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## Anti-Cult Campaigns in China and the Case of The Church of Almighty God: An Introduction

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**ABSTRACT:** This monographic issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to the campaign against “cults” in China and to The Church of Almighty God, one of the movements the government labels and persecutes as a “cult.” In this introduction, “sinicization” of religion and the use of the word “cult” for translating, or mistranslating, the Chinese expression *xie jiao* are discussed as two main tools of control and repression of religious practice in China. After a review of the existing scholarly literature on The Church of Almighty God, a short outline of its history is presented.

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, Zhao Weishan, Xie Jiao, Sinicization, New Religious Movements in China, Anti-cult Movement in China, Religious Persecution in China.

This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to the campaign against “cults” in China and to one new religious movement targeted by the Chinese authorities as a quintessential “cult,” The Church of Almighty God. Massimo Introvigne and Ed Irons discuss Chinese anti-cultism in general, Holly Folk the theology of The Church of Almighty God, and Rosita Šorytė the problems member of that church encounter when they leave China and try to have their status as refugees recognized abroad. The issue is completed by a research note on one incident that involved The Church of Almighty God in 2002, when it was accused of having kidnapped several leaders of an Evangelical Chinese group known as China Gospel Fellowship. In this introduction, I would offer some general comments on both the religious situation in China and The Church of Almighty God, discussing the academic literature on the church and its origins and history.

### *Three Categories of Religions in China*

In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping and other top Chinese leaders called for a further “sinicization” of religion and for a stronger, merciless fight against “*xie jiao*” (Li 2017). Understanding these two words is crucial to evaluate the current problems of religion and “cults” in China. Both words are politically constructed in China, in a way that goes well beyond their literal meaning.

President Xi himself has clarified that “sinicization” of religions means that they should strictly follow the leadership and directives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), operate “under the Party,” and follow its “active guidance” (Li 2017). Religious movements born in China and directed by Chinese are not regarded as “sinicized” if they are not fully integrated into the CCP-dominated Chinese system.

Chinese Web sites often translate *xie jiao* as “evil cults” in order to elicit the sympathy of Western anti-cultists, but the translation is wrong. *Xie Jiao* means “heterodox teachings” (Palmer 2012). Laws against *xie jiao* exist since the late Ming era, and the Emperor “decided on the basis of his own judgement” which religions and movements should be listed as *xie jiao* (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27). In practice, groups were listed, or not listed, as *xie jiao* largely based on political evaluations. Christianity as a whole was listed as *xie jiao* in 1725, and Christians were routinely tortured and executed, but went out of the list in 1842, because of Western military pressure (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 31).

This policy was continued by the Chinese Republic and by the CCP regime. On January 25, 2017, China’s People’s Supreme Court and The Supreme People’s Procuratorate defined *xie jiao* as religious groups that “confuse and deceive” the Chinese “by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means” (The Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China 2017). Such a vague definition perpetuated the possibility for the power to list as *xie jiao* (or “cults,” when Chinese propaganda hits the West) any group the CCP does not like.

The concepts of sinicization and *xie jiao* govern the distinction between three different categories of religions in China:

- *fully sinicized religions*, allowed to operate publicly under the control of, and with leaders appointed by, CCP, including the unified Three Self Protestant Church and the Patriotic Catholic Association;
- *non-sinicized religions*, including the underground Catholic Church loyal to Rome and the flourishing Protestant House Churches, that live precariously and could be hit by the regime at any time;
- *xie jiao*, which the regime promises to “extirpate like a tumor” (Gu 2014): under Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished with 3 to 7 years (or more) in jail (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna n.d.).

According to Goossaert and Palmer, the category of *xie jiao* was “revived” to attack Falun Gong in the 1990s (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 339–40). “A national network of ‘610 offices,’ led by a member of the CCP Politburo, was established on June 10, 1999, with the specific duty of implementing the persecution of Falungong” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 341). Based on the observation of scholars associated with CESNUR, who were invited to China in 2017 by the local authorities to discuss *xie jiao* and The Church of Almighty God, it seems that the 610 Office operates now through two separate branches, one devoted exclusively to Falun Gong and another to all the other *xie jiao*, with a special attention to The Church of Almighty God (Massimo Introvigne, personal communication). Official lists of *xie jiao* have been published since 1995. The Church of Almighty God has consistently been included in these lists (Irons 2016; see also Irons’ article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). In recent years, the church has been on the very top of the list of “cults” for CCP’s clampdown and repression (Gu 2014).

### *Academics and The Church of Almighty God*

We hope that this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* will enlarge the body of academic literature available on The Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning, which has remained scarce so far. The main reference is the book by Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East* (Dunn 2015). Dunn, who had previously written pioneer articles on the church (see e.g. Dunn 2008), did a

considerable homework, but admittedly she only worked on the movement's texts and through interviews with opponents of The Church of Almighty God. During her trips to China, she made "no attempt to contact Eastern Lightning adherents" (Dunn 2015, 22). It was obviously a difficult task to meet church members in person, due to the CCP's vigorous repression and clampdown on the church. She tried to visit members of the church in New York, but had a wrong address and her attempt failed (Dunn 2015, 23). This means that her book was entirely written without any contact or interview with members of The Church of Almighty God. In fact, the church's very visible presence in several countries outside Mainland China started in 2014, presumably after Dunn's book had been written. Her text remains valuable, but needs to be complemented, and occasionally corrected, by other sources.

In the 2010s, Western scholars of new religious movements, an academic category different from sinologists, started paying attention to The Church of Almighty God. American academics J. Gordon Melton and Holly Folk prepared position papers and discussed the church in international conferences. Paradoxically, new impetus to the academic study of The Church of Almighty God by Western specialists of new religious movements was given in 2017 by the Chinese authorities themselves. The Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association, which has direct ties with the CCP, invited twice several leading Western scholars to seminars organized in Zhengzhou, Henan, in June, and in Hong Kong in September, devoted to exploring the notion of *xie jiao* and to offering critical perspectives on The Church of Almighty God. The scholars invited were J. Gordon Melton, Holly Folk, Massimo Introvigne, Jim Richardson, and Eileen Barker. They were joined in Hong Kong by local scholars, including David Palmer and Ed Irons.

Although the Chinese media reported the events in typical propaganda style, claiming that the wrong ideas of the Western scholars had been successfully "corrected" (*KKNews* 2017), in fact Western academics disagreed with Chinese scholars, law enforcement officers, and anti-cult activists on almost everything (Massimo Introvigne, personal communication). The Western scholars, however, encountered a great deal of material produced by Chinese official sources on The Church of Almighty God. Some of them started studying it, and concluded that the main accusations of crimes directed against the church were false. Massimo Introvigne sought the co-operation of leading American sociologist of religions,

David Bromley, and studied the documents about the 2014 homicide in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, of a customer who had refused to supply her phone number to visiting "missionaries." While CCP-related Chinese media claimed The Church of Almighty God was responsible for the murder, and succeeded in persuading Western media that such was the case, Introvigne and Bromley concluded that a different religious movement, unrelated to that church, committed the homicide (Introvigne 2017a; Introvigne and Bromley 2017).

Another frequent accusation was that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shaanxi, members of The Church of Almighty God gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. Holly Folk studied the related documents and concluded that the crime had been committed by the boy's aunt, The Church of Almighty God had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese anti-cultists in the aftermath of the McDonald's homicide, several months after the police investigation had been closed (Folk 2017). Christian opponents of The Church of Almighty God also claim that in 2002 it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). Again, Introvigne collected and studied the available documents, and concluded that the story as told by CGF was largely unbelievable (Introvigne, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

While Folk continued her study of The Church of Almighty God's theology (Folk, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), Introvigne also analyzed the unpredictable flourishing of the visual arts in the diaspora communities of the church after 2014 (Introvigne 2017b), and prepared an overview of the movement for the data base on millenarian movements of CenSAMM, the British Center for the Critical Studies of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (Introvigne 2017c). All these studies were based on participant observation of The Church of Almighty God communities in the U.S., South Korea, and Europe. The CCP's plan to enroll Western scholars in its crusade against The Church of Almighty God backfired quite spectacularly. The academics invited to China, upon reading documents largely published by CCP-related agencies and media, concluded that most of the accusations against the church were false. They also felt encouraged to contact members of the church in the United States, South Korea, and Europe and observe the life of its communities without the filter of the Chinese propaganda.

*The History of The Church of Almighty God: A Short Introduction*

The theology of The Church of Almighty God is discussed by Holly Folk in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*. In this introduction, I would only mention some key dates and facts of its history.

Every religion insists that it originates from divine intervention in human history. Few encourage or like researches into their antecedents. Scholars should, of course, respect this position, but it is part of their job to try to see each group in historical perspective. Considered from a human rather than from a supernatural point of view, no religion arises in a vacuum. The study of The Church of Almighty God requires at least a mention of Watchman Nee (Ni Shu-Tsu, 1903–1972), a Chinese Christian leader who in the 1930s encountered a branch of the Exclusive Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian denomination, and was invited to visit their leaders in England in 1933. Although disagreements followed, and Nee's group became separated from the Western Brethren, he absorbed a great deal of their theology, which originated from John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Nee was later arrested by Chinese Communist authorities and spent most of his life in jail, but his gifted disciple, Witness Lee (1905–1997), was able to move first to Taiwan and then to California, and to establish a large international organization, known as the Local Church in the West and the Shouters in China (Introvigne 2018, 83–85).

The Shouters were listed as a *xie jiao* in 1995 in China, although in the following years they tried to enter into a dialogue with the authorities, and were persecuted less severely than The Church of Almighty God was. The persecution also led to the fragmentation of the group in China into independent branches, without a single centralized leadership. The leader of one of these branches (or perhaps splinter group) in the early 1990s was Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), a native of the Heilongjiang Province in China.

Within the framework of a revival that involved both the Shouters and the House Churches in China in 1989, the person later identified as Almighty God by her followers began attending meetings of the House Churches and, later, of the Shouters. In 1991, she began to utter words that followers compared, for authority and power, to those expressed by Jesus Christ. Many Christians started reading these utterances and believing they came from the Holy Spirit. Among these was Zhao Weishan. From 1993, readers of the utterances started believing

that their author was the second coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, and the only Almighty God, and the movement, born in 1991, took shape as The Church of Almighty God. As it is always the case, the emic self-understanding of its origins by The Church of Almighty God differs from reconstructions by outsiders and scholars. The Church of Almighty God insists that it did not originate from the Shouters, but came into being because of the work of the Christ of the last days, Almighty God. The work of Almighty God started in the Shouters, and the Christians who accepted this work became The Church of Almighty God.

While stating that God incarnated in our time in a female human being, The Church of Almighty God never mentions her name. Several scholars identify her with Yang Xiangbin, a woman born in 1973 in northwestern China. Zhao Weishan is referred to in the movement as the Man Used by the Holy Spirit, the Priest, or the Brother, and is the administrative leader of the church. His name is not advertised either. The fact that the movement does not mention publicly the name of its leaders may seem strange to some observers, but in fact, this phenomenon exists also in some Christian churches, particularly within the Brethren movement. In fact, only one branch of the Brethren identifies its leaders by name, while the others insist that any cult of the personality should be avoided and that attention on the persons would detract from the primacy of the written Word (Introvigne 2018, 81–82).

In the mid-1990s, a severe persecution targeted both the Shouters and The Church of Almighty God, whose theological differences were not necessarily clear to the Chinese authorities. Since 1995, The Church of Almighty God has been continuously and severely persecuted in China. In 2000, Zhao and Yang went to the United States, which they entered on September 6, and in 2001 they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have directed the movement from New York. In early 2009, He Zhexun, who used to oversee the work of the Church in Mainland China, was arrested. On July 17, 2009, Ma Suoping (female, 1969–2009), who took over He Zhexun's role, was also arrested and died while in custody (Introvigne 2017c).

The Church of Almighty God releases periodical statistics, and claims that between 2011 and 2013 more than 300,000 members were arrested (The Church of Almighty God 2017). These figures do not appear unbelievable, if one considers the frequent references to “successful” campaigns against the Church

of Almighty God in Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* propaganda and other official sources. The church also reports that many of its members were tortured in China, and some died while in custody in suspicious circumstances.

But persecution is only one of the features making the history of The Church of Almighty God exceptional. The other is growth. According to Chinese official sources, it had reached four million members in 2014 (Ma 2014). The figure is disputed by scholars, who regard it as inflated, and the situation in China makes counting members of groups labeled as *xie jiao* impossible. Since the Zhaoyuan McDonald's murder of 2014, the repression in fact intensified, and several thousand members escaped abroad, where they have founded churches in South Korea, the United States, Italy, Canada, France, Spain, and other countries, in addition to those established in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the diaspora, The Church of Almighty God started converting non-Chinese, although ethnic Chinese still form the majority in the communities of most countries. Difficult refugee issues also emerged in several countries, as members of The Church of Almighty God struggled to see their status as refugees escaping religious persecution recognized. These problems are discussed in the article by Rosita Šorytė in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*.

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## ***Xie Jiao* as “Criminal Religious Movements”: A New Look at Cult Controversies in China and Around the World**

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**ABSTRACT:** Chinese Criminal Code punishes those active in a *xie jiao* with imprisonment from three to seven years. *Xie jiao* is translated in the English versions of Chinese official documents as “evil cults,” but the translation is inaccurate. As “heterodox teachings,” *xie jiao* have been banned in China since the Ming era, and the Communist regime inherited the practice of publishing lists of *xie jiao* from imperial and republican China. Historically, teachings were often declared “heterodox” for political rather than purely theological reasons, and today the definitions of *xie jiao* in Chinese documents and case law are vague at best. The paper argues that taking inspiration on Western categories such as “heresy” and “cult” would not help the Chinese in defining *xie jiao* in more precise terms, since these Western terms were also historically fluid and easily used as tools for discriminating unpopular groups. In recent years, the Chinese authorities did invite to their anti-*xie-jiao* events, in addition or as an alternative to militant anti-cultists, Western scholars of new religious movements, including the author of this paper. I tried to introduce a new category, “criminal religious movements,” including groups that either (or both) consistently practice and justify common crimes such as terrorism, child abuse, rape, physical violence, homicide, and serious economic crimes, as opposite to the vague or imaginary crimes of “being a cult” or “brainwashing members.” The paper argues that there would be definite advantages in replacing categories such as *xie jiao*, “destructive cults,” and “extremist religions” (the latter now fashionable in Russia) with “criminal religious movements,” a notion that would refer to ascertained crimes perpetrated by each movement rather than to notions so vague that they become dangerous for religious liberty.

**KEYWORDS:** *Xie Jiao*, Cults, Brainwashing, New Religious Movements, Anti-cult Movements, Cults in China, Criminal Religious Movements.

### *Introduction*

In 2017, a group of American and European scholars of new religious movements, including Eileen Barker, James T. Richardson, J. Gordon Melton,

Holly Folk, and the undersigned, met twice, in Zhengzhou and Hong Kong respectively, with leaders of the Chinese Anti-*xie-jiao* Association, which is directly connected with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese police officers, scholars, and pastors of the pro-governmental Three Self [Protestant] Churches. We had been invited by the Chinese Anti-*xie-jiao* Association to discuss the notion of *xie jiao* and its application to a new religious movement that is the source of concern for the Beijing regime, The Church of Almighty God.

I will not discuss The Church of Almighty God (on which see Dunn 2015; Introvigne 2017c) here, although I should note that, by examining documents published by Chinese official sources, both I and Holly Folk came to the conclusion that the main accusations against them were false (Introvigne 2017a; Folk 2017). Rather, I will focus on the notion of *xie jiao* and how this quintessentially Chinese category may help rethink some old controversial questions about “cults.” Both Chinese laws, CCP resolutions, and decisions by the People’s Supreme Court mention the need to combat the *xie jiao*, but definitions are either lacking or unclear (Chen 2017). The most recent attempt to date resulted in Rule 1 of the *Interpretations on the Issues Concerning the Application of Laws in Criminal Cases Relating to Organizing and Utilizing Evil Organizations to Destroy Law Enforcement*, issued on January 25, 2017, by the People’s Supreme Court and the Office of the People’s Supreme Attorney, interpreting Article 300 of the Criminal Code, which mentions *xie jiao*. These were defined as “illegal organizations, which, through fraudulent use of religion, *qi gong*, or any other name, by deifying and promoting their ringleaders, or by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means to confuse and deceive others (...), control group members and harm society” (The Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China 2017; see Chen 2017, 7–8). Each term should be in turn defined: which use of religion is “fraudulent”? Which religious doctrines are “superstitious fallacies”?—and so on.

The Chinese Anti-*Xie-jiao* Association co-operated at first with American and European anti-cult organizations and individuals, and this co-operation in fact has not ended (Chen 2017; Xu 2017). However, thanks to the pioneer efforts towards a dialogue by J. Gordon Melton, at least some of its leaders gradually came to realize that the notion of “cult” they had tried to borrow from American and European anti-cultists was widely criticized by the Western academia, and

adopting it as a definition of *xie jiao* would not defuse the international criticism of what many see as the Chinese repression of religious liberty.

This, and the fact that scholars who do not share the anti-cult approach were invited to China, does not mean that Chinese authorities are ready to introduce a new definition of *xie jiao*, and a new translation replacing “evil cults,” which translates *xie jiao* in some official English translation of Chinese documents, only that they are open to discussion. In fact, the debate is century-old. The term *xie jiao* was introduced in China to designate “unorthodox teachings” in the Ming era, centuries before controversies about “cults” erupted in the West (ter Haar 1992; Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–29). According to Goossaert and Palmer, the Emperor “decided on the basis of his own judgement” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27) which religions and movements should be banned as *xie jiao*. The judgement was often political: Christianity as a whole was added to the list of the banned religions in 1725 and severely persecuted, until in 1842 “British guns forced a radical policy change” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 31). On the other hand, “it would be very misleading to reduce the whole of the imperial state’s policies to security concerns, as quite often decisions on recognizing or banning certain cults, specialists, or rituals hinged on purely moral-theological reasons” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 33). Palmer has also demonstrated how *xie jiao* acquired different meanings through the imperial, nationalist, and Communist periods, in connection with different political circumstances (Palmer 2012).

This long history is reflected in different approaches to the *xie jiao* question within the CCP itself. Pastors of the Three Self Church, the government-approved united Protestant Church, who are often members of the CCP, are supported by a venerable tradition when they insist that *xie jiao* should be defined as heretical groups that deny the basic truths of traditional religions. Marxism notwithstanding, they believe they can persuade the CCP that the only antidote to bad religion is good religion. This notion presupposes that it is possible to define “bad religion.” Since Christian or post-Christian groups such as The Church of Almighty God are now prominent in the Chinese *xie jiao* discourse, the proposed standard is the Protestant interpretation of the Bible. “Unbiblical” groups are *xie jiao*. Pastors are less competent when it comes to criticize non-Christian groups such as Falun Gong, but they may claim, analogically, that they represent heretical distortions of the Three Teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism).

However, being classified as a *xie jiao* does not mean only that a movement is criticized in the Sunday sermons of the state-approved churches. Being active in a *xie jiao* is actually a crime punished with severe jail penalties (Chen 2017, 7–8). It is somewhat paradoxical that an officially irreligious state may seriously consider deciding which religious groups should be repressed based on criteria such as the nature of Jesus Christ and the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. Yet, there are those in the CCP who believe that, while religion would eventually disappear in a distant future, for the time being the best way of eradicating *xie jiao* is to promote pro-governmental Christianity in the shape of the Three Self Church, and rely on the propaganda of their pastors (see Palmer 2012).

A second approach, which is represented by several Chinese academics who specialize in the study and criticism of *xie jiao*, maintains that “cults” are a universal problem, not a Chinese one only. Some academics were busy promoting translations of standard American and European anti-cult works, and even invited deprogrammers to China (Chen 2017; Wu 2017). They eventually realized, however, that this approach had the disadvantage to create extremely long lists of *xie jiao*, while the CCP and the police would prefer to concentrate their resources on the few they regard as dangerous for China’s social stability. Hence, the further translation of *xie jiao* as “destructive cults,” a term also used by Western anti-cultists, or (more commonly) as “evil cults,” with the implication that not all “cults” are really “destructive” or “evil.”

Some Chinese academics imported from Western anti-cultism the notion of brainwashing as the distinctive character of “destructive cults.” This was another paradox, since the very word “brainwashing” was originally coined by the American intelligence during the Cold War to support anti-Chinese propaganda. Brainwashing was something the evil Chinese Communists did (Anthony 1996). Chinese courts, including the People’s Supreme Court, stayed away from brainwashing controversies and, as mentioned earlier, described *xie jiao* as groups spreading “superstition,” which is defined as something opposed to both science and socialism, and different from genuine religion. In fact, *xie jiao* are also defined as “pseudo-religious” movements (Chen 2017).

Only recently, and in connection with the dialogue in which we participated, we heard some CCP representatives—particularly from the police side—consider favorably a behavioristic definition of *xie jiao* as religious groups committing crimes punished by laws of general application, i.e. not crimes such

as “spreading heterodox (or superstitious) beliefs” or “brainwashing,” but rape, homicide, child abuse, and other forms of violence. What these “general” crimes identifying a *xie jiao* are, however, remained a matter of serious disagreement with the Western scholars invited to China. For instance, Chinese law has a very extensive notion of “conspiring to overthrow the government,” which sometimes seems to include any public criticism of the regime or the CCP.

I believe that one mistake Western scholars of new religious movements willing to engage in a dialogue with Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* activists should not commit is to adopt an Orientalist approach, and regard the secular repression of *xie jiao* as a unique Chinese phenomenon, from which the West was happily immune. In fact, what Chinese call *xie jiao* have been constantly repressed in the West too, only under different names (see e.g. Wright 1995; Wright and Richardson 2011; Wright and Palmer 2016). Rather than lecturing the Chinese about an imaginary superiority of the Western history of religious liberty, scholars of new religious movements might actually *learn* from the Chinese debate on *xie jiao*, and perhaps see their own old controversies on “cults” from a new perspective.

### *The West’s Own Xie Jiao: From Heresy to Subversion*

Imperial China repressed religious organizations regarded as heterodox by the prevailing official interpretation of the Three Teachings, i.e. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which varied in time. The imperial power was also the guardian of religious orthodoxy, and spreading heterodox teachings was regarded as a direct threat to the state. It is within this context that the very expression *xie jiao* emerged (ter Haar 1992).

The same situation prevailed in pre-modern Europe. It was taken for granted that Church and state should co-operate to repress heresy, and to persecute it in the harshest possible way. Even such a rational man, and moderate theologian, as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) argued that, if the state executes those who spread false money, it should also execute the heretics, who spread false doctrines that are even more dangerous (Aquinas 2000, *Summa theologiae*, Secunda secundae, quaestio 11, art. 3). After the Reformation, Protestant states, starting

with Geneva under John Calvin (1509–1564), changed the definition of heresy but continued to execute heretics (Bainton 1953).

The French Revolution eliminated the last vestiges of the Inquisition and triumphantly proclaimed that the time of religious liberty had come, if at the expenses of killing several thousand priests during the Great Terror (Shusterman 2014). However, when the dust of the Revolution settled, it became clear that states were still punishing heterodoxy, although based on different grounds. Here, we should start examining a linguistic problem, because what really happened in the following centuries may be easily lost in translation. The literal translation of the English “cult” in French is “culte” (and parallel words in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and German). Conversely, the literal translation of the French “secte” is “sect.” However, during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these translations became increasingly misleading. In fact, the words for indicating a “bad” religious group gradually differentiated. They became “cult” in English, and “secte” in French, with its equivalents in the other Latin languages, and in German. Conversely, “culte” doesn’t have a negative meaning in French, and the Italian “culto” mostly designates the majority Catholic Church in legal language, while “sect” in English carries much less negative baggage than “cult.” Accordingly, within the context of the discourse about new religious movements and related controversies, “cult” should be translated into French as “secte,” not as “culte,” and the same in the other Latin languages, and in German. Conversely, the French “secte” and its equivalents should be translated into English as “cult.” The “anti-sectes” movement in French-speaking countries is what is called “anti-cult” movement in English.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, we find the words “cult” and “secte” used in official documents to warn against the evil activities of Freemasonry. Catholic authors and authorities used these labels to indicate that Freemasons promoted ideas the Church cannot accept. However, some very secular official and police documents, including in countries whose authorities were officially hostile to the Catholic Church, called Freemasonry a “cult” (*secte*) because they suspected it not of anti-Catholicism but of conspiring against the governments (Martin 2000). Here, a new meaning of “cult” was introduced, and the notion of heresy went through a process of secularization. “Cults” were religious, spiritual, or esoteric organizations regarded as subversive and suspected of conspiring against the state.

Once defined, this notion of “cult” (or, since the process took place mostly in Latin countries, *secte*) was extended to groups very different from Freemasonry, which today would be called new religious movements. And it would be unfortunately untrue to argue that at least modern states did not kill the heretics. In Italy, in 1878, the military police raided the communal settlement of the Giurisdavidic Religion on Mount Amiata, Tuscany, killing its founder Davide Lazzaretti (also spelled Lazzaretti, 1834–1878) and three of his followers, and leaving another 150 wounded (Tedeschi 1989). In 1896–1897, the government of Brazil launched a military campaign against the communal settlement of rural prophet Antonio Conselheiro (1830–1897) in Canudos, Bahia, killing him and some twenty thousand followers (Levine 1995). The tragedy is the subject matter of Nobel Prize laureate Mario Vargas Llosa’s 1984 novel *The War of the End of the World* (Vargas Llosa 1984).

Both the Mount Amiata and Canudos movements did not recognize the authority of the local Catholic bishops and were declared “heretic” by the Catholic Church. But both in Brazil and Italy the governments at that time were anti-clerical and even put some Catholic bishops in jail. They did not care about heresy, but violently eradicated these “cults” regarding them as subversive, in the sense that they did not recognize the authority of the governments and independently controlled portions of territory.

A new criminological definition of “cult” was born, based not on creeds but on deeds. This approach started with the father himself of criminology, Italian physician Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), ironically himself an advocate of Spiritualism (Lombroso 1909), which in some countries was regarded as a “cult.” He obtained and dissected Lazzaretti’s body looking for “anomalies.” Cults, he suggested, are religious groups conspiring against the public order and following a mentally disturbed leader (Lombroso 1890, 95–99). Obviously, this approach did not particularly focus on the cult’s “heresies” or doctrines.

Although Lombroso was very much respected during his lifetime and beyond, in recent years a movement in Italy called for removing statues of the great criminologist from public squares and changing the names of streets and museums named after him (Milicia 2014a). Lombroso was accused of having offered his caution to the bloody repression of Catholic revolts in Southern Italy against the newly established and anticlerical Italian state, by arguing that Catholic peasants in the South, not unlike “cultists” such as the followers of

Lazzeretti, were backward ignoramuses manipulated by mentally disturbed leaders (Milicia 2014b). Worse still, although this happened after his death, just how dangerous Lombroso's theories were, became apparent when they were used by both Fascists in Italy and Nazis in Germany to justify the persecution of religious minorities (Petracci 2014).

In fact, the totalitarian regimes went one step beyond Lombroso. While for Lombroso "cults" were groups conspiring against the governments, Nazism and Fascism killed a good number of Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals who, strictly speaking, had no political interests. However, in order to be labeled as a "cult," it was now enough *not to support* the government publicly and exhibit a lifestyle different from the regime's normative model. In the infamous Fascist administrative order of 1935, the Pentecostal "cult" was even accused of "compromising the psychical and physical racial integrity of the Italians," by speaking in tongues and unduly exciting their nervous systems (Rochat 1990, 246).

### *From the World War to the Cult Wars*

The fall of the Nazi and Fascist regimes did not mean that criminology abandoned its own use of the word "cult," which dated back to Lombroso and continued to indicate a religious group that committed serious crimes, by now not necessarily including conspiring to overthrow the government

However, in the meantime, theologians and sociologists had started using the category of "cult" with meanings different from criminologists. Christian theologians started realizing that the word "heresy" evoked the Inquisition and the burning at stake of dissidents. Some of them preferred to use what was once in their literature a synonymous of "heresy," "cult," which in the meantime had entered common language. However, they used the word with a meaning different from criminologists. For them, creeds were more important than deeds, and a group who denied the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus Christ was a "cult" even if its members were otherwise good citizens (Martin 1965).

With sociologists, translation problems became even more complicated because a tradition evolved from Max Weber (1864–1920) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), although the second was not a sociologist but a church historian

using sociological tools (Weber 1904–1905, 1906; Troeltsch 1912). The tradition went through various stages of development in the United States (a key passage being Niebuhr 1929), used both “cult” and “sect,” and distinguished between them. Without returning to this often-told story, what is important here is that, while they started their careers as contemporaries of Lombroso, who was well-known in German-speaking countries, both Weber and Troeltsch completely ignored his criminological categories. For them, and their successors, “sects” and “cults” were not heterodox, let alone criminal, religious groups, but religions in an early stage of their development, regarded as marginal by, and critic of, society at large, and not, or not yet, fully organized (Richardson 1978, 1979, 1993; Dillon and Richardson 1999).

The overlapping activities of criminologists and sociologists created a confusion, not completely resolved to this day. “Cult,” based on the criminological tradition, and the parallel efforts of Christian critics of “cults” as heresies, became generally understood as a word charged with strong negative connotations, while sociologists used it in a value-free meaning. Deciding what group was really a “cult” became difficult. For instance, millions of Pentecostals, known as Oneness Pentecostals, disagree with the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Are they part of “cults”? Christian opponents of the “cults” would (and did) answer in the affirmative, as the classic Trinitarian doctrine is one of their key tests to assess whether a group is within Biblical orthodoxy or otherwise. Criminologists would disagree, since Oneness Pentecostals are generally peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Sociologists would distinguish between newly born, small groups of Oneness Pentecostals and well-established denominations that, while keeping the Oneness doctrine, have millions of members and decades of stable organizational history.

This situation went from bad to worse with the “cult wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, when a societal reaction developed against the success in the West of new religious movements, either imported from Asia or domestic. Parents and the media did not understand why youths might be willing to sacrifice their careers in order to spend their lives in exotic religious organizations, and the modern anti-cult movement was born. Its story has been told in several valuable studies (including Shupe and Bromley 1980; Bromley and Shupe 1981; Shupe and Bromley 1994), and a short summary would suffice for the purposes of this article.

A handful of psychologists imported from Cold War American propaganda against Communism (and, as mentioned earlier, against China) the notion of “brainwashing,” arguing that these youths did not join the groups voluntarily but were manipulated through mysterious mind control techniques. “Cults” were defined as groups using “brainwashing,” yet another evolution of the criminological definition—but one making reference, rather than to actual crimes such as violence or sexual abuse, to a hypothetical crime (brainwashing) whose very existence was disputed.

In fact, sociologists and other scholars reacted against the “brainwashing” theories, claiming that they were pseudo-scientific tools used to deny religious liberty to unpopular groups labeled as “cults.” The argument, they claimed, was circular. We know that certain groups are “cults” because they use “brainwashing,” and we know that they use “brainwashing” because, rather than persuading young people to embrace “reasonable” spiritual teachings, they spread bizarre forms of belief, i.e. they are “cults” (Kilbourne and Richardson 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Richardson 1996).

A good deal of name-calling went on between the vast majority of the academic specialists of new religious movements and anti-cultists during the so called “Cult Wars” (Introvigne 2014; Gallagher 2016). Several studies, starting from the seminal *The Making of a Moonie* by Eileen Barker, demonstrated that “cults” accused of using the so called “brainwashing” techniques obtained a very low percentage of conversions, proving that these techniques, if they existed at all, were not very successful (Barker 1984).

In 1990, in the case *U.S. v. Fishman*, a federal court in California concluded that “brainwashing” was not a scientific concept and that testimony about “cults” based on the brainwashing theory was not admissible in American courts of law (U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California 1990). *Fishman* was the beginning of the end for the American anti-cult movement’s social relevance (Richardson 2014, 2015). The notion of “brainwashing” was still defended by a tiny minority of scholar and inspired some laws, in France and elsewhere, but they soon proved difficult to enforce (Anthony and Introvigne 2006).

Another consequence of the cult wars was that the majority of academic scholars decided not to use the word “cult,” because of its heavy judgmental and criminological implications, replacing it with “new religious movements.” The

new label evolved from Japanese and Korean concepts of "new religions," common in Asia since the 1930s and later applied to Western movements by Jacob Needleman (Needleman 1970), but was defined and widely adopted thanks to the efforts of Eileen Barker.

In the meantime, public opinion and the media were confronted with a fourth possible test to decide questions such as whether the Oneness Pentecostals belong to "cults": do they use brainwashing? In fact, the anti-cult movement and the deprogrammers did target some Oneness Pentecostal denominations, leaving others alone, thus reinforcing the scholars' impression that almost any group could be accused of brainwashing and, consequently, labeled a "cult" (Shupe and Darnell 2006).

### *Introducing a "New" Category: Criminal Religious Movements*

Anti-cultists accused scholars of new religious movements of being "cult apologists," for which all "cults" were inoffensive. This was never the case, as these scholars always acknowledged that some religious movements, both outside and inside mainline religious traditions, created real "social problems," and advocated and committed very real crimes such as terrorism, homicide, rape, and child abuse, not to be confused with the imaginary crime of brainwashing (Barker 2011, 201–03).

In 1993, the FBI siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, ended up in the death of 80 members of the group, including 22 children (Wright 1995; Wessinger 2017). The FBI's Critical Incidents Response Group started studying what went wrong in Waco, seeking the cooperation of academic scholars of new religious movements. I myself co-organized and chaired a seminar for FBI agents in 1998 in Fredericksburg, Virginia (Barkun 2002, 103), where Eileen Barker, J. Gordon Melton, James T. Richardson, Catherine Wessinger, Susan Palmer and Jane Williams-Hogan also spoke. At the seminar, it was immediately clear to the FBI that scholars would not use the word "cult," yet the agents wanted to know which, among thousands of religious groups, were most inclined to commit serious crimes and should be kept under surveillance. Scholars proposed various tentative criteria, and the conversation between the agency and some of them continued for several years, although how much

scholars really influenced FBI practice is a matter of dispute (see Johnson and Weitzman 2017).

In 2001–2002, several leading scholars of new religious movements from Europe and United States (including the undersigned) joined in a project called “Cults, Religion and Violence,” led by David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, which included seminars and sessions at conferences and culminated in 2002 in the publication of a book with the same title by Cambridge University Press (Bromley and Melton 2002). The project did take into account the earlier dialogue between some scholars and the FBI, but was not limited to the issues discussed there.

While the project “Cults, Religion and Violence” was developing, 9/11 occurred, with two important effects: it made somewhat obvious that “bad” groups existed within traditional religions as well, a notion reinforced by the scandals of Catholic pedophile priests, which also extended to other mainline religions (Shupe 1995, 1998, 2007; Shupe, Stacey and Darnell 2000), and created a new urgency in governments all over the world to define the features of “extremist” religious groups, sometimes called, once again, “cults.” Most scholars continued to oppose the use of “cult,” as an expression compromised by its association with the discredited theory of brainwashing, yet recognized that law enforcement agencies did need criteria for identifying the really dangerous groups (Richardson 1978, 1993).

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while China developed its new anti-*xie jiao* policy, the Russian Parliament and courts elaborated their own definitions of “extremist groups,” originally introduced in 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11, to limit the activities of radical fundamentalist Islam in Russia. Later, however, most new religious movements were labeled as “extremist groups.” In 2017, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were “liquidated” and banned in Russia as an “extremist group,” and legal proceedings were started to “liquidate” the Church of Scientology and several other movements. Definitions of “extremist groups” in Russia ran into the same problems China experienced with *xie jiao*, but Russian courts introduced some criteria of their own (Falikov 2017). A crucial one in the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was “exclusivism,” as Russian judges explained that should be regarded as “extremist” any group that argues that its is the only true religion and way of salvation and that all other religions are false (Introvigne 2017b). Obviously, we find similar affirmations in the holy books and statements

of most religions, and religion in general is not where we can expect to find pluralistic and relativistic ideas of truth. The exclusivity test, once again, refers to belief rather than behavior, and can easily lead to the conclusion that most religions are “extremist groups.”

I would propose to introduce a “new” category, “criminal religious movements” (CRM). It is not entirely new, as it uses selectively elements from the criminological tradition and even from the long history of *xie jiao* in China. It avoids the word “cult” and tries to disentangle the category from both the folk psychology of brainwashing and the politics of “extremism,” and theology. For example, one of the problems in the dialogue with the Chinese is that the 2017 interpretation of article 300 of their Criminal Code by the People’s Supreme Court defined as *xie jiao* any group whose living leader is regarded by the devotee as God, as it is the case with The Church of Almighty God. In fact, within groups of Christian origins, this is also the case, among others, of the Korean World Mission Society Church of God and the American King of Salem group, but they do not have a significant presence in China. Several groups within the Hindu or Buddhist traditions also consider their leaders as “living gods” but, unless this is constructed as a license for the leaders to rape or abuse the followers, it is unclear why the mere belief in the leader’s divinity should be regarded as criminal.

I would propose a definition of a criminal religious movement as *a religious movement that either, or both, advocates or consistently engages as a group in major violent or criminal activities, including terrorism, homicide, physical violence against members, dissidents, or opponents, rape, sexual abuse of minors, or major economic crimes.*

There are five key elements of this definition. First, the definition refers to *religious* movements. There are many criminal movements and organizations that are not religious, but this is not the problem we are discussing here. I would favor a broader definition of religion, including spiritual and esoteric groups. The definition does not purport to solve all the problems associated with defining “religion,” but at the same time stays away from attempts to label certain groups as “pseudo-religious,” which are either based on the naïve notion that all religions are benign, or lead to very difficult questions about what is a “genuine” religion (Platvoet and Molendijk 1999). For the functional purpose of the definition, a religious group is a group characterized by religious beliefs and practices, without investigating their orthodoxy, quality, or “strangeness.”

Second, the definition refers to crimes committed, advocated, or justified by a group *as a group*. It is not enough that some members of the movement commit crimes. That some Catholic priests are pedophiles does not make the Catholic Church a CRM, as the institution's doctrines do not condone pedophilia (although some bishops did), and the overwhelming majority of Catholics and priests abhor it. The definition implies that the movement as a group, in its corporate capacity, either, or both, advocates in its doctrines or consistently and systematically commit crimes, although it also recognizes that in some cases one single "critical incident," for example a terrorist attack, may be enough to identify the group as a CRM.

Third, the definition implies that crimes should be *major* ones, such as terrorism, rape, homicide, child abuse, physical violence, and even serious and consistent economic crimes, such as international money laundering. Many religious groups are accused in some countries of tax elusion or evasion, and minor administrative wrongdoings. This alone should not lead to the conclusion that the group is a CRM.

Fourth, the definition also insists on well-defined crimes, punished by existing laws of general application and not by new laws created for the specific purpose of acting against the so called "cults." As such, it focuses for example on physical violence rather than on elusive notions of psychological violence, on beating or murdering opponents in this life rather than on threatening them with the flames of Hell in the next, and so on.

It should also be obvious, but perhaps it needs to be stated when dealing with legal systems very different from the Western ones, that the crimes should be ascertained by courts of law through fair trials, where the defendants should have the opportunity to be assisted by independent lawyers and exert their rights of defense. And that the common laws religious movements are accused of violating should be consistent with UN and other international declarations of human rights. This would not be the case, for example, for a law defining any criticism against the government or a ruling party as a criminal offense. After all, several religions have a "prophetic" tradition of exposing the governments' wrongdoings, and the boundary between prophecy and conspiring to overthrow the government was never as clear-cut as it may seem.

The fifth comment emphasizes that definitions never solve all problems, and grey areas would always remain. CRM are groups that *either* (or both) commit *or*

advocate violence. Advocating or inciting violence is already a form of violence. During the year 2011, I served as the Representative for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Christians and member of other religions of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). The U.S. and Canada are also participating states and are represented by their respective ambassadors at the OSCE, where the reference to "Christians and members of other religions" in my title simply indicated that Jews and Muslims were outside of my mandate, as the organization also had two different Representatives for combating respectively anti-Semitism and islamophobia. Part of my mandate was working with the department of OSCE interacting with participating states for combating hate speech. OSCE defines hate speech as a form of violence, and I agree that certain forms of hate speech implicitly or explicitly incite or advocate violence. Consequently, I would argue that a religious movement consistently and systematically using hate speech may be eventually recognized as a CRM.

However, during my mandate at the OSCE, I became very much aware of how difficult it is to define hate speech, and how American and European traditions are different in this respect, with Europe being generally more restrictive. I also came to the persuasion that the peculiarities of religious language and controversy should be recognized. There is a century-old tradition in many religions of threatening sinners with the flames of Hell, and neither the Bible nor the *Quran* are models of politically correct language. Efforts by religions to interact between themselves, and with society at large, with more civility should be encouraged and applauded, but it took centuries for some older religions to start seeing these efforts as meaningful, and we cannot expect new religions to mature in a few years or decades. *Some* forms of hate speech obviously generate violence, but the analysis in this field should be conducted with care and restraint—and some uncertainty will remain.

Definitions are not "true" or "false," they are just tools used to achieve certain results. Scholars can dispute the appropriateness of the category "criminal religious movements," although they would perhaps recognize that it avoids the intractable problems associated with the word "cult." If this conversation should continue, Chinese discussions about defining *xie jiao* would have valuably contributed to a better understanding of how and when religious movements become criminal organizations, and state intervention starts being justified.

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## The List: The Evolution of China's List of Illegal and Evil Cults

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**ABSTRACT:** In China, departments under the central government have published lists of banned and illegal religious groups since 1995. This practice can be seen as an extension of traditional ways of categorizing heterodox associations dating back to imperial times. Groups on the current list are often identified as *xie jiao*—normally translated as “evil cults.” The list is thus directly connected to questions of the categorization of religion in China. The study of the lists provides insight into the government’s evolving policy on religion, as well as the legal environment for religious activity.

**KEYWORDS:** China, People’s Republic of China, *Xie Jiao*, Religious Policy in China, Religious Rights in China, Cults, Anti-Cult Movement, Chinese New Religions, SARA.

Over the past quarter century, China has sporadically published lists of banned religious groups. These lists as they have been consolidated and published reflect the government’s evolved thinking on religious policy, and illuminate significant aspects of the contemporary religious scene in China while offering insights into the government’s official policy toward religion. The consolidated lists were published in 1995, 2000, again in 2014, and most recently in September of 2017. These published announcements constitute the “lists” proper. They are supplemented by a number of individual circulars that speak to a more limited number of the banned groups, which provide content that would be subsequently compiled into the longer lists.

A range of agencies are involved in these circulars, but the major lists are published by Public Safety, the State Council, both government agencies, and the General Office of the Central Committee, a department of the party. Recent lists

appear under the aegis of the recently-established agency established to counter *xie jiao* groups, the Anti-Cult Association.

### *Xie Jiao* (邪教)

Nearly all of the lists place the individual groups in the category of *xie jiao*. This term is widely translated inside and outside China to mean “cult.” While convenient for translators, this usage is a misleading simplification. *Xie jiao* in fact has a long history of its own (Wu 2016). It was used as early as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to mean heterodox, harmful sects. In the 1990s, *xie jiao* was applied as a convenient, well-known term for translating a foreign word, “cult,” that had its own separate and complex background. Like current usage of “cult” in many countries, *xie jiao* has become a term in common usage. Clearly, the two terms come from different backgrounds. Yet, for better or worse, cult and *xie jiao* are two concepts whose fates remain intermingled.

The 2000 circular gives a useful official definition of *xie jiao*. A *xie jiao* is any group that:

- a. establishes an illegal organization in the name of religion, *qigong*, etc.;
- b. deifies its leaders;
- c. initiates and spreads superstitions and heterodox beliefs;
- d. utilizes various means to fabricate and spread superstitions and heterodox [or cultic] beliefs to excite doubts and deceive the people, and recruit and control its members by various means;
- e. engages in disturbing social order in an organized manner that brings injury to the lives and properties of the citizens (危害公民生命財產安全等活動).

Each of the lists discussed below are *xie jiao* lists. The individual groups are banned because they are *xie jiao*, are harmful, and are hence illegal. *Xie jiao*, an existing concept in the Chinese political lexicon, has been applied to a contemporary religious landscape. This alerts us to the importance of the pre-Communist period in understanding how illegal religious groups are viewed. So, before listing the contemporary groups, I will discuss how such groups were seen in the past.

*Banned Groups: A Brief Historical Background*

In the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), policies toward religion were based on ideology and experience with religion gained before 1949. In the 1950s, the state reorganized existing religions under its own control. The early 1960s was a period of overt antagonism to all forms of religion. This hostility relaxed with the economic reforms introduced from 1979. But religion was not a topic that could be overlooked. Religious shocks such as the Falun Gong demonstrations in 1999 and the rapid rise in non-official Christianity continued to challenge the government.

From the 1990s, the state chose to target specific religious groups. These groups have been prominently declared illegal and suppressed by the various security bureaus. This targeted approach differed from the 1950s and 60s, in which the government made broad proscriptions focused on “religion” as a category that was harmful or, at the very least, false. The new focus moved to specific *groups* that were deemed to be harmful and thus illegal.

The early 1990s also saw an increasing awareness of groups widely categorized as “cults” outside China—for instance, Aum Shinrikyo, the Branch Davidians, and the Order of the Solar Temple. Chinese government units such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Public Security Bureau began initial efforts to track such “cults.” Of course, individual groups inside China had already been proscribed, starting with the “Shouters” in 1983. But tracking became formalized when in 1995 a formal *xie jiao* list was issued. On this list, 10 of the 11 groups were home-grown. This change from informal tracking to formal proscription indicates a shift in perception about what things constitute “threats.”

Such tracking was not new in Chinese history. It was a renewal of practices dating back at least as far as the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The Qing regime showed a healthy respect for the power of religious ideas. This was a necessity—the Qing regime had to deal with a long list of religiously-tinged uprisings (Palmer 2008). These included the White Lotus Rebellions (白蓮教亂, *bailian jiaoluan*) of 1794–1806 and the Húi or Dungan Muslim Rebellions (同治陝甘回變, *tongzhi shangan huibian*) of 1862–77 and 1895–6.

The Qing Code (大清律例, *daqing lulie*), a detailed body of edicts, offers a wealth of information about imperial attitudes towards religious formations. Of particular interest are the different categories of groups singled out in the Code. Secret societies were a particular concern. They were outlawed, and their leaders were seen as deceptive and dangerous (Sutton 2004, 209–37, 216). The Sacred Edict (聖諭, *shengyu*) of emperor Kangxi (康熙, r. 1662–1722), promulgated widely from 1670, also reflected this dislike of secret societies; it urged the people to “wipe out strange beliefs to elevate correct doctrine” (黜異端以崇正學, *chuyiduan yichongzhengxue*). Brotherhoods were another illegal category. A legal statute of 1671 confirmed that sworn brotherhoods were nothing but rebel organizations; the later penal code of 1764 specified strangulation for all of their leaders (Hsu 2004, 323–64, 327). Officials applied the term *xie jiao* (邪教) to sectarian groups starting from the Kangxi period (Liu 2004, 484).

Clearly, the Qing was not nervous only about secret societies. The state was suspicious of *any* religious sect (教, *jiao*) or association (會, *hui*). On the surface, officials sent to the provinces were dismissive of the leaders of such groups, calling them ignorant and uncultured people exploiting the hopes and anxieties of the poor (Bohr 2004, 393–430, 393). Nevertheless, religious activities were always on the radar. Qing policy was therefore one of wary observation and active suppression of non-orthodox groups.

### *Republican Policy (国民时代对宗教政策)*

By the time the KMT party consolidated power in 1927, this imperial spirit of wariness had expanded into a conscious antagonism towards traditional religions. Anti-superstition and anti-tradition were growing intellectual trends among most educated Chinese beginning in the late Qing. The version of modernity promoted by many intellectuals left no room for such non-institutional religious practices as spirit writing or cultic worship. The KMT offered instead an ideology of rationality (Pittman 2001, 153). In addition, organized religions such as Buddhism were widely perceived as being backward, inhibiting China’s transformation into a modern nation. While Article 6 of the Republican constitution guaranteed “freedom of belief,” the government also maintained a strict separation of church and state (Goossaert, Kiely and Lagerwey 2005, 15).

Between 1927 and 1931, the Republican government launched a formal campaign against superstition and institutional religion. The government waged consistent warfare against Buddhism in particular. There was sporadic but widespread confiscation of the property of Buddhist and local deity temples. This campaign can be seen as an outgrowth of the powerful nationalistic movement dating from 1919, the May 4 Movement, and the allied spirit of anti-traditionalism (Laliberté 2004, 33). The KMT translated this attitude of anti-superstition into policy, as would the People's Republic after 1949. The campaign against superstition only ended when, in 1934, KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石, Jiang Jieshi, 1897–1975) launched his own spiritual program, the New Life Movement (新生活運動, *xinshenghuo yundong*).

#### *PRC Religious Policy (人民时代对宗教政策)*

The advent of the People's Republic of China from 1949 was bound to bring changes in all areas of civil society. Leaders of established religions had cause to worry. Marxist ideological antagonism toward religion in general was well known. In addition, religious leaders were often personally associated with the ruling classes. Some religious leaders chose to leave China altogether. Others stayed and were subject to persecution—senior leaders from Yiguandao, the Local Churches, and the Catholic Church suffered in prison, for instance. Beyond these examples, a large number of religious leaders managed to adapt to the new conditions. Despite this generally negative situation, it is not accurate to say the People's Republic did not allow religion of any sort; religion did survive, in many guises (Hattaway 2009). Variability in the tenor of the state's relationship to religious movements and groups is a constant theme in Chinese history. The Communist regime was not the first to suppress religious activity, or to attempt to co-opt major religions. But given the new regime's strong Marxist background, radical change in the position of religion was inevitable.

From our current perspective, looking back over sixty years of Communist rule, it is clear that there has not been a single, consistent approach. PRC thinking on religion has gone through many stages. In the 1950s, there were several campaigns that hurt established religions, indeed wiping such groups as Yiguandao from the landscape. But grass-roots religious practices continued. The 1960s, with the Cultural Revolution, marks a period of extreme antagonism

toward religion; most overt religious activity simply ceased, and many religious sites were destroyed. The very government agencies responsible for overseeing religion disappeared. The succeeding period of economic liberalism ushered in by the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997, in power 1979–1997) saw a broad relaxation in government control over civil society. With economic liberalization came freedom of movement and opportunities for association, a social milieu exploited by many religions new and old. And since 2012 the government of Xi Jinping (习近平, b. 1953) has moved in a more conservative direction, with an emphasis on ideology reminiscent of the Mao era (1949–1975).

### *Current Structures for Managing Religion (目前管理宗教结构)*

China's current constitution, promulgated in 1982, recognizes and gives protection to religion. Under article 36, all citizens have the right to participate in religious activities, or not; they cannot be discriminated against due to beliefs, nor can they be compelled to engage in religion. At the same time, no citizen may use religious activities to "disrupt public order" (*People's Daily*, Constitution, 2004; Chan and Carlson 2005).

All religious bodies in principle must register with SARA, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (国家宗教事务局, *guojia zongjiao shiwujū*), as well as with provincial level Religious Affairs Bureaus. In fact, many kinds of religious groups exist beyond the five officially sanctioned bodies of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Christianity (Protestantism), and Catholicism. Unregistered groups include nearly all those that would be classified as new religions. Such unregistered groups are not *necessarily* illegal. Nevertheless, certain groups of a religious nature openly oppose the government. Falun Gong (法轮) and The Church of Almighty God (全能神) are the best known of these. We can place Falun Gong at one end of the spectrum of Chinese contemporary new religions. At that end, the state's position is not only to deem them illegal, but to actively suppress them. Many other groups, while illegal, are not actively suppressed. And still other groups, such as the Mormon Church congregations meeting quietly in large cities, are not registered but are nevertheless tolerated. In sum, there remains a broad spectrum of religious activity outside the SARA umbrella.

SARA and the Ministry of Public Security (公安部, *gonganbu*) are both organs administered directly by the State Council (国务院直属机构, *guowuyuan zhishujigou*). Under the Party organization, the office directly involved with religious policy is the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (中共中央办公厅, *zhonggong zhongyang bangongting*). Each of these units of governance have issued notices regarding the list of *xie jiao* groups.

Following the Falun Gong incident of 1999, the Public Security Bureau established a new organ, the Public Security Anti-Xie Jiao Organization (公安部反邪教组, *gonganbu fanxie jiao zu*), called informally “the 610 Office,” to focus on *xie jiao* groups. In November of 2000, another organization was established, commonly known in English as “the China Anti-Cult Association” (中国反邪教协会, *zhongguo fanxie jiao xiehui*, abbreviated as CACA). A distinction should be made between such government offices, which may use the term “anti-cult” in their English translations, and overseas civil society groups dedicated to fighting “cults.” The Chinese institutions in fact are anti-*xie jiao*. Officially, CACA is a voluntary, non-profit organization. In practice, the media appears to treat its announcements, for instance the June 4, 2014 front-page article on *xie jiao* groups, as official government notices.

### *State Management of Religion in the Reform Era (改革时期)*

The new constitution, launched at the Fifth National People's Congress in 1978, laid the foundation for land reform and economic development. It also marked the triumph of the Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) approach. In the legal sphere, the 1978 constitution reinstated the citizens' right to equal treatment, along with the right to trial and defence.

But this constitution turned out to be preliminary. The government announced another new constitution in 1982 that incorporated most of the contents of the 1978 version. It also reiterated the rights of citizens to “protection from defamation of character, illegal arrest or detention, and unlawful search.”

Contrarian ideological voices were not silenced completely. These increasingly came to the fore even as China embarked headlong on the Four Modernizations (四个现代化 *sige xiandaihua*)—agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military. Deng's approach was to liberalize the countryside first and rely on

export-led growth. In 1983, conservative elements in the senior leadership, especially propaganda chief Deng Liqun (邓力群, 1915–2015), launched an Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign (清除精神污染, *qingchu jingshen wuran*). This effort can be interpreted as a reflection of the party's nervousness at growing international contacts as well as the impact of such western concepts as civil rights and human rights.

Despite regular changes at the top, the Chinese leaderships' strategic focus has been consistent throughout the reform era; all leaders since Deng have endeavoured to maintain social stability and rapid economic development. In this, they have succeeded: growth from 1978 to today has been generally rapid, marked by increasing urbanization and a rising standard of living (International Monetary Fund 2014). But legal freedoms have not always followed in the wake of economic development. The key question for NRMs (new religious movements) has been how the constitution's stand on religion is interpreted. In practice, the four major leaders since Deng have treated religion with varying degrees of emphasis.

Jiang Zemin (江泽民, b. 1926), who served as General Secretary from 1989–2002, had what appears to be a particular focus on religion. He famously admitted that religion was a force in society that may outlast the Communist party itself. This seemed to signal an official attitude of accommodation and liberalization that generally continued under his successor, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛, b. 1942; in power 2002–2012). Unlike Jiang, Hu rarely mentioned religion.

In late 2001, Jiang chaired a unique meeting of senior leaders, the Religious Work Conference, to discuss religion. The document that resulted from the meeting left little doubt that religion was a central concern for the Party. "It is," reminded Jiang, "impossible to lower one's guard [against religion.]" The document emphasized that religion, like all aspects of life in China, must come under the supervision of the law. This meant the need to "protect the legal, wipe out the illegal, resist infiltration, and attack crime" (Chan 2004, 325). Chan Kim-Kwong interprets this flurry of activity under Jiang as the Party's effort to adjust policy on religion in the face of such social changes as the WTO accession, which took place in 2001. The leadership chose to adopt a policy of recognition, containment, and guidance of the forces of religion, and, concurrently, harsh suppression of illegal groups. In many ways this rethink was a breakthrough: the Party leadership acknowledged religion to be complex and not simply a distortion

in worldview, as orthodox Marxism teaches (Chan 2004, 347). In other ways, this viewpoint was simply a rediscovery of certain previous positions on religion. For instance, the “five characteristics of religion,” an ideological position promulgated in the mid-1950s, had recognized religion’s long-term and complex nature (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 154–55).

### *The List of Banned Groups (被禁止名单)*

One upshot of the Jiang period has been a clear distinction between approved and illegal religious groups. Since the mid-1990s, illegal and banned groups have been categorized and controlled through designation as *xie jiao*. At some point in the 1990s, a specific list of exactly which groups are categorized as *xie jiao* was compiled. This list has generated great interest in the international media.

The first extensive compilation included overseas groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. In this initial version, the focus was on potentially dangerous overseas groups; *xie jiao* became analogous to the term “cult” as used in other countries. But in 1995, the list was expanded to designate groups deemed to be not only dangerous but also heretical. Many of these were home-grown and had evolved out of the Protestant traditions; only one group on the initial list, Supreme Master Ching Hai, was based outside Mainland China (Guzmán 1996). Later that year, the list was expanded by the inclusion of more local Protestant groups and such overseas groups as the Children of God and the Unification Church (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 339).

The Falun Gong incident of 1999, in which thousands of followers surrounded the senior leaders’ compound in Beijing, spurred the government’s thinking on *xie jiao*. For the first time a well-organized group, one that had been nurtured through government support, was seen as a threat to China and, more seriously, to the Party. The Ministry of Public Security in 1998 designated Falun Gong as a *xie jiao*. As if to clarify the implication, *xie jiao* organizations were formally made illegal by a legislative resolution in 1999. It was at this time that the “610” anti-cult unit was established. The State Council in 2000 followed this up by establishing a separate network of offices to deal with *xie jiao* (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 340–41). The government then published an updated list of

eighteen “heresies and cults” (China21.org 2000; Chinasource 2015; Appendix 1989).

This list has had an immense influence on the perception of new religions. First of all, inclusion meant the full weight of state coercion would be applied against any individual associated with any group on the list. This level of severity echoed the nearly absolute suppression of Yiguandao and other religious groups in the 1950s. For Falun Gong, as with Yiguandao before it, the only way to survive was to move overseas, away from the direct influence of the Chinese state. Inclusion also placed some groups into the status of illegal entities, and forced many of their members to “go underground.” Secondly, as Goossaert and Palmer note, the *xie jiao* list acted as the conceptual opposite pole to allowed religions. As a result, any group not belonging to one end of the spectrum or another was cast into a limbo of uncertainty (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 390–92). Some religious groups scurried to head off the threat of inclusion on the *xie jiao* list. Overseas religions, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Scientology, initiated discussions with the Chinese government to explain their peaceful intentions. Finally, these lists, publicized so widely, have given scholars a valuable window on official policy regarding what counts as acceptable religious behaviour. For this reason, we provide here a compilation of the various lists of officially proscribed religious groups, with each group’s year of official proscription listed in parentheses (China21.org 2000).

### *Religious Groups Banned in China*

#### Pronouncements Issued Before 1995

1. The Shouters (呼喊派, *huhuanpai*)/Teachings of Chángshòu (常受教, *changshoujiao*): recognized in Chinese official sources as descending from the Living Stream Ministry founded in 1965 by Li Changshou (李常受, Witness Lee, 1905–1997) in the US (1983).
2. Full Scope Church (全范围教会, *quanfanwei jiaohui*): founded in Henan in 1984 by Xu Yongze (徐永泽) (1988).
3. The Disciple Society (门徒会, *mentuhui*): started by Li Sanbao (季三保, 1940?–1997?) in Shaanxi (陕西) (1989).

4. The Lingling Sect (灵灵教, *línglíngjiào*): founded in 1986 in Jiangsu (江苏) by Hua Xuehe (华雪和) (1991).

Issued in 1995 and consolidated in document #1995–50

5. Anointed King (被立王, *beiliwang*), established 1992 in Anhui (安徽) by Wu Yangming (吴杨明, 1945–1995) (1995).

6. The Church of Almighty God (全能神教会, *quannengshen jiaohui*)/Eastern Lightning (东方闪电, *dongfang shandian*)/True God (实际神, *shijishen*)/New Master of Power (新能力主, *xinnenglüzhu*): founded 1989 in Henan (河南) by Zhao Weishan (赵维山) (1995).

7. Guanyin Method (观音法门, *guanyin famen*), founded 1988 by Ching Hai (青海, *Qinghai*, b. 1950) in Taiwan (1995).

8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station (中华大陆行政执事站, *zhonghuadaluxíngzhengahishizhan*): founded 1994 in Henan by Wang Yongmin (王永民) (1995).

9. Children of God (天父的儿女, *tianfude ernu*), alternatively, The Family International (家庭国际, *jiating guoji*): founded in 1968 in California by David Berg (1919–1969) (1995).

10. Dami Mission (达米宣教会, *dami xuanjiaohu*): founded in the early 1990s in South Korea by Lee Jang Rim (1995).

11. True Buddha School (灵仙真佛宗, *lingxian zhenfozong*): founded 1979 in Taiwan by Lu Shengyan (卢胜彦, b. 1945) (1995).

Issued in Between 1995 and 2000, and consolidated in document #2000–39

12. New Testament Church (新约教会, *xinyuejiaohui*): founded by Kong Duen Yee (江端仪 Jiang Duanyi, 1923–1966) in Hong Kong 1963 (1995).

13. Bloody Holy Spirit (血水圣灵, *xueshuishengling*): founded 1988 in Taiwan by Zuo Kun (左坤, b. 1930) (1996).

14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society (世界以利亚福音宣教会, *shijieyiliya fuyin xuanjiaohui*), also known as the World Mission Society Church of God: started in Korea 1964 by Ahn Sahng-hong (1918–1985) (1996).

15. The Unification Church (统一教, *tongyijiao*): founded 1954 by Reverend Moon Sun-Myung (1920–2012) in South Korea (1997).

16. Lord God Sect (主神教, *zhushenjiao*): established 1993 by Liu Jiaguo (刘家国, 1964–1999) in Hunan (1998).

17. Three Grades of Servants (三班仆人派, *sanbanpurenpai*): founded in 1988 in Henan by Xu Wenku (徐文库, 1946–2006) (1999).

18. Falun Gong (法轮功): founded in 1992 in Jilin by Li Hongzhi (李洪志, b. 1951?) (suppressed from 1999).

19. Yuandunfamen (圆顿法门): founded by Xǔ Chengjiang (许成江) in Heilongjiang in 1998 (suppressed as a branch of Ching Hai from 1999).

Issued in the 2000s

20. Zhonggong (中功): established in the 1987 as a *qigong* group by Zhang Hongbbao (张宏堡, 1954–2006) (2000).

21. South China Church (华南教会, *huananjiiaohui*): founded 1990 in Hubei by Gong Shengliang (龚圣亮) (2001).

22. Pure Land Learning Association (净宗学会, *jingzong xuehui*): founded by Buddhist Master Chin Kung (净空, *Jingkong*, b. 1927) in Taiwan 1984 (deemed illegal 2011).

Of the 22 groups listed here, fully 16 (73%) fly under the banner of Christianity. Six of the Christian groups are overseas imports. Three of these (the Unification Church, the World Elijah Gospel Mission Society [aka World Mission Society Church of God], and the Dami Mission) are Christian groups from South Korea. The Children of God (The Family) is an international NRM that started in America. The New Testament Church has its roots in Hong Kong and Taiwan. And the Bloody Holy Spirit originated in Taiwan. The other ten Christian groups developed in China.

## Consolidated List: Noting 16 Christian-inspired Groups (73%)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. The Shouters 呼喊派                                       | 12. New Testament 新约教会                             |
| 2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会                                | 13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵                        |
| 3. The Disciple Society 门徒会                               | 14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会 |
| 4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教                                  | 15. The Unification Church 统一教                     |
| 5. Anointed King 被立王                                      | 16. Lord God Sect 主神教                              |
| 6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会                           | 17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派                 |
| 7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai)                        | 18. Fǎlúngōng 法轮功                                  |
| 8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站 | 19. Yúandùnfāmén 圆顿法门                              |
| 9. Children of God 天父的儿女                                  | 20. Zhōnggōng 中功                                   |
| 10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会                                    | 21. South China Church 华南教会                        |
| 11. True Buddha School 灵真真佛宗                              | 22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会            |

According to the Public Security documents, several groups have roots, or their early members, in one Christian group known as the Shouters. These groups include the Teachings of Changshou (said to be another name for Shouters), the All-Powerful, The Church of Almighty God, and the Mainland China Administrative Deacon Stations (China21.org 1995). The Shouters in turn are linked in official discourse to the Local Churches (Congressional-Executive Commission 2014, 98). The Local Churches are a Chinese Christian movement founded in the 1920s by Watchman Nee (倪柝声, Ni Tuosheng, 1903–1972). The movement eventually spread overseas, first to Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, then, under the leadership of Witness Lee (李常受, Li Changshou), to the U.S., where it is most commonly known as the Living Stream Ministry. The Shouters came to the attention of authorities early on in the reform era; they were the first group in that era to be officially banned, in 1983 (Bays 2012, 191). Some sources cast doubt on the very existence of a single group called “Shouters;” the name could have started as a label given by irate neighbours describing groups that sang or prayed loudly. Living Stream Ministry and Local Churches groups outside China deny their connection with the Shouters.

Not all the newer Christian groups are derived from Local Churches. A former True Jesus Church member established the Lingling Sect (China21.org 2000). Lord God Sect was founded by a follower of the Anointed King. And the South

China Church descended from the Full Scope Church (China21.org 2000). A final Christian group, Three Grades of Servants, is not described as being descended from any other group.

Consolidated List: Noting 6 <b>Syncretic</b> and <b>Buddhist</b> -inspired Groups (27%)	
1. The Shouters 呼喊派	12. New Testament 新约教会
2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会	13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵
3. The Disciple Society 门徒会	14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会
4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教	15. The Unification Church 统一教
5. Anointed King 被立王	16. Lord God Sect 主神教
6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会	17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派
7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai)	18. Zhonggong 中功
8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站	19. Fálúngōng 法轮功
9. Children of God 天父的儿女	20. Yuandunfamen 圆顿法门
10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会	21. South China Church 华南教会
11. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗	22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会

The six non-Christian groups, at 27%, are clearly in the minority. There are, interestingly, few purely Buddhist groups. The major exceptions are the True Buddha School (真佛宗), which presents itself as a representative of Chinese Vajrayana (esoteric) Buddhism, and the Amitabha Society (净宗学会). The True Buddhist School was founded by Lu Sheng-Yen (Lu Shengyan, 盧勝彥) in Taiwan. The Amitabha Society is a Chinese Mahayana group founded by Master Chin Kung (净空) that enjoyed popularity in southern, central and northeast China during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The four remaining groups, all non-Buddhist, are Falun Gong, Zhonggong, Guanyin Method, and Yuandunfamen. Falun Gong is a new religion that has been prominent in many cities around the world. Zhonggong was a health promotion network from the same period of *qigong* fever as Falun Gong. Zhonggong will be discussed in further detail below. Guanyin Method refers to the Suma Ching Hai movement already introduced above, whose teachings largely derive from the Punjabi Sant Mat tradition. And the Yuandunfamen, in official accounts, is considered to be an offshoot of Ching Hai.

Overall there is balance between the groups which began overseas, accounting for 45% of the total, and the home-grown groups.

## Consolidated List: Noting 10 Overseas Groups (45%)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. The Shouters 呼喊派                                       | 12. New Testament 新约教会                             |
| 2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会                                | 13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵                        |
| 3. The Disciple Society 门徒会                               | 14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会 |
| 4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教                                  | 15. The Unification Church 统一教                     |
| 5. Anointed King 被立王                                      | 16. Lord God Sect 主神教                              |
| 6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会                           | 17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派                 |
| 7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai)                        | 18. Falun Gong 法轮功                                 |
| 8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站 | 19. Yuandunfamen 圆顿法门                              |
| 9. Children of God 天父的儿女                                  | 20. Zhonggong 中功                                   |
| 10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会                                    | 21. South China Church 华南教会                        |
| 11. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗                              | 22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会            |

The list's appearance and public dissemination, especially in 1995 and, more recently, in 2014 and 2017, show its continuing usefulness as a tool for communicating official policy. Yet this list represents only a fraction of new religious activity in China. It will not, for instance, include groups that are part of the network of officially allowed temples or churches, or their unregistered counterparts in the vast grey economy of religious activity. Nor does the list include such groups as the Fangcheng Fellowship (方城团契, *fangcheng tuanqi*), an unregistered network that is regularly repressed by local authorities in Henan.

### *Recent Religious Policy Under Xi Jinping*

China's policy under the most recent leadership of Xi Jinping (习近平), CCP General Secretary since 2012, has moved in a conservative direction. President Xi has on many occasions reiterated the official policy of support for religion. He is quoted as saying that "if the people have faith, the nation has hope, and the country has strength" (Johnson 2017). At the same time, Xi signaled an increasingly harsh approach to unapproved religious activities. In April 2016, Xi

presided over the National Conference on Religious Works (全国宗教工作会议 *quanguozongjiao gongzuohuiyi*). This unusual move indicated an intensification of focus on the subject of religion. In addition, local authorities have cracked down on Christian activity in Zhejiang province by destroying church towers (Phillips 2015). Most recently, the Party has clarified that party members must not be members of religions, and that they are expected to believe in atheism (Finamore 2015). We may conclude that for the current regime “faith,” then, is not a problem. Faith in which particular belief system, on the other hand, is of intense interest.

At the recently completed 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress, Xi mentioned he planned to sinicize (中国化, *zhongguohua*) religion, by which he means inserting socialist values into every religion. Zhang Yijiong (张裔炯, b. 1955), executive deputy head of the United Front Work Department (中共中央统战部 / 中共中央统一战线工作部 [*zhonggong zhongyang tongzhanbu* / *zhonggong zhongyang tongyizhanxian gongzuobu*]), confirmed that “socialist core values” will take precedence (Gao 2017). This means that youth will be “guided to a belief in science.” Zhang reiterated standard policy against using religion to advocate separatism. Xi also reiterated Party policy banning religious believers from joining the Communist Party. In the light of these comments by Xi and Zhang, a previously mooted trip to China by Pope Francis is now considered unlikely (Maza 2017).

The religious affairs regulations were updated in September of 2017, following a draft published in 2016. Specific changes include a renewed focus on the internet. The updated regulations also confirmed that the Public Security Ministry and its organs have responsibility for controlling *illegal* religious activity (Batke 2017). Responsibility for *monitoring* religion extends to every level of government, down to the most local.

On September 18, 2017, the revamped China Anti-Cult (*xie jiao*)-website reiterated the list of banned groups which had been listed publicly in 2014. Of the total 20 groups, eleven were listed as being “dangerous:”

1. Falun Gong (法轮功)
2. The Church of Almighty God (全能神)
3. The Shouters (呼喊派)

4. The Disciples Society (门徒会)
5. Unification Church (统一教)
6. Guanyin Method (观音法门)
7. Bloody Holy Spirit (血水圣灵)
8. Full Scope Church (全范围教会)
9. Three Grades of Servants (三班仆人派)
10. True Buddha School (灵仙真佛宗)
11. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station (中华大陆行政执事站)

In addition, the website warned the public to “be on guard against” an additional nine groups, all of which are listed in the consolidated list of banned groups we presented above. From this list it appears there are two categories, eleven major (“dangerous”) groups, and nine others, for a total of 20.

There is no need to list out these remaining nine groups. This combined list of 20 is *identical* with the consolidated summary list of 22, given above, with two exceptions. The two are worthy of comment because of the light they show on how the list is used.

### *Zhonggong* (中功)

Zhonggong was a *qigong* (气功) practice group that rose in the 1980s–90s period of “*qigong* fever” researched in depth by David Palmer and others (Palmer 2007; Thornton 2010). It was founded by Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡, 1954–2006) in 1987 as the China Health Care and Wisdom Enhancement Practice (中华养生益智功, *zhonghua yangsheng yizhigong*). The group was well-organized and widespread in China up until its banning in 1999. Zhonggong was highly commercial. It was organized as a corporation, the Qilin Group (麒麟集团, *qilin jituan*), with 300 subsidiaries. It was an early example of a “cybersect” that relied heavily on the internet (Thornton 2003, 149–50). Zhang Hongbao, the founder, claimed it had 38 million followers.

Zhonggong’s teachings were from the start a challenge to Marxist orthodoxy (He 2000, 224–26). But what sealed its subsequent fate in China was its very

success. Zhonggong gave adherents a systematic program of self-development that had its own theology and promised practical results. Its success reflected a strong demand for this type of teaching throughout Chinese society. The highly organized structure also led the government to suspect it had potential to become anti-governmental (He 2000, 224–26). The April 10, 1999 demonstration by Falun Gong, in which members surrounded the senior political leadership's Zhongnanhai compound, merely confirmed that all *qigong* organizations, including Zhonggong, were dangerous. The group was banned along with other similar groups after the October 1999 NPC Standing Committee resolution.

Unlike Falun Gong, however, Zhonggong did not survive as an organization. Zhang Hongbao went into self-imposed exile in the United States, and died in a car accident in 2006. According to a 2014 excerpt on a Quanzhou City, Fujian, government website, once in America Zhang established a shadow government with himself as president. He also became active in a Chinese Alliance Against Political Oppression, which was in opposition to the PRC state. Following his death, his secretary Zhang Xiao (张晓) has remained active in this effort (Luo River 2014). Nevertheless, the fact that the group appeared on a previous list of banned groups but has not appeared in recent (2014, 2017) listings indicates it is most likely not perceived as a threat by the central authorities. Despite Zhang's open involvement in anti-PRC activities, it appears that from the government's perspective Zhonggong was successfully eliminated from Chinese society.

#### *Pure Land Learning Association (净宗学会)*

Pure Land Learning Association is banned through a regional circular, not on the national list. Nevertheless, I include the group here to underline the growing importance of regional actions by organs of the State. Regional and local government entities, in taking action against banned groups, certainly reflect state policy.

The Pure Land Learning Association was founded by a Chinese monk, Chin Kung (净空, traditional Chinese 淨空, *Jing Kong*), in Australia in 2001. Chin Kung was born in China in 1927 but moved to Taiwan, where he became a monk in 1959. Chin Kung has founded many organizations to promote Buddhism worldwide. His teachings are recorded and distributed widely. He now lives in Australia.

While Chin Kung's activities have not been included in the national list of banned groups, there is certainly a concerted effort to ban all groups and activities related to him. A Tianjin Anti-Cult Association (天津市反邪教协会, *tianjinshi fanxie jiao xiehui*) website, "Humanism" (人本, *renben*), summarizes activities underway by officials in 28 separate provinces and cities throughout China, from Jilin in the north to Guizhou in the south (Humanism 2015). Most activities dated from 2011–12. The article notes that progress has already been made "under the leadership and oversight and instructions of central leadership comrades" (中央领导同志的重视与指示下, *zhongyang lingdao tongzhi de zhongshi yu zhishixia*), a clear indication that all suppression activities are approved and coordinated by *central* government authorities. The statement also notes that, under the provisions of the Regulations for Management of Religious Activities of Foreigners within China (中華人民共和國境內外國人宗教活動管理規定, *zhonghuarenmin gongheguo jingnei waiguoren zongjiao huodong guanliguiding*), all dharma lecture halls and training centers previously used by Chin Kung's organizations can be legally converted to "other uses." Chin Kung, despite his Chinese heritage, is being seen as a foreigner promoting his own teachings.

The ban on the Amitabha (Pure Land) Learning Association evidently narrow down to these issues:

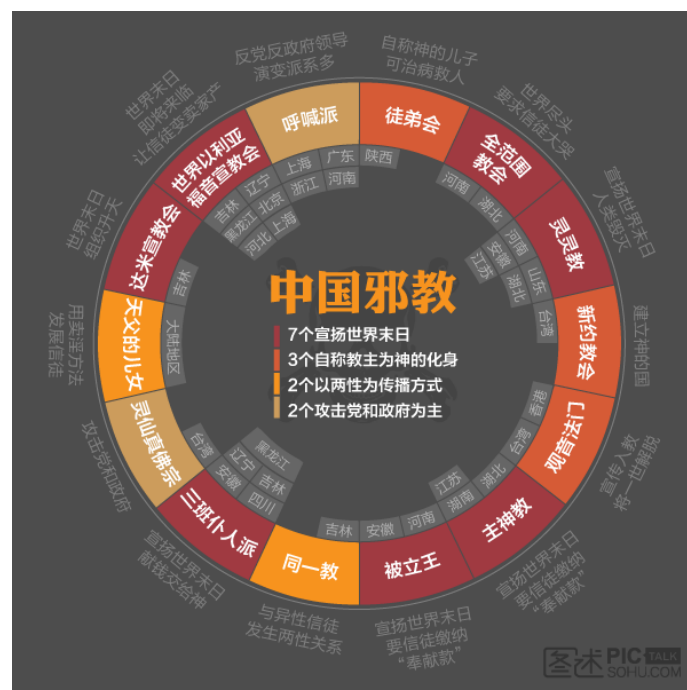
- Chin Kung's organization and influence had grown quickly;
- his lectures and teachings were promulgated directly to believers, without central control;
- his organization had adopted an aggressive, multi-pronged strategy of pursuing many activities over many regions and sites. Chin Kung's followers have, for example, distributed tens of thousands of free copies of his books throughout East and Southeast Asia through their Buddha Educational Foundation. They have also founded local centers in North America, Europe, Hong Kong, Macau, and throughout Southeast Asia.

Like Zhonggong, the various Pure Land Associations constitute in effect a network that is too well-organized and uncontrolled to be allowed to continue. At the same time, the circular does not formally refer to the organization as a *xie jiao*. We may conjecture about the reasons for this, but the conventional nature of Chin Kung's teachings and his vast number of Buddhist devotees have clearly caused the Chinese government to adopt a different strategy than simply using

Public Security to arrest adherents. The nearest analogy to the clampdown on the Pure Land Association is the destruction of illegally erected crosses and chapels in Zhejiang between 2014 and 2016, mentioned above. These two examples may point to a sensitivity to tackling large, established religious groups through the *xie jiao* branding method. In such cases the government may prefer a coordinated administrative effort to suppress religious activity without mass arrests that play prominently in the media.

### *The List as Education Tool*

One further aspect of the list is worth discussing, its educational function. As mentioned above, government agencies promulgated the list of eleven important banned groups in June, 2014, and again in September, 2017. The 2014 pronouncement was accompanied by commentary that reflect an analysis of theology of various groups. In June 3, the *Youth Daily* explained there are four categories of dangerous cults, based on their teachings. Seven of the eleven are classified as millenarian. In three, the leader describes himself as God. In another two groups, sex is commonly used as a method of promulgation. And in a final category, two directly attack the Chinese government (China Commentary 2014).



This type of message is a departure from straightforward calls to avoid *xie jiao* groups because they are illegal, or dangerous. Here we find an effort to discuss openly and, in a sense, to educate. The analysis of these groups goes into more detail on teachings, theology, methods, and politics than has our own analysis, which focuses on origin and tradition. There was also a handy chart (above) which helped the reader place the different groups using these categories.

This level of discussion is in some ways extraordinary. It seems to acknowledge that readers are educated enough to understand how religious groups function. It goes far beyond the standard anti-religion and anti-*xie-jiao* rhetoric of previous campaigns, for instance the anti-Falun Gong rhetoric used to counter the frequent Falun Gong street demonstrations in Hong Kong. Intriguingly, in a nation in which formal religious education is rarely offered in any schools besides a handful of universities and seminaries, there is now a degree of willingness to discuss religious traits. Conceivably, though, there may be some risk in presenting such detail. Like the formulation of the list itself, the government here draws attention to the presence of such groups, and how they differ. Such openness may serve as a two-edged sword, perking interest as much as it deters participation.

### *Conclusion*

The existence of a single, “official” list is not confirmed by national or regional governments. Instead various bodies within China have issued announcements and circulars about illegal groups. Yet the “list” clearly exists, based on published documents. And it clearly reflects policy about what is a *xie jiao*. While it has been remarkably consistent over the past twenty years, the list is liable to shift in line with the state’s thinking on religion. It is thus of unique value to scholars.

The post-1949 period has been characterized by periods of intermittent suppression and relaxation. Nevertheless religious activity continues to flourish in today’s China, in particular Buddhism and Christianity. The implications of this activity are far-reaching. For instance, the number of Christian believers in China, estimated at anywhere between 60 and 108 million, will by some estimates give China the largest Christian population in the world by 2050 (Lian 2010; Johnson 2015). Such trends have led the leadership to re-evaluate the position and significance of religion in modern China, and to adjust policy at

several turns. Much of that policy was settled in the 1982 constitution, which remains the primary legal and administrative framework for managing religious activity. Yet as religious activity progresses the possibility of sudden policy changes remains real.

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## Protestant Continuities in The Church of Almighty God

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**ABSTRACT:** The theology of Christian new religious movements is often denounced as “heretic” by Evangelical critics. This paper explores the beliefs of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) in comparison to several prominent Protestant sub-traditions. The CAG is a Christian new religion that has been banned in China as a *xie jiao*, with the Chinese government partly justifying its campaign against them by arguing that it is a false form of Christianity. The CAG believes that Jesus Christ has returned to the world as Almighty God, and regards Almighty God’s messages as an authoritative Christian scripture. From a “confessional” perspective, this innovation arguably raises questions about the Christian character of the CAG. Despite this, the main priorities of the CAG are expressed in the idiom of systematic theology, in the terms and metaphysical axioms of Christian religious thought. CAG beliefs resonate core doctrines from Protestantism so strongly that continuity and development of Christian beliefs is evident in various aspects of CAG theology. In turn, understanding continuities with teachings of traditional Christianity supports the conclusion that the CAG is indeed “Christian.”

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, New Religious Movements, New Religious Movements in China, Religious Persecution in China, *Xie Jiao*, Eastern Lightning.

### *Statement of Method*

My goal here is to describe CAG theology in a manner that both scholars and believers would recognize (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Within a framework of description, interpretation and evaluation (“DIE”: Bennett et al 1988), my discussion focuses primarily on the first step. CAG religious beliefs are not well understood by non-members, and it is important for scholars to be able to understand them adequately.

In religious studies, the terms *emic* and *etic* refer to “insider” and “outsider” perspectives (Pike 1999; Harris 1983). My discussion is from an emic viewpoint,

seeking to understand CAG theology in the way that its members do. On the other hand, my comparison of the CAG with other Christian traditions is etic rather than emic, and CAG leaders and members would not agree with such a comparison. They would argue that the teachings of the CAG are based on God's work rather than on human doctrines, and that the comparison of Almighty God's work and words with Jesus' work and words should be enough to support the conclusion that the CAG is indeed "Christian." I use here the terms and nomenclature of the members, and refer to the Second Incarnation as Almighty God. I also respect the CAG's use to refer to Almighty God as "he" rather than "she." Although the Second Incarnation is a woman, for CAG brothers and sisters it is more important to emphasize that Jehovah God, Jesus Christ, and Almighty God are one and the same God than to focus on the gendered body of the present incarnation.

The basic beliefs of the CAG are available on their website (HolySpiritSpeaks.org 2018), and I have included a number of secondary sources in the bibliography for further reading (Dunn 2007, 2008, 2009, 2015; Introvigne 2017; Pan 2015), although some of them are by now outdated. The main source for my observations here, however, are my fellowship experiences with CAG brothers and sisters over the past two years.

### *The Christian Origins of the Beliefs of The Church of Almighty God*

For The Church of Almighty God, what is definitional about Christianity is the principle that God relates to humanity, and redeems and saves them, through the work of embodied *Incarnations*.

Almighty God himself stated,

If God does not become flesh, He remains the Spirit both invisible and intangible to man. Man is a creature of flesh, and man and God belong to two different worlds and are different in nature. The Spirit of God is incompatible with man of flesh, and no relations can be established between them; moreover, man cannot become a spirit. As such, the Spirit of God must become one of the creatures and do His original work (The Church of Almighty God 2018l).

Both Jesus and Almighty God are regarded by the CAG as God incarnate, originating from the Spirit of God. Both their works and words are deemed to be expressions of the "Christ." Almighty God explains, "The incarnate God is called

Christ, and Christ is the flesh donned by the Spirit of God” (The Church of Almighty God 2018m). The Church of Almighty God is not Trinitarian; neither can it accurately be called “Modalist.” The CAG believes that Jesus, Almighty God, and Jehovah God are one and the same God. There is a sense that God is complete and singular throughout the ages, but that some of God’s dispositions are more prominently expressed in different time periods. God’s *dispositions* present what he has and is and his essential identity, which is possessed uniquely by the Creator. God’s dispositions are understood to be eternal, but across the ages his different dispositions were manifested according to his works in different stages. For instance, during the Age of Law, Jehovah God revealed his disposition of majesty and wrath mainly through the issuance of laws; during the Age of Grace, Jesus Christ revealed God’s disposition of love and mercy through the work of redemption. With the changing of the times of his work, God expressed and revealed all His own dispositions to humanity gradually and allowed them to know him.

The framework of *dispensations* sets different terms and conditions between God and humankind: what each promises the other in a covenant relationship. During the Age of Law, God “guided” humanity to live on Earth with rules and laws. The primary purpose of religion in this time was the provision of social order, guarding of morality, and cultivation of appropriate fear of God. Noah, Abraham and Job are models for humanity from the Age of Law, each showing complete obedience to God when their faith was challenged. Almighty God says,

Noah was the first person to receive God’s call to work with Him to complete a task of God. ... After Abraham, God made a choice once again for the first time—He chose Job to be the one under the law who could withstand the temptations of Satan while continuing to fear God and shun evil and stand witness for Him (Church of Almighty God 2018f).

In a manner consistent with many Christian sub-traditions, Jesus, whose coming inaugurates the Age of Grace, is understood to be more accessible than Jehovah of the Old Testament, who is exclusively spiritual. As a fleshly incarnation, Jesus fits human needs for a deity, and also gives God a more empathetic framework for shepherding, sustaining, suckling, nourishing and remaining in a practical contact with his creatures. The understanding of the Age of Law and the Age of Grace in the CAG reflects a classic dichotomy in Christian systematic theology. This outlook sees the New Testament God as more accessible and forgiving.

## For Almighty God, [Jesus]

always comforted His disciples, provided for them, helped them, and sustained them. ... He never made excessive demands of the people, but was always patient and forbearing of their sins, such that people in the Age of Grace affectionately called Him ‘the lovable Savior Jesus.’ To the people of that time—to all people—what Jesus had and was, was mercy and lovingkindness. He never remembered people’s transgressions, and His treatment of them was not based on their transgressions. Because that was a different age, He often bestowed plentiful food and drink upon the people so that they could eat their fill. He treated all His followers with grace, healing the sick, driving out demons, raising the dead (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

Jesus is understood as having secured humanity’s forgiveness from the sins we commit, but not having changed our innate condition as sinful creatures, nor transformed our sinful nature. In the Third Age, Almighty God has the qualitatively distinct work of refining and purifying humanity. In Almighty God’s own words,

Though Jesus did much work among man, He only completed the redemption of all mankind and became man’s sin offering, and did not rid man of all his corrupt disposition. ... And so, after man was forgiven his sins, God has returned to flesh to lead man into the new age, and begun the work of chastisement and judgment, and this work has brought man into a higher realm (The Church of Almighty God 2018i).

In what is called The Age of Kingdom, Almighty God is a righteous judge. While maintaining a sense of affection for Jesus, the CAG holds an even greater sentiment that humanity will only grow when guided by the returned Jesus Christ. These ideas, on the one hand, come from the traditional Christian theme of humanity’s need of breaking through from the bondage of sins, and on the other hand, from the prophecies of Jesus Christ’s return in the last days. For instance, Jesus foretold that he “still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (*John* 16:12–13) In the Age of Kingdom, Almighty God does his work to judge, purify and save humanity, and manifests not only the dispositions of love and mercy, but also righteousness, majesty and wrath. Yet as an incarnation, Almighty God is, like Jesus, still more accessible to humanity than Jehovah, who is entirely spiritual and somewhat “vague.” In Almighty God’s own words,

The incarnate God brings to an end the age when only the back of Jehovah appeared to mankind, and also concludes the age of mankind’s belief in the vague God. In particular, the work of the last incarnate God brings all mankind into an age that is more realistic, more practical, and more pleasant. He not only concludes the age of law and doctrine; more

importantly, He reveals to mankind a God who is real and normal, who is righteous and holy, who unlocks the work of the management plan and demonstrates the mysteries and destination of mankind, who created mankind and brings to an end the management work, and who has remained hidden for thousands of years. He brings the age of vagueness to a complete end, He concludes the age in which the whole of mankind wished to seek God's face but was unable to, He ends the age in which the whole of mankind served Satan, and leads the whole of mankind all the way into a completely new era (The Church of Almighty God 2018c).

Almighty God is near and far at the same time. Though few members are able to meet or see Almighty God, the CAG insists that the words Almighty God has expressed allow all readers to gain knowledge of God's work, God's disposition, and what God has and is.

Although the CAG never mentions her name nor any biographic details, some scholars believe that the name of the Chinese woman recognized as the incarnated Almighty God is Yang Xiangbin. The CAG's brothers and sisters think that it is more important to know the truth and God's substance through experiencing his words than knowing the details of God's incarnated life. They claim that in the Age of Grace the early Christians had a similar attitude with respect to Jesus Christ.

### *Authoritative Holy Scriptures in The Church of Almighty God*

The CAG thinks that God is always new and never old. God does new work in each age and expresses new words to guide human beings. The CAG does not disavow the Bible, though it is often accused of doing so. The Bible is recognized as the scripture of the Age of Law and Age of Grace, but in the Age of Kingdom Almighty God has expressed new words collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, which is called "the Bible of the Age of Kingdom." The Bible is seen as a compilation of accounts of encounters with God. Recorded by human beings, it contains messages from God and some truthful insights, which are helpful to know God's work in the Age of Law and the Age of Grace, but it also carries many human errors. Almighty God warns,

Not everything in the Bible is a record of the words personally spoken by God. The Bible simply documents the previous two stages of God's work, of which one part is a record of the foretellings of the prophets, and one part is the experiences and knowledge written by people used by God throughout the ages (The Church of Almighty God 2018b, 2018k).

Brothers and sisters in the CAG regard *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, their main holy scripture, and the other utterances of Almighty God as the authoritative scriptures of our age. Yet, a similar spirit of biblicism animates both the CAG and many conservative forms of Protestantism.

It is a main tenet of CAG theology that “The work of Almighty God is accomplished through words.” *The Word Appears in the Flesh* announces,

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh.’ This (the work of the appearance of the Word in the flesh) is the work that God will accomplish in the last days, and is the final chapter of His entire management plan .... During the last days, when God becomes flesh, He principally uses the word to accomplish all and make all plain. Only in His words can you see what He is; only in His words can you see that He is God Himself (The Church of Almighty God 2018a).

Here, it is important to apprehend the double meaning of *word/words* that is widespread in Christian theology. Historically, “God’s Word” has referred to the Bible. Similarly, for the CAG “words” has a literal meaning: texts containing the utterances of Almighty God. At the same time, the emphasis on words summons the Christian concept of *Logos*, the traditional Christian idea that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (...) And the Word became flesh” (*John* 1:1,14), with *Words* being both performative acts and material expressions of God’s creation. In Almighty God’s own words,

Jesus did a stage of work which only fulfilled the substance of ‘the Word was with God’: The truth of God was with God, and the Spirit of God was with the flesh and was inseparable from Him, that is, the flesh of God incarnate was with the Spirit of God, which is greater proof that Jesus incarnate was the first incarnation of God. This stage of work fulfilled the inner meaning of ‘the Word becomes flesh,’ lent deeper meaning to ‘the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ and allows you to firmly believe the words that ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ Which is to say, at the time of creation God was possessed of words, His words were with Him and inseparable from Him, and the final age makes even clearer the power and authority of His words, and allows man to see all of His words—to hear all of His words. Such is the work of the final age (The Church of Almighty God 2018s).

Through the word, man comes to know the work of God, the disposition of God, the essence of man, and what man ought to enter into. Through the word, all the work God wishes to do in the Age of Word is accomplished. Through the word, man is revealed, eliminated, and tried. ... Though the word ‘word’ is simple and ordinary, the word from the mouth of God become flesh shakes the entire universe. His word transforms the heart of man, the notions and the old disposition of man, and the old appearance of the entire world (The Church of Almighty God 2018h).

This double meaning informs the main tenets of CAG eschatology as well: the utterances of God are announcements of a greater *Management Plan* that is unfolding, and that will ultimately seal the fate of mankind, as well as our individual *destinations*.

### *The Three Stages of God's Management Plan*

Revealed in the utterances and messages of Almighty God, The Management Plan outlines the foreseen destiny (destination) for all of mankind. In CAG theology, the cosmic history of mankind has unfolded over a time period of 6000 years, divided into three Ages, also known as “Stages of Work.” This is God’s entire management plan for saving humankind.

In Almighty God’s own words,

My entire management plan, a plan that spans six thousand years, consists of three stages, or three ages: the Age of Law in the beginning; the Age of Grace (which is also the Age of Redemption); and the Age of Kingdom in the last days. My work in these three ages differs in content according to the nature of each age, but at each stage it accords with man’s needs—or, to be more precise, it is done according to the tricks that Satan employs in the war that I wage against it. The purpose of My work is to defeat Satan, to make manifest My wisdom and omnipotence, to expose all of Satan’s tricks, and thereby to save the entire human race, which lives under its domain. ... (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

The period when God Jehovah led humans, from the time human beings were tempted and corrupted by Satan to the time Lord Jesus revealed himself and performed the redemption work, is known as the Age of Law. The span between Jesus and Almighty God is the Age of Grace. We currently live in the Third Age, in which Almighty God is God’s incarnation, just like Jesus in the Age of Grace, and revealed himself as the last divine manifestation. Jehovah, Jesus, and Almighty God are one and the same God. The work of three stages goes step-by-step, closely interlocked with one another. The work is done by the one and only God. The CAG does not believe in evolution, but their understanding of cosmic history allows for the world to be older than this 6000-year period.

The CAG teaches that the time span from when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden to the flood at the time of Noah was 1500 years. In this period, humankind is thought to have lived in a state of nature. God did not guide humankind formally. However, people indulged their corrupt nature so much that

God was moved to destroy them in the flood, saving only Noah and his family. After Noah, God began to work directly with humankind. At the time of Moses, God promulgated laws and commandments to lead their life and religion. As Almighty God summarizes, “The first stage of God’s work was the leadership of man” (The Church of Almighty God 2018j). Encompassing Abraham, Moses and Job, the Age of Law endured for 2500 years after Noah’s ark landed on dry ground. The total time span of the Age of Law was 4000 years.

The crucifixion of Jesus accomplished the Redemption work. It also provided new possibilities for humanity to relate to God. Jesus is understood to have redeemed humankind from sin, but he didn’t perform the work of removing the sinful nature of humanity. In the era of Jesus, however, humanity still made many advances in relating to God. People could now have a personal relationship with the savior.

The Age of Kingdom (also called the Age of Word) began in 1991, the year Almighty God began delivering messages to humanity. In the Age of Kingdom, human beings have the opportunity to be freed from the bonds of sin, be purified and saved, and to enter into what many low-church Christians would describe as “right relation” with God. We should do this by accepting the work of Almighty God’s *judgment* and *chastisement*, together with his words. This is the key and decisive work through which God saves humankind. Those who have accepted the Almighty God should pray often to him, and consider their own corrupt nature and Satan’s influence. They should be guided by God’s words to overcome their sinful nature, and be purified and *perfected* by God.

Perfection is an idea associated most strongly with the Methodist family tradition. John Wesley (1703–1791) was one of the first Evangelical leaders to propose that, with a vigorous pursuit of the Christian life, it might be possible to change one’s nature, away from sinfulness. A person might still sin, but doing so would not be our “default state.” Perfectionism was carried in the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, where it became associated with the exhibit of spiritual gifts. The CAG rejects present day miracles, and their understanding of Perfection is much closer to the original definition. In CAG theology, Perfection refers to a complete removal of one’s sinful nature. God is righteous and those who sincerely pursue the truth can indeed get perfected. Everyone should work toward it as a goal. One of the main ways to perfection is acceptance of, and obedience to, Almighty God’s words and work.

Operating in the present day, the Third Stage of God's Management Plan allows human beings to align with God and undergo spiritual purification, but only a limited fraction of humanity will pursue the truth fully and achieve this goal. In this final stage, there will be a winnowing of humanity. The saved people will be transformed into godly people, the *overcomers* who are in right relation to God. Those who reject the message of Almighty God, who keep to wicked ways, and implicitly side with Satan will be judged, punished, destroyed, and die in cataclysms such as earthquakes and floods: "The entire human race admits that the end of the world is coming. When the disaster comes, anyone who resists God, judges God, or opposes God, and the ilk of the devil Satan will be destroyed in the disasters" (The Church of Almighty God 2018o).

However, the Earth will not be annihilated, and the ones who are purified by God will be saved in the cataclysms of the last days, and will live on Earth forever and ever. Almighty God says,

"But know that I will not annihilate the entire world, nor will I annihilate the whole of mankind. I will keep that remaining third—the third that loves Me and has been thoroughly conquered by Me, and I will cause this third to be fruitful and multiply on earth just as the Israelites did under the law, nourishing them with copious sheep and cattle and all the riches of earth. ... the mankind that has been conquered during the last days is also the mankind that will be spared and will gain My everlasting blessings. It will be the only evidence of My triumph over Satan, and the only spoils of My battle with Satan. These spoils of war are saved by Me from the domain of Satan, and are the only crystallization and fruit of My six-thousand-year management plan" (The Church of Almighty God 2018t).

The division of history into several eras reflects the influence of the Plymouth Brethren and other evangelical missionaries in China. Dispensationalism, a method of Biblical interpretation that supports a cosmic view of history that includes the end times, was developed in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), the founder of the Plymouth Brethren tradition (Marsden 1982; Introvigne 2018). There are differences between Darby's rendition and CAG theology, but both presume that God has different ways of relating to human beings in successive time periods. Both frame the history of mankind as one that has progressed under the yoke of Satan, which only will be broken in a final, ultimate conflict, foretold in scripture, especially in the Book of Revelation. Both prophesy that following this battle, there will be a peaceful period on earth, and a final resolution when God and Man are "at rest together." The CAG calls this wonderful time which generations of saints hoped to see the Age of Millennial

Kingdom, which is not to be confused with the Age of Kingdom (Introvigne 2017).

Almighty God says,

Following the completion of My words, the kingdom is gradually formed on earth and man is gradually returned to normality, and thus there is established on earth the kingdom in My heart. In the kingdom, all the people of God recover the life of normal man. Gone is the frosty winter, replaced by a world of cities of spring, where it is spring all year round. No longer are people faced with the gloomy, miserable world of man, no longer do they endure the cold chill of the world of man. People do not fight with each other, countries do not go to war against each other, no longer is there carnage and the blood that flows from carnage; all lands are filled with happiness, and everywhere teems with warmth between men (The Church of Almighty God 2018u).

Dispensationalism is widespread in evangelicalism, beyond the Brethren. The CAG, however, added significant and genuinely original innovations.

The CAG believes that the Book of Revelation contains a true prophecy, expressed through metaphor. One of the most important symbols is the “Great Red Dragon” from *Revelation* 12, which Almighty God explains thus: “The great red dragon I speak of is not a big red dragon; rather it is the evil spirit in opposition to Me, for which the ‘great red dragon’ is a synonym” (The Church of Almighty God 2018p). For the CAG, the red dragon is identified with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). “The great red dragon persecutes God and is the enemy of God, so in this land, those who believe in God are subjected to humiliation and persecution” (The Church of Almighty God 2018d). The importance of the color red and of dragons in Chinese culture makes the Bible’s monster a natural symbol for the CCP (Dunn 2008). The alignment of the Great Red Dragon to the CCP has a strong similarity to the connections drawn in the projects of Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986) and Hal Lindsey, who used the Bible’s prophecies to interpret current events during the Cold War. Lindsey’s book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey 1970), and Armstrong’s *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* (Armstrong 1967) are two of the most prominent texts in a genre of popular Christian fiction, in which people and places are recognized as sacred symbols—or profane ones, in the case of the Red Dragon.

*Calvinist Beliefs in The Church of Almighty God*

Prominent ideas from several Christian sub-traditions resonate in CAG theology, but the most sonorous of these is the Calvinist-Reformed tradition. In my conversations with believers, their attitude continually reminded me of the Puritans described by the Harvard historians Perry Miller (1905–1963) and David Hall. I should emphasize, here, that this is my personal observation and opinion as an outside observer. The CAG's brothers and sisters would not agree with such a comparison. They would argue that the doctrine of the CAG comes from all the truths God expresses in three stages of work, i.e. the Age of Law, the Age of Grace and the Age of Kingdom, while Calvinism originated from the limited knowledge humans had about the work of the Lord Jesus in the Age of Grace, and as a consequence is merely human teaching. According to the CAG, God is so wondrous that humans can never fathom him. Human knowledge of God is inevitably found to be limited, and cannot be compared with God's direct teachings.

For the CAG, everything is arranged according to God's Management Plan, the Three Stages of Work. Predestination is the signature doctrine for Calvinism, and in my opinion that the CAG upholds the idea shows the legacy of the Reformed tradition. Calvinism has a distinct understanding of human beings and their relation to God. Our purpose is to love and obey the Creator and accept whatever is God's will for us. In Almighty God's own words,

As a creature, man should perform the duty of a creature: Man should follow God in whatever He does, and you should proceed in whatever way I tell you to. You have no way of making arrangements for yourself, and you are incapable of controlling yourself; all must be left to the mercy of God, and everything is controlled by His hands (The Church of Almighty God 2018j).

In the CAG, obedience to God is stressed.

A normal relationship with God means being able to not doubt or deny any of God's work and submit to it. ... To build a good relationship with God is a top priority for anyone believing in God; everyone should treat it as the most important task and as their major life event. Everything you do should be weighed against whether or not you have a normal relationship with God (The Church of Almighty God 2018g).

In traditional Christianity, Jesus is associated with "blessings," which people could receive simply by asking. In contrast, CAG believers do not ask Almighty God for blessings, nor do they perform petitionary prayers. They trust that

Almighty God will reward the faithful, as well as punish the wicked. Almighty God says, “Having faith in God, you should not solely seek blessings, but seek to love God and know God” (The Church of Almighty God 2018r). Rather, one is to accept what God bestows, be it suffering or happiness. The CAG theodicy stands behind their moral theory of illness. Sickness is the result of Satan’s corruption of humans; an *affliction* intended to inspire self-reflection and lead us to seek repentance. It should be, however, noted that the CAG teaches that there is no conflict between self-reflection and seeking proper medical treatment.

As is true in other predestinarian Christian traditions, there is some flexibility in how the CAG understands predestination. People have a choice to “cooperate” with God in the process of *refinement*, or spiritual change. Whether humans can or cannot be purified and perfected depends on their cooperation. Almighty God says, “Success or failure depends on the path that man walks” (The Church of Almighty God 2018v):

The Holy Spirit works by this principle: Through people’s cooperation, through them actively praying, searching and coming closer to God, results can be achieved and they can be enlightened and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. It is not the case that the Holy Spirit acts unilaterally, or that man acts unilaterally. Both are indispensable, and the more that people cooperate, and the more they pursue the attainment of the standards of God’s requirements, the greater the work of the Holy Spirit. Only people’s real cooperation, added to the work of the Holy Spirit, can produce real experiences and the substantive knowledge of God’s words. Gradually, through experiencing in this way, a perfect person is ultimately produced (The Church of Almighty God 2018w).

Almighty God tells believers, “Throughout the Age of Kingdom, God uses the word to do His work and achieve the results of His work” (The Church of Almighty God 2018h). The CAG is cessationist, which is another similarity to the Calvinist worldview. In opposition to the mystical presence asserted by the Catholic Church, Reformed theologians like John Calvin (1509–1564) maintained that miracles were no longer possible. Only the Apostles could perform miracles, as Jesus had commanded them to do in his name. With the passing of the first generation of Christians, the age of spiritual gifts ended. Since then, God has been active in history, but does not upend natural laws. The CAG does not see the gifts of the spirit as available in the Age of Kingdom. In comparison with natural wonders, the fact that humans are perfected by words is emphasized in the CAG. Almighty God warns that,

Those signs cannot make man perfect! ... God causes man to gain life from His words, and this is the greatest of all signs, and even more so, it is an undisputable fact. This is the best evidence through which to have knowledge of God, and is an even greater sign than signs. Only these words can make man perfect (The Church of Almighty God 2018x).

Cessationism helps support the logic of Protestant natural theology, which sees God's character and will manifesting through nature. In keeping with this logic, Almighty God has delivered many messages on the wonders of creation. Almighty God says,

From the very phrase 'God is in control of everything' we should see that what God controls is not a portion of planets, a portion of creation, much less a portion of mankind, but everything: from the massive to the microscopic, from the visible to the invisible, from the stars in the universe to the living things on earth, as well as microorganisms that cannot be seen with the naked eye or beings that exist in other forms. This is the precise definition of the 'everything' that God is 'in control of,' and is the scope over which God wields His authority, the extent of His sovereignty and rule (The Church of Almighty God 2018e).

In this age God works through the natural world, and does not use supernatural means. The "disasters" are anticipated to unfold as natural events: floods, earthquakes, and other cataclysms, as well as political oppression and war. These natural and human-made disasters are already unfolding today, with God's awareness, as part of the Management Plan.

Along with predestination, CAG theology asserts human *depravity*, which is also another teaching in "Five Point Calvinism." In the Third Age, the Age of Kingdom, Almighty God comes to judge humanity. Like many conservative Protestants, the CAG believes that God is righteous and holy. He will punish human beings who do not turn from sin. In *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, Almighty God repeatedly chastises human beings for giving in to their corrupt nature. The CAG proclaims that the purpose of judgement is for God's salvation, which is God's greater love to human beings. Almighty God says,

In the last days, Christ uses a variety of truths to teach man, expose the essence of man, and dissect his words and deeds...What the work of judgment brings about is man's understanding of the true face of God and the truth about his own rebelliousness. The work of judgment allows man to gain much understanding of the will of God, of the purpose of God's work, and of the mysteries that are incomprehensible to him. It also allows man to recognize and know his corrupt substance and the roots of his corruption, as well as to discover the ugliness of man. These effects are all brought about by the work of judgment, for the substance of this work is actually the work of opening up the truth, the way, and the life of God to all those who have faith in Him (The Church of Almighty God 2018y).

I also see a similarity with Calvinism in the CAG's perspective on theodicy, the problem of evil. Almighty God *deals* with human beings through *chastisement* and *judgment*, *affliction*, *refinement*, and *pruning*. In other words, Almighty God metes out punishment (which we deserve, certainly), to get our attention so we are motivated to change. The suffering we undergo is difficult, but it will change our character and bring us to a closer relationship with God. This offers a personalizable theodicy—a lens through which to view individual hardship. With the Age of Grace now in the past, CAG theology does not take up Unconditional Election or Limited Atonement (additional Calvinist points affirmed at the 1618 Synod of Dordt), but the understanding of how Almighty God saves mankind is broadly similar to Irresistible Grace—putting us into situations wherein we grow and develop the capacity to know God.

Like the Puritans and other Calvinists, the CAG understands Satan as a real entity who like God is active in the world. Some supernatural activity or trickery, therefore, is associated with Satan and evil spirits. The CAG's understanding of Satan's persona compares closely with the one created by John Milton (1608–1674) in *Paradise Lost*. Satan is an opposer of God, the consummate rebel, whose attempt to match God in power led to his alienation from God and goodness. “Satan is humanity's foe, the lowest of the low, the evil one. ... I am the Ruler of all things and Satan is merely one of My creations, which later turned against Me” (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

Satan's corruption of mankind is such that our transgressions against God descend from that original uprising. Corrupt mankind is rebellious and “arrogant.” Demons and evil spirits are fallen angels, the spiritual beings who joined Satan in challenging God and were cast out of heaven. The CAG rejects the fantastic and phantasmagorical elements, but recognizes Satan as a real presence in the world. Satan is the force that corrupts humanity inducing us to turn away from God, and *it* also directly causes much of the suffering in the world. [Note that Satan is so evil as to lack the characteristics that would accord “it” a persona or gender].

The battle between God and Satan is real, but not one that will unfold on the Plain of Megiddo. The fight takes place within and for the *hearts* of individual human beings. The CAG zealously shares the message of Almighty God, because *gaining* believers is the means by which God will conquer Satan. In Almighty God's own words:

God's work of the last days is in order to alter each person's spirit, to change each person's soul, such that their heart, which has suffered great trauma, is reformed, thus rescuing their soul, which has been so profoundly harmed by evil; it is in order to awaken people's spirits, to thaw their cold hearts, and allow them to be rejuvenated (The Church of Almighty God 2018q).

### *The Religious Vocabulary of CAG Theology*

The continuity of Christian traditions in CAG theology is a tantalizing invitation to consider the distinct intellectual heritage carried in Christian missions. The theological fusion likely relates to the transmission of Protestantism to China through inter-denominational projects like the American Bible Society and China Inland Mission. Many religious historians consider the 19<sup>th</sup> century a time of broad evangelical consensus (Marsden 1982; Frank 2009). Although individual denominations carried their versions of Christianity to new lands, many of the largest ventures were interfaith endeavors that developed in an era of Protestant "comity." Evidence suggests their cooperation brought a rich, ultimately combinative, theological vocabulary to mission fields like China.

How much prior sources have shaped the CAG is a matter of debate. Early on, many of the people who joined the CAG had been "Shouters," participants in the Chinese branch of the Local Church. Some scholars credit Watchman Nee (1903–1972) and Witness Lee (1905–1997) as major influences. Yet there are major differences in belief and practice between the Local Church and The Church of Almighty God. The CAG believes that Almighty God at first spoke in the Shouters. They report that, after reading the words of Almighty God, some believers in the Shouters recognized that Almighty God is the return of the Lord Jesus, "returned to Almighty God" (their preferred expression for "converting"), and joined The Church of Almighty God. They insist, however that the CAG came into being because of God's appearance and work, rather than evolving from any denomination.

The two traditions are most alike in their use of a specific religious vocabulary, with phrases like *the Full Weight of Glory*, which actually is a Biblical reference (2 *Corinthians* 4:17). As with the other concepts outlined here, much of this religious vocabulary predates the Local Church, often by several centuries. For example, the CAG describes reading Almighty God's messages as "Eating and

Drinking the Word of God”; and the term is also used by the Shouters, to describe their reading of the Bible. To “Eat and Drink God’s Word,” precedes the Local Church, however, for it was first posited by St. Irenaeus (ca. 130–202: St. Irenaeus n.d.). Such vocabulary shows both groups in discursive engagement with older strains of Christianity. This religious language can be found across the spectrum of Protestantism historically and in many Christianities today, in Asia and elsewhere.

Philology can open many doors to understanding the transmission of Christianity. Let me describe an experiment I have done several times over the past year, which readers can try for themselves. On Google Books, I have run key searches for combinations of theological terms: running, for example, “chastisement, judgement, and affliction”; and often limiting results to those from the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Different searches yield different hits, but the top finds are often startling, and have included Joseph Haven’s (1816–1874) *Mental Philosophy* (an important Presbyterian text), Primitive Baptist newspapers, and the writings of Seventh-day Adventist leader Ellen Gould White (1827–1915). Following the lead of Benedict Anderson (1936–2015), to consider the discursive communities fostered by print culture opens up exciting ways to research world missions and understand global Christianity today.

Though well beyond the scope of this paper, I believe this religious vocabulary should be studied much more. For scholars, it illuminates how Christians in China have encountered and apprehended their tradition. The language points to a continuity of important principles in Christianity, reflecting what Christians see as eternal aspects of God’s disposition through the ages. This language is powerful evidence of the Christian heritage in The Church of Almighty God. Much of the writing about the CAG has depicted their ideas as strange, but The Church of Almighty God is very much a Christian tradition, one in responsive dialogue with other Christianities.

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## Religious Persecution, Refugees, and Right of Asylum: The Case of The Church of Almighty God

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**ABSTRACT:** International conventions and both United Nations and European Union guidelines establish general principles about religion-based refugee claims. They clarify that “religion” should be broadly interpreted, and that it is not necessary for the asylum seekers to prove that they have been individually persecuted. Membership in a persecuted group and a reasonable “fear of persecution” are enough. Proving that the asylum seeker is deeply conversant with the theology of the persecuted group is also not required. However, these general principles are rarely applied by states. The paper discussed the case of The Church of Almighty God, whose members are often denied refugee status in South Korea and Europe, based both on an incorrect interpretation of the international conventions and on inaccurate information about their church.

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, Religion-Based Refugee Claims, UNHCR Guidelines on Religion-Based Refugee Claims, Chinese Refugees, *Xie Jiao*, Religious Persecution in China.

### *A. Religion-Based Refugee Claims: General Principles*

The tragedy of World War II generated an unprecedented number of refugees in Europe. To confront this situation, the United Nations created in 1950 the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). His work with the European emergency was generally regarded as successful, and UNHCR was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1954.

UNHCR also asked the United Nations to establish clear international law provisions regarding refugees. On July 28, 1951, the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, convened in Geneva, Switzerland, under General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of 14 December 1950, and adopted the *Convention Relating to the Status of*

*Refugees*, known as the 1951 Refugee Convention. Although some countries distinguish between “asylum seekers” and “refugees,” in the 1951 Convention a refugee is simply an asylum seeker whose application has been accepted.

To this day, UNHCR regards this convention as “the key legal document that forms the basis of our work” (UNHCR 2017). However, the 1951 Convention was custom-tailored to solving the problem of post-war refugees in Europe, and some provisions were limited to them.

For this reason, a broader document was signed in New York in 1967, the *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. The United States, which were afraid of receiving too many refugees after World War II, had not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention but did sign and ratify the 1967 Protocol. Some 40 countries remain outside the Convention-Protocol system, including Jamaica, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Mongolia, and Malaysia—as well as North Korea. China did sign and ratify the Protocol.

For the definition of refugee, Article 1 of the Protocol refers to Article 1 of the 1951 Convention, which mentions “any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear or for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to return to it.” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 14, already established that: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”

In general, these documents established that a refugee is a person who is outside its own country’s territory owing to fear of persecution on protected grounds. “Protected grounds” include race, caste, nationality, religion, political opinions, and membership and/or participation in any particular social group or social activities.

Persecution, in turn, is the systematic mistreatment of an individual or a group by another individual or group. The most common forms are religious persecution, racism, and political persecution. The inflicting of suffering, harassment, imprisonment, internment, fear, or pain are factors that may establish persecution, but not all suffering will necessarily establish persecution.

The suffering experienced by the victim must be sufficiently severe. The threshold of severity, though, has been a source of much debate.

The worst form of persecution is torture. Torture is the act of deliberately inflicting physical or psychological pain in order to fulfill some desire of the torturer or to compel some action from the victim. Torture, by definition, is a knowing and intentional act. Deeds that unknowingly or negligently inflict pain without a specific intent to do so are not typically considered torture. Torture can be carried out or sanctioned by individuals, groups and states. Reasons for torture may include punishment, revenge, political re-education, deterrence, coercion of the victim or a third party, interrogation to extract information or a confession, irrespective of whether it is false.

Torture is prohibited by international law and is one of the most serious violations of human rights. Torture is prohibited by the 1987 United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (ratified by 158 countries, including China in 1988). Under the Convention, torture means “any act by which severe pain and suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him, or a third person, information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person, committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any other reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in, or incidental to, lawful sanctions.”

Rendering true victims of persecution to their persecutors is an odious violation of a principle called *non-refoulement*. The 1987 Convention against torture, Article 3, stipulates: “No State Party shall expel, return (‘refouler’) or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would be in danger of being subjected to torture. For the purpose of determining whether there are such grounds, the competent authorities shall take into account all relevant considerations including, where applicable, the existence in the State concerned of a consistent pattern of gross, flagrant or mass violations of human rights.”

Two problems were, however, left open. The first was that there was no internal monitoring body for compliance with legally binding Conventions and

their Protocols. UNHCR itself is not empowered to enforce the Convention. There is no formal mechanism for complaints against States, though they can be referred by another State to the International Court of Justice. An individual may lodge a complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or with the UN ECOSOC under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. At present, the only real consequences of violation are public shaming in the press and media, and the verbal condemnation of the violator by the UN and by other countries.

The second problem is that interpreting provisions on religious persecution, a serious human rights problem, proved much less simple than international organizations originally believed. International courts were frequently involved, and gave contradictory interpretations. Finally, in 2002, UNHCR and Church World Service, a Christian inter-denominational agency specialized in assisting refugees, convened an international roundtable in Baltimore. One of its conclusions was that UNHCR, as part of its mandate, could and should provide interpretive guidance on the Refugee Convention and the Protocol. As a result, in 2004 UNHCR issued a document called *Guidelines on International Protection: Religion-Based Refugee Claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*.

The European Union waited for the official publication of the UNHCR Guidelines on April 28, 2004 and, the following day, April 29, published in turn Directive 2004/83, known as the Qualification Directive, on the “minimum standards” for being defined as refugees. It was updated in 2011 as Directive 2011/95, known as the Recast Qualification Directive. Article 2 adopted the same wording of the Refugee Convention, mentioning a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of religion.” The preamble mentioned, among the conditions for qualifying for refugee status, “the existence of a causal link between the reasons for persecution, namely [inter alia] religion [...], and the acts of persecution or the absence of protection against such acts.”

That not all problems were solved by these definitions was proved by a number of high-profile cases before national courts, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the European Court of Human Rights. The latter is not part of the European Union but enforces the European Convention of Human Rights, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1950. In this paper, I will review some of the main interpretive problems about the criteria for being recognized as a refugee

fleeing religious persecution, and will then discuss the case of refugees who flee China where they are persecuted as members of The Church of Almighty God.

## 1. What is a Religion?

Article 10 of the European Recast Qualification Directive States that “the concept of religion shall in particular include the holding of theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, the participation in, or abstention from, formal worship in private or in public, either alone or in community with others, other religious acts or expressions of view, or forms of personal or communal conduct based on or mandated by any religious belief.”

Defining religion is a notoriously intractable subject among scholars. An ambitious survey of existing scholarship sponsored by the European Union produced in 1999 a thick volume, concluding that academics offer many irreconcilable definitions of religion, and no agreement exists (Platvoet and Molendijk 1999). Being not an academic myself but a diplomat, I agree with the way out found by international institutions: adopting as broad a concept of “religion” as possible. This is precisely what the United Nations did in 1966 in the *International Covenant of Religious and Political Rights*, which most countries have signed and ratified, with the relevant exception of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which did not sign, and of China, who signed but did not ratify. Article 18 mentions the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.” It is generally understood that “belief” is a broader concept than “faith” or “religion,” and includes spirituality (assuming it can be distinguished from religion) and atheism.

In 1993, as evidence of how difficult defining freedom of religion remains, the Human Rights Committee issued a *General Comment no. 22* as a set of guidelines for interpreting Article 18 of the International Covenant. Number 2 of *General Comment no. 22* is particularly important, as it deals specifically with new religious movements, often discriminated as such:

Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed.

Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community.

As reiterated in Number 5, atheism is included in the protection of the International Covenant. Being persecuted because of one's atheism is a qualification for refugee status. In 2014, an Afghan citizen obtained refugee status in the U.K. by arguing that his atheism would expose him to persecution in Afghanistan (Baxter 2014).

In light of *General Comment no. 22*, number 2, states have no right to deny refugee status based on the fact that the persecuted belief is related to a "cult," and "cults" are "not really religions" or are "pseudo-religions." Apart from the questionable status of such claims, it is clear that the International Covenant protects beliefs not only *of* religions but *about* religion. It protects the right to be irreligious, i.e. atheism, and it also protects the right to be differently religious, or spiritual, or holding unpopular or non-conventional beliefs about religion that some, or even the majority, may regard as "not really religious."

## 2. How Religious Should the Refugee Be?

Some states and courts, concerned with limiting the number of refugees they accept, have tried to consider as religiously persecuted asylum seekers only those who can prove that they were actively involved in their religion in their home countries. Some have even devised tests to check whether the applicant is knowledgeable enough about his or her religion.

This attitude has been rejected by the 2004 UNHCR Guidelines. They state in paragraph 9:

It may not be necessary, [...] for an individual (or a group) to declare that he or she belongs to a religion, is of a particular religious faith, or adheres to religious practices, where the persecutor imputes or attributes this religion, faith or practice to the individual or group. [...] It may also not be necessary for the claimant to know or understand anything about the religion, if he or she has been identified by others as belonging to that group and fears persecution as a result.

Paragraph 10 specifies that even an infant born into a religion, and persecuted as such, may qualify for refugee status based on religious persecution. This confirms that being conversant with the dogmas of the religion is not necessary. What counts is the attitude of the persecutor, not of the persecuted. The persecutor normally attacks all members of a banned community, without applying any theological test or verifying how many religious services they attend.

Paragraph 9 should be read together with paragraph 30, which states:

Individuals may be persecuted on the basis of their religion even though they have little or no substantive knowledge of its tenets or practices. A lack of knowledge may be explained by further research into the particular practices of that religion in the area in question or by an understanding of the subjective and personal aspects of the claimant's case. For instance, the level of repression against a religious group in a society may severely restrict the ability of an individual to study or practise his or her religion. Even when the individual is able to receive religious education in a repressive environment, it may not be from qualified leaders. Women, in particular, are often denied access to religious education. Individuals in geographically remote communities may espouse adherence to a particular religion and face persecution as a result, yet have little knowledge of its formal practices.

Understandably, paragraph 32 requires a good knowledge of a religion when refugee status is sought by somebody who claims to be a leader, or “the” leader, of a religious or spiritual group and to be persecuted as such.

In general, however, when a religious or spiritual group is persecuted, members qualify for refugee status irrespective of their knowledge of the religion, fervor in its practice, or age.

### 3. Credibility and *sur place* claims

Of course, claims to be religiously persecuted should meet a minimum standard of credibility, to avoid frauds by those who simply want to emigrate for economic reasons and seek a refugee status under false pretenses. “Credibility is a central issue in religion-based refugee claims,” states paragraph 28 of the 2004 UNHCR Guidelines. It calls for credibility to be assessed in a good faith dialogue, without placing an unnecessary burden of proof on the asylum seeker.

A particularly delicate case concerns fears of religious persecution arising from a conversion that happened after the applicant's departure from the country of origin. This is part of the so called *sur place* claims, i.e. requests that a refugee

status is recognized because of events that happened not in the country of origin of the applicant but in the country where he or she now lives. The typical case concerns Muslims who left their country as economic migrants and converted to Christianity after settling in Europe. Some of them seek refugee status based on a credible fear of being persecuted as “apostates,” should they return to their native country. In this case, paragraphs 34–36 of the 2004 UNHCR Guidelines recognize that caution is justified by the fact that conversions may be simulated and only aimed at obtaining refugee status. Paragraph 35 hints at the fact that well-intentioned NGOs or churches may organize for immigrants self-serving or simulated conversions in order to protect them from expulsion. On the other hand, these matters should be carefully investigated, as the existence of *sur place* conversions in good faith obviously cannot be excluded.

On December 19, 2017, in the case of *A. v. Switzerland*, the European Court of Human Rights decided that an Iranian who moved to Switzerland and converted to Christianity there would not face persecution if deported back to Iran. While the history of A., who had tried before, unsuccessfully, to obtain refugee status in Switzerland on grounds other than religion, may justify doubts that his conversion was genuine, the statement by the European Court that in Iran, “converts who had not come to the attention of the authorities, including for reasons other than their conversion, and who practised their faith discreetly, did not face a real risk of ill-treatment upon return” has received some criticism. NGOs have assessed the situation of Christian converts in Iran in more pessimistic terms.

#### 4. How Strong Should Be the Persecution?

Defining persecution is not easier than defining religion. Very few countries, if any, forbids private religious belief. They only sanction the *manifestation* of such belief through public worship, missionary activities, or even wearing certain distinctive dresses or other signs.

Again in the endeavor to limit the number of refugees, some courts have argued that if persecution can be escaped by limiting the public manifestations of one’s religion, then the refugee status can be denied. At least in Europe, this argument should be regarded as a thing of the past after a judgement rendered in 2013 by the Court of Justice of the European Union in the case of *Germany v. Y*

and Z. Y and Z were Pakistani citizens, members of the Ahmadi community, which is regarded as heretic by mainline Islam and severely persecuted in some Islamic countries, including Pakistan. Germany had argued that, if Y and Z would live privately their faith in Pakistan, without proclaiming it publicly or proselytizing, the risk would be low, and therefore refugee status in Germany needed not be granted. The European Court found against Germany, concluding that “the fact that a person could avoid the risk of persecution by abstaining from religious practices is, in principle, irrelevant. The authorities cannot reasonably expect the Applicant [for refugee status] to abstain from those religious practices.” It is also not necessary to prove that an asylum seeker is individually persecuted. The fact that the group he or she belongs to is persecuted is enough.

A very controversial decision by the European Court of Human Rights was *F.G. v. Sweden*. F.G., an Iranian citizen, moved to Sweden claiming he was a political opponent of the government of Iran. Swedish authorities were not persuaded, and did not grant him refugee status on that basis. Once in Sweden, however, F.G. converted to Christianity and claimed he was now seeking refugee status based on his *sur place* conversion and fear of being persecuted in Iran as an apostate. The European Court of Human Rights in 2014 rendered a decision in favor of Sweden, observing that F.G.’s conversion was admittedly genuine, but he had not become a religious activist and the private practice of Christianity is not persecuted in Iran. The fact that the judges divided between themselves, 4-3, confirmed the difficulties of the case. In 2016, on appeal, the Grand Chamber reformed the decision and remanded the case to the Swedish courts for more in-depth assessments of the possible consequences of F.G.’s conversion in Iran.

Apart from the peculiarities of the cases of F.G. and A., the prevailing trend of European courts and authorities is that “persecution” is a broad concept. Freedom of public worship, in addition to freedom of private belief, may be guaranteed and yet there can be “persecution” if, first, there is no freedom of carrying on missionary activities aimed at converting others, and, second, one is severely discriminated in public life because of his or her religion. Coptic Christians in Egypt do enjoy freedom of worship, yet in 2013, in the case *M.E. v. France*, the European Court of Human Rights decided that a Coptic Christian was entitled to refugee status in France because Copts are seriously discriminated in Egyptian society. “Seriously,” here, is the operative word. The 2004 UNHCR guidelines state that “all discrimination does not necessarily rise to the level

required for recognition of refugee status” (paragraph 17). For instance, the fact that a religion is granted special status in a given country may be regarded as a discrimination against the minority religions but, if members of the latter may live a somewhat normal life, they cannot be recognized as refugees for reasons of religious persecution when they move abroad.

## 5. Accusations of Common Crimes

I conclude this section with what is possibly the most delicate case of them all. Quite often, States claim that leaders or members of certain religious groups are not persecuted because of their religious beliefs but because of their behavior, which has breached general laws whose aim is not to discriminate against certain religions. Russia, for instance, has banned or tried to ban a number of religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, claiming they are prosecuted not because of their religious beliefs but because they violate the Russian provisions against “extremism” or carry on illegal commercial activities. Some states do not recognize conscientious objection and jail those who refuse to serve in the army because of their religious convictions (or of any other reason). China has a list of *xie jiao*, religious groups it claims are not really religions and are guilty of common criminal wrongdoings. Can a member or leader of one of these groups, seeking refugee status, claim that accusations of common crimes are a pretext and prosecution is in fact motivated by his or her religious beliefs?

The question is difficult, but precedents do exist. The 2004 UNHCR Guidelines, paragraph 26, state that “prosecution and punishment pursuant to a law of general application is not generally considered to constitute persecution,” but immediately qualify this statement by adding that “there are some notable exceptions.” The example is conscientious objection: where the law does not recognize that a refusal to serve in the army may be based on genuine religious persuasions and does not offer alternatives (or only “excessively burdensome” alternatives) in the forms of non-military community service, those who flee the country may claim religious persecution and become eligible for refugee status.

There are significant precedents even outside the area of conscientious objections. Scientology is the object of legal limitations in various countries, which claim it is not really a religion and it is not prosecuted for its beliefs but for different wrongdoings. In a well-known case, in 1997, a United States

Immigration Court granted asylum to a German Scientologist woman, concluding that German measures against Scientology qualified as religious persecution (Frantz 1997). In 2012, although on appeal after a first unfavorable decision, the Australian Refugee Review Tribunal granted asylum in Australia to a Scientologist from Uzbekistan on similar grounds (Australian Visa Bureau 2012).

The more thorough, and important, examination of the issue was conducted by the Swedish Supreme Court when it decided, on October 21, 2005, the case of Gregorian Bivolaru (Supreme Court of Sweden 2005). A Romanian citizen, Bivolaru is the founder of the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA), a new spiritual movement that teaches, inter alia, Tantric esoteric sexual techniques. Within the framework of a campaign against MISA instigated by anti-cultists and sectors of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bivolaru was arrested in 2004, accused of a sexual relation with a 17-year old, M.D. In Romania, the legal age of consent was 15, but the law punished sexual relations between teachers and their students, and Bivolaru was regarded as the yoga teacher of M.D. The crimes of which Bivolaru was accused (and later sentenced to six years in jail) were obviously not of a religious nature. However, Bivolaru argued that they were a mere pretext to censor his spiritual teachings, including his doctrines about sexuality. M.D. herself testified before the Swedish Supreme Court that she was treated harshly by the Romanian police, and denied both any sexual relationship and the fact that Bivolaru personally taught her yoga.

In its landmark decision of 2005, the Swedish Supreme Court ruled that refugee status should be granted to a person accused of common crimes, when it can be presumed that his or her religious opinions or teachings motivated the prosecution, that charges were trumped up, and that because of religious prejudice a fair trial could not be expected. In the case it examined, the Supreme Court concluded that “due to his religious conception, Gregorian Bivolaru runs the risk to be exposed to pursuits of evil character” in Romania, and he was granted political asylum in Sweden.

This Swedish precedent is crucial for the claims of refugee status by members of many new religious movements labeled as “cults,” or *xie jiao*, in China by their critics and prosecuted for having allegedly committed common crimes, such as fraud, physically assaulting opponents, abduction, or conspiring against the government. There may be cases where evidence of such common crimes is so

overwhelming that it would support a denial of refugee status. But the evaluation of this evidence should be very careful, and certainly cannot rely only on documents supplied by the country accused of persecution. The opinion of neutral scholars who have studied the movement should also be sought. And, as the Swedish case demonstrates, when it can be easily presumed that, because of their religion, accusations against the defendants were fabricated and they would not be granted a fair trial, recognizing that they qualify for refugee status is in order.

### *B. The Case of The Church of Almighty God*

I will now apply the five criteria deriving from the prevailing international interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol to the situation of the Chinese members of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) seeking asylum in different countries, including South Korea, France, and Italy. I am not a lawyer and can only offer some general comments and recommendations on how to protect the rights of these refugees, based on the fact that these countries signed and ratified the Convention and the Protocol and are bound by their principles.

Credited by Chinese official sources with a membership of some four million (Ma 2014), CAG has been banned and persecuted in China since at least 1995 (Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China 2000, mentioning a previous document dated 1995).

In several cases I have examined, immigration authorities quoted documents by refugee boards that do not take into account the existing scholarly literature on CAG and simply mention articles in Chinese media, and in Western media that in turn quote Chinese governmental sources. CAG's normative sacred texts are also not quoted there. One such document is a report from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada that, although it is not a UNHCR document, is available on the UNHCR data base (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2014). The Canadian Board did a considerable homework, but the report is dated 2014, and at that time only journalistic sources or Chinese governmental sources were available. Scholars started paying systematic attention to CAG in 2015, with the publication of the book by Emily Dunn *Lightning from the East* (Dunn 2015), and further studies followed in 2016 and 2017 (Introvigne 2017a, 2017b,

2017d; Introvigne and Bromley 2017; Folk 2017). These scholarly studies were not available to the Canadian Board in 2014. It is also interesting that, despite the Canadian Board report, Canada has accepted a large majority of the applications for refugee status filed by members of The Church of Almighty God and, based on decisions I have examined, has recognized the fact that they are victims of religious persecution in China.

A French report dated 2016 (DIDR 2016) did quote the existence of Dunn's book, but its authors do not appear to have read it, as their direct quotes of Dunn are all from a previous short article that was superseded by the book. Dunn's unsympathetic but more nuanced book would have helped the authors of the French report to reconstruct more accurately the theology and organization of CAG. In fact, they mostly relied on journalistic (largely, although not exclusively, Chinese) and anti-cult sources, including articles by Evangelical groups vehemently hostile to CAG. They also repeated that CAG was responsible of the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014 and of gouging out the eyes of a six-year old boy in the province of Shaanxi in 2013, while in both cases scholars have concluded that the perpetrators of the crimes were not connected with CAG (Introvigne 2017a; Introvigne and Bromley 2017; Folk 2017).

Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code makes it a crime, punished with imprisonment from three to seven years or more, to “use,” which is normally interpreted as “being active in” (see e.g. *Chinanews.com* 2013), a *xie jiao*, an expression sometimes translated as “evil cult” (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna n.d.). The groups regarded as *xie jiao* are those included in lists of religious “illegal organizations” published since 1995 and periodically updated. CAG has consistently appeared in these lists (see Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China 2010; Irons 2016; as well as the article by Irons in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*).

*Xie jiao* should not be confused with “House Churches,” i.e. Protestant churches that operate in China independently from the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC). Only some House Churches are included in the list of *xie jiao*. House Churches members are subjected to various forms of discrimination and repression, but being active in a House Church is not a crime per se. The regime may tolerate a certain extent of

activity in the unauthorized House Churches, while being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime (Introvigne 2017c).

Chinese authorities have declared repeatedly that destroying CAG is among their priorities and that it should be “completely eradicated as a tumor” (see e.g. Gu 2014). Monetary rewards have been offered to those who denounce in China members of CAG (see e.g. Pingtan County 2015; Shandong Anti-Cult Association 2017).

Based on its internal statistics, CAG believes that 380,380 members have been arrested in China during the short span from 2011 to 2013 (see The Church of Almighty God 2017, 1). They have documented 36,572 such cases (The Church of Almighty God n.d.). The respected NGO Freedom House reported that 80% of those persecuted in China for belonging to “heterodox religions” between 2014 and 2016 were members of CAG (Cook 2017, 48). CAG has also denounced several cases where its members died in custody in highly suspicious circumstances or were tortured (The Church of Almighty God 2017, 20–37; Human Rights Without Frontiers 2017). I regard these testimonies as believable and, at any rate, the number of cases mentioned warrant at least a serious independent investigation.

## 1. CAG as a New Religious Movement

The Church of Almighty God is a new religious movement. Some mainline Christian churches regard its beliefs as not orthodox. The Chinese regime labels all religions it does not approve of as “pseudo-religions.” However, the Convention and the Protocol do not limit their definition of religion to sets of beliefs and practices approved, or recognized as religious, by other religious bodies or the governments. They protect even atheism and other beliefs *about* religion. Value judgments on the quality or truth of these beliefs are irrelevant. Nobody can seriously doubt that, for the purpose of the Convention and the Protocol, the beliefs and practices of The Church of Almighty God constitute a religion.

“Cult” appears to be just a convenient label used to discriminate against certain religions. As part of the “cult” accusations, some immigration authorities, in cases I have examined, found it unbelievable that CAG members were first

converted by, and later protected and hidden against persecution, by members of their family, because they read on Internet sources that CAG is “against the family.” A Christian Evangelical magazine in the US against “cults,” quoted in the French report, even claims that CAG instructs its members not to try to convert their own relatives (DIDR 2016, 10). Scholars have concluded that these are just stereotypical accusations against groups labeled as “cults,” and, like in most other religions, conversions to CAG happen, and networks are built, largely among family lines (Introvigne 2017d).

## 2. Knowledge of One’s Own Religion

As we have seen, the 2004 UNHCR Guidelines explicitly state that it is not necessary to prove that one is a fervent, especially knowledgeable, or particularly active member of a persecuted religion. It is enough to prove that the asylum seeker is part of a persecuted group and, as such, may reasonably “fear persecution.” Decisions requiring CAG asylum seekers to prove that they were especially active members of The Church or were individually involved in anti-government protests and activities are inconsistent with the Guidelines. “Ordinary believers” of a persecuted group are eligible for refugee status under the Convention and the Protocol as interpreted by the Guidelines.

I have examined decisions where CAG members were accused of reporting their theology incorrectly based on how this theology was reconstructed by documents based on hostile sources (such as DIDR 2016). It is somewhat paradoxical that immigration authorities assume that these documents offer a better reconstruction of CAG theology with respect both to CAG’s official sacred scriptures and the experience of the community of believers. In one particular French case, one asylum seeker reported that in CAG theology, the three ages of sacred history are called Age of the Law, Age of the Grace, and Age of the Kingdom. This is absolutely correct (Dunn 2015, 73), but the French authorities claimed it was wrong, based on the French report on CAG that incorrectly claims that the three ages are called Age of Creation, Age of Salvation, and Age of Destruction, quoting as a source an American Evangelical counter-cult magazine (DIDR 2016, 4).

CAG asylum seekers were also criticized by the immigration authorities for being either reticent or ignorant about CAG’s identification of the Dragon of the

*Book of Revelation* with the Chinese Communist Party. It is true that CAG members learned that it is wiser not to proclaim too openly their theological criticism of the Chinese regime. But it is also the case that CAG's complicate interpretation of the *Book of Revelation* and the Last Days (Introvigne 2017d) cannot be reduced to a few anti-Communist slogans. The French report mentions a document inciting CAG devotees to kill members of the Chinese Communist Party as a "training manual published in the United States in 2014" (DIDR 2016, 10), but conveniently omits to mention that the manual is only known through anti-cult sources and that CAG maintains that it is a forgery.

In some countries, CAG asylum seekers were accused of not knowing their religion because they did not mention the name of the person CAG identifies with the incarnate Almighty God, nor did they explain the role of the Man Used by the Holy Spirit, or Priest, of the movement, Mr. Zhao Weishan. This objection is based on a misunderstanding about the theology of CAG, which teaches that any attention to the physical person of Almighty God would distract from the only item that is crucial for salvation, the written Word. It is part of the theology and spirituality of CAG members not to discuss the person who is the incarnate Almighty God nor to mention her by name. CAG also tries to avoid any personality cult about its administrative leader, Mr. Zhao Weishan. Scholars have noticed that he is simply referred to as "the Brother" or "the Man Used by the Holy Spirit" when his instructions and sermons are discussed by devotees (Dunn 2015, 92).

In one case, a French immigration commission accused an asylum seeker of not knowing that CAG had announced the end of the world for the year 2012. In fact, Dunn's book, which was certainly not sympathetic to CAG, clarified that, although some CAG members were caught in the general Chinese and international fashion of prophecies about 2012, they were disciplined by CAG authorities, which explained that theirs was both a theological and a factual "mistake" (Dunn 2015, 95–96).

### 3. Credibility

The Guidelines do require credibility, and are aimed at preventing that economic immigrants may claim religious persecution in order to be granted refugee status. It is indeed very important to distinguish those persecuted

because of their religion from those who leave their countries for economic reasons. Credibility, however, means actual participation in the activities of a persecuted religion. It should be enough to prove that applicants are members of The Church of Almighty God and do not simply *pretend* to be members in order to achieve refugee status. This proof can only be offered by producing statements by duly incorporated CAG bodies in countries where the church is free to operate. In China, CAG is an illegal and banned organization and it would be very unwise for it to maintain a data base of its members.

#### 4. Persecution

From what has been reported to me about cases in South Korea and Europe, it seems that the most problematic aspect is the interpretation of “persecution.” It appears that the authorities require evidence that the single asylum seeker is *individually* persecuted, and even consider the fact that somebody left China with a passport and a tourist visa evidence of the absence of such persecution. This is against the prevailing international interpretation of the Convention and the Protocol, regarding as sufficient that the individual *belongs to a persecuted group*.

Of course, the evidence that The Church of Almighty God as a group is persecuted in China is overwhelming. There are even official campaigns threatening the members of the church, multiplying the number of those arrested, and asking citizens to report them to the police. These campaigns intensified after the Zhaoyuan McDonald’s murder case of 2014. No other proof should be requested in addition to the fact that (a) being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime in China; (b) CAG is included in the list of the *xie jiao*; and (c) the asylum seeker is an active member of CAG. Of course, evidence for (a) and (b) is offered by documents published by the Chinese government itself, and evidence of (c) may be supplied by properly constituted CAG organizations abroad.

I have been informed that some national immigration authorities have interpreted the fact that CAG members were able to avoid capture for several years, by moving from one city or village to another, as evidence that they were not persecuted. The objection, however, is less reasonable than it may seem. As mentioned earlier, CAG has a substantial number of members in China and, just as other persecuted religions, has built strong networks of believers capable of operating underground and hiding those brothers and sisters who have already

been identified as CAG members by the authorities. But having to move constantly, without a home and in constant fear of being captured, constitutes precisely the “fear of persecution” mentioned by the international conventions.

As for the question of passports and border controls, obviously nobody would be authorized to leave a non-democratic country by announcing that the purpose of traveling abroad is to protest religious persecution and seek asylum. This objection may also seem reasonable, but it ignores the practical realities of the Chinese situation. The control system of the police is not infallible, data are not necessarily transmitted from one administration to another, and there are always alternative ways to obtain passports and other documents, with one’s own real or with an assumed name, obviously not all of them legal. Based on my own interviews with CAG members, they report that they do not carry identification documents in China and give false names when they are arrested. In many cases, their true identity is ascertained when they are sentenced, but not always. Accordingly, they can be arrested and incarcerated under one (false) name, and obtain a passport under another (real) name. When identified, in theory they should not be able to receive passports and visas, but they claim that officers can always be found who would sell the necessary documents for a fee. Chinese authorities themselves routinely denounce the prevalence of corruption in their country (Wedeman 2012).

## 5. Accusations of Criminal Behavior

The fact that CAG is accused of having committed violent crimes by the Chinese regime should be regarded as irrelevant. All totalitarian regimes accuse their victims of being criminal. In fact, only after the persecution of CAG had been ongoing for some ten years, the regime started accusing the church of various crimes, including the already mentioned murder of a woman in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. Unfortunately, some Western media repeated this accusation, although scholarly studies have debunked it as an egregious example of fake news spread to discredit CAG. In fact, the group responsible for the murder used the name “Almighty God,” but was not part of CAG and had different religious beliefs (Introvigne 2017a; Bromley and Introvigne 2017). Other rumors against CAG have also been debunked as fake news by studies authored by reputable academic scholars (Folk 2017).

At any rate, asylum seekers in South Korea and elsewhere are not accused of having personally participated in such crimes and, even if they were accused, as members of a group persecuted as a *xie jiao*, they could not expect a fair trial in China.

### *Conclusion*

These are no easy times for refugees. From United States to Europe, politicians may win elections by claiming that too many refugees are entering their countries, and something should be done to limit their numbers. Clearly, among those seeking refugee status there are those who submit false or fraudulent claims, and appeals to caution are not unreasonable.

On the other hand, international agencies specialized in religious liberty continue to publish reports showing that the number of those persecuted for their religion is unfortunately still very high in our tormented world. These persons have a genuine right to be recognized as refugees, based on international laws and on conventions very few countries have refused to sign and ratify. It is important to understand that these conventions also protect members of new religious movements, irrespective of whether the persecuting country regards them as religions, or “pseudo-religions,” “cults,” or *xie jiao*. Even accusations of common crimes against these groups should be handled with caution, as they are often a tool or a pretext used to persecute them. As the Bivolaru case demonstrates, when leaders or members of “cults” or *xie jiao* are accused of common crimes but, because of the official hostility to “cults,” cannot expect a fair trial, then asylum should be granted.

The social problems created in certain countries by the growing number of refugees are very much real. But it is also true that religious liberty is a fragile and endangered right. Among the various categories of refugees, those really escaping persecution because of their beliefs certainly deserve our generosity and sympathy.

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[Note: Easily accessible texts of international conventions and decisions by major courts are not included in the references.]

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## Research Notes

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### Captivity Narratives: Did The Church of Almighty God Kidnap 34 Evangelical Pastors in 2002?

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*In 2017, a group of Western scholars, including CESNUR's Massimo Introvigne, were invited to participate in a dialogue in China's Henan province in June, followed by a conference in Hong Kong in September, involving Chinese law enforcement officers, leaders of China's official "anti-xie-jiao" association, and Chinese academics. The dialogue was about the notion of xie jiao (an expression difficult to translate, and not exactly equivalent to the English "cult") and one particular group classified in China as xie jiao, The Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning. The dialogue led Western scholars to further investigate accusations against The Church of Almighty God. So far, the accusations investigated appear to be of dubious authenticity.*

**ABSTRACT:** The Church of Almighty God has been accused of various crimes, including the kidnapping in 2002 of 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). News of the incident were spread by two CGF-related Web sites while it was allegedly happening, and the story was kept alive through articles, videos, and two novels, the second published in 2017. The article examines the arguments in favor and against the plausibility of the CGF narrative, and concludes that, as it is normally told, the story cannot conceivably be true, speculating on how and why it was constructed.

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, China Gospel Fellowship, 2002 China Gospel Fellowship Kidnappings, The Church of Almighty God (and) Kidnappings.

*The Journal of CESNUR* has published two research notes on accusations of serious crimes advanced against The Church of the Almighty God: one by the undersigned, on the murder of a client in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014 (Introvigne 2017), and one by Holly Folk, on the gouging out of the eyes

of a six-year old boy in the province of Shanxi in 2013 (Folk 2017). In both cases, accusations appeared to be false. The crimes really happened, but were not committed by members of The Church of Almighty God. Another frequent accusation is that The Church of Almighty God kidnaps pastors and leaders of mainline Christian churches to convert them. These accusations have been accepted at face value by some Evangelical leaders and reporters in the West (see e.g. Chan and Bright 2005) and even by scholars (Dunn 2015, 154–60), some of whom were introduced by Chinese authorities to pastors who claimed to have been part of those kidnapped during field trips in China (Dunn 2015, 55). Although there are vague claims, not supported by documents, of other kidnapping incidents involving The Church of Almighty God (Dunn 2015, 60), the bulk of the accusations concerns a case of 2002, when 34 pastors and leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF) were allegedly abducted and held for two months by the movement. CGF is one of the largest House Churches (i.e., churches not recognized by the government) in China, and some of its supporters claim that it has now some ten million members (Bach 2017).

### *An Evangelical Cliffhanger*

True or false, the sensational incident of 2002 proved good material for novels. American Evangelical novelist, C. Hope Flinchbaugh claimed to have visited China and collected first-hand accounts immediately after the kidnapping, which formed the raw material for her novel *Across the China Sky*, published in 2006 with an appendix about what she claims were the “real” facts (Flinchbaugh 2006). In 2017, another novelized account was published by Shen Xiaoming, the leader of CGF, who claimed to have been one of the kidnapped, and journalist and Evangelical activist Eugene Bach (Shen and Bach 2017).

However, the incident “spread like wildfire in Chinese Protestant circles” (Dunn 2015, 157) well before these books were published. The kidnappings allegedly occurred on April 16, 2002. After eight days, on April 24, 2002, the inter-denominational Christian ministry Asia Harvest started reporting about the incident and posting periodical updates on its Web site (Asia Harvest 2002). Almost simultaneously, China Gospel Fellowship started operating a dedicated Web site, which has been kept alive until the time of this writing, offering its own day-by-day reports on the kidnapping, requests for prayer, and theological

criticism of The Church of Almighty God (China for Jesus 2002). Together, the two Web sites created a unique instance of an Evangelical cliffhanger

As told by these sources, and by the later novels, a chronology of the story can be established as follows.

*April 28, 2001:* Brother Yang, a CGF minister in Pingdingshan, Henan, was contacted by one Ai Yan-Ling, who introduced herself as a House Church minister from Yuzhou, Henan. She recommended to Yang a certain Brother Lian, who had just arrived from Singapore, was the brother of Sister Li Shu-Xia, a member of Ai's Yuzhou congregation, and was a good preacher. Not realizing that all these people were agents of The Church of Almighty God, Yang accepted to meet Lian.

*April 30, 2001:* Brother Yang and his co-worker, Brother Jia, traveled to Yuzhou to meet Lian, who introduced himself as the general secretary of Singapore's parachurch Haggai Institute. He suggested that the Institute could train CGF leaders either in China or in Singapore. Lian asked Yang to leave to him a CV, phone number, and a copy of his ID card to be considered for training. Yang complied, and reported back to the leader (and one of the founders) of CGF, Brother Shen Xiaoming, who asked to meet Lian personally before taking any decision.

*June 2001:* Yang and Shen met again Lian, this time in Ying Yang, Henan. They agreed in principle that CGF leaders would receive training from Haggai Institute. However, months passed without Lian calling Yang and Shen to finalize the matter as he had promised.

*March 4, 2002:* Unexpectedly, Lian called Yang after several months of silence. Another meeting with Shen was arranged, where a gentleman who introduced himself as Edward Yu, Vice-President of the Singapore Haggai Institute, was also present. Yu explained that Haggai had agreed to train 34 CGF top leaders in Singapore. He asked for, and later received, their CVs, photographs, addresses, and copies of their ID documents.

*April 13, 2002:* Yu met with the top leaders of CGF, including Shen, and explained that, due to the political situation and the problems in obtaining passports, Haggai had decided to hold the training in China rather than Singapore, and that the 34 CGF leaders will be divided in six groups, for training respectively in Shanghai, Zhongxiang (Hubei), Qingdao (Shandong), Renqiu

(Hebei), Xi'an (Shanxi) and Jinzhou (Liaoning). Yu also recommended that CGF trainees do not bring their cell phones to the training, as they could be tapped by the authorities.

*April 16, 2002:* The CGF trainees arrived in the different cities. The teachers, who claimed to be from Singapore and to represent the Haggai Institute, informed them that the security situation had worsened. Those who did not follow the advice and brought their cell phones agreed to hand them over for the sake of security. The six groups were further divided in 17 smaller groups of two trainees each.

*April 17, 2002:* Reportedly, except in Shanghai, at this date CGF trainees realized that the teachers were not from the Haggai Institute but from The Church of Almighty God. They also said they were confined in the house where the training was taking place, and would not be allowed to leave. One Sister Zhao, however, managed to escape.

*April 21, 2002:* Although some of the top leaders were among those kidnapped, alerted by Sister Zhao the remaining CGF leaders convened an emergency meeting and established a crisis unit to deal with the incident.

*April 24, 2002:* CGF decided to go public with the story, both through Asia Harvest and its dedicated Web site China for Jesus.

*April 25, 2002:* While aware of the risks involved, CGF crisis unit decided to send several leaders to Beijing to report what was happening to the police.

*April 27, 2002:* CGF representatives met the police in Beijing and reported back that they were heard with sympathy and the authorities promised to help.

*April 28, 2002:* Two trainees, Brothers Yang and Jing, who were confined in Renqiu (Hebei), managed to escape.

*April 30, 2002:* According to Asia Harvest, it had “received a confirmed report that after being kidnapped, men dressed in police uniforms came and took the believers away to different places”.

*May 1, 2002:* CGF leaders preached against The Church of Almighty God in Zhengzhou.

*May 7-8, 2002:* A national conference denouncing The Church of Almighty God was convened by CGF in Zhengzhou.

*May 9-10, 2002:* Two CGF trainees, Brothers Xing and Qi, were released and reported having been drugged with sexually stimulating substances in order to be seduced by sisters of The Church of Almighty God.

*May 14, 2002:* A top leader of CGF, Brother Zhang, who had been part of the training, was released together with a sister. He reported that The Church of Almighty God had promised to release all trainees within the next two days.

*May 17, 2002:* Some of the trainees were released, but not all.

*June 3, 2002:* Shen Xiaoming and another CGF leader, Shen Yiping, were released.

*June 11, 2002:* Another two top leaders, Brother Lian and Brother Wei, were released.

*June 14, 2002:* All remaining trainees were released, except one who had freely decided to remain with The Church of Almighty God. Web sites attributed the release to “the forceful pressure” of the police (China for Jesus 2002).

### *But Was the Story True?*

Curiously, in its propaganda against The Church of Almighty God, the Chinese authorities and their official media did not mention at all, the story of the 2002 kidnappings. It became much more famous abroad than in China, where it was mostly retold in the following 15 years within CGF and other Evangelical circles. In 2017, however, Shen Xiaoming published his book about the events in the United States, although it appears to have been largely ghost-written by Eugene Bach. In the same year, the Chinese Anti-*xie-jiao* association, which is directly connected to the Chinese Communist Party, also launched a program to persuade leading Western scholars of new religious movements that The Church of Almighty God was a criminal organization. Five scholars from the U.S. and Europe, including the undersigned, were invited to two conferences in Zhengzhou in June 2017 and in Hong Kong in September 2017.

The local media reported on the events, and claimed that our misconceptions had been “corrected” (*KKNews* 2017). As part of the “correction” process, we were also told about the 2002 kidnappings. We did not really stand corrected, but certainly our interest in the incidents concerning The Church of Almighty

God was aroused, which resulted in the publication of several research notes (Introvigne 2017; Folk 2017), including this one. The Church of Almighty God itself realized that the kidnapping incident was now being used by the Chinese propaganda beyond the Evangelical circuit, and issued a statement dated October 18, 2017, exposing the shortcomings of the CGF story (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

I have interviewed both Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* activists, police officers, and pastors of churches hostile to The Church of Almighty God, and members of The Church of Almighty God, including some who were already part of the church in 2002. Based on these interviews, I will now list the arguments advanced in favor and against the veracity of the CGF narrative.

(a) *In favor of CGF narrative*

1. The main argument in favor of CGF narrative is that it is endorsed by the top leaders of CGF, some of them claiming to have been kidnapped themselves. CGF is a popular group among Evangelicals, and its leaders were themselves persecuted by the Chinese regime.

2. A second argument is that a vivid narrative was developed when the events were unfolding: why should it have been invented?

3. According to Emily Dunn, it is true that The Church of Almighty God's "leadership evidently does not condone the use of violence" (unlike CGF, Dunn does not believe that the leadership of the church approved or organized the kidnapping), but it is also true that in the situation of persecution it experiences in China, it cannot control the behavior of all its followers. While condemning violence, the leaders "may be unable to impress this upon some followers" (Dunn 2015, 160).

4. Emily Dunn also notes that The Church of Almighty God itself has published the testimony of one "Xie Qiang," whom she believes to be a pseudonym for Xue Mingxue, who was, according to her, the thirty-fourth CGF leader "kidnapped," the one who did not come back and decided to join the church. "Xie Qiang" starts his story as follows:

One day in mid-April 2002, I received a call from my upper leader, and he invited me to Qingdao for a theological training. On the third day of the training, I realized that they were the preachers of Almighty God, the "Eastern Lightning" sect, as I considered. "I'm

deceived. I'm finished!" I thought to myself, "If I refuse to accept their way, they will gouge out my eyes or cut off my nose, or even my life will be in danger." ("Xie Qiang" n.d.)

However, "Xie Qiang" reports that he was not mistreated or coerced in any way. On the contrary, although he "spoke offensive words to mock or dig at them," the members of The Church of Almighty God treated him kindly and patiently:

regardless of how I treated them or what I said to them, they never lost their temper or contradicted me with words but fellowshiped with me patiently. That was just the opposite of my original thought that if I didn't accept their way, I would be in danger, my eyes would be gouged out, my nose would be cut off, and so on. Then, I observed them secretly and found that their daily prayer before God was sincere, either in the presence of people or behind their backs, which was far more than I could do. They were not like those of an underworld organization at all. Although I didn't listen attentively to their new songs, honestly speaking, both the words and tunes of the songs were very touching. Furthermore, though I was so unfriendly and arrogant, the host entertained me with warm hospitality all the time. In addition, during the more-than-ten-day stay with them, I found that they were steady and decent and that they kept a very clear distance from the opposite sex and behaved properly in having meals, fellowshiping, and accommodating. There was not at all the "sexual seduction" as I had fabricated. So, my misunderstanding about the people in this stream gradually disappeared and my resistance against them was also removed. ("Xie Qiang" n.d.)

In the end, "Xie Qiang" converted. Dunn speculates that this may be a different, *post factum* perception of what to others CGF leaders appeared as kidnapping (Dunn 2015, 159–60).

(b) *Against CGF narrative*

1. In 2002, The Church of Almighty God was in the midst of a severe persecution in China, with thousands arrested. The main concern of its national and local leaders was to stay out of jail. Hunted by the police, it is difficult to believe that they were able to set up a large-scale kidnapping operation in different cities and provinces.

2. CGF was itself persecuted and had survived by going underground (as reported by Shen and Bach 2017 themselves). It is difficult to believe that their members would disclose the names, addresses, and ID card numbers of their top leaders to people they had met only two or three times.

3. The fact that these people had introduced themselves as members of the Haggai Institute should have been a further argument *not* to disclose information

to them, as Haggai was known for co-operating with the pro-regime Protestant Three Self Church and China Christian Council. In fact, the same official CGF account reports that Haggai “had been cooperating with the TSPM (Three Self Patriotic Movement) and CCC (China Christian Council) for a long time” (China for Jesus 2002), without explaining why, nonetheless, CGF leaders should have trusted Haggai representatives personally unknown to them.

4. Given the severity of the persecution CGF was itself experiencing, it is unbelievable that they would run the risk of meeting the police and tell to the authorities the names and whereabouts of their 30-odd leaders. Even less believable is that, faced with a massive cross-province kidnapping, the police did not take any action, and did not arrest any member of The Church of Almighty God—nor of CGF (itself an illegal group persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party). This would have given further justification to their suppression of the so-called cults, perhaps following one spectacular anti-cult trial of the kind the Chinese propaganda against the *xie jiao* so much cherishes.

5. As noted by Emily Dunn (who, as mentioned earlier, believes that the abductions were really organized by lesser members of The Church of Almighty God, although not condoned by its leaders), kidnappings and mistreating pastors of other churches is against the theology of The Church of Almighty God. It is also obviously “counterproductive” (Dunn 2015, 160) if the aim is winning the hearts of other Christians and converting them. The Church of Almighty God also claims to have “expelled from 300,000 to 500,000 members” and that it would have had “no reasons to resort to extreme and bizarre maneuvers to gain some 30 more” (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

## *Conclusion*

Several scholars have noted how conversions to “cults” have been consistently interpreted by anti-cultists in terms of “captivity” and “kidnappings,” and have proposed comparisons with racist captivity narratives of white Americans (particularly women) captured by native Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see e.g. Bromley 1998; Pike 2009). The captivity narratives about the 2002 incident is, however, unique, for the vivid details “revealed” while the events were allegedly still unfolding. These narratives can be explained in four different ways:

1. 34 pastors were really kidnapped by The Church of Almighty God, or perhaps, as Emily Dunn would have it, by some members of The Church of Almighty God who acted against the church's theology and the indications of the leaders, who were unable to control them. However, the scale of the operation would have required the coordination of a group of believers large enough to make it virtually impossible that it would not have been detected, stopped, and punished by the police.

2. Real kidnappings were organized by the Chinese police. There is one indication that this is a possibility: Asia Harvest's "confirmed report" that on April 30, 2002 "after [the CGF leaders had being kidnapped], men dressed in police uniforms came and took the believers away to different places" (Asia Harvest 2002). Asia Harvest did distinguish mere rumors from "confirmed reports" at that time. Of course, the Evangelical organization came to believe that members of The Church of Almighty God were able to obtain the uniforms and impersonate the policemen, but this, given the situation prevailing in China in 2002, is hard to believe. I am personally fascinated by this possibility, although on the other hand I also doubt that Chinese policemen would have been able to teach theology to Evangelical leaders for several days without being unmasked.

3. Pastors of the CGF went to a training to which they were invited (presumably, *not* under the name of the Haggai Institute) by members of The Church of Almighty God who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained by the climate of persecution. Only gradually, they realized that they were with The Church of Almighty God, as reported by Brother "Xie Qiang" in his testimony (Xie Qiang n.d.). The latter testimony does not show any element of violence, or "kidnapping," according to the common meaning of this term. However, those hostile to The Church of Almighty God had in the tradition of anti-cult captivity narratives a reservoir of clichés they used to describe their experience (in fact, grossly exaggerating) as "kidnapping."

4. It can also be seen from Xie Qiang's testimony that, before 2002 already, to stop their members from converting to Almighty God, CGF leaders had spread rumors accusing members of The Church of Almighty God of preaching the gospel through kidnapping and sexual temptation, which greatly impressed their members. CGF leaders had to confront a credibility crisis when thousands of their members, including top leaders, converted to The Church of Almighty God.

Rather than admitting that this was a process they were not able to contain or explain, they invented the kidnapping narrative. This is the interpretation of The Church of Almighty God in its 2017 statement (The Church of Almighty God 2017). It implies the bad faith of the CGF leaders, that many describe as honorable men and women. This consideration notwithstanding, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the narrative they proposed has so many inconsistencies and shortcomings that it cannot be literally true.

Possibly, a combination of the third and fourth explanation should be used: some CGF leaders attended seminars or training sessions without fully realizing they had been invited by The Church of Almighty God and, although the violence that would justify the label of “kidnapping” was absent, they interpreted their experience in terms of the traditional captivity narratives that were easily accessible to them and part of a Christian tradition of controversies against “cults.” Others, however, spread this narrative knowing that no “kidnappings” ever happened. An academic observer not particularly favorable to the movement, Chan Kim-kwong, also noted that accusations mentioning The Church of Almighty God’s dishonest techniques of “sheep-stealing” were invoked to explain the loss of members of churches experiencing a phase of decline, in an intra-evangelical Chinese religious market that had become increasingly competitive (Chan 2005). Be it as it may be, none of the accusations concerning the use of violence by The Church of Almighty God for proselytization purposes has been proved. And surely the Chinese authorities, when they used the kidnapping story in their campaigns against The Church of Almighty God, reconstructed it as just one more item of fake news, to be added to the McDonald’s murder and the story of the boy whose eyes were gouged out.

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