

The Investigation of the Phenomenon of Stealing Sheep by Almighty God Cult in the West Rural Area of Hubei

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Abstract: The Almighty God cult often takes a special way to preach which is that planting an undercover in a Protestantism Church to steal sheep. The undercover poses as a new protestant to join this church and communicates with other Protestants. The disguise gives him the chance to preach Almighty God to Protestants and convert them into Almighty God believers. The branches of Almighty God cult are mainly active in rural areas and urban-rural fringe zones. The west district of Hubei is surrounded by mountains whose poverty and low development bring the living space to Almighty God cult. This investigation chooses the local rural Protestantism churches which have involved the stealing in the west rural area of Hubei to study the phenomenon and especially focus on the specific mode of the stealing operation, the actual impact that it produces and the preventing measurements that the churches have taken. After assessing the result of the investigation, we find that the stealing sheep has caused the following consequences. 1. the stealing disturbs Protestants' faith in these churches. 2. the stealing has influenced the process of nine-year compulsory education and has hindered the growth of young people. 3. the stealing has caused tension in the family relationship of believers. 4. the success of the stealing usually leads to the convert's mental coercion in varying degrees. In general, the local churches take the steps below to prevent the stealing according to the investigation. 1. Churches promote the theological knowledge of Protestantism to help them clarify the orthodox belief and to resist the Almighty God or other beliefs. 2. Churches are enhancing organization construction and are giving believers more realistic concern. 3. the local churches are trying to promote Protestants' knowledge of legitimate rights and interests and their awareness of self-protection.

Key Words: Stealing Sheep; Almighty God; Protestantism churches; Hubei

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1 The background of the investigation and the basic situation

The Church of Almighty God, also called as East Lightning, formed in the end of the 1980s. Its missionary manual, "Detailed instructions for sounding out and paving the way (摸底铺路细则 *Modi pulu xize*)", describes in detail its way of missionary work^[1]. According to the manual, the preacher of Almighty God pretends to be a Protestant at first, and then get close to those who has the potential to be persuaded to disseminate teachings to them, and finally to achieve the purpose of

[1] Pokorny L. 2016: "Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China. By Emily Dunn. Religion in Chinese Societies", 8. Leiden; Brill, 2015. Pp. xii+251. Hardcover, \$ 142.00[J]. *Religious Studies Review*, 2016, 42(2). Page 158.

converting them to the Almighty God followers. The Almighty God calls the way stealing sheep. In July 2014, a journalist from the southern rural newspaper and a journalist from the Southern Daily reported a questionnaire survey of the families of 47 Almighty followers and the result showed that 40 of them lived in the county or rural areas, 1 in big city and 6 in small cities. 20 of them are farmers and 10 are unemployed housewives. According to the data, the survey concluded that the missionaries of Almighty God in mainland China mainly are active in rural areas and small cities. Almighty God focuses on missionary activities in remote rural, rural-urban fringe zone and suburban areas, especially for the elderly and women left behind in rural areas. In 2012 and before, rumors such as “the end of the world” were made to persuade people to believe in the Almighty God by distributing leaflets, gathering illegally and publicizing doors.〔2〕

According to the characteristics of stealing sheep, we selected two agricultural towns in western area of Hubei Province and conducted the filed investigation on local Protestantism churches and gathering point. The work focused on the features of Almighty God’s missionary, the realistic influence of the missionary and the measures that local Churches have taken to prevent the spread of Almighty God. The objects of the investigation were priests, deacons and other religious staff, as well as general followers. 10 of them were interviewed in depth, including 3 men, 7 women. Among those 10 people, 9 were 60—75 years old and 1 people was under 60 years of age. From the perspective of education, among the surveyed believers, except one who had been a local primary school teacher, many other disciples were illiterate or little literate.

These two towns belong to a county of a prefectural-level city. According to the data published by the city government in 2015, the city’s permanent population has more than 550 thousand people, of whom more than 23 thousand people are Protestants, and Protestants account for about 0.42% of the permanent population. The county is located in the mountainous area of Western Hubei Province. The statistical yearbook shows that registered population in this county has 599 thousand and 200 people, of whom 302 thousand and 400 are rural population, accounting for 50.4% of the total population. There are four churches and several gathering point in the county. The total number of believers given by these churches is more than 600, accounting for 0.1% of the county’s population.

The priest told that the church has a history of more than 100 years since a Norwegian missionary had come here and created it. After the reform and opening, the local old Protestants applied to the government in 1985 to restore the church and implemented it in the next year. The priest was influenced by her father and was baptized in 1987. At that time, there were about ten people in the church and the first group was established. After 1990, the church developed rapidly. In 1991, there were more than 100 brothers when they got their church building back, and at the end of 90s the scale of about 500 people was reached. According to the president of the local Three-self Protestantism Church committee, members in this church have been diverted into other churches and gathering points due to the resumption of churches in surrounding towns since the entry into 21 century. Now there are about 200 people on Sunday’s activities and about 300 people attending

〔2〕 李辉山 LI Huishan 2012: “和谐社会视阈中农民精神信仰的重构——对‘全能神’邪教在农村传播的反思” *Hexie shehui shiyu zhong de nongmin jingshen Xinyang de chonggou* [Reconstructing peasants’ faith on the thresh-old of harmonious society——Reflection on the spread of the “Almighty God” cult in the countryside]. 《兰州交通大学学报》*Lanzhou jiaotong daxue xuebao* [The Journal of Lanzhou Transportation University], 2013, 32(2): 135-138.

church parties on important festivals.

2 How Almighty God steals sheep in local area

“Detailed instructions for sounding out and paving the way (摸底铺路细则)” divides the propagation steps of Almighty God into three parts: Sounding out, Paving the way, Testimony.^[3] Sounding-out means entering the church by various possible personal connections, choosing the suitable target for inquiring about the internal news of churches and develop a better relationship with him. After the establishment of relationship, paving the way is a strategy based on the understanding of the state of the object’s belief that asks them questions which may weaken their faith. But the missionaries will not directly speak the doctrine of Almighty God at that time until the third step testimony is taken. Testimony is the step to fully explain the theological theory of Almighty God and convert the one into follower on the basis of former work.

In the process of the interview, we could clearly feel the local church’s antipathy and contempt forstealing sheep made by Almighty God. Many words said by those interviewees, they are always sneaky; their books should be thrown into the garbage dump, et cetera. There are three characteristics of stealing sheep that we find through the talk interview in local area:

2.1 Hiding identity and trace of activities

The local Protestantism churches sometime have one or two young visitors who claim themselves preachers from out of town want to attend local church parties. But they cannot offer the certification of preachers’ identity when the churches ask for that as the condition of accommodating them. At the end of 2017, two preachers, they called themselves this, came and got our respondent’s, a minister, phone number by unknown way. They wanted the minister to meet them and provide them accommodation. The interviewee was vigilant hence she had the memory of the past missionary activities of the cult and required them to show their relevant documents for the permission of the preaching activities. She refused their request at last because they had no such document files. After that, some brothers told the minister that the two men had contacted with them and gave minister some missionary copies of Almighty God from these two. Other brothers have reported several harassment incidents made by missionaries of Almighty God that some of them came to brothers’ home and made excuses to stay there so that they can contact with more people in churches in the name of discussing theological issues through those brothers’ personal relationship.

The main steps of contacting and approaching the target audience can be seen from the guidance books, Detailed instructions for sounding out and paving the way (摸底铺路细则), and the other missionary work guides of Almighty God: Firstly, they disguise their identity and draw attention by asking questions; secondly, they create fake identity information that is associated with the propagating target; thirdly, they give what the target audiences like to gain their trust based on the analysis of targets’ personal characteristics. The main techniques adopted by the Almighty God preachers in the process of communication are as follows: A, these preachers pretend to pursuing the

[3] Pokorny L. 2016: “Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China. By Emily Dunn. Religion in Chinese Societies”, 8. Leiden; Brill, 2015. Pp. xii+251. Hardcover, \$ 142.00[J]. *Religious Studies Review*, 2016, 42(2). Page145-151.

truth of theology when they ask strangers questions to know the clear situation of local churches and make preparations for contacting with churches. B, although Almighty God has many different theological opinions with Protestantism, the preachers will ignore the different places to develop better relationship with Protestants at first. The missionaries come later after the establishment of relationship to convert the sheep into the believer of Almighty God. C, they have enough patience of keeping the doctrine of Almighty God secret in case of exposing their character. D, they follow the rules of keeping confidentiality of church activities and actions so as not to attract outside attention.

2.2 Taking the elderly Protestants as the first choice of missionaries

There is a more than 80 year old female Almighty God believer, a former member of the local church, which is active in the family church now, but comes to the church every week. She usually had no contact with the pastors, but only with the elderly men. When the minister took the initiative to talk with her and discuss her beliefs, she kept silent and said nothing. She often comes to the church at non-party hours when the minister and other clergy members are not there to propagate that the three-self belief cannot help people to be saved but only Almighty God can let people arrive heaven. In the interview, there is a more than 60 year old female believer who had given up the Almighty God already. She once had been much influenced by her mother's belief of Protestantism, but she has not been baptized until now. In the past, those brothers and sisters from Almighty God often came to her home to join the party held by Protestants. They appeared in the identity of Protestants at first but not Almighty God and then gradually transferred the idea of "the Female Christ" and "the end of the world" to her. Later, with the collapse of the claim of doomsday and her going to other place for several years for family reasons, she gradually abandoned the idea of "Almighty God".

Due to the limitations of the educational conditions in the past, the overwhelming majorities of the elderly Protestants have got little or none basic education. Lack of scientific & cultural knowledge and having no ability to study the Bible themselves, they are unable to distinguish the distorted interpretation of the "Almighty God" to the Bible and are very easily influenced by some superstitions and "earth explosions", "Cosmic Destruction," and so on. In addition, the elderly do not work, which makes them like to gather together to chat in order to pass the time. The lack of discrimination of theological theory and the long gathering hour are the best reason for the missionaries to choose them as the first choice and even convert those elderly followers into new local preachers.

2.3 The clergy are the key targets

The interviewed minister told a case of her own experience that happened in other churches. She saw a young woman at about 30 or 40 years old from other place shouted and cried after the pray and others' testimony when she took part in a party at a nearby church in 2018. The crazy performance drew others' attention successfully including the minister in this church. The woman claimed herself as a business woman and hinted her wealth and local investment plan to the minister and asked for the minister's phone number for a private communication later. When the interviewed minister felt something strange, she interrupted the communication between the two people on a pretext of a meeting. After that, the rich woman never appeared in the church again and did not carry out any influential economic activities there. According to the woman's words and deeds, the activities of heresies and cults recently, the local clergy regarded the woman as a missionary of Almighty God. Besides the temptation of money, the missionary of Almighty God does not exclude the use of honey-

trap to build the connection with targets. They even directly lured important clergies, such as the preachers of the Protestantism Church.

The clergy of Protestantism Church is the key target of the missionary work of Almighty God. Once those clergies are brought to Almighty God, more laities can be transformed or more convenience will be available with the help of their influence and authority. The clergy, Wu Yanfen, who was expelled from Hong Kong Evangelical Church of the Hong Kong protestant organization because of her converting to Almighty God, issued a confession letter, Why I believe and do not believe in the teachings of the Church of the Almighty God. The letter introduced in detail the process how Almighty God missionaries contact and transform her. After she was transformed by Almighty God, she led the thirteen brothers to participate in the Almighty God party. This event was a great shock to the Hong Kong Evangelical Church and many people worried that believers, especially young believers, would be affected. Finally, she found that the doomsday prophecy claimed by Almighty God had not been fulfilled, and then she came to herself and left the organization.

3 The influence of the Almighty God on the believer

The findings show that whether the stealing sheep itself or the means that Almighty God adopts to followers has brought bad results to the local Protestantism church, brothers and sisters in these churches and in the church of Almighty God.

3.1 Disrupting the Protestant faith and making theological opposition

The most direct influence of the Almighty God's missionary tactics that choose the targets on the basis of his Protestant belief and the missionary activities that disguise as Protestants and twist the scripture of Bible is to disrupt the faith of the church believers. A religious staff said that Almighty God likes to choose those fresh protestant or who seldom attend the party as targets because of their weak foundation of faith. They skillfully use the Bible and take the idea of female Christ instead of Jesus to misinterpret the Bible which leads to the confusion of believers. One result of the confusion is the popularity of the 2012 doomsday prophecy. An interviewee who was baptized in 1996 also referred to an example that an old sister was affected by Almighty God. The affected sister had brought her several propaganda books of Almighty God and had persuaded that Bible is out of date and Three-self Protestantism Church is not able to help people to be saved now. The old sister finally comes back to Three-self Protestantism Church after a long time of persuasion. In the process of missionary work, Almighty God blended some parts of his own belief in Protestant theology which make it difficult for some Protestants with weak knowledge of theology difficult to distinguish the true or false theory and leads to the result that some people treat the doctrine of Almighty God as orthodox Protestant belief.

3.2 Straining the family relationship of believers

Family relations are an important obstacle to the development of Almighty God, because Almighty God said in the book, God and man will enter the rest of the rest, that, there is no family among human at first. . . the perfect realm where human will enter in the future doesn't tolerant the relationship of husband-wife, father-daughter and mother-child. Almighty God dispraises the family

relations and advocate that staying away from home is the normal life. A female Protestant's mother who believed in Almighty God left home in March 2015 because she decided to serve God wholeheartedly. It took her and her father six months to find the lost mother. Many articulate and communicative followers are chosen as preachers by Almighty God and are asked to go to distant area far away from home for missionaries as a compulsory requirement, also is called jinbenfen(尽本分). These preachers are usually middle-aged women over the age of 30. They have abandoned families and relatives to go to other places for missionary works, and live in the local host family. [4] Interviewees said that there have been a number of men in a nearby county gathering to seek help from local government to find their wives who has left home for missionaries for a long time. A similar wife seeking event happened in 2017 that some family members of Almighty God believers went to South Korea to find their families. It's normal to see that a believer of Almighty God run away from home. A new believer will not reveal his belief to families at the beginning of faith in Almighty God. But it will be serious at the moment when he has the decision of leaving home because the decision means the enough belief. There are many difficulties for families to find those who leave away from home and hide in somewhere on purpose, not to mention persuading them to come back. Many of these disappears have gone to South Korea because the church of Almighty God encourages believers to leave home and go there. The church even has bought many house properties to build the oversea churches in Korea by the funds that made from its believers. Those money is also used to help the disappears apply for refugees visa of South Korea illegally. Korean JoonAng Daily reported that the number of applying for asylum from Chinese in the name of religious persecution has reach to 736 which accounts for more than 60% of the total number of refugees applicants in South Korea from 2014 to 2017. Majorities of the 736 applications are from the believer of Almighty God.

It can be seen that Almighty God causes serious harm to family relations. In addition, the Almighty God treats those who are against with or do not believe in its faith as devil or Satan, so believers are full of hostility to their loved ones who oppose their beliefs. Under the long-term abnormal situation, the Almighty God believers and their families are in a tense opposition.

3.3 Impeding the implementation of the nine year compulsory education and the growth of youngsters

The Almighty God preaches that the end of the world is coming, and requires believers to serve God wholeheartedly. The priest told a story of a girl born in 1998 who quit school to meet the end of the world. The girl grown up with her grandfather and grandmother and was influenced by them, thus she believed in Protestantism since then. But she was transferred to a believer of Almighty God when the missionary preach to her grandparents. She was persuaded in a party held by Almighty God that God makes human and arranges their fate thus it is useless to get education in school after members of the party watched videos about the end of the world. The only way to be saved and get life in the end of Earth is to believe in God wholeheartedly but not to go to school. The girl really dropped out of junior high school and didn't go back to school. Another time, a missionary of Almighty God, claiming to be sent here by the local priest, came to the local high school to preach. The priest's husband, who was teaching in this school, exposed the lies of the missionary and expelled him from the school. In the face of the doomsday, any activity of the believer has lost

[4] Ditto, 141-142.

meaning, only to find a place to devout the god together with other believers to meet the end of the day and get tickets of the saving ship in the disaster. Young believers should be in the school to receive national education, study and growth but not waste precious time in an isolated space to join the party.

3.4 Believers are coerced in mental by the end of the world and a series of rumors

Similar to the Falun Gong's living organ harvesting rumor, the Almighty God advocates the specific date of Apocalypse to create a social atmosphere of terror. During the conversation, four respondents recalled the experience that Almighty God went from door to door to publicize the end of the day. Besides distributing publicity materials on the streets, schools and government doors, missionaries of Almighty God knocked every local resident's door every night to propagate that, the earth is to be destroyed, entering the church of Almighty God to get the boat ticket of the end, those who do not follow the Almighty God will suffer a lot, and so on. The Almighty God publicizes in the way of entering the house and creates panic in the local area, so that all the candles in the whole town store were sold out. The former female believer that we mentioned before has the experience of quitting the church of Almighty God, believing again and then quitting again. After the first break, the missionary of Almighty God came to her home to tell her that the end of the world is coming, the universe is about to get into chaos, and the whole world will be dark. The missionary also told her an example of a person who had left the church and died with the disease and the destruction of the family.

The cult often uses spiritual coercion to strengthen the awe of the believers^[5]. Almighty God first creates panic and life security threats, and then proclaims the salvation of the Almighty God to stress the believers in different degrees of spiritual coercion, so that the believers lose their self-consciousness and discernment.

4 Countermeasures taken by local churches

The Almighty God has seriously endangered the church, believers and society. Local churches have taken many countermeasures to deal with the threat. In this interview, the Church introduced the following concrete measures to mend the fold after the sheep have been stolen.

4.1 Strengthening own construction of theological theory

Facing the stealing sheep done by Almighty God, the local church actively has strengthened its theological construction. The first is to ask the pastoral staff to improve their own theoretical knowledge. The minister stressed that all the pastoral staff of the churches and gathering point must undergo the theological training provided by the Protestantism association above the prefectural-level city. As for the minister herself, she graduates from Zhongnan Academy of Theology and Philosophy in Wuhan. The second is to distinguish the truth from heresy in the weekly sermon. In the words of two religious staff, reading the text in the book of Almighty God is the same as eating others' vomit,

[5] 陈青萍 CHEN Qingping 2002:“邪教痴迷与强迫性心理障碍” Xiejiao chimi yu qiangpoxing xinli zhang'ai [The infatuation of the cult and compulsive psychological disorder],《陕西师范大学学报》*Shanxi shifan daxue xuebao* (哲学社会科学版)[The Journal of Shaanxi Normal University],2002,31(6):120-125.

all these distortions should be thrown into the garbage dump.

4.2 Strengthening own organizational construction and reality concern for laities

On one hand, the church has strengthened its own organizational construction to prevent those people who disguise as preachers of Protestant: Firstly, missionaries from other place will be required to show the certification of preaching permission issued by the Protestantism association above the prefectural-level city. Secondly, religious staff will pay closer attention to the ideological trend of believers to help them clarify the confusion of theological topics. On the other hand, the church also strengthened the reality concern for laities, and providing necessary help to those brothers whose family meet troubles.

4.3 Enhancing believers' awareness of self-protection and rights& interests

In order to avoid the loss of personal security and property of who is influenced by Almighty God, the church is warning them to stay alert and away from the missionary activities of the heresy. The church helps believers to be aware of self-protection by exposing the normal means how Almighty God infringes on the legitimate rights and interests of people.

As the conclusion, stealing sheep from Protestant Church as the important strategy of Almighty God to preach is the hidden threat of the security of faith for local Protestant Churches. Almighty God also threatens the personal and property security of believers converted from Protestant. The local Protestant Church should actively respond to the threat of stealing sheep no matter from the perspective of protecting the church and protecting the believers. The result of those countermeasures is showing that, these measures of the church have been making a strong blow to the Almighty God and stealing sheep. The minister said that the activity of local Almighty God is trying to avoid contact with Three——self Protestantism Church, and turn the stealing target to the family churches and other cult groups.

中文题目：

鄂西农村“全能神”邪教“偷羊”现象调查

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提要：卧底“偷羊”是“全能神”邪教一种独特的传播途径，他们安排信徒伪装成新入教的基督教徒渗入基督教会，并伺机向基督教会内的信徒传播灌输全能神自己的理论，最终实现将基督教信徒转化为自己信徒的目的。“全能神”邪教的活动范围主要是农村地区和城乡结合部，鄂西地区属于湖北的山区地带，是湖北比较贫困落后的地区，也是“全能神”邪教的活跃地区。本次调查选取鄂西农村发生过偷羊事件的的基督教会，集中了解“偷羊”的具体运作方式、产生的现实影响和教会采取的预防措施。调查发现：首先，全能神的“偷羊”扰乱了基督教会教徒的信仰；其次，“偷羊”破坏了九年制义务教育，阻碍青少年成长；再次，“偷羊”造成信徒家庭关系紧张；最后，“偷羊”带来了改宗者程度不同的精神胁迫。当地教会一般都采取了以下预防措施：首先，加强自身的神学理论建设，提升信徒对邪教的鉴别能力；其次，加强自身的组织建设和对信徒的现实关怀；第三，提升信徒对自身权益的认知和保护意识。

关键词：偷羊；全能神；基督教；湖北