

The Church of Almighty God: Is It A Religion? A Comment on the Order by the Court of Rome of January 19, 2018

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ABSTRACT: With an order dated January 19, 2018, the Justice Court of Rome granted “subsidiary protection,” i.e. temporary refugee status, to a member of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) who had sought political asylum in Italy. The order states, quite correctly, that the CAG is not a “cult” and that it is persecuted in China. However, it also maintains that CAG is not a religion. This conclusion is incorrect, and may be based on confusing statements by the asylum seekers themselves in the interview process.

KEYWORDS: Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, Religion-Based Refugee Claims, Refugees in Italy, House Churches.

With an order dated January 19, 2018, the Justice Court of Rome granted “subsidiary protection” to a member of The Church of Almighty God who had sought political asylum in Italy. “Subsidiary protection” is something less in Italy than political asylum: it is based on a “reasonable fear” of persecution should the applicant return to his or her country of origin, which is different from “evidence” of persecution. Still, “subsidiary protection” allows the asylum seeker to remain in Italy (for five years, and for subsequent 5-year periods, by proving that the situation in the home country has not changed), work there, and receive free health care.

The decision makes some valid points: it denies that The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is a “cult,” and it states that it is persecuted in China. It recognizes that some believers, identified as such, may be threatened and mistreated by the police, but not included in any national police data base, which allows them to

obtain a passport. All these points are important for future cases, both in Italy and internationally.

There are, however, two objectionable points in the Rome decision. The first is the definition of the CAG as a “house church.” Although the Rome judge states that he interprets the expression “house church” sociologically rather than theologically, thus making the objection that CAG has a different theology from the “house churches” irrelevant, he fails to notice that the Chinese Communist Party’s persecution of groups included in the lists of *xie jiao* (an expression mistranslated as “cults” and in fact designating “heterodox teachings” not approved by the government) is much more severe than the one targeting the house churches. House churches are not legally recognized and are often persecuted, but being a member of a house church is not a crime *per se* under Chinese law. Being active in a *xie jiao*, on the other hand, is a crime, punished with a jail term of three to seven years, as mandated by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code.

The second point is the statement that the CAG is not a religion, and therefore the provisions of the international conventions on refugees about religion-based asylum claims do not apply to CAG members. For scholars of the CAG (Dunn 2015; Introvigne 2017; Folk 2018), it is pretty much obvious that it is a religion. Why did the Court of Rome come to a different conclusion?

Quite correctly, based on the prevailing Italian and international case law, the Court of Rome states that for a group to be recognized as a religion, three features are needed:

1. a clear religious doctrine;
2. a ritual;
3. an organization, with leaders clearly identified.

The decision finds an “embryonic” form of the first element in the CAG but denies the presence of the second and the third, noting that all three features are needed in order to identify a group as religious.

All three comments are wrong and are based both on non-academic sources and on possible confusing information supplied by the asylum seekers in the interviews.

As for the first point, the CAG has a very systematic doctrine and a normative scripture, *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, offering a sacred history, a theology, a

spirituality, and an ethic. The utterances of Almighty God consist of more than a million words and constitute a rich and global system of theology (Folk 2018). It is mandatory, for a member of the CAG, to live according to this sacred scripture, including its parts known as the “Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God’s Chosen People in the Age of Kingdom” and the “Seventeen Commandments.” Those who behave in a way that contradicts the “Administrative Decrees” and “Commandments” are expelled (which is indeed very common in the CAG).

As for the second point, the notion of “ritual” should be understood as plural. Not all rituals are similar to a Catholic Mass or to a Protestant Sunday service. For the CAG, “fellowshipping,” i.e. meeting to read and share the experience and knowledge of the words of Almighty God, and for singing hymns and hearing sermons, constitutes a “ritual” that has many precedents in the history of Christianity, from the Quaker’s meetings to the gathering of the Brethren in the tradition of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). The two typical elements of Christian ritual are present in the CAG’s meetings: praising and worshiping God through hymns and prayers and reading a holy scripture. The fact that the meetings are not held in a fixed day of the week is not unique to the CAG and does not deny per se their nature of rituals.

As for the third point, the CAG does have an organization with local, regional, and national leaders. There is an international administrative leader, Mr. Zhao Weishan, who lives in New York and is regarded as “the Man Used by the Holy Spirit” and the only “Priest” in the CAG. His decisions are authoritative and binding on all administrative matters and are conveyed to the members of the CAG through an organization operating in a way not dissimilar from other Christian churches.

Here, however, it is possible that misunderstandings derive from the answers of the asylum seekers themselves in the interviews, and this on two different accounts. First, CAG members may state that “there are no leaders” or that “every member is a leader.” These statements should be interpreted in a theological rather than an organizational sense. They echo the words of Jesus, “do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ” (*Matthew* 23:10) and the statement by Martin Luther (1483–1546) that “every Christian is a Pope to himself.” These statements notwithstanding, Lutheran Churches obviously have leaders and an organization. And this is true for the CAG.

Spiritually, the emphasis of the CAG is in rejecting any cult of the personality of the leaders. Practically, it is also the case that CAG members are very reluctant to disclose information on their organization after years of severe persecution in China. But in fact, an organization exists. Chinese governmental sources attribute to the CAG four million members in China only (Ma 2014). Sociologists would find it impossible that such a large group might operate without a stable and clearly identifiable (if clandestine) organization. Statements by CAG asylum seekers should be taken here with a grain of salt, and how the CAG is organized can be learned from academic sources about the CAG, not to be confused with outdated information by immigration agencies and journalistic accounts.

References

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