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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

**Hellbound as a Parable for Contemporary South  
Korea**

Hellbound jako parabola pro současnou Jižní Koreu

OLOMOUC 2024 Bc. Sabina Nam

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla veškeré použité prameny a literaturu.

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## Annotation

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In my thesis I focus on the South Korean dark fantasy television series *Hellbound*, where each episode serves as a window into an imaginary near future, showing the detriment that media and a manipulated public discourse can cause on society. The thesis explores relevant backgrounds like the roles of neoliberalism, media, and religion in South Korea, in connection with the current socio-economic situation. The analysis focuses on key scenes, dialogues, and motifs that can be considered a parabolic reflection of contemporary South Korean conditions, especially how society deals with the unlucky ones and how media and social media impact public discourse and manage to silence dissent. Following these lines of investigation, this thesis aims to shed light on how *Hellbound* can be regarded as a parable and allegory. I seek to contribute to the study of media in the digital age by unravelling the complexities of manipulation shown in a thought-provoking drama on human-fallibility that in a post-pandemic world offers even more layers of meaning.

## Anotace

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Ve své diplomové práci se zaměřuji na jihokorejský fantasy seriál *Hellbound*, jehož jednotlivé epizody slouží jako okno do imaginární blízké budoucnosti a ukazují, jakou škodu mohou média a zmanipulovaný veřejný diskurz způsobit společnosti. Práce zkoumá relevantní souvislosti, jako je role neoliberalismu, médií a náboženství v Jižní Koreji v souvislosti se současnou socioekonomickou situací. Analýza se zaměřuje na klíčové scény, dialogy a motivy, které lze považovat za parabolický odraz současných jihokorejských poměrů, zejména toho, jak se společnost vypořádává s nešťastníky a jak média a sociální sítě ovlivňují veřejný diskurz a dokáží umlčet dissent. V návaznosti na tyto směry zkoumání si tato práce klade za cíl osvětlit, jak lze *Hellbound* považovat za podobenství a alegorii. Snažím se přispět ke studiu médií v digitálním věku tím, že rozplétám složitost manipulace zobrazené v myšlenkově podnětném dramatu o lidské omylnosti, které v postpandemickém světě nabízí ještě další významové vrstvy.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Andreas Schirmer for his valuable advice, help, support, and enthusiasm. I would also like to thank my family, close friends and my cat for their motivation and support.

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## Editor's note

For romanization of Korean, Revised Romanization of Korean is used. In case of personal names, commonly used transcription is used. Romanized expressions are italicized except for Korean names.

“Korea” is used to refer to South Korea.

# 1. Introduction

My thesis will focus on the South Korean television series *Hellbound*, which premiered in 2020 on Netflix. The series depicts a dystopian world where mysterious entities appear and burn people alive – ostensibly as a punishment for their sins, which brings about the birth of a new religious movement, aided by a radical group, and the subsequent infiltration of their views into the media and government. The series explores the effect of media manipulation and the impact of religion on society. *Hellbound* thus offers a window into the complex spiritual as well as socio-economic landscape of South Korea, providing a parabolic reflection of contemporary conditions. These conditions in South Korea are strongly influenced by neoliberalism, which serves as justification for fierce competition and egoistic pursuit of profit and success.

In my thesis, I will also examine how social media platforms can be exploited for manipulation in the context of the modern technological age. While AI can be a valuable tool, it is also becoming a threat to social security. As the accessibility of AI increases, it is being used with malicious intent, spreading disinformation and misinformation. South Korea is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of technological advancement. South Koreans utilise online media daily. However, there has been a recent backlash against news reporters and the spread of misinformation, with the statistics indicating that South Korea has one of the lowest levels of trust in the established media. However, *Hellbound* doesn't reflect only media manipulation and neoliberalism but also the question of religion. In Korea, it is difficult from a regulatory point of view to distinguish between cults that commit religious crimes and respectable religions. The lack of regulation has led to the spread of controversial religious movements throughout the country. In the series, we can observe how such religious groups can gain their power by utilising fear and manipulation.

The analysis will then focus on key scenes and dialogues across the six episodes of the series. It will delve deeply into the motifs of religious belief, neoliberalist ideology, and media manipulation, examining their reflection on contemporary South Korea. Through this examination, I intend to demonstrate how *Hellbound* might be regarded as reflecting allegorically debates and discourses about media, society, and the public sphere in South Korea. Ultimately, the thesis aims to examine the manner in which this series serves as a parable for conditions in South Korea.

## 2. Neoliberalism

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a “neoliberal” can be defined as “a liberal who de-emphasises traditional liberal doctrines in order to seek progress through more pragmatic methods”. Neoliberalism claims that the government is unable to provide conditions for economic growth and to supply society with the necessary security of well-being and social welfare. This movement is based on the belief that government makes things worse, not better, and claims that the private sector (including both businesses and individuals) and especially free markets are the key to economic prosperity and social welfare (Bockman 2013). Tejaswini Ganti states that there is no single, universally accepted definition of neoliberalism, as the concept is open to interpretation based on the perspective of the individual. Despite its complexity, there are multiple references that can be used to discuss neoliberalism. The closest is the idea that the market exchange can be used to guide humans in both economic and ethical ways. In other words, it could be defined as the promotion of free markets, competition, and self-interest (Ganti 2014).

The term ‘neoliberalism’ is currently employed in a multitude of contexts. One illustrative example is the corporatisation of universities or the expansion of low-wage service work. The manifestations of neoliberalism vary according to the field in which it is applied. Consequently, sociologists can observe potential connections between these changes. However, in the context of history, the term was first used in the 1930s following the Great Depression in 1929, when people sought alternative solutions to the social and economic crisis. European liberals came with an imaginative new form of liberalism, which would keep free markets while utilising a government that only slightly intervenes in the economy in order to maintain organised business. Such governments are in the context of liberalism called minimal states. It is crucial to acknowledge that the objective of neoliberal policies was not to eliminate the state but rather to transform it. (Bockman 2013; A Dictionary of Economics 2024)

In our generation, neoliberal power and market-dominated society have become integrated into the practical reality of the majority of the world’s population. The agendas of neoliberalism were adopted by both social-democratic and conservative parties and had survived decades of criticism and resistance. Influences included social and cultural changes that brought a competitive mind-set. This performance and market-oriented thinking integrated into everyday lives, changing the way people relate to each other (Connell and Dados 2014).

In the context of South Korea, the neoliberalisation of the economy following the 1997 financial crisis led to accelerated financialisation and transnationalisation, which in turn influenced the current state of the country. During this process, there was a transformation in the power distribution and inter-relationship between the three institutional actors – the state, the banks, and the *chaebols* (Lim and Jang 2006).

The literal meaning of the term *chaebol* is wealthy family. The word refers to large and diversified conglomerates that are controlled and owned by a family in a dynastic manner. These conglomerates have experienced rapid growth in South Korea, expanding globally and influencing the economy to a significant extent. They are currently the dominant market players, contributing significantly to the economy. Samsung is a prominent example of a *chaebol*, ranking as the second largest global provider of smartphones and chips. Another notable *chaebol* is the Hyundai Motor Group, which has established itself as a leading enterprise within its industry. Neoliberalism, or more specifically its strategies implemented after the pro-democratic movement in 1987, is the underlying factor behind the global success of *chaebols*. The influence of neoliberal strategies was then further reinforced during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The rise of the *chaebol* during the mid-2000s was a phenomenon that was widely observed, with many commentators referring to Korea as the *Republic of Samsung* (Kim 2022).

South Korea underwent a transition from a developmental role to a regulatory role, aligning its economic policies with neoliberal principles to create an environment conducive to foreign investors. A similar shift can be observed in the Korean banking industry, where the country's banks are now predominantly foreign-owned and independent of government influence. This has led to a prioritisation of profit maximisation, with a focus on wealthier customers. In 2006, Lim observed that the *chaebols* were undergoing a process of change, with their affiliate firms becoming increasingly independent while adopting a more conservative approach to new investments. This involved a shift towards equity financing rather than debt financing (Lim and Jang 2006).

As a result of the neoliberal strategies' quick increase in sales, the labour cost to total sales ratio was unable to recover from the previous crisis. Following 2007, it fell, reaching an all-time low in 2011. The neoliberal approach of South Korea's *chaebols* was significantly influenced by their perception of the entanglements with global and East Asian capitalist dynamics. As the nature of government is typically shaped by the power

dynamics among social forces, their interaction and relationship with the government was crucial. The ultimate goal of the *chaebols* was to achieve full autonomy from government intervention. Furthermore, this specific power balance – or the lack thereof – among stakeholders, including owners, CEOs, shareholders, and labour, contributed to the monopolisation of *chaebol* businesses and their affiliated companies. The profit maximisation and subsequent accumulation of capital by *chaebols* was enabled by the complex environment. This, in turn, contributed to the inexorable widening of the gap between the rich and the poor (Kim 2022).

Neoliberalism is not a monolithic ideology with fixed criteria for its application. Rather, it manifests in diverse forms across the globe, shaped by the specific circumstances of each context. These circumstances give rise to a multiplicity of forms, some of which may even appear contradictory. It is a global phenomenon for individuals to criticise the government, whether for its ineffectiveness, corruption, or the repression of a specific group of people. The longing for freedom is an inherent aspect of humanity. Politicians from both the left and right, as well as those in positions of power, work with the distortions of criticism and needs, ultimately transforming them into the engagement of citizens in the entrepreneurial process. Neoliberalism frequently reflects genuine concerns of society. However, it is often accompanied by the negative effects of capitalism, which have led to the emergence of a wide range of neoliberal phenomena worldwide. We can see how it led to the rise of the *chaebol* conglomerates in South Korea or the creation of neoconservatism in the US, where the ideology was augmented with nationalism, militarisation and Christianity (Bockman 2013).

### 3. Manipulation on Social Media Platforms

Already in 1997, political scientist Michael Parenti warned that newspaper articles are influenced by human bias. Thus, no communication system can communicate all information and selectivity on the part of the author is required. The reader's perception is thus shaped and influenced by what information the author of the article wants to convey. Media biases are subordinated to the interests of the owners and sponsors of the newspaper in question. However, it does not necessarily have to be completely subordinate to their interests, it is sufficient if they omit information that could be a conflict of interest. Manipulation often lies behind the information we omit rather than

mention. For example, the news may focus on neutral events and mention politically sensitive conflicts only briefly (Parenti 1997).

The manipulation of media in the online sphere, especially on social media and other online platforms, is often discussed these days. In particular, the rise of extremist and divisive behaviour on social media deserves attention. Policies like flagging questionable content, whether manually or automatically, are increasingly being added as features to platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. Even at the cost of accidentally removing harmless content. Social media platforms have been forced to take these measures after being asked to introduce regulations to deal with extreme content (Rogers and Niederer 2020).

One of the terms that we often come across these days is *fake news*, an umbrella term that has spread around the world and means that the information that is given to us through the media is false. Although it is a relatively new term for the same meaning, words like news satire, fabrication, advertising, and propaganda have been used in the past. In the context of fake news and manipulation, it is necessary to mention the terms disinformation and misinformation. While both refer to false information, misinformation is created unintentionally without any harmful intent. Disinformation, on the other hand, is created in a way that deliberately tries to deceive the recipient and thus spread a false message. Recently, the term mal-information has been adopted to describe the information that is accurate but spread with the intention of causing harm. Mal-information is used as a form of harassment, and an example of this could be doxing<sup>1</sup> or the publication of private details. Tools like these are being used for the weaponization of social media platforms. People are using them to incite dispute by implementing fake news and shaping public opinion. As mentioned earlier, social media platforms are increasingly responding to calls for their content to be regulated. Platforms such as YouTube or Facebook use algorithms as well as human workers to prevent the spread of false information, hate speech, etc (Rogers and Niederer 2020).

However, the question arises as to whether marking content as inappropriate using algorithm rather than a human approach inadvertently omits necessary information and parts of the relevant context. The term "extreme speech" has been proposed as a way to

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<sup>1</sup> The action or process of searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, typically with malicious intent.

nuate the discourse surrounding hate speech when it comes to toxic online content (Rogers and Niederer 2020).

Bliuc et al. (2020) in their article on the growing power of online communities, where they collected data from 14 years of online communication between members of an extreme right-wing online community, talk about how online groups can instigate radicalised behaviour. Extremist online communities can have a significant impact on their members' lives outside of the virtual space by changing their self-definition and behaviour. By becoming a member of such a community, an individual becomes susceptible to radicalisation by being given voice to their views and placing them within a framework of meaning that is suited to their means. Moreover, such a member may see the justification for his violent actions in the pursuit of a collective group goal. The radicalised group therefore provides values, motives and norms that allow its members to change their moral standards and engage in despicable acts that they would not have done before (Bliuc et al. 2020).

One common form of online harassment that can be incited by these groups is hate speech. The members may target a particular group of victims based on their race, religion, sexual orientation or political orientation. Their actions have a negative impact on the well-being and quality of life of the victims, affecting their privacy, safety and mental health. Online platforms provide the radical groups with many ways in which to target their victims. In addition to the previously mentioned doxing, the modern age also brings trolling<sup>2</sup>, degrading memes or revenge porn (Walther 2022). Behind this harassment behaviour of online groups is the similarity of shared beliefs about the world within the group. The sense of community is deepened by supporting each other's beliefs and sharing the collective emotions associated with them. If the radical group itself faces criticism and attacks, its members feel and fuel the same angry emotions, which can escalate and eventually lead to even more extreme views and behaviours (Bliuc et al. 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> Persistent pestering and goading

### 3.1. Manipulation in the Age of AI

Contemporary societies are confronted with an unprecedented new form of manipulation and disinformation that is slowly but surely becoming a growing threat to public security. This danger lies in artificial intelligence.

Machine learning method allows machines to perform useful cognitive tasks such as analysing data, predicting trends and more. Machine learning uses algorithms to learn from data and produce solutions to a given task. Artificial intelligence (AI) then has a number of methods it can use to create intelligent behaviour, and for some tasks, such as image recognition, machines have already outperformed humans in benchmark tests (Scharre et al. 2018).

In the past, artificial intelligence required powerful computers and specialised equipment, but today it is accessible to everyone. Thanks to large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT or Google's Gemini, anyone with access to the internet can use AI for various purposes. While LLMs can be a useful tool for accessing information quickly and conveniently, the information they provide is not always accurate. Researchers at Stanford's HAI acknowledge that certain aspects of open foundation LLMs<sup>3</sup> bring their own risks, such as bioweapons tutorials, hacking and others, however they also argue that these are preventable (Sexton 2024). For example, OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT and DALL-E (AI image generator), mentions on its website that it is actively working to ensure the security of its model through both human and machine learning approaches (OpenAI 2015–2024).

Governments and government organisations are increasingly using AI to their advantage. They are implementing it in their new technologies, such as facial recognition and biometric tracking. They are using AI to combat illegal and threatening activities, including terrorism and extremism. However, even these intentions evoke bitter feelings in some, as the technology also monitors and tracks citizens, which many consider an invasion of privacy and personal freedom. It is possible that it could cause discrimination on the basis of health conditions, race or religious belief in the future. One possible example could be the persecution of Uighurs by the Chinese government. In the past few years, major newspapers such as the New York Times or the Guardian have published

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<sup>3</sup> As opposed to closed foundation AI methods, which are not accessible to the public.



articles in which they describe how the government in China uses advanced facial recognition technology to track and control the Muslim community of Uighurs (Mozur 2019; Bhuiyan 2021; Feldstein 2022).

Recent advances in computer science have brought a new way of creating convincing disinformation (Helmus 2022). Deepfake is defined in the dictionary as an image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to make someone appear to do or say something that was not actually done or said (Merriam-Webster 2024). Deepfakes often use self-learning technology, which makes them significantly more convincing. This allows people with malicious intent to use them in ways that make deepfakes a threat of the imminent rise of disinformation and manipulation. As technology advances, this type of video will become more affordable to produce with less original footage required. On the web, we can find various sites that allow their users to use deepfake services. One of the prime examples of negative use of free deepfake services are sites such as DeepNude, where users can upload pictures of mainly women and the site then makes the person in the picture appear nude. This site is openly available without any restrictions such as age limits. If a picture of a politician is to be used, the photo could even influence the election. Deepfakes however are not restricted only to pictures and videos. Voice cloning is becoming popular on social media platform and many websites can produce variety of celebrity voices saying whatever the user input (Helmus 2022). Combined with the use of deepfake videos, users are able to produce entertaining content for social media<sup>4</sup>, but it is important to be aware of the problems this creates. In an age where anyone can publish their material to a large audience online, the misuse of AI is not a question of what if, but when. If a piece of information is viral or powerful enough, we can imagine even traditional media inadvertently spreading disinformation (Alliance for Democracies 2020). If a user were to create a sufficiently believable deepfake video of a world leader saying he was going to attack another country with nuclear weapons, the consequences could be catastrophic if such material were to go viral in the wrong way.<sup>5</sup> The use of deepfakes could also have a negative impact on

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<sup>4</sup> On TikTok in particular, videos with celebrity voices are becoming increasingly popular. In recent trends, we can see edits of songs originally sung by other artists being sung by another celebrity, Shrek or even a toothbrush.

<sup>5</sup> Empirical evidence from over 100,000 posts on Twitter (now X) between 2006 and 2010 shows that fake news reaches people faster than accurate information (Vosoughi 2018)

citizens' trust in institutions and authorities. A fake video of a police officer acting inappropriately or violently could easily affect how some citizens perceive the officer. Another misuse of deepfakes could be that members of radical organisations can easily conceal their identities by utilising AI-generated images, as these are not subject to reverse search (Helmus 2022).

There is a growing awareness of the potential dangers of deepfakes. However, this awareness also brings with it a number of negative consequences. The proliferation of disinformation through this medium undermines the trust of individuals in even legitimate news and information sources. Even authentic videos or images portraying an important event can be falsely marked as deepfakes. Consequently, deepfakes can be used not only as a tool to spread disinformation, but also to manipulate opinions about correct information.

Despite the considerable advances that have been made in the field of artificial intelligence, it is yet to reach its full potential, additional research on the impact of it is still needed and will be critical for future prevention of spreading disinformation. There is a pressing need for more extensive cross-disciplinary research that could identify how radical groups and media utilise AI to disseminate disinformation and mal-information. (Helmus 2022; Bliuc et al. 2020).

### 3.2. Media in South Korea

Prior to democratisation in 1987, the press in South Korea was heavily controlled by the government, whose aim was to use the media's influence to reinforce the propaganda of authoritarian rule (Cho 2017). Now that the press is not restricted by propaganda, the influence of media in democratic countries like South Korea is unchallenged. The information disseminated through the media not only shapes society but also has a direct impact on the political and socioeconomic landscape. However, particularly in South Korea, there is a lack of trust in the media. Korean society often leans towards the negative view of the media (Park 2019). This negative attitude has even led to the creation of the derogatory neologism *giregi*. This is a portmanteau word, coined by blending *gija* ("reporter") with *sseuregi* ("trash"). This term is not only used in the online sphere but is also discussed in academic circles. A study which examined comments containing the

term *giregi* in various Naver<sup>6</sup> posts between 2013 and 2019, showed a steady increase in the use of this term over these years. The term *giregi* was most frequently observed in the comments section of articles pertaining to political and economic matters. Upon examination of the number of comments under each post, the study revealed that the term was most prevalent in economic-related articles. This, in conjunction with the general upward trend in its usage, indicates that this term is not solely associated with political matters but also reflects the public's perception of the media in general, particularly the Korean public's distrust of the media (Kim and Kang 2022). A survey published in 2021 by The Reuters Institute revealed that media bias is a growing problem in Korean society. The survey found that many respondents believed that the media was not fairly representing different political opinions and that there was a lack of representation of the voices of people from lower socio-economic classes. The report's results also indicated that there was both political bias in new media content and a bias in the way readers consume media. It is also important to mention that the level of trust in the media in South Korea increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it still remains one of the lowest in international comparison. The results of the same survey in 2023 showed that the level of trust in the media among South Korean citizens has fallen again, with only 28% of respondents saying that they mostly trust most of the media. Korean citizens have a greater level of trust in broadcast channels such as YTN and a lower level of trust in traditional newspapers such as the Chosun Ilbo, which was ranked lowest in terms of respondents' trust in the media. Koreans are also more likely to use social media platforms as a source of news, while only 4% use TikTok as a source, 53% of respondents use YouTube for news every week (Newman et al. 2021; Newman et al. 2023).

The distrust of South Korean media was highlighted in 2014, when the tragic sinking of the Sewol ferry took place, killing many people. The media at the time mistakenly announced that all passengers had survived and was criticised for its lack of fact-checking. When the Halloween incident occurred in Itaewon in 2022 and many young people died in the stampede, the media, unlike in 2014, had many reporters on the scene and tried to portray the incident truthfully. Although their information was true, many media outlets were criticised for their sensationalism. Media broadcasted and

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<sup>6</sup> The search platform Naver, along with its competitor Daum, is the most frequently utilized search engine by Korean citizens for information retrieval.

shared sensitive, graphic footage of casualties or people performing CPR online, failing to respect the privacy of victims and their families (Lee 2023).

Digital literacy is a crucial aspect of online information seeking and sharing. This is influenced by a multitude of factors, including demographic and psychological characteristics, which are challenging to influence or control (Lee, Hwang, and Jeong 2021). South Korea is one of the leading countries in terms of technology, and in the modern age, online communication is closely connected to the everyday lives of South Koreans (Park 2019). It is therefore crucial to understand how digital literacy is taught and perceived in South Korea in order to develop effective media communication strategies with the ultimate goal of stopping the spreading of misinformation and disinformation. It would be naive to believe that such forms of manipulation can be entirely prevented, given that their spreading is ultimately linked to the individual personalities and psychopathologies of those involved (Walther 2022). While it is easy to villainise modern technologies as they facilitate the spread of hate, the connection of radicalised individuals, and the deceit that can be perpetrated online, it is also important to remember that online platforms also provide a multitude of sources and points of view. One potential solution is to emphasise the importance of critical thinking and digital literacy, which could help to combat the spread of ills such as misinformation online.

#### 4. Religion in South Korea

The religious landscape of South Korea is characterised by a multitude of diverse and evolving traditions, shaped by the country's long history and influenced by external influences. Consequently, South Korea does not possess a single dominant or national religion. The most prevalent religions observed in the country include Protestantism, Buddhism and Catholicism. Despite Buddhism's longstanding presence in the nation, largely due to the influence of Western culture, Christianity has emerged as the most prominent religion. The prevalence of Christianity in South Korea is an interesting phenomenon, particularly given that only approximately 4% of the Asian population adheres to Christianity. Despite the country's rapid economic growth, religion in South Korea continues to exert a significant influence on society. (Kim 2002)

The most recent statistical data on religion in South Korea indicates that the majority of the population (51.7%) does not adhere to any particular religion. The largest religious group is Protestantism, which represents 19.72% of the population, followed by

Buddhism (15.53%), Catholicism (7.93%), and other religions (0.72%). A comparison of the results of the 2005 and 2015 consensus surveys reveals a 9% decrease in the proportion of religious people (Statistics Korea 2016; Korean Statistical Information Service 2017).

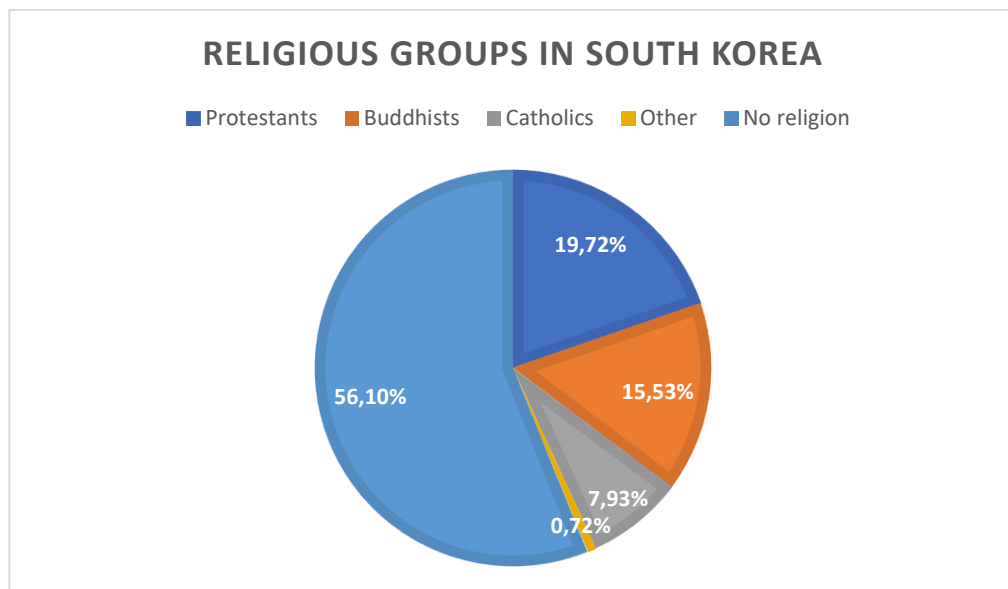


Fig 1: Size of religious groups in South Korea (Korean Statistical Information Service 2017).

The manner in which Protestantism expanded throughout South Korea since its introduction in 1884 is undoubtedly an intriguing phenomenon. However, the rise of Catholicism is also worthy of our attention. Catholicism was first introduced in 1784, and in the following century, it had been subjected to severe persecution in the country, with over eight thousand Catholics martyred. Nevertheless, it managed to establish itself as the third largest religion in South Korea. Catholicism has experienced the fastest growth since the late 1980s. Although Christianity failed to gain a foothold in the neighbouring countries of China and Japan, it has become deeply embedded in Korean society, despite the continued practice of Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism, which have exerted a profound influence on the wider society. Nevertheless, Christianity remains a significant presence in South Korean society. This phenomenon can be attributed to the church's involvement in economic and political development. Additionally, the dynamics have been adapted to align with Korean traditional views, which Christianity has incorporated into their practices. Moreover, Korean pastors have identified specific aspects of Christian practices that correspond with shamanic beliefs, with the intention of enhancing the appeal of the imported faith to a broader audience. The lack of a clear distinction between traditional religion and Christianity has enabled them to coexist

peacefully together (Kim 2000). Christianity is still growing despite Korea's rapid modernisation and urbanisation, which are usually associated with the decline of religion (Kim 2000). However, this development has already reached its peak, as evidenced by the statistics between the years 2005 and 2015, which show a decline. In the mid-1980s, religious affiliation was associated with the number of children women had, showing that Catholics and Protestants were more likely to have fewer children than atheist women; however, this influence of religious affiliation diminished and is now virtually non-existent, as the leading factor in determining the fertility rate has become socio-economic, showing the decreased influence of religion in contemporary Korean society (Yoo and Agadjanian 2021).

Religion in South Korea is linked to many areas in which its influence is reflected. When it comes to politics, the institutional adjustments of the major religions during the period of democratic transition have affected the voting patterns and political orientations of believers. Unlike in Buddhism, where the majority is conservative party supporters, when it comes to Protestants and Catholics their election choices are based on the current circumstances of competition between conservative and liberal organizations. However, religion was an important factor both before and after democratization (Kim 2017).

In the 1990s, the media covered religion in a new, more critical, and broader context. With greater freedom of the press, when articles were no longer manipulated by the pre-democratic government, the influence of the media grew rapidly. As a result, religious organisations became sensitive to their portrayal in the mass media and increased their efforts to maintain their own religious media institutions. On occasion, the religious groups sued either the media groups or individual journalists (Cho 2017). As an example of extreme behaviour, in 1999 about 300 members of Manmin jungang gyohoe broke into the MBC television station in an attempt to stop the broadcast of a documentary about the true nature of this particular church (BBC News 1999).<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.1. The Danger of Cults in South Korea

Religion can be seen as a belief system centred on divine, superhuman power, with the addition of worship and power-oriented rituals. While most religious beliefs are inherently against violence and association with criminal and extremist activities, they

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<sup>7</sup> The Christian Council of Korea later called this church heretical.

can also contribute to violence and extremism (Lee 2020). If we look at religion in South Korea from a Western point of view, it is a relatively new concept for Koreans, which has been transformed by various influences throughout modern history. As a result, religion in Korea is not strictly regulated. This has allowed new religious movements to flourish, often contradicting traditional (i.e. Christian) teachings. Korea as a society does not seem to be able to agree on the right way to distinguish between legitimate churches and those whose goals are not in line with commonly agreed social morals. For such illegitimate religious movements, Koreans commonly use the words *idan* (“heresy”) or *saibi jonggyo* (“pseudo-religion”). These can be also translated as cult or sect. (Baker 2010)

In essence, the root cause of religious crimes is religious conflict, which can manifest between different religious groups or within the same religion. The problems associated with cults arise from the inappropriate concentration of power in the hands of a single individual, the leader, who assumes a god-like position within the cult. This allows them to minimise internal criticism from their own church. The question of whether the person in charge truly believes in their delusion of being a god or is aware of their deceiving acts is of little consequence to the cult victims, who are supporting the cult leader’s behaviour. Ultimately, religion is transformed the moment it is tied to material things or used as a tool for politics. It can be used to justify a particular political system, ideology or behaviour. The radicalisation of religious groups is possible because they believe that these acts are in line with their religious beliefs. Furthermore, they utilize religion to gain benefits from the state or government or to gain preferential treatment (Lee 2020). Cults in South Korea can be described as criminal groups that hide behind religion in order to commit violent and fraudulent crimes, including sex crimes and even homicides. These groups are avoiding being subjected to direct control by creating religious organisations and utilising the principle of religious freedom stipulated by the constitution. (No 2010). The process of finding research on religion-related crimes in South Korea is challenging. This is due to the unique point of view that Koreans have for religion as a subculture, which makes it difficult to define both the scope of the crimes and the very definition of religious groups (Lee 2020). Despite the fact that they are negatively affected by media portrayals and social awareness, they remain to be significant social issues. Members of religious groups are expected to remain loyal to them, and leaving such groups is often constrained by internal pressures and

commitments that involve financial dependence and the potential destruction of one's self-image. By accepting and borrowing doctrines from established religions, cults are able to present themselves to the general public in a manner that is less recognisable as cultic. Although they share a religious essence, there is a distinction to be made between legitimate religions and cults. Legitimate religions focus on the individual and the development of society, whereas cults are concerned with individualism and the egoism of the leader. Those who have been victimised by cults have been deceived by the leaders of these organisations, who have employed a range of manipulative techniques to control them. These techniques include the promotion of false doctrines and emotional theories, which are used to exploit the victims in a number of ways, including matters of property, money, bodies, labour, sexuality and many others (No 2021). In theory, the existence of a cult is not a crime in and of itself, as people are free to choose their religion. However, the outward appearance of a cult may be indicative of the potential dangers that lie within. For instance, the arrest of a church leader for fraud or sexual assault may serve as an indicator of the prevalence of such crimes within the church group. These types of crimes, such as sexual or child abuse, are often justified within the church community by their own leaders (Lee 2020).

In the case of Korea, the leaders of various organisations claim to be God, Jesus, or Buddha in order to idolise and deify themselves. There are several reasons why this phenomenon of cult crimes is occurring in Korea. The presence of institutional corruption has led cults to exploit the indifference of established religion to this problem. Cult leaders seek to gain people's sympathy by highlighting the corruption and inactivity of established churches, justifying their own existence and rationalising their views. They also criticise established religions for their incompetence, claiming that they are unable to fulfil people's emotional, psychological, and social needs. Cults promise to meet people's unrealistic expectations in miracles, using propaganda such as promises of curing all diseases or removing all problems from the world. Their manipulation techniques also include luring victims with unreasonable temptations of immortality and eternal salvation. Cults frequently excel at instilling a sense of crisis, whether by modelling a belief in inevitable doom or by hyperbolizing existing problems. They exploit people's hopelessness to convince them that they can be saved only by their religious group. Christian cults are founded upon faulty doctrines and their own interpretation of the Bible. They employ complex passages from the Bible to justify their beliefs, which



they present in a manner that is convenient for them. Their understanding of the Bible is crucial in persuading their followers that they are the only religious group that is able to correctly interpret it (No 2021).

In my previous research, I examined the phenomenon of new religious movements and cults in Korea. The results of the survey offered insights into the manner in which these religious groups interact with people in everyday life. One of the most common approaches was to engage in friendly conversation or to request participation in a survey on the street. Some respondents reported being approached in university campuses. Another common motive was the pressure placed upon individuals to provide their phone number, which resulted in the respondents experiencing a high volume of unsolicited messages and calls from these religious groups. The research also revealed the involvement of Korean religious groups in other countries, as Czech respondents were aware of the activities of controversial religious movements such as Shincheonji or Moonists (Nam [Ševčíková] 2022).

In a comprehensive study, Lee (2020) delved into the statistics of religious crime cases from South Korean courts between 2014 and 2018. The analysis revealed a spectrum of offences, with the most prevalent being fraud (with an average of 823.8 fraud crimes each year), assault, personal injury, drunk driving, hit-and-run incidents, and sex offences. This extensive examination sheds light on the complex dynamics and challenges surrounding criminal activities within religious contexts, demonstrating the significant threat they pose to society and the economy. (Lee 2020) During the coronavirus pandemic in South Korea, a novel form of problematic conduct emerged among members of Protestant religious groups, such as *Sarang Jeil Gyohoe*, who disregarded quarantine regulations and failed to adhere to the restrictions on group gatherings (Choe 2020).

Another specific yet not unique problem has arisen in some Christian religions in Korea. Since the mid-1900s, a mandatory military service for men has been in place in South Korea. However, this is contrary to the doctrines of certain religious groups in Korea. For instance, male members of Jehovah's Witnesses are frequently imprisoned for refusing to fulfil their compulsory military service, which is prohibited by the church. As a result, members of such religious groups are compelled to choose between remaining loyal to their church and being regarded as criminals by society or undergoing military service and facing exclusion from the church, which would have a detrimental impact on

their private lives. Either way, the consequences are significant, affecting their lives and their position and contribution to society (Eum 2019; Jin 2006).

In 2020, a petition was submitted to the Blue House requesting the enactment of the ‘Pseudo-Religion Damage Prevention Act’<sup>8</sup>. The petition included the Religious Name Disclosure System, Fraudulent Proselytising Prohibition, Damage Compensation and Punishment Act. The Religious Disclosure Act imposed restrictions on individuals and organisations from planning and conducting gatherings or educational and cultural activities as part of their proselytising activities. It required them to state in advance which religious organisation they belonged to clearly (Lee 2020).

## 5. Hellbound

In April 2020, the global streaming platform Netflix first announced its plan to produce *Hellbound* (Kang 2020). The new dark fantasy series then premiered on the platform a year later in November 2021 (Yeon and Choi 2021).

There are two main creators behind *Hellbound*. The first is director Yeon Sang-ho, who was already known for his horror film *Train to Busan*, which at the time of the drama announcement in 2020 had already grossed 98 500 000 million dollars worldwide (Nash Information Services, LLC 1997 – 2024). The show was written by Choi Gyu-seok, whose previous experience in creating webtoons helped him adapt the script for this drama from its original webtoon adaptation. The webtoon was first published on the Korean server Naver in 2019 under the name *Jiok* or *Hell* in English (Kang 2020; Yeon and Choi 2019).

The South Korean drama consists of six episodes set in the near future between the years 2022 to 2027. The series explores supernatural and religious themes and their influence on human behaviour through media and internet personas. The main premise of *Hellbound* revolves around the appearance of an angelic figure who foretells death, or in other words gives a “death notice” to a person by telling them they are bound for hell. This is followed by the appearance of three supernatural entities, who murder the subject of the prophecy, the process is later referred to as “demonstration”. One of the main narratives of the show is the rise of a new religious movement called *The New Truth*.

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<sup>8</sup> Yusa(saibi)jonggyo pihaebangjibeop [유사(사이비)종교 피해방지법].

Working with the theme of religion is nothing new for the drama's director Yeon. His previous works include among others an animated movie *The Fake*<sup>9</sup> or *The Hell*, from which the webtoon *Hell* originated. Thanks to these working experiences he was able to plant his personal insight into *Hellbound* and thus immerse the viewer deeper into the issue of new pseudo religions and their ways of manipulation through media (Lee 2023). For Daun Lee *Hellbound* is a drama that asks audiences to engage with fundamental concerns about religion and God in order to fully comprehend its meaning. The work's ultimate message can only be appreciated if we are ready to contemplate its philosophical and social themes (Lee 2022).

The first season is divided into two acts, each containing three episodes. In the first act, we are first introduced to entities that brutally attack people. Yoo Ah-in plays Jeong Jinsu, the chairman of *The New Truth* – a religious group that claims the supernatural entities are angels who have come to take sinners from this world. Another significant group are the *Arrowheads*, an online organization made up of radical youth who support the same beliefs but do not hesitate to use violence. Since the first appearing of the entities and their first murder a police investigation was initiated and led by detective Jin Gyeonghun, portrayed by Yang Ik-june.

In the second act, there is a five-year time jump. This act follows the story of the wife of a television producer and their baby, who is bound for hell. This fact undermines the doctrine of *The New Truth* since the baby couldn't have sinned yet, and therefore, there is no reason for it to be bound for hell.

Ultimately, *Hellbound* is not a drama about God and sin; rather, it is about religion and society. In this context, people are shown to indirectly place themselves in the position of God. The process where people's beliefs form religion is demonstrated through the disaster situation and the corruption and degeneration. This process has been demonstrated in real life by many religions throughout history (Lee 2022).

### 5.1. Hellbound as a parable for Covid19

In December 2019, the first cases of SARS-CoV-2 were reported in Wuhan, China, causing the COVID19 pandemic. The first cases of this new disease in South Korea were reported in February 2020, around the same time *Hellbound* was announced by Netflix

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<sup>9</sup> Saibi [사이비].

(World Health Organization 2020). This brought speculations about some of the aspect of the show being used as a metaphor for the current situation in the country at the time. Since its release in 2021, *Hellbound* has found its audience from all over the world. Just like in real life, the characters in the show have struggled with things like unemployment, social isolation, the collapse of the economy and the widening gap between social groups (Unger 2023).

Through the phenomenon of the supernatural, where the pervasive fear of the uncertainty brought about by the possible appearance of death notices influences society, it is possible to observe how the subject of faith and religion becomes an everyday discussion between citizens. As in the time of COVID19, we see how the impending catastrophe affects society (Lee 2023).

Contracting COVID19 can be compared to receiving the notice of one's death. One of the essential ideas of this series is that any member of society can become a victim, regardless of gender or age; the only factor, according to *The New Truth*, is whether or not the person in question has committed a sin. The religious movement thus relies on the fact that anyone can become a victim, given human nature. People thus find themselves in a perpetual paranoia of the unknown and uncertainty, just as people do during a pandemic. People in 2022 were publicly debating that COVID19 could become the new normal. The characters in the show are also faced with a similar issue, knowing that sooner or later they will have to adapt to a new reality. This allows the audience to identify with the series on a new level that may not even have been originally intended, as the webtoon on which the drama is based was released before the pandemic (Unger 2023). The character of Jeong Jinsu speaks of the death notice as something inevitable like a natural disaster, which could be interpreted as a metaphor for the pandemic situation (Yang 2022).

## 5.2. Hellbound and Neoliberalism

This chapter will examine the manner in which neoliberalism is incorporated into the drama *Hellbound*. The synopsis is based on my own reception of the work, as well as on the interpretations of An (2022), Lee (2023) and Lee (2022).

Neoliberalism is a flexible form of capitalism that seeks to maximize the freedom of the market. In South Korea, neoliberalism employs pluralistic competition as a social control mechanism, manifested in the transparent governance of neoliberalism. It can be argued that society driven by neoliberalism promotes the perception among individuals

and groups that they are part of a world where competition is fair and effort is rewarded. Within this scheme, the reward system becomes justice and the competition system becomes common sense. In other words, when this reality becomes an unquestionable state of society, the rules that stand behind the exaggerated competitive system become another form of fairness. South Korea is no stranger to a hypercompetitive society, where transparency is promoted. Many South Koreans believe that transparency promotes trust among individuals and within society, leading to a culture of self-exposure and expectations of the same from others. This, in turn, deepens competition and may potentially result in the demand for a one-size-fits-all society.

In the context of the series, the dystopian setting represents the contemporary reality, where the concepts of justice and common sense have become increasingly volatile. Throughout the drama, we can observe a demand for a transparent society, which inevitably nourishes a need for mutual surveillance. Paradoxically, the individual's demand for transparency pushes society into a perpetual state of mutual mistrust, which reinforces the need for transparency, thus sustaining the cycle of the performance society and the surveillance society. The cycle is a breeding ground for superstition and conspiracy theories, which are a threat to social stability.

The deaths in the drama are caused by an unknown entity in a supernatural manner. However, the act of killing itself does not violate the laws of nature. In *Hellbound*, *The New Truth* gives a name to these entities, identifying them as angels. This leads people to believe these phenomena are connected to God's intention. It can be observed that *The New Truth* is perceived as a religion by those external to the organisation, whereas the chairman of *The New Truth*, regards it as a factual existence.

Korean society in the show is characterised by a number of factors. A need for psychological discipline is evident in public life, requiring individuals to have no doubt in God's intention. This discipline is further reinforced by a fear of being a victim of anger and punishment by both God and human society. This leads to a reality in which it is difficult to question the behaviour and acts of God, as God's supposed will is also monitored by groups such as *The New Truth* or *Arrowheads*. This ultimately provokes a state of uncertainty, which in turn leads to volatility and opens the door for inevitable radicalization. In such a society, perceived reality becomes much more important than actual facts, allowing unfounded beliefs to find their way into society.

The concept of neoliberalism in the series is reflected through the media, which compete for profit by sensationalising and exploiting the public's desire for transparency. This is evident in the portrayal of death as a tool for achieving these goals, despite the highly respected nature of the subject matter. This phenomenon can be observed in the case of *The New Truth*, which offers financial compensation to a woman in exchange for broadcasting her own death. In this context, death is not only a commodity to be traded for profit but also a tool to manipulate people's perceptions in a way that serves *The New Truth*'s best interests. This aligns the interests of those seeking transparency with those of media outlets driven by a competitive market. Accordingly, in the *Hellbound* universe, the deaths of individuals prophesied to be bound for hell are displayed to a large audience via broadcasting and media platforms such as YouTube. In addition to the broadcast, the locations where the supernatural killings occurred are transformed into holy sites, becoming tourist attractions. This contributes to *The New Truth*'s influence.

In the background, we can observe how the limits of legal justice are revealed. The limitations of the human law system in South Korea in the drama contribute to the spreading of the doctrine of divine intention. In other words, the law loses its ability to properly name the acts of death. What was originally called a *death notice* is now, as preached by *The New Truth*, a divine prophecy. The exhibition and presentation of death in Hell, the production of scapegoats, and the neutralisation of law have the effect of making the notice of death appear to be God's will. This becomes an inevitability, and religion fills the gap left by the absence of human law and governmental power. The world becomes a dystopia that fertilises hatred for those destined for Hell by God, which results in a bloom of consumption, ultimately leading towards treating fear and hate as a driving power for society.

The need for community is a fundamental aspect of human nature, and the desire to belong to a group can help us overcome feelings of solitude. The concept of *Hellbound* illustrates how religion is constructed upon the foundation of human-biased views. When events or phenomena occur that are beyond the comprehension of humans, they seek to replace them in order to avoid the anxiety and responsibility that accompany the unknown. In the context of *The New Truth*, it offers a sense of belonging and stability during challenging times, providing a sense of certainty and predictability that many people are seeking. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that *The New Truth* has become the centre of power, with exclusive authority over the interpretation of phenomena. Those

who adhere to the teachings of *The New Truth* or *Arrowheads* are blinded by the fear imposed by God and society and therefore fail to see the problematic nature of these groups. They simply accept that surviving equals submission to the authority of God as taught by the groups. It is evident that those involved in this process are unaware of the fact that their autonomy is being diminished within the community of faith.

In the second half of the series, following a time jump, we observe that society has reached a state of helplessness and peacefulness. This is due to the fact that the belief structure connected with the social system no longer causes controversy. The underlying system is supported by shared beliefs in society. Firstly, people must believe that there is an intellectually and morally perfect God. Secondly, it must be accepted that the perfect and logical nature of God's will, deeds, declarations, and demonstrations are superior to anything else since human understanding is imperfect. Finally, *The New Truth* is recognised as an authority that acts upon God's will. These beliefs serve to benefit society by creating a net function. It is crucial to acknowledge that the underlying cause behind the manifestation of the prophecies and entities is never revealed within the context of the drama. It is *The New Truth* that effectively transforms the phenomena into a matter of religious significance.

The drama is aware of its pessimistic approach to fatalism, which is often hidden within the context of faith. Furthermore, the drama questions whether it is acceptable to frame death from supernatural causes as an unavoidable occurrence. It is shown that human autonomy is volatile and is prone to be diminished, yet in *Hellbound*, people are still keen to have hope even when faced with large and overwhelming disasters without certain cause.

The series illustrates how religious institutions, like any other institution, can become corrupted over time. This occurs when the doctrines of the institution are modified to justify the pursuit of power and the actions of its members. The religious groups serve as an exemplar of religion, which removes the concept of God from a society where the anguish of people is being resolved by belief in absolute power. *Hellbound* demonstrates that religion can be structured on human needs and desires rather than on the concept of God while exposing how a religion that adheres to the doctrine of not sinning can lead to more violence and the exploitation of faith. In the case of the radicalised group known as the *Arrowheads*, it can be observed that the group members are becoming hypocrites in their pursuit of a shared goal. This is evidenced by their

criticism of criminals and promotion of toxic transparency, while simultaneously engaging in violent activities such as harassment, stalking and bullying.

## 6. Analysis

In my thesis I will analyse all six episodes of the drama *Hellbound*. I will first provide a brief synopsis of each episode to explain context for the scene analysis. This will be followed by an in-depth examination of the key scenes, with a focus on the main motifs of the show. The reasoning behind limiting the analysis to select scenes is to exclude those that are irrelevant to the thesis topic or that do not provide any new insights. In this analysis, I will be in most cases employing my own translation of the Korean original dialogues, as the translation provided by Netflix has been edited in a way that prioritises the viewer's comfort over accuracy.

### 6.1. First episode

The episode begins in a cafe where a man is attacked and chased by three monstrous entities. The man is killed by being burned into dust in the middle of the street in front of witnesses who documented the incident on video.

Detective Jin Gyeonghun, the main character, teams up with his colleague Eunpyo to gather information about *The New Truth*, but they are warned by their boss to be careful as it is not in their interest to get into trouble with any religious groups.

*The New Truth* is an organisation for religious studies that was established by its chairman, Jeong Jinsu, in 2012. As the drama's timeline begins in 2022, it is clear that *The New Truth* has only been in existence for 10 years. Additionally, we learn that a group called *Arrowheads* was formed by radical members of this organisation. While their main goal was to leak the identities of previously convicted individuals, their activities eventually moved offline. It is stated that members of the *Arrowheads* participate in minor crimes.

Near the murder scene, a group of *The New Truth* members were praying while listening to their chairman Jinsu's presentation about previous victims from various countries who died in the same way. According to him, all of them were criminals. Detective Jin Gyeonghun's adolescent daughter is also among the members of *The New Truth*. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that his wife, the mother of his daughter, was previously murdered.



During one of his broadcasts, the leader of the *Arrowheads* revealed the identity of one of the victims. He also targeted a novelist, which resulted in an attack on the writer led by other members of the *Arrowheads*. Subsequently, the members were detained by the police. It was mentioned that the attackers were all minors. During the scene in which the attacked novelist visits a police station, we are introduced to Min Hyejin, a lawyer who refers to *Arrowheads* as religious fanatics whose attacks will only worsen over time.

The episode ends with *The New Truth* requesting one of the people who is bound to hell to allow them to do a live broadcast of the demonstration.

#### 6.1.1. Scene description

The drama's opening scene depicts people in a cafe watching a YouTube video of Jeong Jinsu, the chairman of *The New Truth*, explaining the fate of those bound for hell. According to Jinsu, an angel appears to people and informs them of their impending death and the fact that they are bound for hell. When the right time comes, executors from hell will come to fulfil the prophecy. The creators of *Hellbound* outlined the current divide in society through a discussion between minor characters.

Character 1: *He looks completely normal.*

Character 2: *But why is he talking nonsense? Does anyone even believe this bullshit?*

Character 3: *Lots of people believe this. Loads of videos on his YouTube channel back it up.*

Character 2: *Come on. Cultists like him can only exploit people because idiots like you exist. Don't take this seriously, all right? Hey, don't tell me you're already indoctrinated.*

Character 3: *What? Let's watch it again, then.*

Character 1: *It's all CGI.*

Character 3: *No, it's not CGI.*

Character 1 [about *The New Truth* video]: *멀쩡하게 생겨 가지고는.*

Character 2: *뭔 말 같지도 않은 소릴 하고 있어? 야, 요즘에 이런 걸로 낚여지는 사람이 있냐?*

Character 3: *야, 요즘 이거 믿은 사람이 더 많거든? 이 사람 유튜브 채널 가면 증거 영상도 엄청 많아.*

Character 2: *야. 너 같은 애들이 있으니까 사이비들이 사기 쳐 먹는 거 아이야. 그냥 우리 재미로만 보자, 어? 너 설마 벌써 광신도 된 거 아니지?*

Character 3: *뭐? 아, 그럼 처음부터 다시 보든가.*

Character 1: *야, 이거 다 CG 라니까.*

Character 3: *아, CGI 아니라니까?*

While most of the group is sceptical about the supernatural aspect and questions Chairman Jinsu's statements and intentions, one of them supports Jinsu's views. In this way we can see the extent of *The New Truth*'s influence at the beginning of the series. It is implied that the influence is not yet that strong, as most of the group finds Jinsu's speech ridiculous. One character inquires whether the other has been indoctrinated, implying that *The New Truth* is somewhat of a religious movement. One of the characters also calls Jinsu a cultist implying that *The New Truth* is considered to be a cult by some people.

During the scene where the police investigate the attack on the man by the entities, we learn that certain keywords such as 'Hell', 'God', 'Death', 'The New Truth', or 'Angel' are trending on social media platforms in Korea. This suggests that the incidents are becoming increasingly well-known among the general public. The online influence is furthermore highlighted by Eunpyo saying, "Their [The New Truth's] doctrine is full of holes, but people believe it because of the false video evidence they have. Kids learn everything from videos these days." ("교리는 어설픈데 치증거 영상이 있고 이렇다 보니까 잘 먹히나 봐요. 요새 애들은 뭐 다 영상으로 배우니까."). The police advise against providing any information to the media to prevent the spread of misinformation.

In one of the following scenes, we meet single mother Bak Jeongja. She arrives home from work to a surprise birthday celebration prepared by her two children. However, a large shadow figure, representing a supposed angel, appears and tells her that she will die in five days at 3 pm and that she is bound for hell. This happens in front of her children, who videorecord it. This is the first time we see the process of someone receiving a *death notice*. The mother informs lawyer Min that she first contacted *The New Truth* after her experience. *The New Truth* expressed interest in arranging a live broadcast of her demonstration of going to hell in exchange for monetary compensation. This example highlights *The New Truth*'s pursuit of new methods to attract followers.

Their focus on online platforms is observable in the real world as well. *The New Truth* is connected to a target audience that often includes minors. This is evident from the fact that the detective's daughter, who is a minor, is connected to the group. Additionally, the radical group *Arrowheads* is mostly composed of young people who are also minors. This motive is demonstrated in numerous examples throughout the first episode. Current research on new religious movements indicates that these groups often focus on situational vulnerability (Newcombe et al. 2023). In this drama, individuals face

a situation where they believe they can avoid going to hell simply by not committing any crimes. Fundamentally, they want to believe that only sinners such as murderers can receive this punishment from God.

During the next scene, we are introduced to the key character Arrowhead, an online streamer and a leader of the radical group called *Arrowheads*. The chat during the livestream shows a range of comments from viewers, some supporting and others doubting his doctrine. Arrowhead questions the investigation and suggests that the police should focus on the crimes committed by the victims instead of investigating how they died. In his monologue, it is revealed that the name *Arrowheads* comes from the belief that when God releases an arrow, members of the group are the arrowheads that should fly and hit the target. *Arrowheads* then believe they are empowered by God to expose sinful citizens. Throughout Arrowhead's speech, his language is erratic and exaggerated in order to grab the attention of the audience.

*Arrowhead: Ugh. They're investigating, investigating. It's crazy. If a judge gives a death sentence, does the judge investigate? No, then what? Okay, 'You are under urgent arrest for murder'. Are you going to do this? I'll tell you what. Now, what's the police supposed to investigate at this point? Ju Myeonghun! They're supposed to find out what this sinner's guilty of, so that no one – not even a passing ant chick - can escape God's two eyes!*

*Why did you choose to demonstrate hell in Seoul, South Korea at this time? Because we're here. Arrowheads! Arrowheads! Arrowheads! If God pulls a demonstration, we fly! We fly and we get hit!*

*Arrowhead: 으아 수사를 한대요, 수사. 미친 거죠. 판사가 사형 판결 내리면 판사 수사합니까? 아니, 그럼 뭐? 자, '신님을 살인 혐의로 긴급 체포합니다'. 이럴 거야? 내가 알려 줄게. 자, 이 시점에 경찰이 해야 되는 일이 뭐겠습니까? 주명훈! 이 죄인의 죄가 뭔지를 밝혀서 어떤 누구도! 지나가는 개미 새끼 한 마리까지도 신의 두 눈을 피할 수가 없다는 사실을 알려야죠!  
현시점에 대한민국 서울에서 지옥을 시연하신 이유가 뭘까요? 우리가 있기 때문입니다. 화살촉! 화살촉! 화살촉! 신께서 시위를 당기시면 우리는 날아가야죠! 날아가서 박혀야죠!*

These days we can observe that online platforms are becoming a place, where people who are prone to violent tendencies can connect with ideologies that induce and promote extremist behaviour. Unlike traditional offline cults, the internet provides individuals with greater freedom to address their needs during distressing or tragic events in their lives (Newcombe et al. 2023).

Furthermore, during the Arrowhead livestream scene, the screen resembles the view typical of platforms that offer live video options, such as Twitch, which allows content creators to stream various types of content, including gaming and discussions. However, unlike Twitch, *Hellbound* does not mention any potential profits or monetization from this imaginary platform, although advertisements are shown on the screen. The name of the fictional platform, TEENTOK TV, created by the series' creators, suggests the target audience is teenagers or young adults, which is also the target group of Arrowhead.

Arrowhead himself is wearing a bright neon wig and neon face paint with an animal skull mask on top of his head. Although at first glance it might seem that the symbolism of Arrowhead's visage is accidental there is a subtle crossover with *The New Truth* from which *Arrowheads* emerged. The masks and distinctive camouflage on Arrowhead's face are reminiscent of the masks of ancient Tibetan shamans and Bon animists performing rituals (see Reynolds 1989). It was in Tibet where the founder of *The New Truth* Jinsu first encountered angels who burned a sinner to ashes. However, the connection to Tibet is uncertain since the origin of the new belief system of *The New Truth* is Christianity. Meanwhile, Arrowhead's use of Tibetan shamanism is linked to Buddhism. This could either be a coincidence, a result of insufficient research by the creators, or a minor plot device that makes Arrowhead an unreliable character who did not put much care into the symbolism of his internet persona.

## 6.2. Second Episode

The second episode begins, where the first episode left off, with the single mother, Bak Jeongja, visiting lawyer Min. Bak reveals to Min that *The New Truth* offered her money in exchange for broadcasting the process of her being bound for hell. Later in the episode the lawyers together with Detective Jin, Jinsu, and Bak meet in her home, where they sign the contract about the broadcasting. Min also shares her intention to send Bak's kids to Canada.

We meet Min's mother, to whom Min explains what is happening at the moment. The mother compares the process of receiving a death notice to when the doctor told her she had cancer, which she has suffered from ever since.

During the scene of the death investigation, it is revealed that the analysis demonstrated that the burnt remains, which were previously believed to be the body of

the victim, were not a living organism but something that does not exist in this world. The investigation of the death notices is treated in the same manner as death threats.

Detective Jin's daughter continues to meet with Jinsu. While lying to her father, she shows her trust in Jinsu by revealing to him how her mother died. Later on, they together find the killer of her mother together and burn him alive.

She is however not the only one hiding her beliefs from Jin, as his colleague is revealed to be a secret supporter of *Arrowheads*. As Bak's family identity gets revealed during a livestream because of Jin's colleague, with the help of Min, the children are secretly put on a plane to Canada. On their way to the airport, they are forced to hide, as the Arrowhead's livestream gains influence and they become in danger of an attack by the Arrowhead supporters. At the end of the episode, the police station is violently attacked by the members of *Arrowheads*, who are demanding for their members to be released.

#### 6.2.1. Scene description

The opening scene of the episode introduces a key element of the narrative. As previously mentioned, single mother Bak Jeongja has been offered financial compensation by *The New Truth* in exchange for broadcasting her death. Determined to accept the deal, Bak asks the lawyer Min to guarantee that *The New Truth* fulfils its promise, and that the money is really given to her children. This illustrates the pressure that society places on her situation, as even when facing impending death, her primary concern is how to provide for her children. Furthermore, the monetary compensation is the only way in which *The New Truth* provides her comfort, rather than offering emotional support or a way in which she could redeem herself in the eyes of God, which would be more commonly associated with traditional religious groups. Min tries to warn her about the consequences of exposing her family, but Bak is determined to accept *The New Truth*'s offer. While Min is genuinely concerned about Bak's situation, the other law firm representative Yeongho is ready to jump at the chance to take on the case, demonstrating a clear focus on profit and exposing *The New Truth* as a fraud rather than the well-being of their potential client, stating Bak has nothing to lose anyway.

Bak: *They said they want to broadcast it. The demonstration.*

Min: *Pardon? Sorry, I didn't hear you correctly. What did they say again?*

Bak: *They want to pay me to broadcast the moment I go to hell.*

Yeanghoe: *Ha, really. Crazy people.*

Min: *So, what did you say to them?*

Bak: *The... the young chairman said he'll give us 3 billion won for the broadcasting. But I don't know how I can safely receive such a huge amount of money. Look, Mrs Min, I, um, I don't know if the notice is, uh, real or not, or anything like that, but the money that I'm gonna get... I mean, please help me make sure my kids get it...*

Min: *Well, ma'am, it is not something you can decide easily. Agreeing to the broadcast can expose the identities of not just you, but your entire family...*

Bak: *What if it's real?? If I really do die in a few days, how will my kids live? My son did a lot of research and thought you might be the best, so I came to you, but if you can't help me, I'll go somewhere else.*

Bak: 방송을 하고 싶대요. 그 시연인가 하는 거를.

Min: 네? 아니, 제가 잘 못 들었어요. 뭐를 하고 싶어 한다고요?

Bak: 돈을 줄 테니까 생방송으로 중계를 하고 싶대요, 제가 지옥에 가는 순간을.

Yeanghoe: 미친놈들, 진짜. 하, 참.

Min: 그래서 뭐라고 하셨어요?

Bak: 그... 젊은 의장님이라는 분이 중계료로 30 억 원을 주시겠대요. 근데 제가 그렇게 큰돈을 어떻게 하면 안전하게 받는지 그거를 잘 몰라요. 저기, 변호사님, 제가, 음, 그 고지가 뭐, 진짜지 아닌지 그런 거는 모르겠는데 그 돈 제가... 아니, 우리 애들이 꼭 받을 수 있게 좀 도와주세요.

Min: 근데요, 선생님, 이게 그렇게 쉽게 결정할 일은 아니에요. 중계를 하면 선생님뿐만이 아니라 선생님 가족 모두가 다 신상이 알려질 수도 있고요.

Bak: 만약에 진짜면요? 만약에 며칠 뒤에 저 진짜로 죽으면 우리 애들 어떻게 살아요? 우리 아들이 다 검색해 보고 민혜진 변호사님이 제일 나올 거 같다 그래서 제가 찾아온 건데 안 되시면 다른 데 가 보고요.

In one of the following scenes, the gradual radicalisation of the *Arrowheads* is shown when they manage to get the personal phone number of detective Jin's boss and harass him by calling him. Their disregard for anonymity is also clear when Arrowhead says on one of his livestreams that *The New Truth* is finally doing its job by arranging the broadcast and demanding that they also reveal the victim's identity and their sins. However, during the same livestream, Bak's identity is revealed by detective Jin's colleague, who has been secretly supporting the *Arrowheads*. As a result, Bak's children's identities are also shared on the livestream.

The wealth of *The New Truth* is demonstrated when chairman Jinsu walks around a neighbourhood where he is planning to broadcast the death of Bak, and one of the members tells him that it will not be difficult to pursue the landlords as this neighbourhood is not expensive, suggesting that their finances are sufficient to overpay for the average market value of the properties. In the same scene, when Jinsu is confronted

by detective Jin about the 3 billion won offer that *The New Truth* presented to Bak, Jinsu simply states that some of their members have great wealth.

Within the story, we can see a lot of themes that relate to life in South Korea. One of them is the social stigma around single mothers in South Korea, which is reflected when Jinsu, lawyers and detectives visit Bak to sign the broadcasting contract. Bak, who is already in an emotionally difficult position, is questioned by Jinsu about the father of her children. After explaining that they don't have a father, Jinsu says, "I'm curious to know the reason. How you ended up having not one but two fatherless children..." ("그 이유가 궁금하네요 하나면 모르겠는데 둘씩이나 아버지가 없는 아이들을 낳으셨다는 게..."). He goes on to suggest that the children could have been the result of infidelity, and therefore adultery could be the reason why Bak is bound for hell.

Throughout the episode, we see Jinsu connect with Huijeong, the daughter of detective Jin, making use of her vulnerability after her mother's death as an emotional manipulation tool. Using techniques such as gaining her trust, offering comfort and being the person in power, Jinsu manages to get Huijeong to commit a crime. In the scene where Jinsu takes Huijeong to see her mother's killer, he says to her, "That man is living well with the price of a crime set by us humans..." ("저 사람은 우리 인간이 정한 죄값을 치르고 잘 살고 있네요..."), implying that they can become the hand of God and their crime will be justified. Huijeong manages to immobilise the killer with a teaser, and in the following scene she burns him alive with the help of Jinsu, making the killer's death look like the death of someone who was bound for hell. Intentionally leaving the killer's ID next to his remains ensures that Jinsu's doctrine, that claims only criminals go to hell, is supported. It is also implied that it was him, who first called reporters to the scene so that the identity would be revealed before the police tried to conceal it. In these actions, we can clearly see the hypocrisy of Jinsu, as he criticises sins such as adultery, but then commits murder.

### 6.3. Episode Three

The episode begins with the broadcasting of Bak's demonstration of going to hell orchestrated by *The New Truth*, leading to the death of Bak being livestreamed to the broad public. At the end of the process, we can see people bowing to the remains of Bak.

After the broadcasting, Jinsu's popularity and influence are rising, as he is praised by the media for his action. Meanwhile, detective Jin finds a piece of evidence about Jinsu's crime, however, in the end, he decides not to report it and confront Jinsu in person.

Arrowhead targets detective Jin and lawyer Min on his livestream, turning them into public enemies, resulting in Min attempting to flee South Korea with her mother to Canada as they are in danger of being attacked. Min's plan fails when her mother is brutally attacked by the *Arrowheads*.

In this episode, we are introduced to a new character, Jeongchil, whose church Jinsu had previously been a member of. When it's revealed, that Jinsu also received a death notice and Jeongchil is going to be the next chairman of *The New Truth* he tries together with the *Arrowheads* members to kill Min. Meanwhile, Detective Jin witnesses Jinsu's death at the hands of the supposed angels and decides not to tell the world to protect his daughter.

### 6.3.1. Scene description

The third episode starts with Bak's trial, which is broadcasted on all the major channels. Surrounded by filming equipment, Bak sits on a chair in a building with a demolished wall so that everyone can see her. In front of her is a group of VIPs who have the best view. The concept of VIPs, who donate a substantial sum of money to watch people die for entertainment, in this case to *The New Truth*, is not uncommon. Similar phenomena can be observed in other dramas, such as *Squid Game*, where the elite class of wealthy individuals exploit the poor by making them compete for money. This concept is also portrayed in Western popular media, for instance in the film *Purge 2*, where all crimes are legal for one night and wealthy individuals pay poor people to be hunted by the wealthy. In the case of *Hellbound*, the VIPs, who essentially become part of the process of going to hell, demonstrate how the power of wealth can put you in a god-like position. While Bak's entire identity was revealed to be judged by the public, allowing others to watch her die, VIPs are able to maintain their anonymity with masks over their faces. Even when the whole society demands transparency, no one dares to question the VIPs.

After the news of Bak's death, Jinsu is portrayed by the media as a national hero, and videos of him rescuing children from burning buildings or stopping gun attacks are shown along with praise for his actions within *The New Truth*. With people having no alternative to his explanation of the current situation, he quickly becomes a popular figure with immense public influence. The media go so far as to call the documents on *The New Truth*'s teachings the Bible of the New Age.

When detective Jin decides to confront Jinsu at his home, he is pushed around by Jinsu's followers, who are now camping around Jinsu's house. This shows how loyal his



followers have become since the first episode when the majority of people was still sceptical. The radicalisation of society is further highlighted when Min's colleague Yeanghoe is brutally beaten in broad daylight, and no one tries to help him because they recognise him as the enemy of *The New Truth*.

Min and her mother also become victims of the brutal attacks by the *Arrowheads*, which are easily recognisable by the masks and bright colours associated with their leader, Arrowhead. During the scene, the group members viciously begin hitting first her mother and then Min with iron bars. In the case of the *Arrowheads*, we can observe how an online group became a radical extremist group causing violence in a relatively short time. While at the beginning, *Arrowheads* justified their crimes by attacking only those they deemed to be criminals, they have now extended their attacks to include Min's mother, simply for being Min's mother. The world of *Hellbound* is gradually becoming more dystopian as the video of the attack is published across social media. *Arrowheads* are aware that they will not face any allegations for their actions and instead will be met with praise. Furthermore, the hospital staff responsible for the care of Min's mother demonstrates a reluctance to engage with them, leaving Min's mother to die in the hospital without any care.

In the middle climax of the series, detective Jin discovers Jinsu in an abandoned building. Jinsu confesses to Jin that he was also condemned to hell 20 years ago and will die within a few minutes. During his monologue, Jinsu offers Jin a choice: either reveal this to the world and expose him, or keep it a secret, which will ensure that Jin's daughter will not go to prison for murder. Jinsu also reveals that he doesn't know the real reason why people are bound for hell. The detective, motivated by a desire to protect his daughter, decides not to film Jinsu's demise. The scene illustrates how Jinsu employed fear as a strategy to enhance his and *The New Truth's* influence. Many cults in real life also utilise fear to manipulate their followers, increasing the likelihood of compliance. Jinsu exemplifies a manipulative figure, placing Jin in a moral dilemma even at the end of his life, exerting pressure and control over him through his daughter. It is frequently the familial ties that make it challenging for cult members to extricate themselves from such organisations. Despite the fact that Jin is not a member of *The New Truth*, the scene still serves as a metaphor for this phenomenon.

Jinsu: *I don't know why God does this, but I want to give everyone in the world the horror I felt, and that horror will make the world much more righteous than it was before, and that horror will free the world from sin.*

Jinsu: 신이 어떤 이유로 이런 일을 벌이는지는 모르지만 나는 세상 모든 사람들에게 내가 느낀 공포를 선사하고 싶어요. 그리고 그 공포는 세상을 전보다 훨씬 더 정의롭게 만들 거예요. 그 공포가 세상 사람들을 죄에서부터 해방시킬 거예요.

At the very end of the episode, the show gives us a glimpse of society's aversion towards *The New Truth* when a man, seeing statues of angels taking people to hell, says, "Ugh, those New Truths bastards." ("아유, 저 새진리회 새끼들.")

#### 6.4. Episode Four

The fourth episode begins with a significant time jump of five years, showing the nation's full acceptance of *The New Truth*, with priest Jeongchil as its new chairman. In the episode, we meet the new main character producer Bae Yeongjae, who, while waiting for news of his newborn child in the hospital, discovers a loan shark's business card on his colleague's desk, with the location and time handwritten on the other side.

As Song Sohyeon, the wife of Bae, films a video of their baby, she unintentionally captures her baby receiving a death notice, which says their baby is bound for hell in three days. On his way to the hospital, Bae receives a call from his colleague's wife, telling him that she can't reach her husband. She has been worried since receiving a call from a loan shark telling her that her husband owes them money. Bae decides to search for his colleague instead of going to the hospital.

Investigating further, Bae finds his colleague who tells him he has received a death notice. Bae's colleague chooses to die in secret, sparing his family the shame of being branded a sinner. The Sodo Law Firm, led by attorney Min, becomes involved in covering up his death.

The next day, Bae visits his wife in the hospital and sees a video of their baby receiving a death notice. Meanwhile, a *New Truth*'s priest Yuji finds the business card of Sodo Law Firm while investigating the disappearance of Bae's colleague.

##### 6.4.1. Scene Description

At the beginning of the episode, we are presented with a document-style show created by one of the Korean television stations for *The New Truth*. This show reveals that the site of Bak's death has become a tourist attraction. Furthermore, it informs us that individuals

who have received a death notice and subsequently commit suicide are later brought back to life and killed again by the shadow figures. In the same documentary, Jeongchil urges people to confess their sins. We can see a clip of a young girl, accompanied by her parents, pleading with God for forgiveness for her sinful father. This is then criticised by *The New Truth* because the father displays excessive emotion. It illustrates that *The New Truth* attempts to dehumanise the individuals in question in the public eye. The producers get into an argument with *The New Truth*, that dictates them how to present *The New Truth* in their programme. This restricts the freedom of the press, which is essential for a healthy democracy. By imposing censorship on the media, *The New Truth* encourages the spread of mal-information and disinformation. An example of mal-information could be *The New Truth*'s insistence that the crime rate has decreased since their influence, but TV producer Bae Yeongjae challenges them when he says, "Who believes that? Well, the crimes of the Arrowhead kids, people are too afraid to report them. If you add them up, the crime rate is probably quite high. [...] You think you're going to make the world a better place by scaring and tormenting people? There's another place for that. It's called Hell." ("그걸 누가 믿어요? 응? 그 화살촉 애들 범죄는 그거 누가 무서워서 말도 안 하잖아요. 그거 합치면 아마 상당할 텐데, 범죄율? [...] 사람들 겁주고 벌줘서 더 나은 세상을 만드시겠다? 그런 데가 하나 더 있죠. 지옥이라고.") But even among the producers themselves, there are conflicting views on the matter.

In another scene, upon Bae's search for his colleague in the location indicated on the card he found on his table, he is confronted by the *Arrowheads* near by the lake. The *Arrowheads* question him about his intentions, informing him that they are patrolling the neighbourhood. This illustrates the *Arrowheads*' assertion of power and justice, positioning themselves as an unofficial police force.

Bae's colleague, under the possible weight of public anger, decides to hide from everyone that he is bound for hell. He tells Bae that in order to protect his family, he has decided to fake his disappearance with the help of the Sodo Law Firm, which is later revealed to be run by lawyer Min. This illustrates the extent to which South Korean society is now under the control of *The New Truth*, as Bae's colleague is more afraid of what would happen to his family than his own death. We can see the change from the first two episodes, where Bak sought help from *The New Truth* and was willing to televise her own death in order to provide for her family. Bae's colleague, on the other hand, did everything he could to avoid being exposed and to protect his family from *The New Truth*. *The New Truth* is even involved in investigating the disappearances, seemingly on a hunt for the sinners.

At the end of the episode, Bae's wife Song keeps asking herself if she has done something wrong and if she has given birth to a sinner. Rather than questioning the reality of *The New Truth* doctrine, she first questions herself and the baby, which reflects how much the society has been influenced.

### 6.5. Episode Five

At the beginning of the episode, the false information that Bae's colleague had left South Korea due to debts from a gambling spread quickly, masking the truth of what had happened. Bae tries to find out more about Sodo and meets a professor behind Sodo from Hankuk University, who tells him they are hiding people, so *The New Truth* doesn't find them, helping them to not get stigmatised.

Priest Yuji, along with other members of *The New Truth*, visit Yeongseok the latest person to be condemned to Hell and tries to force him to reveal when he will be taken to Hell so that they can do a live broadcast. During the visit, Yuji finds another card from the Sodo. Later, after Yeongseok's death, it is revealed to *The New Truth* that after the video of him receiving a death notice went viral, he was contacted by Sodo offering to help him disappear before *The New Truth* could find him. The chairman denounces Sodo as an act of blasphemy and calls for their determination, regardless of the cost, without the involvement of the police. Yuji decides to involve the *Arrowheads*, who torture a man in order to get information about Sodo, which results in them killing the professor from Sodo and finding the place of Sodo headquarters.

After Bae shows Sodo the video of his baby receiving a death notice, he meets Min, who tells him that a newborn receiving a death notice is against the ideology of *The New Truth*, which says that only acts that can be prevented by human effort are considered sins. She tells him that in order to stop *The New Truth*, they should broadcast the death of Bae's baby.

The *Arrowheads* attack Min but she manages to escape. However, the burnt bodies of the Sodo members are hanging at the entrance of Hankuk University with the *Arrowheads* logo painted under them. The *Arrowheads* also publish a statement in which they are exposing Min and Sodo, stating their members received a death notice for running the organisation.

The episode ends with Bae's wife walking into the headquarters of *The New Truth* with her baby.

### 6.5.1. Scene Description

In the scene where *The New Truth* along with the civil servant officer visit a man called Yeongseok who is bound for hell, we can see the pressure they put on the victim. The members of *The New Truth* raise their voices and angrily demand that the man tells them when he will be taken to Hell, making him cry. When Yeongseok reveals that he will be taken soon, the officer panics and says that the government can't afford another holy site and tells *The New Truth* to take him to headquarters where his death can be broadcasted. This shows that *The New Truth* is now working with the government, with both sides trying to accommodate their interests without much regard for the victim's choices and wishes. While the government is trying to save money, *The New Truth* wants to secure its power by broadcasting the victim's death from its headquarters, where they have a studio designated for it.

Priest 1: *Kim Yeongseok, when is the time of your demonstration?*

*Yeongseok: 'You'll die at 5 pm in six days from now.'*

Civil servant officer: *Six days? When is that? Isn't it today? Oh no, it's almost time. Priests, we're running out of time. He's already told us what he's guilty of, so let's move him. Are you going to let it happen here? If we sanctify every single one of these things, we're going to blow the government budget.*

Priest 2: *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I understand, don't worry. We're going to take him to our headquarters and broadcast the demonstration. We're running out of time, so call headquarters and get them to set up a live stream of the demonstration.*

Priest 1: 김영석, 시간을 말하라고 시연이 언제야?

Yeongseok: '넌 앞으로 6 일 후 오후 5 시에 죽는다.'

Civil servant officer: 6 일? 그럼 언제야? 오늘 아니야? 아니, 얼마 안 남았네. 아니, 사제님들 시간 얼마 안 남았어요. 아까 자기 죄목도 다 말했고 아, 빨리 옮겨 줘요. 여기서 시연받도록 할 거예요? 이거 여기저기 다 성지화하면요 정말 정부 예산 금방 빵꾸 납니다.

Priest 2: 예, 예, 예, 뭐 말인지 압니다 걱정하지 마세요. 저희 본부로 데려가서 시연 중계할 거고. 이거 시간도 없으니까 빨리 본부에 연락해서 시연 중계 준비하라고 해 김영석 죄인 가족들한테 다 연락 돌리고.

During the scene of Yeongseok's demonstration, we see the studio that *The New Truth* have built in their headquarters. Yeongseok is kneeling half-naked in the middle of the platform on their logo, with the spotlights shining on him. In front of him is a crowd of masked VIPs waiting for the demonstration. Behind Yeongseok is a large mural of Jinsu in a meadow, surrounded and embraced by happy children (see Fig 2). This mural is similar to the one located in the Children's Palace in Pyongyang, North Korea, which

shows the two former North Korean leaders, Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il, being hugged and surrounded by a group of children in a flower garden (see Fig 3). In the mural, Jinsu holds a little girl in his arms, in the North Korean painting Kim Jong Il does the same. This could lead to a connection between the dystopian world of *Hellbound* and North Korea, which is currently under dictatorship. In *Hellbound*, *The New Truth*'s power is growing, and it is shown that they have the power to manipulate the media and the government, so *The New Truth*'s ideology is slowly becoming an absolutistic power. Similarly to conditions in a dictatorship, people in *Hellbound* are controlled by fear. When a victim of the death notice is exposed, it's not just them who are in danger, but their families as well. During the broadcast of Yeongseok's death, we see that his family has been brought to the scene. Jeongchil, the new chairman of *The New Truth* and a host of the demonstrations, shames Yeongseok for running away rather than confessing his sins while forcing him to look at his family, putting them all in a state of distress and embarrassment. This could be interpreted as a metaphor for people who leave their families behind when they flee North Korea, and the families are then punished.



Fig 2: Mural of Jinsu at *The New Truth*'s headquarters (*Hellbound*, Netflix)



Fig 3: Painting of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il at the Children's Palace in Pyongyang (Harrell)

When Min meets Bae and tells him they want to broadcast the death of his baby to stop *The New Truth*, we are faced with a paradoxical situation, as the first broadcast was what allowed *The New Truth* to gain their power, and this broadcast may be the only thing that could stop them. Bae tells Min and the professor that Sodo is the same as *The New Truth* because they care more about their goals than his baby. However, Sodo gives him an option to not broadcast the baby's demonstration and conceal the death of his baby.

### 6.6. Episode Six

The episode opens with Min calling Bae to tell him that *The New Truth* is working with the *Arrowheads* and urging him to contact his wife. However, she texts him, that she has gone with her baby to *The New Truth* to ask them about the reason why their baby received a death notice.

Bae and Min arrive at *The New Truth*'s headquarters with a person, who announces he is bound for hell as a part of their plan to save Bae's wife and baby. As the man takes *The New Truth*'s attention, Min and Bae infiltrate the building. Meanwhile, *The New Truth* is trying to separate Song from her baby, luckily Min and Bae arrive just in time to stop them. In the end, they manage to escape.

Min takes Bae's family to a man who is waiting to go to hell after receiving his death notices, and in whose apartment they can hide. When he offers to help them film and upload a video of a baby receiving a death notice, we learn that the man is the original Arrowhead, who founded the *Arrowheads* group.

Arrowhead betrays them and secretly calls *The New Truth* to tell them information about the Bae's family, hinting them their location. Claiming to be Messiah, Arrowhead tries to kill Bae's family. When the entities arrive to kill the baby, Bae and his wife make the ultimate sacrifice to protect the infant, resulting in the child's miraculous survival.

After Arrowhead is killed by the entities a few minutes later, Min saves the baby, while the crowd turns against *The New Truth*. At the end of the drama one of the previous corpses comes back to life, leaving a potential for a second season.

#### 6.6.1 Scene description

When *The New Truth* sees the video posted on the internet of Bae's baby receiving a decree, an argument arises among them as to whether they should adopt the concept of original sin that comes from traditional religion. However, this goes directly against their ideology, as they have been able to influence people by making them understand why some sinners are bound for hell. One of their members says that this would make them no different from Protestants. This is the first time other religions have been mentioned in *Hellbound*.

Jeongchil: *What do you think about this?*

Member 1: *Well, shouldn't we go with the original sin theory now? That is, humans are born with sin from birth...*

Member 2: *No, that's why we've been able to make such a big impact in such a short time because we made people understand why some sinners were bound for hell. The moment we admit to the original sin theory, we will surely hear the question of how it is different from Protestantism. Our power will shrink in an instant.*

Jeongchil: 우리 의장단 이거 어떻게 생각해요?

Member 1: 글썄, 뭐, 이제는 원죄론으로 가야 되지 않나? 그러니까 인간은 원래 태어날 때부터 죄를 가지고 태어나...

Member 2: 안 돼요, 그건 우리 새진리회가 이렇게 단시간 내에 큰 영향을 끼칠 수 있었던 건 우리가 이해할 수 있는 범위 내의 죄인들이 지옥에 간다는 거였는데 원죄론을 인정하는 순간 개신교하고 뭐가 다르냐는 얘기가 나올 게 뻔합니다. 순식간에 세력이 쪼그라들 거예요.



The character of Arrowhead reappears when Bae's family takes refuge at his place. It is revealed that Arrowhead stopped streaming after receiving a death notice four years ago. Unlike Jinsu, whose goal was to gain power through fear, Arrowhead was firmly committed to the ideology of *The New Truth* and his motives were driven by the belief that he was doing a good thing for society. *Arrowheads*, including Arrowhead himself, are a great example of self-righteousness, when they claim to be a right hand of God, but their actions are filled with violence and brutality. *Arrowheads* bend their morals in a way, that allows them to justify the bad behaviour, they are criticising themselves.

However, these beliefs are shattered when he receives the notice. This ultimately leads to the distortion of his personality. Although there is a possibility for Arrowhead's redemption, the *Hellbound* narrative demonstrates how easily *The New Truth* could manipulate him into turning against Bae's family and Min. *The New Truth* exploits his volatile behaviour, convincing him that he is a Messiah chosen to cover up God's mistakes and strengthen God's message. Although the character of Arrowhead is presented as an antagonist in the narrative, in the latter half of *Hellbound* he displays indications of mental illness, which are used against him, making him a puppet of *The New Truth*. This raises the question of whether he was the genuine enemy or simply another victim of *The New Truth*.

Bae: *Why are you doing this now, all of a sudden? You also received a notice.*

Arrowhead: *That's right, I'm the one who will be demonstrated five minutes after your baby is demonstrated. Yes, I'm someone to cover for God's mistakes. Listen, listen, I have a plan. So, I'm gonna kill you here, then I'm gonna go upstairs and kill your wife, then I'm gonna kill Min Hyejin, then I'm gonna have your baby demonstrated in my room, and then I'm gonna get rid of the baby's body in five minutes, and then I'm gonna get demonstrated in my room. Then people become confused about who was demonstrated and what happened to the baby. It will become unclear. But wait. This God is such a nasty bastard. This, this, this, this mistake, eh? He chose me to cover it up!*

Bae: *Wait. I don't know what you're saying right now but stop losing your mind and let's talk.*

Arrowhead: *My mind? My mind has never been clearer in my life. I know exactly why I was born and why I will die. How many people in the world know this? I am now the human closest to God.*

Bae [after Arrowhead betrays them]: 갑자기 왜 이러는 건데요, 지금? 당신도 고지받은 사람이잖아.

Arrowhead: 그렇지, 난 당신 아기가 시연당하고 5분 뒤에 시연당할 사람이야. 어, 신의 실수를 감싸 줄 사람이지. 내 계획이 있는데 말이야 들어 봐 봐. 어,

일단 여기서 당신 죽이고 올라가서 당신 와이프 죽이고 민혜진 죽이고. 그다음에 당신 아기가 내 방에서 시연을 받게 하는 거야. 어, 난 5분 만에 아기 시체를 치우고 나도 그 방에서 시연을 당하는 거지. 그러면 사람들은 도대체 이게 누가 시연을 당한 건지 아기는 어떻게 된 건지 모든 게 애매해져 버리는 거지. 애매해져 버리는 거야. 근데 말이야. 이 신이란 놈이 참 야비한 놈이야. 이게, 이게, 이게 실수나 처하고, 어? 그걸 덮으려고 나를 선택했던 말이지!

**Bae:** 자. 내가 지금 무슨 말인지 잘 모르겠는데 진정하고 정신 차리고 얘기합시다.

**Arrowhead:** 정신? 아, 나는 살면서 이렇게 정신이 맑았던 적이 없는데. 내가 왜 태어났는지 왜 죽는지 명확하게 알고 있어. 이거를 알고 있는 사람이 세상에 얼마나 있겠어. 나는 지금 신과 가장 가까운 인간이야.

At the end of the drama, we can see Yuji resorting to violence against an elderly man, a move that ultimately leads to the crowd turning against him. This serves as a commentary on the dynamics of power and authority within *The New Truth*. At the beginning of the drama, we can see how people are gradually influenced by the organisation. At the end, we can see how fragile *The New Truth*'s ideology is when people turn against it, as they finally see the hypocrisy.

## Conclusion

*Hellbound* is a dystopia, where society is facing not only the threat of receiving a death notice at any time but also manipulation and volatility of the social structure. In the first half of the series, we observe how *The New Truth* gradually gains power through the exploitation of people's emotional distress and the use of fear of the unknown in society. The utilisation of online platforms enables the radicalisation of Korean youth in their pursuit of becoming the moral hand of God. This results in the formation of an extremist group, the *Arrowheads*. In the second half of the series, the absolutist power of *The New Truth* is evident, as it has the ability to influence the media and government.

Throughout the series, *The New Truth* has been called a cult many times, and rightly so. *The New Truth* could be seen as the ultimate embodiment of all that is wrong with illegitimate religious groups in Korea. While its influence in the series is certainly exaggerated, it does accurately portray how cults use fear to control their victims; using them when they are most vulnerable. We can see this in the example of Jinsu using the grief of the detective's daughter to gain her trust. Another instance is the use of Arrowhead's mental instability in the final episode to achieve their goals. Much like in the real world, *The New Truth* doesn't shy away from using the family as a tool of control, punishing those close to the sinner with shame.

One of the key moments in the show is when Bak is offered money by *The New Truth* in exchange for broadcasting her demonstration. This exemplifies the weight of the economic situation on her, as her first concern, even in the face of death, is how to provide for her children. It reflects the competitive nature of Korean society, where the best way to succeed is through money, which can provide education and connections, both of which are crucial to a young individual's future.

The radical group *Arrowheads* demonstrates how social media platforms can serve as a modern space for the creation of such a group. With the online space accessible to a wider audience, these groups have new ways of attracting members. In the case of *Hellbound*, Arrowhead uses the streaming platform service TEENTOK TV and specifically targets young people while encouraging acts of doxing and spreading mal-information. *Arrowheads* go on to become a large extremist group involved in brutal acts of violence. Through *Arrowheads*, the series shows us the phenomenon of self-righteousness, when the members justify their immoral actions by punishing people they declare to be sinners.

Through its themes of religion, media manipulation and commentary on the socio-economic situation in South Korea, *Hellbound* manages to address current issues in the country, such as the lack of regulation of new religious groups, the profit-oriented society or the lack of trust Koreans have in the media. The show does this by hyperbolising these problems and setting them in a dystopia where confronting them becomes inevitable. Ultimately, it doesn't try to comment on God or supernatural elements, but rather on modern Korean society and its values.

The series *Hellbound* provides an opportunity for open discussion and further debate on these issues, making them more visible to the general public. For future research, it would be interesting to focus on public discourse on these themes. With Netflix's recent confirmation of a second season, it is evident that the series has gained a following, and an analysis of how the issues depicted in the series progressed would certainly contribute to the knowledge of the topic.

## Resumé

*Hellbound* je dystopie, kde společnost čelí nejen hrozbě, že kdykoli obdrží oznámení o smrti, ale také manipulaci a nestabilitě společenské struktury. V první polovině seriálu sledujeme, jak *The New Truth* postupně získává moc prostřednictvím zneužívání citového strádání lidí a využívání strachu z neznámého ve společnosti. Využití online platform umožňuje radikalizaci korejské mládeže ve snaze stát se morální rukou boží. Výsledkem je vznik extremistické skupiny *Arrowheads*. V druhé polovině seriálu se projevuje absolutistická moc organizace *The New Truth*, která má schopnost ovlivňovat média a vládu.

V průběhu seriálu bylo *The New Truth* mnohokrát označeno za sektu, a to právem. *The New Truth* lze považovat za konečné ztělesnění všeho, co je na nelegitimních náboženských skupinách v Koreji špatné. I když je vliv organizace v seriálu přehnaný, přesně zobrazuje, jak sekty využívají strach k ovládnutí svých obětí a tím je využívají, když jsou nejzranitelnější. Můžeme to vidět na příkladu Jinsua, který využívá smutku detektivovy dcery, aby si získal její důvěru. Dalším příkladem je využití duševní nestability *Arrowheada* v závěrečné epizodě k dosažení svých cílů. Stejně jako ve skutečném světě se *The New Truth* nevyhýbá využití rodiny jako nástroje kontroly a trestání blízkých hříšníka hanbou.

Jedním z klíčových momentů seriálu je situace, kdy *The New Truth* nabídne Bakové peníze výměnou za odvysílání její demonstrace. To ilustruje tíhu ekonomické situace, která na ni doléhá, protože její první starostí, a to i tváří v tvář smrti, je, jak zajistit své děti. Odráží to konkurenční povahu korejské společnosti, kde je nejlepší cestou k úspěchu získání peněz, které mohou zajistit vzdělání a konexe, což je obojí pro budoucnost mladého jedince klíčové.

Radikální skupina *Arrowheads* ukazuje, jak mohou platformy sociálních médií sloužit jako moderní prostor pro vytvoření takové skupiny. Díky online prostoru přístupnému širšímu publiku mají tyto skupiny nové možnosti, jak přilákat členy. V případě seriálu *Hellbound* využívá *Arrowhead* službu streamovací platformy TEENTOK TV a cíleně se zaměřuje na mladé lidi, přičemž podporuje akty doxingu a šíření závadných informací. *Arrowheads* se později stávají velkou extremistickou skupinou zapojenou do brutálních násilných činů. Prostřednictvím *Arrowheads* nám seriál ukazuje fenomén samospravedlnosti, kdy členové ospravedlňují své nemorální činy trestáním lidí, které prohlašují za hříšníky.

Skrze témata náboženství, mediální manipulace a komentáře k socioekonomické situaci v Jižní Koreji se *Hellboundu* daří poukázat na aktuální problémy v zemi, jako je nedostatečná regulace nových náboženských skupin, společnost orientovaná na zisk nebo nedostatek důvěry Korejců v média. Seriál toho dosahuje tím, že tyto problémy hyperbolizuje a zasazuje je do dystopie, kde se konfrontace s nimi stává nevyhnutelnou. V konečném důsledku se nesnaží komentovat Boha nebo nadpřirozené prvky, ale spíše moderní korejskou společnost a její hodnoty.

Seriál *Hellbound* poskytuje příležitost k otevřené diskusi a další debatě o těchto problémech, čímž je zviditelňuje pro širokou veřejnost. Pro budoucí výzkum by bylo zajímavé zaměřit se na veřejnou diskusi o těchto tématech. Vzhledem k tomu, že Netflix nedávno potvrdil druhou sérii, je zřejmé, že si seriál získal své příznivce, a analýza toho, jak se problematika zobrazená v seriálu vyvíjela, by jistě přispěla k rozšíření znalostí o tomto tématu.

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