee. On February 19, 2020, news spread that a Shincheonji member in Daegu, South Korea, had been infected with COVID-19. She had been erroneously discharged from the hospital after being diagnosed with a cold and was allowed to participate in Shincheonji gatherings. This resulted in thousands of other Shincheonji congregants testing positive for COVID-19, as well as a media and political outcry against the "secretive cult" allegedly responsible for the epidemic's spread in South Korea. As John G. Grisafi has argued, this overblown response was fostered by a broader fear and loathing in South Korea toward groups branded as "cults", particularly given that South Korean authorities unearthed no reasonable evidence that the group was uniquely culpable for spreading the disease. Despite a widespread petition with over a million signatories demanding Shincheonji's dissolution in South Korea, the Moon Administration ultimately demurred.⁷

This paper thus addresses why the Singaporean government moved to dissolve Shincheonji despite its marginal presence in Singapore's religious landscape and the extent to which the South Korean government's response influenced its decision. This paper will first contextualise Shincheonji's activity internationally and in Singapore, with recourse to the tactics and strategies adopted by other new religious groups. Subsequently, this paper will examine Singapore's religious policies and governance, particularly its

⁵ "Shincheonji Church," *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

⁶ Harry Farley and John Bingham, "Exclusive: Churches warned of 'deceptive cult' linked to South Korea infiltrating congregations," *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 December 2016; Lincoln Tan, "Churches on alert of 'dangerous cult' Shincheonji on takeover mission," *New Zealand Herald*, 4 April 2017; Prasanta Mazumdar, "Dangerous Korean cult' Shincheonji sends Christians in Northeast into a tizzy," *The New Indian Express*, 13 August 2019.

⁷ John G. Grisafi, "A Marginal Religion and COVID-19 in South Korea: Shincheonji, Public Discourse, and the Shaping of Religion," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 25, no. 1 (2021): 43.

model of upholding multi-religious harmony by cultivating trust between religious groups. Finally, this paper will argue that it was Shincheonji's failure to build transparency with the Singaporean government, as well as its threat to the mainline Singaporean Christian community and not any other religious groups, that led to its swift expulsion. This paper will also address the role of the Singaporean media in cultivating suspicion toward the group and its tactics, bolstering public sentiment against Shincheonji.

II. Korean Christianity, New Religious Movements, and Shincheonji at home and abroad

As a group with historical links to the Christian church in Korea, Shincheonji's international presence in various countries is not unique. Korean missionaries from both Protestant and Catholic organisations are a formidable presence globally, their ministries ranging from neighboring China and Japan, to parts of Asia and Africa, to 'Christian' Europe and the Americas. The history of Christianity in Korea can be dated to the 16th-century from the arrival of Catholicism, which endured persecution under the Joseon regime for its followers' failure to adhere to Confucian orthopraxy. Subsequently toward the end of the 19th century, the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea.⁸ The first Protestant church was established by Seo Sang-ryun and the first Protestant missionary to enter Korea was Horace Newton Allen in 1884.⁹

Amidst decades of colonization, violence, war, and strife on the Korean Peninsula, both denominations in South Korea have emerged as missionary-sending churches. South Korea is touted as Asia's 'Protestant superpower' and a new force of Christian mission.¹⁰ An article in *Christianity Today* stated. "South Korea sends more missionaries than any country but the U.S. And it won't be long before it is number one."¹¹ In 2013, there were 25,745 Korean missionaries in 169 countries.¹² With regard to the Catholic church, it experienced an explosion in sending missionaries to numerous countries and has

⁸ Don Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 64.

⁹ Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 58-59; Kang Wi Jo, "The Legacy of Horace Newton Allen", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 3 (1996): 125.

¹⁰ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61.

¹¹ Rob Moll, "Mission Incredible: South Korea Sends More Missionaries Than Any Country but the U.S. and It Won't Be Long Before It's Number One," *Christianity Today* 50, no. 3 (2006): 28-35.

¹² Sangmok Shin and Yera Ahn-Park, "53% of Korean Overseas Missionaries are Concentrated in 10 Countries," *Kukmin Daily*, 14 January 2014.

<www.kukmindaily.co.kr/article/view.asp?page=&gCode=7111&arcid=0007936468&code=71111101>

become committed to participating in initiatives related to international development and emergency aid. The number of Korean Catholic missionaries increased from 335 in 1996 to 911 in 2019, covering 80 countries across six continents.¹³

The reasons behind the sheer number of Korean missionaries being dispatched across the world are various and complex, ranging from a glut of trained clergy and the lack of available roles for them in South Korea¹⁴ to the strident proclamation that Korea is uniquely anointed by God to preach the Gospel.¹⁵ What distinguishes Korean missionaries from their predominantly American and European predecessors is the comparative absence of colonial baggage – less animosity is roused toward a Korean face relative to a white face.¹⁶ Within Singapore, Korean missionaries and pastors continue to serve across an array of Christian organizations – mainline denominational churches such as The Methodist Church in Singapore, Korean churches that cater to the resident Korean population, and parachurch organizations such as Youth With A Mission. While a deeper interrogation of the dynamics and factors that have shaped the effectiveness of Korean Protestant and Catholic mission is beyond the scope of this paper, it nevertheless provides a sense of the religious backdrop against which movements such as Shincheonji have emerged and been able to expand internationally.

Christian new religious movements (NRMs) in Korea such as Shincheonji did not emerge until after the 1907 Pyongyang Great Revival Movement. The Korean church began to witness alternative phenomena through such activities as gatherings at “prayer mountains” (기도원, 祈禱院) and “revival meetings” (사경회, 查經會) from the early 1930s to the 1940s.¹⁷ Native congregation leaders in Korea, primarily from Protestant churches, progressively created their own religious figures in the contexts of mysticism, eschatology, and arbitrary interpretations of the Bible.¹⁸ Christian NRMs can thus be considered to have had three waves of origin.

The first wave consists of foreign NRMs that came to Korea in the early 20th century, including Seventh-day Adventism (1905), the Jehovah’s Witnesses (1912), the Salvation Army (1932), the

¹³ Denis WS Kim, “Going Global: The Transformation of the Korean Catholic Church,” *Journal of Korean Religions* 12, no. 1, (April 2021): 7.

¹⁴ Sang-keun Kim, “Sheer Numbers Do Not Tell the Entire Story: The Challenges of the Korean Missionary Movement from an Ecumenical Perspective,” *Ecumenical Review* 57, no. 4 (2005): 463–473.

¹⁵ Timothy S. Lee, *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), 105.

¹⁶ Rebecca Y. Kim, *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

¹⁷ Lee You Na, “The Discourses of Orthodoxy and Heresy in Modern Korean Christianity,” *Religion and Culture* 26 (2014): 10–15.

¹⁸ Kim Heung-Soo, “A History of Christian Heretics in Korea,” *University and Mission* 12 (2007): 9–37.

Pentecostal Movement (1937), and Mormonism (1956).¹⁹ The second wave includes movements that have native Korean origins but were influenced by international Christian NRMs as well as the Korean Presbyterian and Methodist churches. The last wave consists of second-generation Korean Christian NRMs, including Guwonpa (구원파, Salvation Sect), the World Mission Society Church of God (WMSCOG), and Shincheonji (신천지, 新天地). They have emerged as some of the most dynamic grassroots movements in contemporary Korea.²⁰ While native NRMs such as Donghak, Daejonggyo, Won Buddhism, and Jeungsan movements were conservative and nationalistic,²¹ these Christian NRMs taught prophetic and mystical theology from a global perspective, challenging beliefs held by traditional churches.

Relevant Christian NRMs for this discussion include the Unification Church and the World Mission Society Church of God. The Unification Church has roots in Christianity, its original name being “the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity.” However, it added its own sacred writings termed the “Exposition of the Divine Principle” to traditional Christian scriptures and modified various Christian doctrines. For example, the church teaches that Jesus was a chosen individual of God but not God himself. To offer humanity complete salvation, Jesus was supposed to get married and father sinless children, ending the stain of original sin caused by Adam and Eve, the first human beings. However, Jesus was crucified before he could complete his mission. Hence, God sent a second messiah, Sun Myung Moon, to complete the mission Jesus began.²² The Unification Church is no longer a primarily Korean religion; Moon moved to the United States in the mid-1970s and the church now has a stronger presence outside of Korea. Increasingly, it has been overshadowed by Moon’s larger Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.²³ His son, Sean Moon, broke away from the church and now leads an offshoot sect named World Peace and Unification Sanctuary Church in Pennsylvania, which is

¹⁹ David W. Kim and Won-il Bang, “Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji: Three Dynamic Grassroots Groups in Contemporary Korean Christian NRM History,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019).

²⁰ Lee, “The Discourses of Orthodoxy and Heresy in Modern Korean Christianity.”

²¹ Kim Sung-hae, Su Ņng-hye Kim, and James W. Heisig, *Encounters: The New Religions of Korea and Christianity* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, 2008).

²² Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 92.

²³ Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 92.

notorious for involving AR-15 rifles in church ceremonies.²⁴ Like Shincheonji, the original Unification Church was dissolved by the Singaporean government.²⁵

Another religious movement that is active in Singapore is the World Mission Society Church of God. As of 2017, the group has 2.7 million members worldwide. Among its 7,000 churches, 5,600 were established in 175 countries.²⁶ The society's primary teaching stems from an interpretation of Genesis. The word "Elohim", translated as "Gods", is interpreted as the notion that God exists in both a female image, God the Mother, and a male image, God the Father.²⁷ This has developed into the teaching that the Second Coming of Christ is both male and female, with Ahn Sahng-hong as God the Father and Zahng Gil-Jah as God the Mother.²⁸ The society teaches that Ahn restored the lost New Covenant in the Holy Spirit era.²⁹ Its members continue to approach people especially at subway stations in Singapore.

Both the Unification Church and the WMSCOG share various characteristics with Shincheonji, in particular the culmination of biblical prophecy in charismatic Korean leaders. For Shincheonji, this figure is Lee Man-hee. Lee was born in 1931 in North Gyeongsang Province and did not receive any higher education.³⁰ He attributes his knowledge and understanding of the Bible to revelations received from Heaven.³¹ Lee served in the South Korean Army during the Korean War and, when the war ended, settled in Hyeonri-ri as a farmer.³² He later reported experiencing visions and revelations from divine messengers and from Jesus himself. From 1957 to 1967 he participated in the religious activities of the Olive Tree, a Christian NRM founded in 1955 by Park Tae-seon that had an estimated 1.5 million followers at the time.³³ During the 1960s, Park's message moved in a direction that positioned the Olive Tree away from traditional Christianity, claiming he was God incarnate and had a position higher than

²⁴ Tara Isabella Burton "The cultlike church behind a ceremony with AR-15s and bullet crowns, explained," *The Telegraph*, 1 March 2018 <<https://www.vox.com/2018/3/1/17067894/church-bullet-crowns-ar15-world-peace-unification-sanctuary-moonies-moon>>.

²⁵ "Moonies banned: 'Movement prejudicial to public welfare and good order'," *The Straits Times*, 1982.

²⁶ Tark Ji Il, "Christian New Religious Movements in Korea," *University and Mission* 12 (2007): 155-157.

²⁷ Kim and Bang, "Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji."

²⁸ Kim and Bang, "Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji."

²⁹ Kim and Bang, "Guwonpa, WMSCOG, and Shincheonji."

³⁰ Massimo Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", *The Journal of CESNUR* 4, no. 3 (2020), 4.

³¹ *Introduction Materials for Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony* (Gwacheon, South Korea: Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, 2019), 3-4.

³² Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 4-5.

³³ Kim Chang Han, "Towards an Understanding of Korean Protestantism: The Formation of Christian-Oriented Sects, Cults, and Anti-Cult Movements in Contemporary Korea", 2007, University of Calgary, PhD dissertation, 222-223.

Jesus Christ.³⁴ Their numbers decreased, and several senior pastors and laypersons left the Olive Tree, including Lee.

In 1966, under the leadership of Yoo Jae Yul, eight people gathered on the Cheonggye Mountain where they remained for 100 days, guided by the feeling that they were learning the Bible from the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Obeying what they perceived to be God's will, they established the Tabernacle Temple of which Lee was an original member. However, Yoo was arrested for fraud and sentenced to five years in prison in 1976.³⁶ Lee wrote to the group's members denouncing the corruption prevalent in the Temple and called on them to repent.³⁷ As a result, he was repeatedly threatened and beaten until he gave up on trying to reform the Temple.³⁸ In 1980, when General Chun Doo-hwan launched a military coup and became President of South Korea, the government launched an anti-cult campaign known as the "religious purification policy".³⁹ An institution called the Stewardship Education Center was established, created to educate pastors in mainline Christian churches. It joined the "purification" movement and coordinated churches' actions against "cults".⁴⁰ To avoid the consequences of this anti-cult campaign, the Tabernacle appointed Oh Pyeong Ho, an evangelist of the Tabernacle who had a pastoral certificate from the Presbyterian Church, as its new head. Oh introduced the Stewardship Education Center to the Tabernacle, eventually leading to the Tabernacle merging into the Presbyterian Church with its members and assets.⁴¹

Lee continued to visit the Tabernacle Temple as it was in the process of joining the Presbyterian Church but denounced its endemic corruption. Having heard and agreed with his testimony, several members left the Tabernacle and followed Lee. With them, Lee founded his own separate organization, Shincheonji ("New Heaven and New Earth") on March 14, 1984. All these events, according to Shincheonji, represent the fulfilment of key prophecies in the *Book of Revelation*.⁴² The Cheonggye

³⁴ Kim, "Towards an Understanding of Korean Protestantism", 222-223.

³⁵ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 5.

³⁶ "장막성전 교주에 징역 5년을 선고" (Sentenced to Five Years Imprisonment), *Dong-A Ilbo*, 1 March 1976; "장막성전 교주에 집행유예를 선고" (Leader of Tabernacle Temple Sentenced to Probation), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 10 July 1976.

³⁷ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 5.

³⁸ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 5.

³⁹ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 5.

⁴⁰ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 5.

⁴¹ Introvigne, "Shincheonji: An Introduction", 6.

⁴² Lee Man-hee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 2nd English edn. (Gwacheon, South Korea: Shincheonji Press, 2014), 176-278.

Mountain in Gwacheon, Shincheonji argues, is where *Revelation's* prophecies were physically fulfilled, and for this reason God commanded Lee to join the Tabernacle Temple. As foretold in *Revelation*, first seven stars and seven lampstands appeared, corresponding to the seven angels of the seven churches, represented by the seven leaders of the Tabernacle whose representative was Yoo.⁴³ Then the heretic “Nicolaites” (those who corrupted the Tabernacle’s doctrine) and seven destroyers (the Presbyterian pastors, some associated with the Stewardship Education Center, who “destroyed” the Tabernacle from the outside) were led by “a beast coming out of the sea”, a “great prostitute” (the Center’s head Tak Myeong Hwan) and a “chief destroyer” (Oh Pyeong Ho, the Tabernacle’s new head.) Finally, the “one who overcomes”, Lee Man-hee, manifested himself, fought, and was victorious over the Nicolaites and the chief destroyer, becoming the “promised pastor of the New Testament” Jesus had announced.⁴⁴ As the time when the new heaven and new earth, or Shincheonji, were created, 1984 also represents the year the universe completed its orbit and returned to its point of origin.

Shincheonji thus views the Bible as a succession of covenants between God and groups identified as the “recipients” of each covenant.⁴⁵ After Jesus left earth and ascended to heaven, his message was gradually betrayed by Catholic and Protestant churches. Without the arrival of “the promised pastor” on earth through whom God would work, Shincheonji doctrine holds that the world would become dark. Thankfully, Lee Man-hee “manifested” himself as this “promised pastor”. This teaching is often misunderstood by critics, including both the Singaporean media and government, who claim that Shincheonji regards Lee as God or Jesus. Lee is regarded as a man who God will work through in the last days, serving as the “advocate” for humankind, and ushering in the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶ In *John*, while the “advocate” described is the Holy Spirit in Christian doctrine, Shincheonji teaches that this refers to a “spiritual advocate” whom Jesus sends to earth in the last days.⁴⁷ This “spiritual advocate” works and speaks through a physical advocate, Lee.

Having established the new heaven and new earth (Shincheonji) as the New Spiritual Israel, and restored the Twelve Tribes, the tribes’ 144,000 saints (*Revelation* 7:2–8 and 14:1–5), the sealed 12,000 from

⁴³ Lee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 176–278.

⁴⁴ Lee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 176–278.

⁴⁵ Introigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 10.

⁴⁶ Lee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 78–85.

⁴⁷ Lee, *The Creation of Heaven and Earth*, 78–85.

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. Shincheonji’s ideology is thus a millenarian one.

The first temple of Shincheonji was opened in June 1984 in Anyang.⁴⁸ Branch churches were opened between 1984 and 1986 in Busan, Gwangju, Cheonan, Daejeon, and in the Seongbuk district of Seoul. Crucial to Shincheonji’s expansion was the establishment of the Zion Christian Mission Center in Seoul in June 1990.⁴⁹ Members started taking courses and exams, with the first graduation ceremony in 1991 involving twelve graduates.⁵⁰ In South Korea, the work progressed through the territorial division of the members into Twelve Tribes as formally established in 1995. The South Korean tribes were assigned responsibility for missions abroad, leading to the inauguration of the churches in Los Angeles in 1996, in Berlin in 2000, in Sydney in 2009, and in Cape Town in 2012. The Twelve Tribes oversee 128 churches in 29 countries (71 churches in South Korea, 57 abroad).⁵¹ In 1999, Shincheonji’s headquarters were moved from Anyang to Gwacheon, an area with prophetic significance in Shincheonji’s theology. Shincheonji also became known to the public through the Shincheonji Mannam Volunteer Organization and the Shincheonji National Olympiads. According to the movement’s statistics, there were 200,000 members in 2018.⁵²

This growth would not go unnoticed from mainline Christian churches in South Korea, particularly because most new members of Shincheonji were converted from their flocks. They started increasingly vocal campaigns against Shincheonji, with 2003 seeing the first cases of deprogramming.⁵³ Apart from heresy, Shincheonji has been accused of dissimulation and “brainwashing.” Shincheonji admits that Christians and others invited to its meetings are not immediately told that the organizer is Shincheonji, that some of its street stalls do not use the name Shincheonji, and that members do attend incognito meetings and services of other churches, hoping to make friends and invite them to Shincheonji courses.⁵⁴ The movement justifies this by explaining that opponents of Shincheonji spread derogatory information through seminars organized by conservative, fundamentalist Christian churches and media

⁴⁸ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 7.

⁴⁹ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 7.

⁵⁰ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 10.

⁵¹ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 14.

⁵² *Introduction Materials for Shincheonji Church of Jesus*, 8.

⁵³ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 7.

⁵⁴ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 15.

outlets. 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 would come “as a thief in the night”. Shincheonji interprets this to mean that harvesting members will be difficult due to organized opposition, justifying a cautious, underhanded approach.⁵⁵ Such practices, as Grisafi has noted, have cultivated widespread suspicion and wariness among Christians in South Korea toward Shincheonji and its intentions as a group.⁵⁶

In March 2020, the South Korean government stated that Shincheonji had hindered its efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 in February by failing to provide complete and accurate lists of members and the locations of church facilities. It launched a criminal investigation into the church and Lee Man-hee, who was arrested in August and subsequently released on bail.⁵⁷ Health authorities determined a single individual in Shincheonji had spread the COVID-19 virus to nearly 600 people by late February and approximately 5,200 others through October.⁵⁸ In August 2020, authorities indicted Lee on charges of embezzling 5.6 billion won in church funds and obstructing the government’s efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 by failing to comply with government measures, impeding contact tracing.⁵⁹ According to the indictment, Lee and other church officials submitted inaccurate membership lists in contravention of the disease control law, notably by refusing to submit national identification numbers of 100,000 members and instructing 50,000 members to submit incorrect dates of birth.⁶⁰ The South Korean media also reported that prosecutors said church officials submitted incomplete information about Shincheonji meetings, omitting 757 meeting places. Shincheonji representatives criticized Lee’s indictment and detention as “baseless” persecution of the church.⁶¹

Subsequent to the outbreak, Shincheonji representatives said its members experienced discrimination and harassment, including in schools and at workplaces. In a “letter of appeal” posted on its website on March 4, 2020, Shincheonji indicated there had been approximately 4,000 cases of discrimination against its congregants, including instances of members being fired from their jobs or of

⁵⁵ Introvigne, “Shincheonji: An Introduction”, 15.

⁵⁶ Grisafi, “A Marginal Religion and COVID-19 in South Korea”, 43.

⁵⁷ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁵⁸ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁵⁹ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁶⁰ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁶¹ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

spousal abuse.⁶² A Shincheonji advocate said Protestant groups that had campaigned for decades for Shincheonji to be banned because of its success at converting their members treated the group with “aggressive hostility.”⁶³ In an interview with *The New York Times* in March 2020, one Shincheonji member remarked of South Korea, “The entire society has gone berserk against our church since the virus outbreak.”⁶⁴

III. Singapore and its approaches to religious management

Bearing in mind Shincheonji’s historical and theological development as well as its heavy stigmatisation bolstered by the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, it may be instructive to examine Singapore’s religious landscape. In particular, an understanding of Singapore’s religious groups and its government’s approach to religious policy may illustrate why Shincheonji sought to establish a chapter in Singapore beyond its injunction to spread its message, and why the government moved swiftly to dissolve it.

The Singaporean state, as Rodney Sebastian has suggested, officially portrays itself as a “secular but not atheistic” state, doing so in order to manage religious diversity under the guise of neutrality.⁶⁵ Shane Pereira has argued that religious communities in Singapore are “limited to and expected to attend to the spiritual welfare of their members; provide social welfare services in terms of education and charitable work; refrain from hindering, or preferably accept national modernization projects including those supporting the state’s preference for economic advancement; and practice religious tolerance”.⁶⁶ Proselytizing is also restricted to the private sphere and hence, only willing parties convert to new religious faiths. Secularism as a nation-state ideology is connected to what Foucault called “governmentality”, where the state demarcates different spaces that it can classify and control such as

⁶² “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁶³ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 1.

⁶⁴ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Korea”, 9.

⁶⁵ Rodney Sebastian, *The State’s Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore: A Case Study of ISKCON* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2010), 7; Vineeta Sinha, “Constituting and Re-constituting the Religious Domain in the Modern Nation State of Singapore”, *Our Time and Space - Exploring Heritage and Memory in Singapore*, ed. Kwok Kian Woon (Singapore: Singapore Heritage Society, 1999), 81.

⁶⁶ Shane Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, *Managing Diversity in Singapore: Policies and Prospects*, ed. Mathew Mathews and Wai Fong Chiang (Singapore: World Scientific), 87.

education, health, and justice.⁶⁷ Crucially, it does not work to eliminate religion, but to contain it within its own sphere.⁶⁸

Singapore's constitution states every person has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his or her religious belief, as long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality.⁶⁹ The constitution also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion in the administration of any law or in the appointment to, or employment in, any office under a public authority.⁷⁰ It states every religious group has the right to manage its own affairs, and does not prohibit restrictions on employment by religious institutions.⁷¹

The Singaporean state's paranoia with respect to religion and race has existed since the communist threat in the mid-1940s and riots in the 1950s.⁷² Prior to independence in 1965, Singapore experienced several riots. The first was the infamous "Maria Hertogh Riots" in December 1950, named after a Dutch Eurasian girl who was fostered by a Malay family and raised as a Muslim. In 1950, her father successfully sued for custody. This court ruling, as well as Maria's subsequent cloistering in a Christian convent, angered segments of the Malay Muslim community who viewed the proceedings as an indication of bias against Muslims and the "forced conversion" of a Muslim to Christianity. This discontent led to riots that claimed the lives of 18 people and injured several hundred.⁷³ The second major incident took place in July 1964, when communal riots between Malays and Chinese broke out during a procession celebrating the Prophet Mohammad's birthday. This was shaped in part by grievances stirred against the People's Action Party by the United Malays National Organization, the latter emphasizing that the former did not accurately represent the political interests of Malay Muslims.⁷⁴ 36 people were killed and several hundred wounded.⁷⁵

As a result of these riots, after Singapore became independent in 1965, the Singaporean government renewed its commitment to a "secular modernism". The state introduced clear national goals

⁶⁷ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 201.

⁶⁸ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 201.

⁶⁹ Attorney-General's Chambers, *2021 Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*, *Singapore Statutes Online*, 2021.

⁷⁰ *2021 Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*.

⁷¹ *2021 Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*.

⁷² Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁷³ Ganesan Narayanan, "The Political History of Ethnic Relations in Singapore", *Beyond Rituals and Riots: Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 50.

⁷⁴ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009).

⁷⁵ Michael Hill, *Conversion and Subversion: Religion and the Management of Moral Panics in Singapore*, Asian Studies Institute Working Paper (8), 2000, 9.

such as meritocracy and multiracialism wherein the personal attainment of material and educational goals could be attained in a “neutral space”.⁷⁶ This effectively relegated religion to the private sphere. The framing of these incidences of communal violence as “race riots” rather than as religiously motivated effectively subsumed the significance of religion under the category of “race”. Matters of religion and ethnicity in Singapore are carefully controlled through legislation and state policies, especially with regard to social integration.

One consequence of this calibrated management and control of ethno-religious identities in Singapore is the essentialization and reification of race and religion.⁷⁷ As Chua Beng Huat and John Clammer have noted, Singapore's multicultural policy works through a process of simplification and symbolic representation,⁷⁸ through which race becomes “highly politicized” as an essential ideological category.⁷⁹ Where religious groups have dared to contravene this social contract between state and religion, there has been swift and decisive retaliatory action. A stark example of the state’s intervention in religion is that of Operation Spectrum in 1987, where Catholic activists were arrested for charges as “Marxist conspirators” aspiring to “overthrow the government”. This resulted in the detainment of twenty-two members of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Archbishop of Singapore was also persuaded to withdraw his initial support of their actions.⁸⁰

According to the 2020 Census, 31.1% of Singaporeans are Buddhist, 18.9% are Christian, 15.6% are Muslim, 8.8% are Taoist, 5% are Hindu and 0.7% belong to other religions.⁸¹ Additionally, 20% of all Singaporeans do not affiliate with a religion.⁸² Virtually all Malays are Muslims and Indians are primarily Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. The Chinese population is more varied and less easily identified with one religion: 40.4% profess Buddhism, 25.7% profess no religion, 21.6% profess Christianity and 11.6% profess Taoism.⁸³ There are non-governmental interfaith organizations such as the Inter-Religious

⁷⁶ Sebastian, *The State's Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore*, 10.

⁷⁷ Sharon Siddique, “Singaporean Identity”, *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds. K S Sadhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 572.

⁷⁸ Chua Beng Huat, “Culture, multiracialism, and national identity in Singapore”, *Trajectories: inter-Asia cultural studies*, ed. Chen Kuan-Hsing (New York: Routledge, 1998), 190.

⁷⁹ John Clammer, *Race and state in independent Singapore 196-1990: the cultural politics of pluralism in a multiethnic society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 49.

⁸⁰ Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, 85.

⁸¹ Department of Statistics, Singapore, *Singapore Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion*, 31.

⁸² *Singapore Census of Population 2020*, 31.

⁸³ *Singapore Census of Population 2020*, 33.

Organization (IRO). The IRO's work is promotional or constructive and aims to "inculcate the spirit of friendship and cooperation among the leaders and followers of different religions".⁸⁴

Socio-economic factors also aid in reinforcing racial and religious identities, as Robbie B. H. Goh suggests: Christianity is strongly correlated with households living in more expensive private property as opposed to public housing, as well as with those who have attained university-level education, particularly in English-speaking households.⁸⁵ These socio-economic factors are most consequential to the Chinese as they exhibit the greatest degree of variability in religious practice. As Goh observes, the Christian Chinese form a distinct grouping among the Chinese, exhibiting what might be called "elite" modernized qualities.⁸⁶ As a result, they tend to be segregated from other Chinese who speak Mandarin or other Chinese languages, live in public housing, and practice the "traditional Chinese religions" of Buddhism, Taoism or perform other practices such as ancestor worship.⁸⁷

Where "cult" groups are concerned relative to religious groups, according to Thio Li-Ann in reference to *Chen Cheng v. Central Christian Church*, the courts consider a "cult" to be:

[A] pejorative term that is potentially defamatory and has a sinister connotation, whole teachings or practices are considered by the ordinary man to be abhorrent or harmful to society. Mere deviance of beliefs from orthodox religions is insufficient to give rise to alarm as "Singapore is a secular state with diverse religions" and "a very high degree of religious tolerance"⁸⁸

The state, thus, reserves broad discretion in defining and regulating religion, and while it is wary of new religious movements in general, the courts are more measured in their definition and imposition of the term "cult". Pereira observes that by maintaining a careful balance between what constitutes religion and what constitutes a harmful "cult", the state concurrently maintains the diversity of Singapore's religious landscape while retaining control over the activities of religious organizations.⁸⁹ This is exemplified by the myriad legislative means put in place to regulate religion. These include the Maintenance of Religious

⁸⁴ Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore, *Objectives of the inter-religious organisation*, 2007
<<http://www.iro.org.sg/website/objectives.html>>

⁸⁵ Robbie B. H. Goh, "Christian identities in Singapore: religion, race and culture between state controls and transnational flows", *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 1 (2009): 3.

⁸⁶ Goh, "Christian identities in Singapore", 3.

⁸⁷ Goh, "Christian identities in Singapore", 3.

⁸⁸ Thio Li-Ann, "Courting religion: The judge between Caesar and God in Asian courts", *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2009): 63.

⁸⁹ Pereira, "The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore", 92.

Harmony Act, the Societies Act, the Internal Security Act, the Undesirable Publications Act, the Sedition Act and the Penal Code, all of which act in tandem to control and manage religious relationships with each other and with the state.⁹⁰

For instance, through the Societies Act, all societies are required to register with and send regular reports of their activities to the Registrar of Societies; concurrently, contentious groups are kept under watch by the Internal Security department.⁹¹ Registration confers legal identity, allowing registered groups to own property, hold public meetings, and conduct financial transactions.⁹² Registered religious groups may apply to establish and maintain charitable and humanitarian institutions, which enables them to solicit and receive funding and tax benefits, such as income tax exemptions. Registered societies are subject to potential deregistration by the government on a variety of grounds, such as having purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare, or good order.⁹³ Deregistration makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religious group, with consequences related to owning property, conducting financial transactions, and holding public meetings.⁹⁴ Through legislation like the Societies Act, the government may remain secular, and therefore neutral, in its handling of religious issues while maintaining tight control over their activities and influence.⁹⁵

Comparatively, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed in November 1990, makes it an offence to “cause ill-feelings between different religious groups”.⁹⁶ The Act authorizes the Minister for Home Affairs to issue a “restraining order” against a person in a position of authority within a religious group if it is ascertained that the person is causing feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, promoting political causes, carrying out subversive activities, or encouraging disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion.⁹⁷ The act established the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony, which reports to the Minister for Home Affairs. The work of the act, as Goh describes, is actively restrictive, “explicitly policing and reinforcing the boundaries between

⁹⁰ Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, 92.

⁹¹ Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, 92.

⁹² “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, *Office of International Religious Freedom*, U. S. Department of State., May 12, 2021, 5.

⁹³ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, 5.

⁹⁴ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, 5.

⁹⁵ Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, 94.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Information and the Arts, *The need for the maintenance of religious harmony Act* (Singapore: MITA, 1992), 1.

⁹⁷ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, 3.

religions”.⁹⁸ The effectiveness of the Act is due in significant degree to the looseness of key terms, especially the terms “ill-will” or “ill-feelings”. This compels religious groups to act cautiously in their relations with one another to prevent any possibility of rousing “ill-feelings”.⁹⁹

To date, no one has been charged under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. However, other legislative tools such as the Sedition Act and Internal Security Act have been legally employed to detain and charge those who are deemed to have attempted to incite religious tension.¹⁰⁰ While such legislation has not been used on members of new religious movements, the example of Falun Gong is instructive as the Penal Code was used to indirectly curb their “undesirable” activity. The High Court in *Ng Chye Huay v. PP* held that Falun Gong was not a religion but a form of *qi gong* or spiritual meditation, and thus was accorded no protection under the Constitution.¹⁰¹ Its members were arrested for meditating in front of the Chinese embassy and displaying banners that read, “Stop persecution of Falun Gong in China”. Members were charged with illegal assembly and “displaying insulting writing with common intent” and subsequently either jailed or deported.¹⁰²

However, religion in Singapore, as Goh notes, is not “entirely coterminous with and controlled by the state sphere”.¹⁰³ He elaborates that there are “significant religious flows that cross the constructed boundaries of this sphere, particularly in terms of people and cultural influences”.¹⁰⁴ Examples he cites include the significant numbers of Filipinos living and working in Singapore, many as domestic workers, who are Catholics and form significant parts of the congregations in such churches as Cathedral of the Good Shepherd.¹⁰⁵ Another example of transnational religious flows he raises is that of Hindu temple priests in Singapore who are almost exclusively expatriates from India.¹⁰⁶ As Goh argues,

These and other “incoming” religious flows may contest the boundaries of the state religious sphere, and suggest the permeability of some parts of its membrane. However, they do not yet fundamentally challenge that constructed state religious sphere, which is built upon

⁹⁸ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 5.

⁹⁹ *The need for the maintenance of religious harmony Act*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Pereira, “The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore”, 93.

¹⁰¹ Ng Chye Huay v. Public Prosecutor, 2005.

¹⁰² Loh Chee Kong, “Case closed, Falungong member to be deported”, *Today*, 18 August 2006.

¹⁰³ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, “Negotiating public space: strategies and styles of migrant female domestic workers in Singapore”, *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3 (1998): 583-602.

¹⁰⁶ Grace Chua, “Expat priests”, *The Straits Times*, 23 August 2008.

tightly-controlled spaces and institutions – religious buildings, citizenship, the legal sphere – that effectively demarcate and differentiate a dominant ‘state religion’ from lesser transnational currents.¹⁰⁷

Christianity in Singapore in particular occupies a peculiar position relative to these religious flows. The religion is marked by a high degree of globalization relative to other groups. Mainline denominations such as the Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and others have affiliations with their respective global organizations. Large independent churches such as City Harvest and New Creation characteristically operate and network transnationally. Many essentially globalized Christian organizations such as Youth with a Mission, Operation Mobilization, and the Asia Evangelistic Fellowship have regional bases or offices in Singapore.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, although never explicitly stated in governmental discourses, Christianity in Singapore shares many characteristics with cosmopolitanism. As Goh notes, both are characterized by a high incidence of the use of the English language, a high incidence of university education, residence in relatively expensive private property, and related “elite” qualities.¹⁰⁹

Robbie Goh observes that various incidences have confirmed this peculiar position of Christianity. Following the attacks of 9/11 and related terrorist incidents, Singapore experienced a period of heightened religious sensitivity. This resulted in complaints emerging in 2005 over Christian professionals attempting to convert their clients.¹¹⁰ The consequent public awareness cultivated by these complaints reflected a broader sense of unease within Singaporean society regarding “Christians who are perceived to be over-aggressive in promoting their faith”.¹¹¹ Goh argues that this reveals not just “a general anxiety about Christianity’s peculiar position as a function of its strongly evangelical and exclusively monotheistic ideology”, but also the “close association between Christianity and professional ranks in Singapore”.¹¹² A newspaper article stressed that “doctors and teachers occupy positions of authority”, a cause for concern given that active Christian fellowships are present in both professions.¹¹³ Goh notes that Christianity gets singled out in both public debates and media representations not just

¹⁰⁷ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Robbie B. H. Goh, *Contours of culture: space and social difference in Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 838.

¹⁰⁹ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 11.

¹¹⁰ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 7.

¹¹¹ Li Xueying and Ken Kwek, “Say aaah...men”, *The Straits Times*, 15 October 2005.

¹¹² Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 12.

¹¹³ Li and Kwek, “Say aaah...men”.

because of the evangelical zeal of its adherents but also because of anxiety about their domination of positions of authority.¹¹⁴

Hence, Singapore churches preserve a flexible and dual identity, as Goh states, by channeling their evangelical zeal and energies regionally. This helps them avoid the types of inter-faith tensions in Singapore which might be perceived as violating the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act.¹¹⁵ Given their being well-resourced, being able to provide finances and well-trained congregants eager to serve, Singapore churches are positioned to provide services effectively to communities in need in neighboring countries.¹¹⁶ Goh observes that any large and missions-active churches have church-planting activities in, and even broadcast worship services to, countries such as India, China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam.¹¹⁷ Many churches thus anchor their presences in these countries through aid projects including the administration of orphanages, medical clinics, disaster aid, and poverty relief.¹¹⁸ As the ‘Antioch of Asia’ proclaimed by several well-known Christian leaders, Singapore essentially functions as a hub for Christian organizations and large international Christian meetings and conventions.¹¹⁹

In the light not only of the unique position occupied by Christianity in Singapore, as well as its outsized regional and international influence as a “Christian hub”, we may begin to recognize some of the reasons Shincheonji sought to establish a chapter in the country. In practice, these reasons may not be dissimilar to other Korean Christian denominations – Singapore’s connectivity and proximity to other Southeast Asian nations, its position as a potential administrative hub for regional mission activity, and the sheer diversity of its residents whether from Singapore or abroad. Yet, Christianity’s alignment with Singapore’s Anglophone, professional elite must also be noted.

What is surprising, however, is the fact that Shincheonji did not provoke as rabid a response from the mainstream Christian organizations as it did in South Korea – while there were plenty of stern warnings issued and denunciations of its heresy, such responses did not cross the threshold to kidnappings and forced conversions.¹²⁰ Most curiously, the government’s containment of Shincheonji was

¹¹⁴ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 12.

¹¹⁵ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 12.

¹¹⁶ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 14.

¹¹⁷ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 14.

¹¹⁸ Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 14.

¹¹⁹ Robbie B.H., Goh, “The Internet and Christianity in Asia: cultural trends, structures and transformations”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, no. 4 (2005): 837–839.

¹²⁰ Willy Fautré “Coercive Change of Religion in South Korea: The Case of the Shincheonji Church.” *The Journal of CESNUR* 4, no. 3 (2020): 37.

swift – within nine months, the organization was dissolved and disbanded, all without justifications surrounding the group’s threat to the government’s COVID-19 containment efforts or for the instigation of ‘ill-feeling’ with respect to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. Shincheonji’s threat to Singapore’s social order was uniquely focused on the Christian community, with none of Singapore’s Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Taoist, or other religious groups reporting being ‘infiltrated’ by Shincheonji agents, and by extension, the largely ethnic Chinese community. Shincheonji, as it seems, did not target the Korean Christian community in Singapore specifically either.

IV. Shincheonji’s threat in Singapore

In February 2020, Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs announced it was investigating a local unregistered chapter of Shincheonji. Because of the group’s links to COVID-19 clusters in South Korea, the ministry said it would accelerate its investigations given potential local health risks. In November, the ministry announced police arrested 21 members of the organization for being members of an “unlawful society” under the Societies Act and for resuming activities “covertly” despite warnings to cease.¹²¹ The Ministry of Home Affairs then repatriated five South Korean nationals holding key positions in the local chapter and dissolved the group’s affiliated organizations.¹²² The Singaporean government’s treatment of Shincheonji is not without precedent – it deregistered the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1972, banned the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the 1970s, dissolved the Unification Church in 1982, and shut down the Christian Conference of Asia in 1987. Groups such as the World Mission Society Church of God continue to operate in Singapore, albeit quietly, and ISKCON operates under societies with different names.

In 1972 the government deregistered the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order because its members refused to serve military service, salute the flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the state.¹²³ This was a response to the passage of the National Service Act in 1967. To reinforce its authority, the state proceeded to arrest

¹²¹ “Shincheonji Church”, *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

¹²² “Shincheonji Church”, *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*.

¹²³ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, 3.

and charge members who did not obey the order for conscription. For instance, on January 10, 1973, 18-year-old Lim Yong Peng was jailed for 18 months for failing to enlist for National Service.¹²⁴ On August 15, 1982, the home of a Jehovah's Witness where members gathered for regular meetings was raided and 29 people were fined for possession of banned tapes and publications.¹²⁵ Although the Court of Appeals in 1996 upheld the rights of members of Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious beliefs, and the Government did not arrest members for being believers, the result of deregistration has been to make public meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses illegal. To this day, Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be arrested for their refusal to enlist for National Service.

As Shane Pereira has argued, the Singaporean government's surveillance tactics and management of new religious movements through legal registration and state policy has also relied on members of the public.¹²⁶ They generate cult controversies in order to successfully locate and circumvent the adaptive strategies of NRM groups.¹²⁷ An instructive example is that of the Unification Church, which by 1975, had entered Singapore via two businessmen, American George Glass and Japanese Masayoshi Sato, who clandestinely established a church through a company front.¹²⁸ In September 1980, the church successfully registered with the Registry of Societies under the company name, established four churches, and began actively recruiting members from university campuses.¹²⁹ On April 8, 1981, a concerned member of the public wrote to a letter to the *Straits Times* forum, warning others of the successful registration of "The Moonies" under a company front.¹³⁰ The letter implored the government to take action, and by April 2, 1982, the Unification Church was deregistered and banned. The Ministry of Home Affairs also banned the two founding members of the Singapore branch, Glass and Sato, from re-entering the country, having deemed that they used their company illegally as a front for the group's operations.¹³¹

What links the dissolution of these religious groups is the importance of upholding national security. This is seen as threatened when a group instructs its members to disobey orders from the state, as with the Jehovah's Witnesses, or when a group operates in a way that eschews transparency with the

¹²⁴ Pereira, "The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore", 100.

¹²⁵ "Banned tapes found at Jehovah sect meet at flat: 29 fined", *The Straits Times*, 1982.

¹²⁶ Pereira, "The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore", 102.

¹²⁷ Pereira, "The Management of New Religious Movements in Singapore", 102.

¹²⁸ "This cult has come in by the 'back door'", *The Straits Times*, 1981.

¹²⁹ "Free-sex cult operating under another name", *The Sunday Times*, 1989.

¹³⁰ "This cult has come in by the 'back door'", *The Straits Times*, 1981.

¹³¹ "Moonies banned: 'Movement prejudicial to public welfare and good order'", *The Straits Times*, 1982.

state, as with the Unification Church and its reliance on front companies. The arrests of Catholic social workers suggest that affiliations between religious groups and communist political parties also provoked a heavy response from the Singaporean state. How the work of Shincheonji fits into this ideological paradigm may be expounded, most decisively, within the context of this lack of transparency. It was this failure to make its religious motives explicit, whether because of its reliance on front companies or its surreptitious tactics, that raised the threat of the group opposing the government or causing fissures within the Christian community or within families. The stability of family units is seen as constitutive of not only Singaporean society as a whole, but to the broader structure of “public order” or morality.

The influence of the Shincheonji-linked Daegu cluster, however, cannot be overlooked. South Korean politicians at various levels, from city authorities to cabinet ministers, supported proposals to de-register Shincheonji as a religion, raid its churches, and file criminal lawsuits against its leaders, including Lee. However, the South Korean government’s survey of COVID-19 members among known Shincheonji members, completed by March 2020, showed that there was little correlation between Shincheonji affiliation and COVID-19 symptoms beyond the Daegu area cluster. However, the early prioritization of screening and testing Shincheonji members may have made the statistics show its members as a higher percentage of infected individuals than was actually true, consequently increasing public stigma.¹³² In January 2021, a South Korean court acquitted Shincheonji chairman Lee Man-hee on charges of obstructing the government response to COVID-19, with Judge Kim Mi-kyung ruling that problems with lists of Shincheonji members and properties did not constitute an attempt to impede disease control efforts.¹³³

Grisafi describes the public response toward Shincheonji in South Korea as such:

The preexisting negative views of Shincheonji colored responses to the revelation that the February 2020 COVID-19 infection cluster was associated with the religion, not only from the general public but also in domestic and international media coverage. Some of the terms used to describe the religion in Korean were *idan jonggyo*, meaning “heretical religion,” and *saibi jonggyo*, meaning “pseudo-religion” or “false religion.” In popular usage, both terms have an effect similar to the word “cult” in English. Christian Today, a South Korean interdenominational Christian

¹³² Massimo Introvigne, Willy Fautré, Rosita Soryte, Alessandro Amicarelli, and Marco Respinti, “Shincheonji and the COVID-19 Epidemic: Sorting Fact from Fiction,” *The Journal of CESNUR* 4, no. 3 (May–June 2020): 77.

¹³³ Yonhap News Agency, “Court Acquits Shincheonji Leader of Obstructing Gov’t Response to COVID-19,” *Yonhap News*, 13 January 2021 <<https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210113007451315>>.

newspaper, at one point used the term *idan saibi jipdan* (heretical pseudo-group), omitting the word religion entirely.¹³⁴ The group was also frequently described with such adjectives as “secretive,” “fringe,” and “shadowy.” The tendency to use such descriptors in media coverage was still evident in early 2021.¹³⁴

This carried over to coverage of the group by the Singaporean media.

Shincheonji’s association with the pandemic and the public response to it thus tarnished the religion’s reputation. This was the case when Singaporean authorities cited the group’s association with South Korea’s COVID-19 clusters as pretense to investigate the group’s activities in Singapore. The Ministry of Home Affairs said it decided to accelerate its investigations into the local chapter of the church because of reports linking the church’s practices to the coronavirus outbreak cluster in Daegu, South Korea, framing it as a contact-tracing exercise. “If the local members of SCJ had been in recent contact with the Daegu chapter of SCJ, then there could be health risks to Singapore,” said the MHA. “However, interviews with members of SCJ in Singapore, who have been called up so far, found that they have not been in recent physical contact with persons from the Daegu cluster.”¹³⁵ Four of the South Koreans who assisted in investigations in early 2020 entered Singapore before the outbreak of the virus in Daegu and Cheongdo. This association between the spread of the disease and the surreptitious activities of the group was strengthened by an array of reports in the Singaporean media. For example, an article reported:

In February, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said the MHA was looking to ban the activities of the local chapter of SCJ. The church in South Korea was at the centre of that country’s coronavirus outbreak¹³⁶

Grisafi’s observations about the yoking of the group to the spread of COVID-19 prove salient in this context, with the Singaporean media strengthening an image of the group as shadowy, untrustworthy, and positioned for further destructive activity despite evidence to the contrary in Singapore. The description

¹³⁴ Grisafi, “A Marginal Religion and COVID-19 in South Korea”, 44.

¹³⁵ “Investigations into Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony in Singapore”, *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*, 28 February 2020
<<https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/investigations-into-shincheonji-church-of-jesus-the-temple-of-the-tabernacle-of-the-testimony-in-singapore/>>

¹³⁶ Ng and Yang, “MHA looking to ban activities of Singapore chapter of church at centre of South Korea’s coronavirus outbreak”.

of the group, described as an “ultra-secret religious cult” by most Singaporean news outlets, reflects Grisafi’s analysis that:

The word “cult,” along with other pejorative and categorical terminology, is “frequently used with a robust confidence that its meaning and accuracy are both self-evident and widely shared.” But these words are not self-evident at all. They do not describe a natural order of things. They create boundaries and hierarchies and have the ability to grant power to some while marginalizing others.¹³⁷

In this instance, the discursive formation of Shincheonji as a cult is set in opposition to mainstream Christianity. The Ministry of Home Affairs offers this description of the group’s activity:

SCJ teaches that it is acceptable to use deceit and lies if it serves God’s purposes. It has been accused of infiltrating and disrupting established Korean churches by using deception and secrecy to trick people into becoming involved with them.¹³⁸

The Ministry of Home Affairs, however, said its investigations started in February 2020 when the local chapter of the church tried to register a company in Singapore under the name of Heavenly Culture, World Peace and Restoration of Light (HWPL), which is the group’s organization dedicated to humanitarian activity.¹³⁹ The Singaporean government’s designation of the group as a “front entity”, however, could be considered debatable: as Rosita Šorytė has argued, the HWPL has garnered legitimacy as a project aiming to promote global peace and stop wars, becoming associated with the United Nations Department of Global Communication in 2015 and achieving achieved consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2017.¹⁴⁰

These investigations into Shincheonji’s activities predates the group’s association with the Daegu cluster, though the latter caused investigations to accelerate. These investigations found that the church had previously incorporated another “front company” known as Spasie Pte Ltd, which described itself as

¹³⁷ Grisafi, “A Marginal Religion and COVID-19 in South Korea”, 55.

¹³⁸ “Investigations into Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony in Singapore”, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore.

¹³⁹ Charmaine Ng and Calvin Yang, “MHA looking to ban activities of Singapore chapter of church at centre of South Korea’s coronavirus outbreak”, *The Straits Times*, 3 March 2020 <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-looking-to-ban-activities-of-singapore-chapter-of-church-at-centre-of-south-koreas>>.

¹⁴⁰ Šorytė, Rosita, “Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light”: Shincheonji as a Global Social Actor and Its Enemies,” *The Journal of CESNUR* 4, no. 3 (2020): 27-28.

offering consultancy services and the development of software.¹⁴¹ The church also set up a sole proprietorship called Kings Ave, described as providing corporate training services, motivational courses and personal development workshops.¹⁴² This served as a front to lease property for use as a “temple”.¹⁴³ Singapore’s Urban Redevelopment Authority regulates the use of commercially and industrially zoned space for religious activities and religious groups.¹⁴⁴ Commercial or industrial premises that host religious activities but are not zoned as places of worship must be approved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which Shincheonji did not apply for. Under national security legislation, Shincheonji’s deceptive, underhanded tactics are seen to be of greater concern to Singapore’s social and religious fabric than its potential connections to COVID-19. Minister for Home Affairs K. Shanmugam, adds that while people in Singapore are “free to believe in any religion and practise it in the way they want’, the government will step in when “it crosses the line into criminality or potential public security issues”.¹⁴⁵

While organizations such as CESNUR have argued that Shincheonji’s deceitful tactics are a response to fear of broader stigmatization, as well as that a quick Internet search will reveal the group’s connections to other entities that serve as its fronts, such ostensibly commonsensical deductions may not have been obvious to the Singaporean Christians that the group targeted. As mentioned earlier, the group did not focus on Korean Christian groups in Singapore, but the Christian community at large. Reports on how the group operates often say members infiltrate mainstream churches and use deceptive methods to lure young converts, in some cases inviting them to bible study sessions. The scholars of new religions David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton recently suggested a categorization of new religious groups based on the degree of social and cultural alignment between religious organizations and established institutions.¹⁴⁶ Shincheonji’s failure to align with Singapore’s model of multi-religious toleration, in

¹⁴¹ Ng and Yang, “MHA looking to ban activities of Singapore chapter of church at centre of South Korea’s coronavirus outbreak”.

¹⁴² Ng and Yang, “MHA looking to ban activities of Singapore chapter of church at centre of South Korea’s coronavirus outbreak”.

¹⁴³ Ng and Yang, “MHA looking to ban activities of Singapore chapter of church at centre of South Korea’s coronavirus outbreak”.

¹⁴⁴ “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore”, 6.

¹⁴⁵ Charmaine Ng, “21 members of unregistered Singapore chapter of South Korean ‘cult’ arrested”, *The Straits Times*, November 12, 2020 <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/21-members-of-unregistered-singapore-chapter-of-south-korean-cult-arrested>>.

¹⁴⁶ David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, “Reconceptualizing types of religious organization: dominant, sectarian, alternative, and emergent tradition groups”, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 3 (2012): 4–28

particular through transparency about its intentions and motivations, may have proven culpable for its dissolution.

An article from Singaporean Christian publication *Salt & Light* offers an anecdotal account by Min, a university graduate who attended Shincheonji's bible study classes in Singapore. She is described as being approached by two men at Dhoby Ghaut MRT station who described themselves as part of "an underground church in Shanghai" and asking if she would be "willing to share her testimony with him, as he wanted to use it to encourage the persecuted Christians in China".¹⁴⁷ Upon agreeing to meet up with James, one of the men from the group, his narrative changed to indicating that they "doing research on how Christians in Singapore hold on to their faith even when they're very busy with work and school".¹⁴⁸ At the time, Min, a Christian, had rededicated her life to God in an act of piety and surrender, prompting her to sign up for a Bible study class with James. This was where the unorthodox practices of the group grew apparent:

The largest stumbling block that Min took a while to accept was the teaching that it is perfectly okay to use deception and lies to carry out God's will. She noted that they never explicitly used the words "lie" or "deception". Rather, they advised students to "be wise". Min said they used 1 Samuel 16:1-5 to support their claims. In the chapter, God rejected King Saul because of his wicked ways and asked the prophet Samuel to anoint David as the new king. Samuel was afraid that Saul would kill him if he knew that he was here to appoint a new king, so God told him to say that he has come to sacrifice to the Lord.

For example, they were not allowed to ask other students how they ended up in the class. "They said that some people had to go through a lot of difficult things to come to the class, so we shouldn't ask sensitive questions," Min said, adding that they were also not allowed to exchange contact numbers. "I felt super at home with them," Min said. "They were very genuine and empathetic, very patient and understanding. It felt so real. I thought they genuinely wanted to mentor and teach us." [...] After reading up on accounts of former SCJ members, she now suspects that not all of the students were actual seekers and that some may have been members of the group that were "planted" to be positive influences.¹⁴⁹

Among other characteristics, this anecdote demonstrates not only the duplicitous elements of the group's activity but also its active tendency to cultivate secrecy and embed inductees within new, robust sets of

¹⁴⁷ Gracia Lee, "'They seemed so genuine': How one woman fell into the trap of alleged Singapore chapter of Shincheonji", *Salt & Light*, 7 March 7 2020
<<https://saltandlight.sg/news/they-seemed-so-genuine-how-one-woman-fell-into-the-trap-of-alleged-singapore-chapter-of-shincheonji/>>.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, "'They seemed so genuine': How one woman fell into the trap of alleged Singapore chapter of Shincheonji".

¹⁴⁹ Lee, "'They seemed so genuine': How one woman fell into the trap of alleged Singapore chapter of Shincheonji".

social structures. Another anonymous former member of the group, in an interview with platform *MothershipSG* echoed similar sentiments, not only regarding the secretive nature of the group as reinforced by mobile phones being barred during Shincheonji classes, but also of the group's invasive attempts to build rapport. This source cited mandatory daily diary entries that were read by teachers. Upon exiting the group, the person remarked:

For three months, every day we are being washed by this word, by this falsehood. It feels like my heart spiritually played with something very dark and it's like devilish. and at night when I turn off the lights, it's really dark, and I could feel the chills running through my body.¹⁵⁰

As the Ministry of Home Affairs stated, "There was reason to believe that people were being misled and defrauded into certain actions."¹⁵¹ While Shincheonji's threat to Singapore at the time of investigation was not high because their activities were picked up fairly quickly, Minister Shanmugam stated that their activities would be "inimical to the broader public if (the group is) allowed to carry on".¹⁵²

It is therefore evident that Shincheonji's dissolution in Singapore stems from the Singaporean state's conception of religious freedom within certain boundaries. The state is positioned not only as an arbiter between religious groups in the interest of preventing "ill-will", but maintains oversight regarding a religious group's physical premises. What is vital to this relationship between religious groups and the authorities, what Shincheonji seems to have transgressed, is trust. The group, while small, proved dangerous because of its potential harms to Singaporean society – new members to the chapter had neither begun to leave their families entirely nor undertake surreptitious activity at a large scale.

However, Shincheonji's attempts to bypass government regulation to use premises ostensibly for commercial use as religious houses of worship seems to have contravened the understanding that the Singaporean state maintains this aforementioned oversight. Shincheonji's constructive millenarianism was immaterial in the face of its underhanded tactics with regard to Singapore's Christian community. Within the national security apparatus of Singapore, the group's potential to separate families and generate

¹⁵⁰ "The Shincheonji cult in Singapore | How Cults Influence the Unsuspecting," *YouTube*, uploaded by MothershipSG, 22 April 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe6Ew3aePmQ>>.

¹⁵¹ Ang Hwee Min and Michael Yong, "MHA investigating unregistered Singapore chapter of South Korean religious group Shincheonji", *CNA*, 28 February 2020 <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/shincheonji-south-korea-singapore-covid19-investigate-mha-781271>>.

¹⁵² Ang and Yong, "MHA investigating unregistered Singapore chapter of South Korean religious group Shincheonji".

“ill-feeling” between Christian denominations in Singapore and potentially beyond the Christian community because its underhanded tactics were sufficient for the government to crack down on the group. This is particularly salient given the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the Singaporean government needed to shore up public trust, secure cooperation from religious groups to comply with restrictions on gatherings, and preserve a sense of stability amidst volatile policy responses to contain the virus.

V. Conclusion

This paper has examined and analyzed the reasons behind the Singaporean government’s dissolution of Shincheonji within its borders. Within the paradigm of protecting Singapore’s “public safety, peace and good order”, it is evident that Shincheonji’s underhanded tactics were regarded as potentially disruptive and acrimonious, bearing the potential to cause fissures not only within families but within Christian denominations, as has been the case of South Korea.

What this paper has demonstrated, however, is that while the stigmatization of Shincheonji in connection to the Daegu clusters did carry over to Singapore and justify an accelerated investigation of the group, this did not ultimately prove to be a prevailing factor in the group’s dissolution. Rather, Singapore’s particular approach to religious policy, one contingent on transparency between religious groups and the Singaporean government, seems to have been a more decisive factor in it being clamped down on. Yet, this is not representative of a concerted effort to crack down on Korean religious movements in Singapore, as evidenced by the continued operations of the World Mission Society Church of God and the Korean Church in Singapore, as well as the deregistration of the non-Korean Jehovah’s Witnesses. Where a conception of religious freedom is concerned in Singapore, it is evident that religious groups must be seen as trustworthy by the state to continue operating.

As new religious movements from South Korea continue to expand internationally, the case of Shincheonji in Singapore may prove an instructive example of how such groups interact with new contexts and find themselves treated with degrees of hostility, whether by legal sanction or opposition from the state or other religious or civic groups. As a set of cultural flows, religious transmission will

continue to hinge on a religion's ability to equip new followers with the tools to maximise joy and contend with suffering, crucial practices clearly seen in Singapore as incompatible with Shincheonji's underhanded tactics.

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