

Today's Martyrs – Pastor Dennis Balcombe



It is no surprise to observers of contemporary China that Christianity is undergoing very rapid growth. It is highly likely that one out of ten Chinese citizens is a Christian, and a certainty that more Christians attend Sunday worship in China than in all of Europe combined. The Communist government has been dismayed by this growth and has applied some pressure to limit it, although much of the current persecution is due to corrupt local officials rather than the central government. While it is easy to cast this as a Christian versus atheist conflict, there is another side: China has also seen a parallel rise in syncretic cults that possess a Christian veneer. The religious-political confrontation involving Christianity in China has three sides, not two.

The most infamous of these cults is the Church of the Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning. This organization fits the most classic definition of a cult: members are not allowed to leave, and some who have have been murdered or seen their family members murdered. Their syncretism has included belief in the Mayan calendar's apocalyptic end. The nadir of their history occurred on May 28, 2014 when several Eastern Lightning members stabbed a woman to death in a McDonald's restaurant in Zhaoyuan, Shandong province after she refused their solicitations. This attack made headlines around the world and triggered a government crackdown.

What is little known outside China is that Eastern Lightning has been targeting orthodox Christian churches. An underground Catholic priest known as Fr. John was the object of an entrapment attempt by a female member in Fujian province; he described the event on April 10, 2013: "[She was] pretending to want to join catechism classes in which she could draw people to her sect...She used different methods try to get close to me. One day she suddenly pulled up her shirt in front of me, showing her breasts. I ran out of the house and shouted to my parishioners to come and see, which forced her to run away, embarrassed." This event was only the latest of several such attempts against Catholic clergy.

At almost the same time, Dennis Balcombe, an American Evangelical missionary with twenty years' experience in China, was physically assaulted in his Hong Kong office by four female Eastern Lightning members. He reported the attack to the police, who responded by giving him anti-Eastern Lightning literature and DVDs that had been prepared by the central government. Pastor Balcombe reviewed the materials and found them suitable for use in his evangelization work. This was an intriguing turn of events: an officially atheist government had begun to enlist the same Christian churches that it has intermittently persecuted in an attempt to counter a violent religious cult.

Pastor Balcombe then travelled to an April 21, 2013 revival meeting in Nanyang, Henan province at the invitation of the local house [i.e., unofficial] church. This church had foreseen a large turnout and so had rented a ballroom in a local hotel. During the meeting the local police raided the hotel and detained the attendees including Pastor Balcombe; it later transpired that a hotel employee had suspected cult activity and called the police. When the police interrogated Pastor

Balcombe they became apologetic – they admitted that they were Christians who listened to podcasts of his homilies! His possession of the anti-Eastern Lightning materials also added to his credibility. The house church leaders were told by the police to just be sure to register their event and they would be left alone.

This event tells another truth about the growth of Christianity in China: the fact that Christians have been moving into positions of governmental responsibility. It has been rumored that at least three cities now have Christian majority populations, with large numbers of Christians counted among the Communist Party and the police. If this growth remains constant then it will eventually become impossible to repress Christian churches in China.

Unfortunately Chinese Christians have not yet reached that promised land. Several Christian churches have been persecuted simply because coincidentally Eastern Lightning has used the same hymnals. The government still practices guilt by association, however tenuous.

Another organization, the Local Church (also known as the Shouters) has been treated as a cult since its' founding in the 1970's. Many mainstream Christians in both China and abroad have been critical of the Shouters, but ecumenical dialog in the last few years has resulted in a softening of the criticism and an acknowledgement that the Shouters are likely a valid orthodox Christian church. These mainstream Christians have publicly asked for forgiveness from the Shouters for their earlier position. None of this dialog seems to have impacted the government, which has continued to persecute the Shouters and the other Christians it has incorrectly associated with them.

A third organization, the Total Scope Church (also known as the Born Again Movement) seems to have cultic attributes – for example, they require new members to weep for three days over their sins – and it has also been criticized by mainstream Christians. The true position of this church on the spectrum between the Shouters and Eastern Lightning remains unclear. Again, mainstream Christians have been mistaken for Born Again Movement members by the government, whether out of ignorance or calculation is unknown.

There have been Christians who have taken a romantic view of the early years of the Church, when faith was often underground in the catacombs and grew in abundance despite dissention with various cults. It would seem that if a Christian would like to relive those years he or she could do no better than to learn Mandarin or Cantonese or another Chinese dialect and follow in the footsteps of Dennis Balcombe and his Chinese colleagues of all orthodox churches, who themselves follow in the footsteps of Christ. It would make for quite a career, in the literal sense of the word. May God bless and protect all His missionaries.

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