

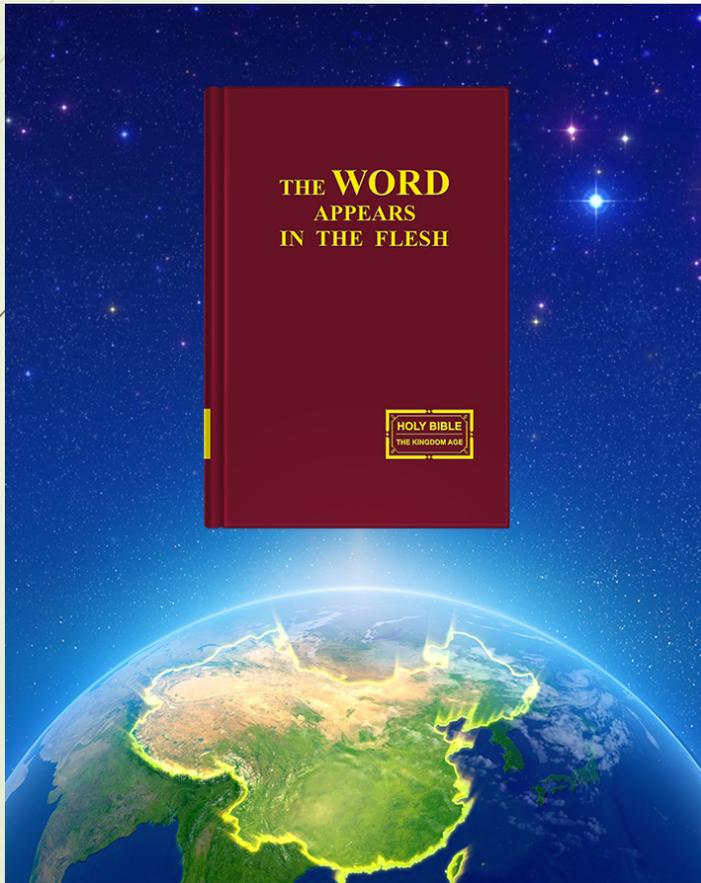


Dynamic New Religions in China: Family Networks and the Growth of The Church of Almighty God

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR, Torino, Italy)

"Dynamic Asia" Conference, University of Latvia, Riga, April 14, 2018

The Church of Almighty God (CAG)



- Established in 1991, the CAG is the largest contemporary Chinese Christian new religious movement. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and was incarnated in China as a female Almighty God, who teaches the fullness of truth and performs the final work of thoroughly purifying and saving humanity. Almighty God's utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*

Growth and Diaspora



- ▶ Despite persecution, the CAG grew in China and, according to Chinese official sources (perhaps exaggerated), had reached four million members in 2014. Several thousand members have escaped abroad, where they have founded churches in South Korea (left), the United States, Canada, and some European countries, in addition to these established in Hong Kong and Taiwan

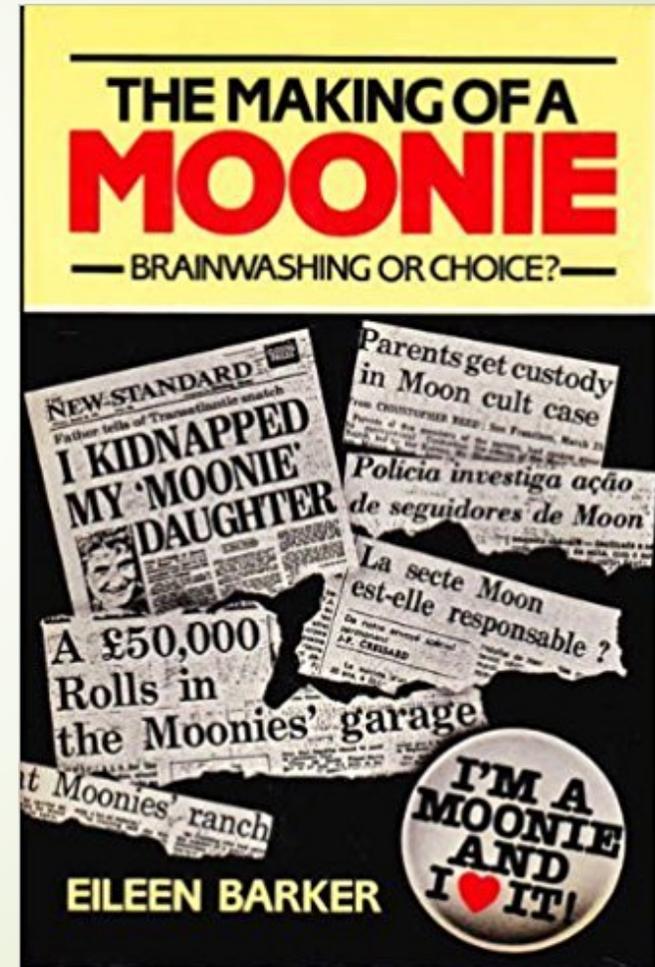
Why the Growth?



- ▶ My purpose here is not to discuss statistics. There is little doubt, however, that, in the short span between its origins in 1991 and the second decade of the 21st century, CAG's growth has been phenomenal. What reasons explain such rapid growth?

Joining New Religious Movements

- ▶ There is a large literature on conversion to religion in general and new religious movements in particular. While anti-cultists have accused new religious movements to use sinister recruitment tools such as brainwashing, mind control, and massive deception, scholars have found very little evidence of unusual missionary techniques, and much less of their allegedly “magic” effectiveness



ACTS OF

FAITH

*Explaining
the Human Side
of Religion*

RODNEY STARK
and ROGER FINKE

Emic and Etic Perspectives

- On how religions grow, the emic perspective of the members and the etic point of view of scholars are normally different. Members believe that their religion grew because of divine guidance and its roots in divine truth. Scholars deal with the "human side of religion" and look for more mundane factors. However, sociologists such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke note that emic and etic explanations are different but not opposed. It would be wrong for social scientists to dismiss doctrine as irrelevant, while in fact the persuasiveness of doctrine is the key factor for the growth of a religion. But scholars also consider other factors

Most Conversions: Through Family Networks

- Most scholars concluded that, with rare exceptions, new religions convert new members and grow very much as the old ones do: by using pre-existing family and friendship networks. Most religions are usually joined through families and friends



“The Cult is Anti-Family”

The Chinese cult that kills 'demons'



Carrie Gracie
BBC China editor
@BBCCarrie

© 13 August 2014



- CAG, however, is accused of having a very low opinion of the family as an institution. A BBC 2014 service, which relied heavily on Chinese anti-cult sources, reported that, according to somebody who claimed to be a relative of a CAG member, “the cult is anti-family ... [i]t throw[s] away family relationships and encourage each other to do the same... Whoever is more resolute in rejecting their family is given a higher rank”

But Is It True?



The Classic Words of God

- 1 Only Those Who Know God Can Bear Testimony to God
- 2 Only by Experiencing Refinement Can Man Truly Love God
- 3 Those Who Love God Will Forever Live Within His Light
- 4 Only Those Who Focus on Practice Can Be Perfected

I. Utterances of Christ of the Last Days

More >



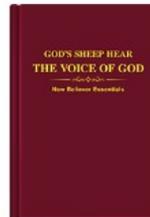
The Word Appears in the Flesh



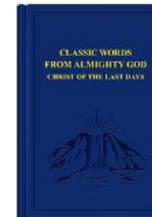
Continuation of The Word Appears in the Flesh



Utterances of Christ of the Last Days (Selections)



God's Sheep Hear the Voice of God (New Believer Essentials)



Classic Words From Almighty God, Christ of the Last Days



Witnesses for Christ of the Last Days



A Hundred Questions and Answers on Investigating the True Way

- ▶ I will first examine whether the alleged “anti-family” position of the CAG is confirmed by its theology and literature, and second, present the results of a survey conducted among more than 500 CAG members in South Korea, the U.S., and the Philippines, most of them refugees from China

The Three Ages



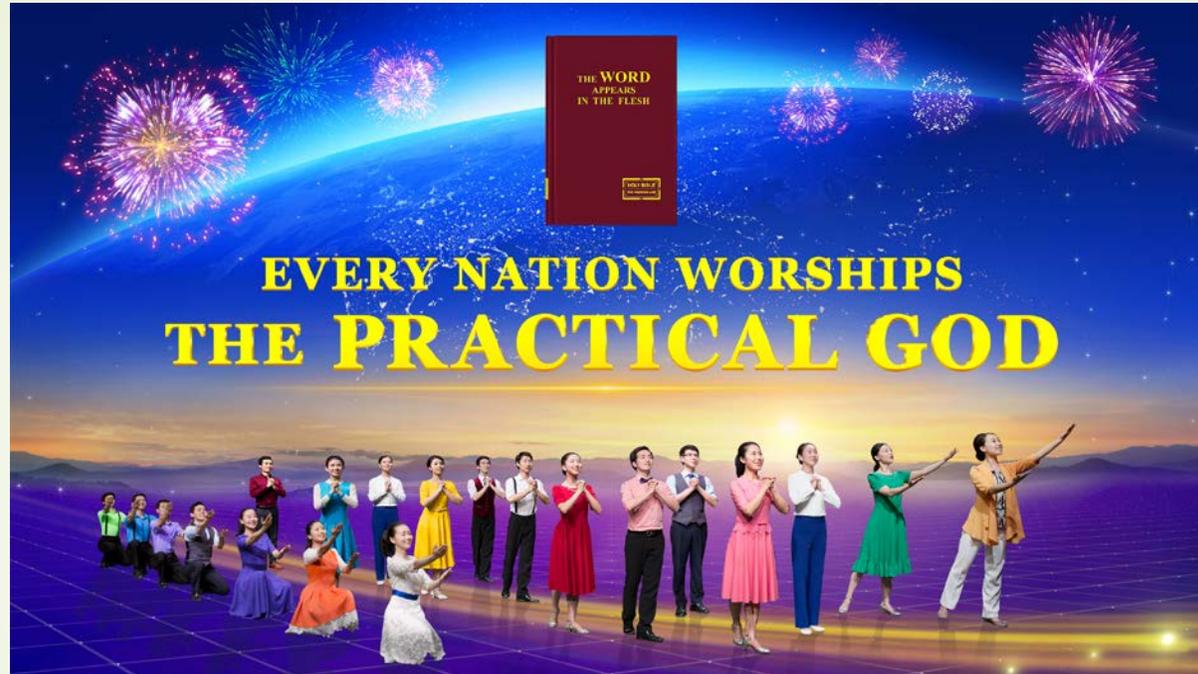
- According to CAG, Almighty God came to inaugurate the third and final age of humanity, the Age of Kingdom, which follows the Age of Law, i.e. the time of the Old Testament, and the Age of Grace (of Jesus). In the last days, the work of Almighty God has the main aim to eradicate the humans' sinful nature

The Ten Commandments: Still Valid?



- ▶ However, one basic truth remains through the different ages: God loves humanity and teaches humans how to overcome their corruptions and live a good, moral life. His teachings include specific requirements for the family, expressed in The Ten Commandments
- ▶ With the passage to a new era, God has made higher requirements for humans, so that The Ten Commandments are somewhat less important in the Age of Kingdom, yet they are not entirely superseded

Not Abolished but Uplifted



- ▶ Almighty God, the “Practical God” for our age, stated: “Today, what is required of you is not only limited to The Ten Commandments, but are commandments and laws that are higher than those of before, yet **this does not mean that what came before has been abolished**, for each stage of God’s work is carried out upon the foundation of the stage that came before. That which Jehovah introduced to Israel, such as giving sacrifice, **honoring your father and mother**, (...) **not committing adultery**(...) is it not the foundation for your practice even today? (...) **These laws have not been abolished, and instead, they have been uplifted”**

The Family Exists Because of God's Sovereignty and Arrangement

- ▶ Almighty God teaches that the family exists because of God's sovereignty and arrangement, and is a positive feature of human society: "Were it not for the Creator's predestination and His guidance, a life newly born into this world would not know where to go or where to stay, would have no relations, belong nowhere, have no real home. But because of the Creator's meticulous arrangements, it begins the journey of its life with a place to stay, parents, a place it belongs to, and relatives"





“ A Positive Thing ”

- In the words of Zhao Weishan, the main CAG administrative leader, referred to in the church as The Man Used by the Holy Spirit: “ Marriage and giving birth originated from God’s creation and preordination, It’s God who created man and woman and caused them to be fruitful and multiply. It’s an undisputed fact. Marriage and giving birth is from God, so it is a positive thing, which is undeniable ”

Marrying Freely

- ▶ While some critics claim that CAG leaders interfere with the choices of devotees about their marriages, this is actually contrary to the teachings of Almighty God, who insists that, “when God acts, He does not coerce people. For example, whether you get married should be according to your own actual situation”



Share, But Do Not Impose

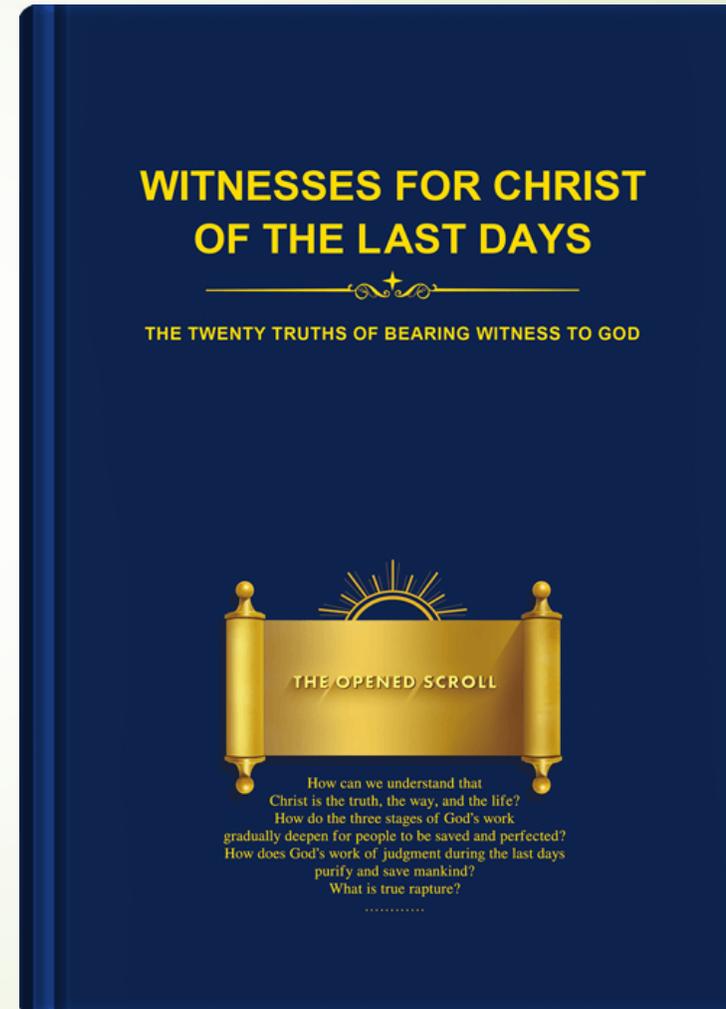
The Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God's Chosen People in the Age of Kingdom



- As it happens in all missionary religions, members are counseled to share their faith with their families. However, one of the "Ten Administrative Decrees" proclaimed by Almighty God, states that: "Kin who are not of the faith (your children, your husband or wife, your sisters or your parents, and so on) should not be forced into the church. God's household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church"

Full-Time Service, A Free Choice

- ▶ Zhao Weishan also insists that nobody should be pressured to leave the family and serve as a full time missionary: "Dedicating one's entire being to expend for God should be based on one's own choice. (...) God's family does not force people to do things"



When Persecution Breaks Families



- Obviously, it is a different situation when families are separated because CAG members are arrested or forced to flee China. While the media of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims that CAG separates the families, CAG's literature notes that in fact it is the same CCP that in many cases is responsible for the separation. In one of the movies produced by the CAG in South Korea, *Red Re-Education at Home*, this point is forcefully argued

Family-Oriented Movies



- Movies produced by the CAG diaspora won awards in Christian festivals, often organized by Evangelicals whose theology is very much far away from CAG – but they recognized the Christian family values (and the quality) of the films

CAG Is Not “Anti-Family”



- ▶ The accusation that CAG’s theology is “anti-family” does not seem to find any support in the church’s scriptures, which teach that the family exists because of God’s sovereignty and orchestration, and reiterate that God’s requirements of honoring parents and respecting the marriage are still very much in force in the Age of Kingdom

Interviewing CAG Members



- In 2017, I conducted interviews of CAG members in several countries (Italy, U.S., and South Korea). Most of them were Chinese refugees, and most reported they had been converted (or rather had “returned to Almighty God,” in CAG’s language) through members of their families
- I also interviewed some American (non-Chinese) converts who, on the contrary, had started interacting with CAG members on Facebook, then met them in person and joined the church

Collecting Survey Evidence

- I decided to conduct a more systematic survey by administering questionnaires to CAG members in countries other than Mainland China (where, because of the persecution, any survey would be impossible). The questionnaires were given to CAG members in different localities in South Korea, the U.S., and the Philippines when they attended worship meetings, and they were encouraged to compile them anonymously



The Sample

- The sample confirmed that CAG diaspora communities include a majority of refugees from China. 337 of my 516 respondents (65.31%) converted in China, and only 10 were Chinese who converted abroad (1.94%). However, the percentage of non-Chinese new converts, 169 or roughly one third of the sample (32.75%), was not insignificant. They included 34 Koreans, 66 Americans, and 69 Filipinos

Right: CAG members in the Philippines



Source of First (Positive) Information About CAG

Groups	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	Non-Chinese	Total
Literature	5	0	0	5
Internet	0	0	68	68
Family member	255	4	17	276
Friend	52	1	72	125
Missionary	24	4	11	39
Other	1	1	1	3
Total	337	10	169	516

Chinese and Foreign Converts: Differences

- ▶ The table is not about conversion, but about the sources where respondents firstly found some positive information about the CAG. For those Chinese who converted in China, where CAG Web sites and most international social networks are blocked by the authorities, it was overwhelmingly family members that first supplied the future convert with positive information about the CAG: 255 out of 337, or 75.67%. Internet, on the other hand (68), was a significant source for those non-Chinese who converted abroad (40.24%)



Sources of First (Positive) Information about the CAG among Non-Chinese Converts

Non-Chinese Converts	South Korea	USA	Philippines	Total
Literature	0	0	0	0
Internet	1	54	13	68
Family member	7	7	3	17
Friend	20	0	52	72
Missionary	6	5	0	11
Other	0	0	1	1
Total	34	66	69	169

National Differences



- It is also interesting to note the prevailing role of the Internet among non-Chinese converts in the U.S., while in South Korea and the Philippines networks of friends appeared to be more important. Based on previous in-person interviews, these networks often consisted of members of the same congregations of other Christian churches, who converted en masse to the CAG, in at least one Filipino case following their pastor

Agents of Conversion

Groups	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	Non-Chinese	Total
Family	212	1	8	221
Relative	24	1	3	28
Missionary	63	2	16	81
Internet	0	6	89	95
Friend	31	0	52	83
Other	7	0	1	8
Total	337	10	169	516

Conversion Dynamics



- ▶ In China, a solid majority in the survey (212, 62.91%) was converted by members of their immediate family, and another 7.12% (24) by more distant relatives. Missionaries, although operating under the threat of persecution, did play a role (63, 18.69%), as did friends (31, 9.20%), but most members were converted in their families
- ▶ As opposite to these results, family members (8, 4.73%) and relatives (3, 1.77%) were not very significant for the conversion of non-Chinese members abroad, where Internet (89, 52.66%) accounted for the majority of conversions

Agents of Conversion for Foreign Converts

Non-Chinese Converts	South Korea	USA	Philippines	Total
Family	5	1	2	8
Relative	2	0	1	3
Missionary	11	5	0	16
Internet	16	60	13	89
Friend	0	0	52	52
Other	0	0	1	1
Total	34	66	69	169

Note the role of Internet in the U.S, and of friends (probably from the same Christian congregations) in the Philippines

A Word of Caution



- ▶ It is possible, as suggested in some of my interviews, that conversion through the family in China was over-represented among CAG members who escaped overseas, the only ones who were able to participate in the survey. The case of whole congregations who converted to the CAG led by their pastors is not unique to the Philippines but also happened in China. These large communities of CAG believers are somewhat less likely to flee en masse abroad than single individual members

CAG Devotees Who Tried to Convert Family Members

Converted Family Members	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	South Koreans	American	Filipino	Total
Yes	278	6	33	44	69	430
No	40	4	1	22	0	67
Other	19	0	0	0	0	19
Total	337	10	34	66	69	516

Converting Family Members



- Once converted, CAG members, as is typical of most converts, tried to convert others to their newly discovered faith. Only a handful of the respondents (12.98%) indicated that, after joining the CAG, they did not try to convert family members. The majority (430, 83.33%) claimed that they tried convert members of their family: not always successfully, since in China family members might have been afraid of the consequences, and both in China and overseas might have been influenced by negative propaganda against the CAG

Conclusions (I)

- Both the analysis of CAG's theological literature and the survey demonstrated that the church is not "against the family"



Conclusions (II)



- Conversion to the CAG is not dissimilar from conversion to many other religions. The overwhelming majority of those who converted in China (70.03%) did so because of a family member or relative. In turn, 82.49% of those who converted in China and 83.33% of the total sample tried to convert family members. Conversion, as usual, was a process working often among family networks, and rumors that the CAG grew through unusual or sinister tactics appear to be just another instance of the usual stereotypes targeting “cults”

For more
information:
[maxintrovigne
@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)

