



SOUTH KOREA

Infectious Religion

Religion and its surprising-but-not-unprecedented role in the spread of the coronavirus

By William Schweiker | FEBRUARY 24, 2020



Guided by the interest and expertise of the author, *Sightings* articles have covered an astonishing range of topics. Today's "sighting" is also about range, specifically the quickening global spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Of course, I am hardly a specialist in epidemiology, public health, or even bioethics or medical ethics. But my interests are in how religions shape and are shaped by cultural and social forces, and I will take my stand there. So what about *infectious religion*?

On February 21, *The New York Times* noted, "[Fears of Global Spread as Cases Accelerate in Iran and South Korea.](#)" This is bad news, of course. There are worries about the virus becoming a global pandemic. But what does this have to do with *Sightings*? Read on: "Iran acknowledged 18 cases in three cities, with four fatalities, and a surge in cases in South Korea was linked to a secretive church." So, two issues immediately stand out about religion, one particular and the other general. Let's think about them in that order.

The particular sighting of religion and the coronavirus has to do with a church in South Korea now connected with a surge in cases in the country. These cases have been linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. In an article in *The New York Times* by [Choe Sang-Hun](#), "[Shadowy Church Is at Center of Coronavirus Outbreak in South Korea,](#)" we learn that certain practices of the church can spread the disease: no face masks or glasses allowed; sitting on the floor closely aligned with other congregants is required; mandatory church attendance even when sick; services are followed by members going out into the public to proselytize. Shincheonji teaches that illness is a sin and that members should attend to their mission work to proselytize people even if sick. Lee Man-hee, who, according to Choe Sang-Hun's article, is an "88-year-old self-styled messiah," founded the church. Given the size of the church, some 150,000 members, Lee has, thankfully, urged his followers to abide by the government's instructions. Nevertheless, as the article notes, in a message to congregants, Lee forcefully

argued that “This disease outbreak is the work of the devil, which is hellbent on stopping the rapid growth of the Shincheonji.”

There we have it, sightings of every trapping of religion: ritual practice, teachings, the authority (of whatever sort) of a founder; attributions of supernatural forces seeking to thwart the work of God; and everything wrapped in secrecy. Seen as a cult by mainline religions because of the command of the church on some members’ lives, the case in point here is that religion can aid the spread of actual disease. The question is whether or not this is just a particular case.

As in many things, the particular does in fact—sadly—illustrate the general point. A provocative story in *Science*, “[Does Religion Influence Epidemics?](#)” by Elizabeth Pennisi (August 23, 2011), noted that David Hughes, evolutionary biologist at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, gave a lecture at the 13th Congress of the European Society for Evolutionary Biology (2011) in Tübingen, Germany, on why biologists should treat religion as a serious topic. Hughes’ initial observation is that some of the world’s religions arose at the same time as infectious diseases, along with the flourishing of cities. Disease and religion, oddly enough, mutually shaped one another. Teachings about disease and religious practices shape responses to infections, good and ill. This is not a new insight, at least not for those of us who study religion. Why, for instance, do some people, given their religious convictions, tend to the sick even when this means risking their own lives? As Pennisi noted, Hughes stated that, as an evolutionary biologist, “the question is not whether religion is correct on the issue of a God, but rather how people behave thinking there might be a God.”

Students of religion know that not every religion focuses on beliefs, or God, or gods. The forms of religion are many, to state the obvious. And Hughes and his colleagues grant that different religions respond to and teach about disease in different ways. Some Muslims believe it is pointless to avoid the sick and so attend to their beloveds who are ill. Some Christians—but by no means all—follow Jesus’s example and tend to the sick, even if doing so endangers their health. And so it goes: diversity is a human and religious fact. The point is that religion must be factored into the story of evolution, at least with respect to infectious disease. The case of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus gives some clues—but not all—as to why this might be the case.

Proximity is a human problem. How are human beings to live in close quarters with each other, align themselves in common projects—so-called collective action problems—and do so without too much stress, strain, and conflict? Importantly, religions provide answers for such collective action problems (as do cities). Fear, like the fear of disease, can also act as a bond for communities. The holy—or unholy—collaboration of cities, religion, and disease is not only exemplified in the instance of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, but also historically, such as in the European plague. While Robert Bellah’s magisterial [Religion and Human Evolution](#) is a great beginning, part of what infectious religion means for students of religion is that we need to be more attuned to work in evolutionary biology than even Bellah, because—as debatable as Professor Hughes’ claims might be—the biologists have a jump on this topic.

To make things even more confusing, some of the so-called New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, et. al) talk about religion as a virus of the mind. Like a biological virus, that is, an infectious agent that replicates inside of an organism’s living cells, religion replicates itself inside cultural forms to shape (and distort) the outlooks of people, whether religious or not. But what the New Atheists fail to see, unlike Hughes and his colleagues, is that religion takes different forms and some of them work to stop diseases that would otherwise lay waste to human populations. So the question we might all take up in our study of the religions is simple: where do they stand on the topic of infections, biological and cultural? ♦

[Sightings](#) is edited by [Joel Brown](#), a PhD Candidate in Religions in the Americas at the Divinity School. Sign up [here](#) to receive *Sightings* via email. You can also follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Marty Center or its editor.

Image: City workers spray disinfectant in front of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, in the city of Daegu in the southeast of South Korea, last Thursday. (AP)



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