

Beyond the Noise: Observing Shincheonji in France

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ABSTRACT: This article offers the first qualitative sociological study of Shincheonji in France, based on fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation. While the movement is often portrayed through controversy—particularly by the governmental anti-cult agency MIVILUDES, anti-cult activists, and journalists who rely on Korean Protestant critics—this study reveals a very different reality. It reconstructs the history of Shincheonji’s French mission since 2016, tracing its slow beginnings, its adaptation to a secular cultural environment, and its unexpected growth among young French citizens of African descent, who now constitute the majority of its membership. Beyond evangelization, Shincheonji in France has developed a dense network of social, cultural, charitable, and ecological activities, conducted in cooperation with other religious and secular organizations. They illustrate the movement’s integration into French society and its members’ desire to express their faith through service. Shincheonji’s French presence cannot be understood through the lens of anti-cult narratives and Korean controversies. Instead, it reflects broader dynamics of religious pluralism, diasporic Christianity, and the search for meaning in a secular society.

KEYWORDS: Shincheonji, Lee Man-hee, Shincheonji in France, New Religious Movements in France, Anti-Cult Movement in France, MIVILUDES.

Introduction

Shincheonji is a Korean Christian new religious movement to which I have devoted considerable attention for more than a decade. I have interviewed the founder and leader, Chairman Lee Man-hee, repeatedly. He will turn ninety-five in September and remains remarkably active. I also wrote the first scholarly articles on Shincheonji in languages other than Korean and by a non-Korean scholar (Introvigne 2019, 2020a, 2021). My purpose here is not to revisit the history of the movement, the long campaigns by Korean and international anti-cult activists, the accusations connected with COVID-19 for which Chairman Lee was jailed and later fully exonerated, or the recent crackdown by the Korean government that accuses Shincheonji of illegal political involvement and has led to Chairman Lee’s new arrest on March 24, 2026. These matters have been discussed elsewhere. What follows is a qualitative sociological analysis of the movement in France, based on observation and interviews.

This analysis takes on special meaning at a time when Shincheonji has been attacked by the French government's anti-cult mission, MIVILUDES, and by journalists specializing in anti-cult campaigns, including *Le Figaro*'s Étienne Jacob (MIVILUDES 2025, 77; Jacob 2024, 2025). Many of the accusations originate from Korean Protestant pastors who regard Shincheonji as competition and travel internationally to warn against it. Their claims are repeated by journalists and activists who often do not understand the Korean context. They also circulate allegations that can be checked and found inaccurate.

One example is the claim that Shincheonji violated COVID-19 laws, a claim denied by three levels of Korean courts, up to the Supreme Court (Introvigne 2022; see Introvigne 2020b; Introvigne et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Chairman Lee apologized at the beginning of the controversy for mistakes Shincheonji might have committed, but in East Asian culture, apologizing when a controversy arises is regarded as the right thing to do and is not considered an admission of guilt.

Another example is the idea that Shincheonji is sinister and secretive. My observations of Shincheonji across several countries suggest something quite different. Most surprising is the accusation by Jacob and others (Ho and Le Van 2024; Mari and Poupeau 2025), based on accounts by a few disgruntled ex-members, that Shincheonji teaches its French members not to think and obey. Throughout the world, I have interviewed dozens of Shincheonji members, and when asked why they joined, the most common answer is that they were unhappy in other churches where they were told to obey and discouraged from asking questions. In contrast, in Shincheonji, they were encouraged to formulate questions and ask them freely.

A Korean Church in a Secular Country: The Story of Shincheonji in France

The story of Shincheonji in France, reconstructed here based on interviews I conducted in May 2026, begins with the arrival of a Korean woman who did not speak French and a French girl who had learned Korean in South Korea, who became the only French member of the first mission. It continues with the movement's rapid growth and the composition of its membership, which today includes a large majority of French citizens of African descent.

The leader of the French church arrived in France on February 26, 2016. She had never visited the country before. She came directly from South Korea with a mandate to evangelize France. She told me that she had imagined a Catholic country where many would be interested in the Bible. She soon discovered something very different. After one year of evangelization, she realized that, in her words, people in France do not listen to religion and are not interested in religious matters. She and her small team walked the streets of Paris and tried to speak with passersby. One day, they heard a young woman talking about religion and approached her. She turned out to be a British Christian living in the United Kingdom, who had come on her own to evangelize. They spoke about the Bible. She liked what she heard and started studying in the Shincheonji academy. Through her, the missionaries met others. This was the beginning of the French church.

The leader explained that she had not intended to evangelize only young people of African descent. She tried to speak with everybody. Those who listened and showed interest were mostly Protestants, and many were of African origin. She discovered that France is home to many young people from Africa who came to study or are second-generation immigrants. They were more willing to talk about the Bible. She concluded that it was better to evangelize first those who liked “the Word.” This was not a strategy based on ethnicity. It was a pragmatic response to the reality of French society.

The French girl who became the first French member of the mission had a different story. She had gone to South Korea to study Korean as part of her training in translation and interpretation. She needed a rare language to complete her studies. She liked Korean culture and enrolled in language courses. She met Shincheonji there, became a member, and was later sent to France as part of the first mission. She was the only French person in a team otherwise composed of Koreans. She told me that she knew evangelization in France would be difficult. She knew that French people do not like to be approached in the street and do not like to talk about religion with strangers. She tried anyway. She described the early years as a time of trial and error. She and the missionaries approached people in the street and asked whether they were Christian or interested in the Bible. She said that French people often reacted with suspicion. People of African descent were more open to discussing religion.

The first academy opened in May 2016 in Île-de-France. Growth was slow at first. After one year, there were about fifty members. By 2019, the number had reached 350. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the church moved online. Unlike in many traditional churches, online evangelization worked well for Shincheonji. Around 700 people joined during the pandemic. In 2023, the church celebrated reaching 1,000 members, a landmark for them. Today, they report 1,440 members, some 1,000 of them in Île-de-France. According to data supplied by the French church, 65 percent are women. While 55.6 percent are French citizens, most are of African descent.

When I attended a service at the headquarters in Île-de-France, more than 90 percent of those present were of African origin. Several interviewees came from Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Benin, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso. Others were French Caribbeans. Forty percent of the members are twenty-five or younger. More than 80 percent converted from another Christian church, although there are rare cases of former atheists or Muslims. Among French members, 43.2 percent were Pentecostals and 28.5 percent were Catholics before joining Shincheonji.

The French girl who served as interpreter and missionary confirmed that the church looks African. She said that this is not the result of a deliberate choice. She and the missionaries approach everybody. Those who respond positively are often of African descent. She said that African cultures encourage religious conversation and that many African families maintain a strong Christian identity. She contrasted this with French families, where religion is often transmitted weakly or not at all. Several interviewees echoed this view. One said that in African families, God has a large place even when people do not attend church regularly. Another said that African parents teach their children that God exists and should be prayed to. A third said that his (white) French friends are not very interested in religion.

The leader of the French church told me that the original goal was to evangelize the French population. She said that the missionaries did not want to evangelize African youths first. They wanted to reach the French people. They discovered that French people did not listen. They concluded that the best way to reach the French population was to build a church first. “If people of African descent accepted the Word, the French would later see that the Word is right,” she said. This was the logic behind the mission’s early years.

The story of Shincheonji in France is also a story of adaptation. The leader told me that when she arrived, she tried to apply the methods used in Korea. They did not work. She and her team needed time to understand French society. Korean headquarters understood this. They prayed for the mission and waited for one year, when growth accelerated. The missionaries learned how to speak with people in France, which did not necessarily mean speaking good French. To this very day, the leader preaches in Korean, with translation into French. The missionaries learned that they had to be patient. They learned that they had to explain their identity openly. At first, they did not mention the name Shincheonji because they feared misunderstanding. Later, they realized that nobody in France knew the name. They began to introduce themselves as “Shincheonji Church.”

The leader’s personal story also sheds light on the movement. She was a Protestant who spent seven years searching for answers about the Bible. She visited the Presbyterian, Methodist, Jehovah’s Witness, and Unification Church. She could not find answers to her questions, especially about the Book of Revelation. Her pastor told her that Revelation had not been opened yet and could not be understood. She felt frustrated. She considered going to North Korea as a missionary and even dying a martyr there. She thought that martyrdom would allow her to go to heaven. She then saw a banner advertising a Bible conference. She attended. The instructor explained the prophecies according to the Bible. He answered her questions. She was shocked. She enrolled in the academy and joined Shincheonji in 2000. She later became an instructor and was responsible for education in South Korea. She prayed for three years to be sent to France. She had studied French in high school and liked French music. She regarded her assignment to France as an answer to her prayer.

The French girl who became the first French missionary had a different religious path. She was Catholic by background but not very involved in her parish. She said that Catholic parishes in France lack a strong sense of community. People come and go. She discovered Shincheonji in Korea and found a different, warmer environment.

The early years of Shincheonji in France were marked by slow growth, cultural adaptation, and the discovery that the most receptive audience was composed of young people of African origin. The movement grew steadily. It has now opened academies in Lyon, Marseille, Montpellier, and three in Greater Paris. It developed a membership that is young, predominantly female, and largely composed of

French citizens of African descent. It built a community that studies the Bible intensively and encourages questions. It created a space where people who felt frustrated in other churches found answers.

Thus, a Korean Christian movement took root in a secular country. It is a story of persistence, adaptation, and the unexpected role of African diasporas in shaping the religious landscape of contemporary France.

The Daily Life of the French Community

Shincheonji is often described from the outside through the lens of controversy. Those who take the time to observe its daily life in France encounter something different. The movement has developed a dense network of activities that go far beyond evangelization. These activities include sports, cultural events, collective study, and structured dialogue with pastors of other churches. They create a community that is both disciplined and lively, where members invest significant time and energy. The interviews I conducted in France reveal a world that is rarely acknowledged in media accounts, where people study the Bible with intensity, cultivate friendships, and engage in activities that strengthen their sense of belonging.

Several interviewees described a rhythm of life that combines work, study, and community events. One of them, L., explained that she teaches the Bible and continues to engage in evangelism, something she had already practiced at her previous church. She said that she does it more joyfully now because she has found answers to questions she had carried for years. She described her daily life as a combination of teaching, studying, and interacting with people from different backgrounds. She emphasized that she speaks about the Bible not only in formal settings but also in informal conversations with friends and family. For her, this is a natural extension of her faith.

Another interviewee, S., described a similar pattern. He grew up in a Christian family and had been active in youth gatherings in his previous church. He said he had many questions about how to live a life of faith and understand the Bible. He did not find answers in the churches he attended. He found them in Shincheonji. He now participates in evangelization and attends services on Wednesdays and Sundays. He said that his parents know about his involvement and that he has

been clear with them from the beginning. He described his life in Shincheonji as structured and purposeful.

The movement's activities in France include sports events that bring together large numbers of members. These events are not peripheral. They are part of the community's culture. One interviewee, C., described a sports day when all congregation members gathered to play basketball, football, volleyball, and badminton, and to dance. She said that these events are meant to promote health and strengthen bonds among members. She recalled that during one of these events, they encountered other runners who greeted them. She laughed as she remembered that some participants would have preferred to sleep longer, but the early morning exercise helped them stay healthy and alert.

These sports activities have attracted attention from critics, who have described them as part of a so-called training camp, which they call sinister and reminiscent of paramilitary training. The interviewees offered a different perspective. They explained that the early-morning exercise sessions were held because members had to go to work or school afterward. The idea was to maintain good physical condition and prepare for the day. They insisted that these activities were not coercive. They were part of a routine that combined physical and spiritual discipline. One interviewee said that she had practiced early morning exercise even before joining Shincheonji.

The movement also organizes weekend gatherings that include games, study sessions, and communal meals. These gatherings create a sense of community that many interviewees described as important in their lives. One of them, M., said that she had been active in a Protestant church for twenty-three years before joining Shincheonji. She said she had been touched by the teachings she heard at an online event held during the COVID-19 pandemic. She now participates in various activities, including sports and study sessions. She described the community as supportive and said that she feels encouraged to grow spiritually.

Dialogue with pastors of other churches is another aspect of Shincheonji's activities in France. Several interviewees mentioned that they have met pastors from different denominations. They said that these pastors often appreciate the opportunity to discuss theology, even if they do not intend to join Shincheonji. The movement's leaders regard these conversations as valuable. They believe that engaging in dialogue with other Christian leaders helps clarify misunderstandings and foster mutual respect. One interviewee said that she enjoys these conversations

because they allow her to explain what she has learned and to hear different perspectives. Clearly, the devotees I interviewed hope that some of these pastors will eventually join Shincheonji. However, they realize that many will not. They maintain generally good relations with those who do not join and believe that exposing them to Shincheonji ideas is at any rate useful.

These dialogues are not limited to formal meetings. They also occur in everyday interactions. One interviewee said that she often speaks with friends from different Christian backgrounds. She said that these conversations are an opportunity to share what she has learned and to listen to others. She emphasized that she does not pressure anyone to join Shincheonji. She shares her experience. She also denies disguising Shincheonji under other names. She says she always refers to her church as “Shincheonji Church” when discussing it with others.

The teaching structure of Shincheonji is another important aspect of its activities in France, as it is in Korea and internationally. The movement offers a nine-month curriculum divided into three levels: introduction, intermediate, and advanced. Students must pass exams at the end of each level to progress. Several interviewees described this curriculum as demanding but rewarding. One of them said that she had been suspicious at first but decided to continue because the teachings made sense to her. She said she verified everything with the Bible and found the explanations consistent.

Another interviewee said that she had been contacted online and invited to attend a conference. She was initially cautious but decided to participate. She said that she had been searching for answers about Christian eschatology. She had asked priests and pastors but had received different answers. She said that she cried after one of these encounters because she felt frustrated. When she attended the Shincheonji conference, she found the explanations precise. She verified them by reading the Bible and decided to continue. She said that she had been afraid of encountering something strange, but instead found a structured curriculum that encouraged questions.

Interviewees describe the teaching environment as interactive. They said that they are encouraged to ask questions and to verify everything with the Bible. One interviewee said that she had been told in her previous church that Revelation could not be understood. She said that she found it liberating to study it in detail. Another said that she had been discouraged from asking questions in her

previous church. She said that in Shincheonji, she was encouraged to ask as many questions as she wanted.

Evangelization in France takes different forms. Some interviewees described approaching people in the street. Others described online evangelization. One interviewee said she had been contacted on Instagram by someone who complimented her on playing music for God at another church. They stayed in touch and later met on Zoom. She said that she had been searching for answers and found them in the teachings she received. Another interviewee said that she had been approached in the street while on her way to a concert. She said that she had been praying for her grandmother, who was ill, and had been thinking about how to get closer to God. She regarded the encounter as timely.

These stories reveal a pattern. People join Shincheonji not because of pressure but because they are searching for answers. They encounter the movement through different channels. They attend conferences, study sessions, or online meetings. They are encouraged to verify what they hear by looking at the Bible. They decide to continue because they find the teachings coherent. They then participate in activities that strengthen their sense of community.

The movement's activities also include cultural events. One interviewee mentioned that she teaches French and Korean outside the church. She said she sometimes participates in cultural exchanges involving language and music.

These activities are not formally part of Shincheonji's structure, but they reflect the multicultural environment in which the movement operates.

The interviews also reveal that Shincheonji members in France maintain normal lives. They work, study, and interact with their families. One interviewee said that she is a quality, safety, and environment assistant in a waste collection company. Another reported that he is a plumber preparing for a career change. Another said that she works in design. Another is a communication officer in an insurance company and also serves as the deputy mayor of her village. These details show that Shincheonji members are integrated into French society.

The movement's activities create a sense of purpose. Members describe their involvement as meaningful. They believe that the movement is more than a church. It is a community that studies, plays, discusses, and grows together. It invests in physical health, intellectual engagement, and spiritual development. It seeks

dialogue with others and welcomes questions. It is a community that has created a distinctive space in the French religious landscape.

Charitable Activities: From Blood Donation Campaigns to Tree Planting

Shincheonji's presence in France is often discussed through theological debates or media controversies, yet the movement's daily life includes a dimension that receives far less attention. Members engage in a variety of charitable and ecological initiatives that reflect their understanding of solidarity and stewardship of the Earth. These initiatives are not limited to internal needs. They involve cooperation with secular organizations, local associations, and citizens who have no connection with the movement. The interviews I conducted reveal a pattern of participation in public life that is both practical and consistent with the values members say they learn in their Bible studies.

One of the most visible initiatives is LifeON, a blood donation campaign that originated in South Korea during the COVID period when blood supplies were insufficient. The campaign was introduced in France in 2022 (Shincheonji Église de Jésus 2026, 7). Since then, hundreds of members have donated blood. Several interviewees mentioned LifeON spontaneously. One said that she would have liked to participate but could not donate for health reasons. She added that she joined other humanitarian activities instead. Another said that he had participated in LifeON events and regarded them as an opportunity to help people he would never meet. These testimonies show that the campaign is not limited to members who are physically able to donate. It includes those who help organize the events, welcome participants, and encourage others to contribute.

LifeON events in France are open to the public. Members set up booths, distribute information, and invite passersby to donate blood. They cooperate with medical services and follow the procedures established by the French blood donation system. Several interviewees described these events as moments when they interacted with people who had no connection to Shincheonji. One said that she enjoyed speaking with donors who were curious about the campaign. She said these conversations were simple and focused on the importance of blood donation. She emphasized that the events were not occasions for proselytization. They were occasions for service.

Another initiative that has become a regular feature of Shincheonji's activities in France is Shincheonji PariClean. This project reflects the movement's concern for the degradation of the urban environment. Members participate in World Cleanup Day every September. The first PariClean event took place in Paris on September 17, 2022 (Shincheonji Église de Jésus 2026, 20). In 2025, the initiative expanded to Montpellier, Marseille, and Lyon. Members clean streets, parks, and public gardens. They collect plastic, bottles, paper, and other waste. They also operate booths to promote ecological awareness. These booths distribute information about recycling, pollution, and environmental responsibility.

Interviewees described these activities with enthusiasm. One said that she had participated in several cleanup events and found them energizing. She said that she enjoyed working alongside people she had never met before. Another said that he had joined the Mégothon day in Paris in May 2025, an event organized by associations unrelated to Shincheonji. The focus was on collecting cigarette butts. He said that he was impressed by the number of volunteers from different backgrounds. He said that participating in such events helped him feel connected to the city.

The Mini Forest Project is another example of Shincheonji's ecological engagement. The movement believes that planting trees contributes to a healthier and more beautiful urban environment. In 2025, members planted 150 trees in Joinville-le-Pont (Shincheonji Église de Jésus 2026, 33). They did so in cooperation with secular organizations specialized in urban forestry. Interviewees who participated in the project described it as a meaningful experience. One said that planting a tree felt like leaving a small gift for future generations. Another said that she had never planted a tree before and found the experience unexpectedly moving. The project is both ecological and personal.

Shincheonji's concern for the environment intersects with its concern for vulnerable populations. The movement participates in the Nuit de la Solidarité de Paris, an annual event dedicated to helping the homeless (Shincheonji Église de Jésus 2026, 30–2). In January 2025 and 2026, members joined volunteers from religious and secular organizations to conduct a census of the homeless and provide assistance. They distributed food, blankets, and hygiene products. They also spoke with people living on the streets to understand their needs. Several interviewees mentioned these nights. One said that she had been deeply affected by the conversations she had with homeless individuals. She said that the

experience made her reflect on the fragility of life. Another said that he had participated in the event as part of the Eco Héros group, which combines ecological and charitable activities. This group collects garbage and also works to reduce food waste by redistributing surplus food.

Shincheonji members in France engage in activities that benefit society at large. They cooperate with others. They participate in events organized by secular associations. They join campaigns that have nothing to do with their religious identity. At the same time, they do so because they regard these activities as expressions of their faith. Several interviewees said that they had learned in Shincheonji that caring for others and caring for the Earth are part of a life of faith. One said she had been taught that the world is a gift to be preserved. Another said that he had learned that helping others is a way to practice gratitude.

These activities also create opportunities for members to interact with people who have no connection with Shincheonji. One interviewee said that she enjoyed meeting volunteers from other organizations. She said that these encounters helped her understand different perspectives. Another said that participating in public events helped him feel part of the broader community. He said that he appreciated the sense of solidarity that emerged during cleanup days and blood drives.

The interviews also reveal that these initiatives are not limited to those who are physically able to participate in all activities. Some members cannot donate blood. Others cannot participate in physically demanding cleanup events. They find other ways to contribute.

Opponents of Shincheonji have argued that these initiatives serve as propaganda. They claim that the movement uses charitable activities to improve its image and attract new members. Some have suggested that the blood donation drives were launched to counter the negative publicity surrounding Shincheonji's alleged violations of health regulations in Korea during COVID-19. They argue that the campaigns are designed to present Shincheonji as benevolent. These criticisms raise questions that are not unique to Shincheonji. They apply to all organizations that engage in humanitarian aid. When churches, NGOs, states, or international organizations help others, they also promote an image of benevolence. The United Nations, Caritas, and countless other institutions engage in humanitarian work that enhances their reputation. This does not diminish the value of their actions (Šorytè 2020).

The interviews suggest that few, if any, of those who benefited from Shincheonji's charitable activities have joined the movement. In general, blood donors who participate in LifeON events do not become members. Volunteers who join cleanup days do not enroll in Bible classes. Homeless individuals who receive assistance during the Nuit de la Solidarité do not attend services. The activities serve those in need. They also provide members with opportunities to practice solidarity.

Disentangling self-promotion and charity is an impossible exercise. Humanitarian actions always have multiple dimensions. They help others. They shape public perception. They express values. They create opportunities for cooperation. Focusing exclusively on one dimension risks obscuring the others. The interviews show that Shincheonji members in France are motivated by a desire to help. They speak about their activities with sincerity. They describe moments of connection, gratitude, and reflection. They do not describe these activities as recruitment tools. They describe them as expressions of their faith.

The charitable and ecological initiatives of Shincheonji in France reveal a movement that seeks to contribute to society. They show members who engage with the world around them. They show cooperation with religious and secular organizations. They show a commitment to solidarity and environmental stewardship. They show a community that extends its values beyond its own boundaries.

These humanitarian activities are part of a broader landscape in which many Christian churches and religious organizations also contribute to the common good, even though their efforts are not always acknowledged in a society as deeply secular as France. What I observed among Shincheonji members, in contrast with their portrayal as a mysterious "Korean" or "African" group described at times with racial overtones, is that they live as an ordinary component of French society, not very different from their co-workers, fellow students, and friends, except for their particular religious beliefs.

Anti-Cult Opposition to Shincheonji in France

Shincheonji's presence in France has generated a reaction that reveals more about the French environment than about the movement itself. The interviews I

conducted show that most members lived their faith quietly until a wave of negative attention emerged. This attention came from journalists specialized in anti-cult campaigns, from the governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES, and from a small number of disgruntled ex-members. Their narratives circulated widely and created tensions in families and workplaces where none had existed. The stories collected in France illustrate how fragile the boundary between legitimate concern and moral panic is. They also show how members have tried to rebuild trust through transparency and open-door events.

The first finding from the interviews is that the majority of members had no conflict with their families before the publication of hostile articles. Several told me that their relatives knew they attended Bible classes and services. They regarded it as a normal religious choice. One interviewee, E., said that her parents had never objected to her interest in Christianity. She had been searching for a deeper understanding of the Bible and had found it in Shincheonji. She said that her family accepted her decision without difficulty. This changed abruptly when they read articles portraying the movement as a dangerous “cult” (“secte” in French). She said that her mother suddenly feared that she was being manipulated. The shift was not the result of anything she had done. It was the result of what her mother had read.

Another interviewee, B., described a similar experience. He said that his mother is a member of Shincheonji and that his father reacted with hostility after reading negative reports. He said that his father accused his mother of being involved in something harmful. He said that this created tension at home. He emphasized that the conflict did not originate from the family’s own observations. It originated from external narratives. He said that his mother continued to live her life normally and that nothing in her behavior justified the accusations. The problem was the perception the articles created.

The most dramatic case I encountered was that of a young woman, A., who was subjected to confinement and attempted deprogramming. Her story illustrates the consequences of alarmist narratives. She said she had been studying the Bible with Shincheonji and found its teachings meaningful. Her parents became alarmed after reading hostile material online. They decided to intervene. She said that they confined her at home, confiscated her cell phone, and brought a pastor to convince her to abandon her faith. He looked threatening and once violently squeezed her hands. She resisted. Her parents then brought in a psychiatrist. She said that

the psychiatrist tried to persuade her that she had been manipulated and compelled her to take psychotropic drugs. She insisted that she had joined Shincheonji freely and that she had not been pressured. She said that the experience was traumatic. She eventually regained her freedom, but the episode left deep marks.

Cases of deprogramming are rare in France. The reason is not that hostility is absent. It is parents who object to the religious choices of their adult children who often turn to institutions rather than private actors. MIVILUDES and the police are regarded as more effective than private deprogrammers. Several interviewees said that their parents contacted MIVILUDES after reading negative articles. They said that this created fear and confusion. One interviewee said that her parents asked whether she was allowed to sleep, was allowed to eat, and was being controlled. She said that these questions made no sense in relation to her actual life. She said that she worked, studied, and lived independently. She added that the questions came from fake news circulating online.

The interviews also reveal that the media campaign had consequences for the movement's activities. One interviewee said that the church had organized a sports day at a venue they had used the previous year. When they contacted the venue again, the management refused to rent the space. They said that they had read about Shincheonji in AFP reports about a lawsuit by hostile ex-members. The refusal was not based on any incident. It was based on the reputation created by the articles.

The interviews show that the accusations circulating in France often originate from Korean Protestant pastors who regard Shincheonji as competition. These pastors travel internationally and warn against the movement. Their claims are repeated by journalists and activists who do not always understand the Korean context. Apart from the inaccurate reporting about Shincheonji and COVID, one example is the accusation that the movement hides its identity when approaching people. Several interviewees said that they were told immediately that they were speaking with Shincheonji. One said that she was approached in the street and that the missionaries introduced themselves openly. Another said that she was contacted online and that the name Shincheonji was mentioned from the beginning.

These testimonies contradict the narrative that the movement systematically conceals its identity. In fact, because of virulent media campaigns, the movement did not initially mention Shincheonji in its initial contacts with prospective

converts in Korea and other countries. The Korean Supreme Court ruled that the practice was unethical but not illegal (Supreme Court of Korea 2022; Introvigne 2023). It has now been largely abandoned in most countries, as even anti-cultists have noticed, criticizing Shincheonji for “boldly” using its own name (Tan 2022). The strategy was promptly abandoned in France, as the missionaries realized that when they arrived in 2016, no one there had heard of “Shincheonji,” and it did not carry negative connotations. The situation changed in later years, but the movement maintained its “open evangelization” attitude in France.

The interviews also show that the movement has responded to the negative attention by increasing transparency. Several interviewees mentioned open-door events where relatives and friends are invited to attend services and ask questions. One interviewee said that her mother had read negative articles and had become worried. She invited her to an open-door event. Her mother attended and saw the community firsthand. She said that this experience changed her mother’s perception. Another interviewee said that her sisters had been concerned after reading online material. They later watched Shincheonji videos, met other members of the movement, and saw that they were living a normal life. She said that this helped restore trust.

These open-door events are part of a broader effort to rebuild relationships. Several interviewees said that they had learned in Shincheonji to communicate better with their families. One said that she had been distant from her mother for years. She said that her instructor encouraged her to speak with her mother and try to understand her. She reported that this advice helped her rebuild the relationship. Another said she had learned to be patient with relatives influenced by negative narratives. She said that she tried to show through her behavior that she was living a balanced life.

The interviews also reveal that the movement faces ongoing challenges. The lawsuit mentioned in the media may have serious consequences. The negative attention from MIVILUDES and journalists continues to influence public perception. Members are aware of these challenges. They speak about them with concern. They also speak about their determination to continue their activities.

The French environment is complex. It is shaped by a strong secular tradition, by a history of suspicion toward new religious movements, and by a media landscape where sensational anti-cult narratives circulate easily.

Shincheonji entered this environment with little knowledge of its dynamics. The movement's members have had to navigate a terrain where religious choice is often viewed with suspicion. They have had to explain their faith to relatives who rely on external narratives rather than personal observation. They have had to respond to accusations that do not correspond to their lived experience.

The interviews show that the members' response has been grounded in patience and transparency. They have opened their doors. They have invited relatives to attend services. They have explained their activities. They have tried to rebuild trust. They have also continued to study the Bible, participate in community events, and maintain their daily lives. They have shown resilience in the face of misunderstanding.

The movement arrived in a secular country with a small team and grew through persistence and adaptation. It developed a community that studies, plays, and interacts with others. It faced suspicion and hostility. It responded with openness. The interviews reveal a movement shaped by its members' questions, their desire to understand the Bible, and their efforts to live their faith in a challenging environment.

The French debate on Shincheonji is far from settled. It will continue to evolve as more people encounter the movement directly rather than through external narratives. What emerges from the interviews is a portrait of a community that seeks understanding rather than confrontation. It is a community that has suffered from misrepresentation but continues to build bridges. It is a community that invites others to see it as it is, not as it is portrayed.

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