

The Church of Almighty God

A Lightning Born in the East “Falls” Right Onto Italy...

Article by *Raffaella Di Marzio*



A capture taken from a [video spread by the Church of Almighty God](#)

For as the lightning comes out of the east, and shines even to the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be (Matthew 24:27).

This statement provides the ground for the doctrine of the Church of Almighty God, which considers itself as Christian, and that [Religions in Italy](#) includes among new religious movements, thus providing the only reliable pieces of information that Italian language readers can have, starting from the group’s history.

This Church was born in China in 1991. [In the group’s website](#) the origin of the divine work was reconstructed as follows: “In 1991, Almighty God, Christ of the last days, began to officially perform His ministry in China.” According to its central teaching, Jesus Christ has come back on earth as incarnated God Almighty. Although the movement never mentions His name, according to the majority of scholars it identifies God Almighty as a Chinese woman, Yang Xiangbin, who was born in 1973 in North-Western China. While she was attending the movement of Witness Lee (1905-1997) – known as Local Church in the West

and as “Shouters” in China (based on their habit of crying out the Lord’s name) –, she started to say new and inspired words which are believed in by a certain number of faithfuls because they consider them as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Chinese government views this church, and thirteen other organizations, as a cult (*xie jiao*)¹ – which in terms of dangerousness is second only to Falun Gong – to be suppressed and outlawed. So much so that, due to the increase of persecutions, the leader and another representative fled from China and in 2001 they obtained asylum in the United States. With regard to this, the [CESNUR profile](#) makes it clear that, “after harsh repression at the end of the Nineties – jointly suffered by the Shouters and the Church of Almighty God, whose theological differences originally were not very clear to Chinese authorities, to the point that some government documents wrongly talk of one single group –, in 2000 Zhao and Yang moved to the United States, where they arrived on 6 September and in 2001 obtained political asylum.”

Being considered as “non Christian” by other Chinese Christian churches (household churches) – which are also non authorized by the government, and which seem to have lost many faithfuls to the Church of Almighty God –, the latter has been charged with “kidnapping” other Christians to convert them through “mental manipulation” or extortion. In fact, the church flatly rejects having ever “kidnapped” other Christians, because “its activity leaves people free to join or not, and no-one is forced.”²

[Massimo Introvigne](#) has explained that it is not clear whether these kidnappings have actually taken place. Based on the [CESNUR profile on this movement](#) – and as stated by an academic observer, Chan Kim-kwong – this could be a way of holding the Church of Almighty God responsible for the losing of faithfuls who belong to other churches, in a religious intra-evangelical market that has become more and more competitive, just like the Chinese one. The church declares that they are not a “non Christian cult” – they rather consider themselves as “a new expression of Christianity, in the sense that they hold the Father, Son and the new incarnation of God Almighty as the very same One God as in the Christian Bible.”

However, kidnapping is not the most serious charge moved to the movement by the Chinese government and other competing churches, and that regime media widely spread

¹ According to Massimo Introvigne, this term should not be translated as “destructive cult”, because it was already being used in China, and it meant “heterodox teachings” or “criminal religious cult”. (See the article by Massimo Introvigne [“Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast”: Investigating the 2014 McDonald’s “Cult Murder” in Zhaoyuan](#)

² Statement of a Church member.

in China and throughout the world. Chinese authorities and media ascribe to the Church of Almighty God a murder which took place on 28 May 2014 in a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese Shandong region, by a group of missionaries who declared that they represented "God Almighty". When a customer, Wu Shuoyan (1977-2014), refused to give missionaries her telephone number, one of them, Zhang Lidong (1959- 2015), with the help of others beat her dead.

[In the above-mentioned article by Massimo Introvigne](#), the author widely expanded on the evidence accounts given by the accused during the trial, which, in fact, exonerated the church, given that the culprits were none of their members'. Nevertheless, the government used this 2014 murder as an excuse to intensify persecution against the church. This report is also shared by some human rights activists who stressed the decisive role played by media in the service of the regime: "Considering that as of 19 August 2017 I counted about as many as 20,000 newspapers pages in a variety of languages which connect the Church of Almighty God or Eastern Lightning to the McDonald's murder, this type of propaganda has proved pretty successful."³

As to the group, it views persecution by the regime in a theological perspective that is clearly put forward in the [church website](#) as follows:

"Since mankind was corrupted by Satan, God has never stopped His management plan for saving mankind. Mankind, however, doesn't know the truth, much less does it know God. As a result, every time God is incarnated to begin new work, He is rejected and persecuted by those in power and by religious groups. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus became flesh, He was persecuted and arrested by the Roman government and the Jewish faith, and in the end He was crucified. In the last days, since God returned to flesh in China to do the work of judgment, He has been cruelly persecuted and hunted by the CCP government, and also cursed, framed, condemned, and rejected by all denominations and sects of Christianity. It is a clear indication of man's corruption and evil."

Persecution of this church – which, according to [Religions in Italy](#), claims hundreds of thousand members just in China "and a few thousands abroad, concentrated, by order, in South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, United States, Canada, Italy, and other countries too," – has had repercussions in Italy, where a few members who had fled from China

³ [See the article by Massimo Introvigne](#)

have sought shelter and have applied for asylum on religious grounds. The association name with which the Church of Almighty God participated in [the eleventh session that OSCE](#) (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) dedicated to humanitarian issues on 18 September 2017, is *Morning Star*, and is based in Milan. In its Warsaw headquarter, members of the group reported the behavior of the Italian and German Ministries of the Interiors.

During the Side Event "[The Difficult Path to Asylum for Christians of the Church of Almighty God in Italy and Germany](#)", their representatives declared that they had been forced to flee from China because of persecutions they suffer as Christians. For this reason they have applied for asylum in Italy. However, their condition is supposedly not fully understood by the Ministry of the Interiors as more than 90% of Christians of the Church of Almighty God have sought asylum in Italy without obtaining it. This is also happening to most members of the Church of Almighty God who have applied for asylum in Germany. These fugitives believe that such a denial is based on erroneous information which is artfully fabricated by the Chinese government, with the essential support of media. At the end of the Side Event, members of the church turned to OSCE states so that they strive to defend human rights of the persecuted faithfuls of their church.

Persecution against the Church of Almighty God has many common traits with other events which have badly hit religious minorities in many regions in the world, although each context has its own specific characteristics depending on the type of regime that makes use of persecution and the social and cultural reference context.

In particular, persecution of religious organizations in China takes on very violent ways, and government's opposition to any religious display is, so to speak, "institutionalized", as in the case of Falun Gong, which is universally known. In China persecutions are not due to a concrete danger inherent in this or that group, but rather to an ideology which has declared war on all that the government cannot "control", especially in the case of ideas and "irrational" religious creeds which could replace the one ideology, that is the one of the party and the media in their service.

In China, the regime takes advantage of competition among the disparate Christian churches, which try to survive in spite of persecutions – and often blame each other of being "cults" – developing delation and espionage strategies, in order to identify, imprison and torture those who are "reported" as Christians, insomuch that who frequents in secret house churches can't trust his own relatives or neighbours. This is what is happening to

the detriment of many churches, among which the Church of Almighty God, that is one of the most affected. Besides, Chinese people who have come to our country are still very wary, as their fear consequences for their families who have remained in China, as well as possible spies of the regime who might be in Italy.

The final consideration that I would like to make on this specific case is the same as the one I have already expressed on other occasions, namely that persecution does not “work”, quite the contrary... In spite of the repression and serious violation of human rights suffered by these believers, in China there is an ongoing expansion and increase of “household churches” which are not authorized by the government, and live in hiding.

The case of China is yet another shining example of the way a religious creed cannot be rooted out of their faithfuls’ hearts – despite implementing imprisonment, tortures or executions –, and, on the opposite, it **thrives** on persecutions and violence, gaining strength from the inside and extending beyond the borders of the oppressing country when faithfuls are forced to flee.

This is a fact that persecutors today do not want to open their eyes to – same as past and future persecutors. However anyone, whether a believer or not, with open eyes and a mind free from prejudices, can recognize it: whether the *lightning* comes from the East or the West, it strikes anyhow, and no-one can prevent it.