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Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 May 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Forcible deprogramming of members of Shincheonji in the Republic of Korea

In the last decades of the 20th century, the international flourishing of new religious movements (NRMs) caught unprepared both the traditional religions and the secular media that had predicted the demise of religion. The simplistic, pseudo-scientific explanation of this growth was that the NRMs converted their followers through a sinister form of mind control called “brainwashing.”

If they were “programmed” through “brainwashing,” their opponents argued, members of “cults” needed to be “deprogrammed.” A new private profession was born. “Deprogrammers” kidnapped members of the “cults,” after having been paid significant sums by their parents or relatives, kept them imprisoned, and submitted them to heavy physical and psychological pressures until they agreed to renounce their faith.

Most scholars who studied new religious movements concluded that brainwashing does not exist at all (Anthony 1996; Anthony and Introvigne 2006), and that there was no accepted distinction between “cults” and religions. “Cults” were simply forms of religion their opponents did not like (Richardson 1978, 1979, 1993). Since the *Fishman* decision in 1990 (United States District Court for the Northern District of California 1990), American courts of law declared that brainwashing was not part of accepted science (Richardson 2014, 2015). Deprogramming was considered a crime in the United States of America, Europe, and (later) in Japan, and several deprogrammers went to jail. They invariably objected that victims submitted to their programs “voluntarily,” but courts of law concluded that this was not the case. In fact, deprogramming involved several instances of serious violence, including forced use of drugs and rape (Shupe and Darnell 2000).

One of the few countries where deprogramming is still going on is the Republic of Korea, not coincidentally a country where many new religious movements and new Christian churches flourish. Traditional Christians label these new Christian movements as “cults” or “heresies,” and have established “counter-cult counseling associations.” Obviously, religious controversy is as old as religion itself. However, Christian pastors, some of them affiliated with the Christian Council of Korea, do not limit themselves to theological disputes. Some are actively engaged in deprogramming.

One of the most successful Christian new religious movement in the Republic of Korea is Shincheonji, established in 1984. Its members are the most frequent victims of deprogramming. Shincheonji reports 1,287 deprogrammings since 2003. Two members of Shincheonji, Ms Sun Hwa-kim in 2007 and Ms Gu Ji-in in 2017 died during attempts at deprogramming. For Gu, this was the second deprogramming, after a previous attempt in 2016 had failed. Deprogrammers claimed deaths were due to natural causes, but co-religionists and relatives believe otherwise.

The Christian Council of Korea claims that Shincheonji is a “heretic cult” that deceives its converts. Korean media often echo these accusations. The academic study of Shincheonji is just at its beginnings, but it has debunked most accusations as just an expression of the hostility of traditional Christian churches against the missionary successes of a movement that converted so many of their members. Obviously, Shincheonji’s theology is different from the beliefs of mainline Christian churches, although it is often misunderstood and misrepresented.

However, theology can never justify the actions of vigilantes who try to “de-convert” men and women from their religions through violence. CCPR General Comment No. 22 to Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion) of the UDHR, adopted at the Forty-eighth Session of the Human Rights Committee, on 30 July 1993, clearly stated that “Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent

religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community” (General Comment 22).

Unfortunately, South Korean authorities have not taken adequate actions against the deprogrammers. Relatives who hired the deprogrammers have sometimes been found guilty by Korean courts, but the deprogrammers themselves have so far largely escaped punishment. South Korean authorities seem to be unaware of the fact that the defense that victims submitted “voluntarily” to deprogramming has been regarded as false by courts of law in all other democratic countries.

Deprogramming is also supported by hate speech going well beyond the normal boundaries of religious controversy and de-humanizing members of Shincheonji, thus justifying and preparing violence against them. Specialized institutions called “Cult Seminars” have a key role in propagating these forms of hate speech, while “Cult Counseling Offices” operated by some mainline Christian churches and pastors put relatives in touch with the deprogrammers.

We ask the South Korean government to investigate Cult Seminars and Cult Counseling Offices, take action against hate speech, investigate in depth accusations of forcible deprogramming, put a stop to this obnoxious practice, and hold those responsible fully accountable.

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