

Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

Lian Xi has produced a remarkably detailed, skillfully written, and meticulously researched history of important indigenous Christian movements and leaders in modern China. Focusing on the period from the early 1900s to the present, Xi covers the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family, the Shandong revivals and leaders such as John Sung, Wang Mingdao, and Watchman Nee, to name a few. He also offers detailed analysis of more recent house church movements and a number of the contemporary cults.

In spite of the obvious strengths of this book and the intellectual gifts of its author, this study is marred by a number of weaknesses. These weaknesses are all related to the author's presuppositions. Xi often writes in condescending tones when he describes the millenarian or apocalyptic views of his subjects. He appears to judge these "popular" movements, rooted as they are in apocalyptic visions of the future, in Marxist-like terms as serving as an "opiate" that dulls the pain of the harsh realities faced by the poor and oppressed. The eschatological views of these groups—almost all of them look to the future for a radical transformation of the present order—are often ridiculed or dismissed as utopian and naive in Xi's narrative. Additionally, he links these views with Pentecostal ecstasies (healing, exorcism, visions, and speaking in tongues), and paints these groups as rooted in syncretistic practices driven by their context of poverty and oppression. However, Xi's analysis misses a number of important elements.

First, Xi fails to recognize or acknowledge that these eschatological views and Pentecostal practices are all found in the early church and the Bible, especially the book of Acts. In other words, these groups are generally orthodox and Evangelical in character (Xi doesn't make a strong distinction between orthodox, Evangelical groups and those that are cultic) and reflect views and practices shared by millions (some would say the majority) of Christians around the world. The biblical background for these beliefs and practices is rarely noted and never highlighted; rather, there is constant reference to similar practices or concepts in Chinese religions. Yet, it is quite evident that the Bible has profoundly impacted these groups and that the loose parallels in other religions merely indicate that these practices address felt needs, like in so many other countries and cultures around the world.¹

¹For example, without any reference to the biblical pedigree of Pentecostal belief and practice (see especially the book of Acts) and the fact that these beliefs and practices are also featured by hundreds of millions of Christians around the world, Xi writes:

Xi also appears to dismiss apocalyptic and millenarian eschatological views as escapist and, at best, irrelevant. Here he fails to acknowledge that these views have been a part of the Christian faith from the earliest of days (most would trace them back to Jesus), are firmly rooted in the Bible, and have left an extremely positive legacy. Although it might appear counter-intuitive, people with a strong faith in the second coming of Jesus have been empowered and active in alleviating and transforming lives and societies in the present world. A strong and clear vision of the future enables Christians to live moral and heroic lives of service in this present age.² The escapist narrative so often touted by sociologists and not a few theologians simply is not accurate and needs to be challenged.

The same might be said for Xi's dismissal of "Pentecostal ecstasies" (to use his term). His reductionistic perspective also blinds him to the incredibly positive legacy left by a century of Pentecostal pioneers. According to Xi, Pentecostal manifestations such as healings, exorcisms, visions, and tongues, like the apocalyptic views noted above, are symptoms generated by a life of deprivation and impoverishment. But this judgment, which was often championed by a previous generation of sociologists, is now tired and outdated. It has been proven to be based on faulty premises (these experiences are the result of poverty and oppression) and simply does not accurately reflect the current data available.³ More importantly, it misses the incredible impact that the Pentecostal faith is having on the faithful around the world. As sociologist David Martin notes, Pentecostals are having a tremendous impact among the poor of Latin American precisely because of the clarity of their message, rooted in the Bible. With reference to the challenges facing poor families in Brazil, which are often ravaged by the pull of "a culture of machismo, drink, sexual conquest, and carnival," Martin writes: "It is a contest between the

"Instead of bringing back to life withered Western faith, the Chinese were fashioning a Christian faith that increasingly revealed continuities with indigenous folk religion, which also made a startling comeback during the same period, attracting some two hundred million worshippers at the turn of the twenty-first century" (*Redeemed by Fire*, 230).

²David Martin aptly notes, "Pentecostals belong to groups which liberals cast in the role of victim, and in every way they refuse to play that role." (*Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2002], 10). Although it often goes unrecognized, Pentecostals around the globe are having a dramatic social impact. But they are doing so precisely because they are focused on a clear biblical message of repentance, forgiveness, transformation, and hope.

³For example, Max Turner writes, "Contrary to earlier claims, there is no evidence that 'tongues speech' is correlated with low intellect, education, social position or pathological psychology." (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996], 305). See also the numerous studies he cites.

home and the street, and what restores the home is the discontinuity and inner transformation offered by a demanding, disciplined faith with firm boundaries.”⁴

All of this blunts Xi’s ability to see these Christian groups as having much to contribute to China’s future. Here again we encounter another questionable assumption: if these groups do not directly impact those with political power, they are irrelevant and have little to offer. While it is probably accurate to say that the vast majority of China’s Christians will not coalesce into a unified, powerful political block, their potential for impacting China’s future should not be underestimated. Indeed, their message of the worth of each individual, a firm moral compass, purpose beyond selfish interests, and hope for the future has the potential to dramatically impact a nation in search of meaning.

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⁴Martin, *The World Their Parish*, 105-6.