CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: Eastern Lightning in Local and Global Perspective

This book was borne out of my simple intrigue with a religious movement that teaches Jesus has returned to earth in the form of a Chinese woman. I wanted to understand what made this teaching credible and attractive to believers, and why Chinese Protestants and authorities were making such a fuss about it. Through my reading of Eastern Lightning’s texts, I discovered that as well as being one instance of the age-old, pan-cultural phenomenon that is millenarianism, the movement is very much at home in Chinese religious history. Teachings such as a female Christ, apocalyptic warnings and millennial expectations are not especially novel to the Chinese context.

The conclusion that Eastern Lightning draws on pre-existing religious and cultural sources is hardly surprising, for all new religious movements do. Christianity itself began as a new religious movement emerging from Judaism, and first-century churches borrowed from local pagan beliefs.\(^1\) Nevertheless, Eastern Lightning is unique in its admixture of teachings. It differs from popular Chinese religions in its organizational structure, soteriology, lack of efficacious response, and the extent of its Christian references. It differs from Christianity in its new scriptures, eschatological predictions, and teachings of the first and second incarnations of God. Unlike the Eternal Mother of earlier sectarian groups, Eastern Lightning’s Female Christ is not a maternal figure, and does not prescribe meditation or body cultivation techniques. Finally, Eastern Lightning lacks Falun Gong’s scientism and allusion to Buddhism.

Where, then, does Eastern Lightning fit in Chinese religion? This runs the risk of being a Eurocentric question, as most Chinese were unconcerned by such classification projects prior to the popularization of the term ‘religion’ (宗教 zongjiao) in the early twentieth century. (An exception to this was heterodox sects, which circulated scriptures emphasizing the importance of belief in their respective teachings.)\(^2\) Nowadays, however, as Chapters 5 and 7 illustrated, the classification of Eastern Lightning within (or indeed, beyond) the schema of ‘religion’ is central to the way in which it is treated by political and

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1 Clinton E. Arnold, The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996).
2 Overmyer, Precious Volumes, 280–81.
religious leaders. Where Eastern Lightning fits is therefore not just a Western or even an academic question, but one of great political and practical concern in China today.

Eastern Lightning is best understood as part of a heterodox tradition that hybridizes elements of Christianity and popular religions. The big red dragon indicates that Christian motifs have been indigenized by believers at the grassroots, and the Female Christ exemplifies the way in which popular religious notions have affected interpretations of Christianity and led to religious innovation. The boundaries of this tradition are blurred and porous, but it is characterized by millenarian teachings that refer to biblical themes and characters, the presence of supernatural powers and phenomena in everyday life, and the rejection of mainstream political and religious prescriptions. Commonalities between Eastern Lightning and the Taipings regarding the dragon and the reading of Genesis as foretelling a female divinity lead one to wonder how continuous this heterodox tradition might be, and how it might continue to evolve.

**Eastern Lightning and the Glocalization of Christianity**

This book has considered Eastern Lightning in the Chinese context to identify its cultural origins, and to foreground the innovations and agency of those who are involved with and against it. Historically, studies of Christianity in China have tended either to represent local agency as a response to foreign activity, or to focus on East-West cultural exchange, which can still insinuate that China is worth studying for its relationship with the West. It is refreshing now to invert this weighting, and consider Eastern Lightning’s relationship to global developments in something of a postscript.

Eastern Lightning can be viewed as part of a global shift in Protestantism from northern continents to southern continents. Whereas for the past five centuries Christianity has been bound up with European (-derived) civilizations, over the past hundred years, its “center of gravity” has shifted. Of the countries with the largest overall growth per hundred Christians in 2010, seven of the top ten were located in Africa and three in Asia, while six of the ten largest overall losers per hundred Christians were in Europe. The popular view of Christianity as a Western or European religion is therefore outdated, and a “next Christendom” is already to be found in Africa, Latin

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3 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 1.