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This article examines the Boxer rebellion in China in 1900. The author details the expansion of Christianity in the late 1800's and the reasons for the tensions between Christians and non-Christians. The formation and rise of the Boxers as an anti-Christian movement in 1898 is also detailed and the reasons behind the rebellion are analysed.

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each other and asked the assembly to confirm their action.

A few weeks later Thomas went to a congress of the World Federation of Democratic Youth in Prague, a movement strongly influenced by Marxist convictions. There, no ambiguity was to be found. The congress with one voice affirmed their support for the Indonesian struggle and called on the world to join the battle for the liberation of the oppressed victims of imperialism. The delegates taunted M.M.: You Christians, with your ideas of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, cut the nerve of resistance to oppression. You relativize the struggle for liberation and justice, and so, despite your words, you serve the ends of imperial power.

Are we, then, weak allies in the fight for justice, against the powers of this world? We must always ask that question. Yet there is an answer to it. It has to do with the continuing revolution that the justification of the sinner by grace alone and the resurrection of Jesus Christ bring into this world. The victory of a revolutionary power may be good for the people who gain power over their political destiny, but it is not the end. New forms of corruption, exploitation, and injustice arise and must be fought aires. New opponents must be found to challenge the victors. In the long run all justice is relative and must be continuously sought. God's revolutionary transformation never ends. Forgiveness and reconciliation are its tools. They too change people and societies, in ways that will be fulfilled only in the final judgment day.

Marxism is humanism to the highest degree. As we have seen, it is a collective humanism of the human species in solidarity, not of individuals pursuing their various goals, as most secular humanism is. It projected a vision of human society without exploitation, inequality, or the selfish spirit of private property and ambition. It galvanized the protest of the masses of the dispossessed and the poor to fight for their liberation and for a new humanity. In its Communist form the vision failed. It became inhuman in its humanity because it did not understand how human sin persists, even when the masses have won control. It did not learn the Christian graces of compromise, reconciliation, forgiveness, and the limitation of power by a God who is justice and love. Now it is gone. But it has left us Christians with a massive challenge.

What is the form of a just, equal, and caring society that could take the place of Marxism? What is the vision of common humanity that can transcend the savage tribal wars that now divide us? No such vision is out there today. The global forces of business, technology, and finance certainly do not provide it. The demons again hover at our doorstep. As post-Marxist Christians, we have a tremendous responsibility.

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**Baptism of Fire: China's Christians and the Boxer Uprising of 1900**

R. G. Tiedemann

As preparations are made to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Boxer Uprising, this "midsummer madness" of 1900 remains a well-known but poorly understood episode in modern Chinese history. Most readers will be familiar with the fifty-five-day siege of the foreign legations in Beijing, for that story was covered by sensational accounts in the Western press at the time and has since been retold in popular books and motion pictures. While the heroic defense of the diplomatic quarter and its subsequent relief by an eight-nation allied force makes for fascinating reading, it is not the full story. The tragic and extremely bloody event, usually described as an outburst of intense anti-Western hostility, affected much of North China and Manchuria. The majority of the Boxers' victims were, in fact, Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries. In Beijing itself a second siege took place, namely of the North Cathedral (Beijing), where several Vincentian (Lazarist) priests, sisters, and a large number of Catholics held out until the foreign expeditionary force lifted that siege on August 15, 1900, a day after the legations had been relieved. However, the ferocity of the anti-Christian persecution was such in the Beijing area that nearly all the Christians were killed outside these two relatively safe centers in the capital. The suffering and martyrdom of the many individual Chinese Catho

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sion strategy is said to have alienated the local populace during the 1890s. The murder in the southern part of Shandong of two Catholic missionaries in late 1897 is seen as the beginning of this inevitable confrontation. Since the German navy, by way of compensation for the missionary murder, took possession of Kiaochow on the promontory in the east of the very same province of Shandong, it is often assumed that the emergence in 1898 of the Boxer movement in that province was a direct response to the aggressive intervention of the missionaries and their increasingly assertive converts, as well as to the perceived close link between the foreign missionary enterprise and an ever more threatening Western secular imperialism. This essay discusses, therefore, the means of “conversion” employed by the foreign evangelists in North China, the extent of missionary reliance on diplomatic intervention, and the origin of the Boxer movement in the border regions of western Shandong and land in all the provinces and to erect buildings therein. The Sino-French treaty furthermore guaranteed to Catholic missionaries the right to preach in the interior, and to Chinese converts the right to practice Christianity without being liable to punishment. The imperial edict of April 8, 1862, exempted Chinese Catholics from making contributions toward communal endeavors that were deemed to contain “superstitious” practices. Most important, although not provided for in any treaty, France assumed the right to protect all Roman Catholics in China, regardless of nationality. This protectorate was, in practice, extended to Chinese converts as well.

Under the treaties the missionaries—Catholic as well as Protestant—were in a better position to vigorously pursue their calling. Not surprisingly, their often provocative responses to local efforts to preserve China’s cultural integrity brought them into social conflict. The greatest threat to local power holders came from the missionaries’ role as formidable political actors. Catholic priests, in particular, explicitly challenged both the formal and informal agents of Chinese political authority. They were part of a complex and proactive ecclesiastical hierarchy that deliberately paralleled the increasingly inert Chinese administrative structure. Furthermore, in their dealings with local government functionaries, Catholic priests insisted on wearing Chinese official dress and considered it their right to demand preferential access and to be treated as social equals with local officials.

Some missionaries and Christians were prone to violate the cultural and moral principles of Chinese society, for instance, when Christians performed their religious observances openly and quite conspicuously. Occasionally the provocative display of the symbols of successful expansion (chapels, churches, schools, orphanages), often distinctly foreign in appearance, caused local opposition. Disputes in connection with local socioeconomic practices constituted a frequent source of anti-Christian conflict. Weddings and funerals, in particular, were occasions that could give rise to anti-Christian hostility and even violence. Where Christians chose to set themselves apart so as to enjoy the privileges that missionaries had won for them under the religious toleration clauses of the treaties, their behavior might create or exacerbate communal tensions. The Christians’ refusal to take part in communal practices that they claimed to have a “superstitious” character, such as traditional ancestor worship, could be especially contentious.

The extent to which the preceding examples of intrusive behavior resulted in actual conflict is difficult to assess. On the one hand, accommodation and toleration may have been more common features than ostracism and marginalization. On the other hand, it may not have been the behavior of Christians that provoked hostility but popular and elite attitudes toward outsiders, shaped by the unshakable belief in Chinese cultural superiority that permeated all levels of society. In this connection, we have to keep in mind that the great majority of rural dwellers had never seen Europeans and may have derived their opinions of them from the long tradition of lurid tales propagated in incendiary posters, calumnious pamphlets, and ugly rumors. The so-called irrational forces at work in some of the antimissionary agitation were conditioned by the widely held Chinese belief that the foreigners engaged in atrocious practices, immoral licentiousness, sorcery, and the kidnapping of children. In certain circumstances such fears gave rise to xenophobic reactions.

It is often asserted that it was mainly the more unsavory characters of society that joined the church. In North China the motives behind conversion, however, were complex, mixed, and

Rural, insecure areas of North China gave rise to the Boxers—and to many Christian communities.

southeastern Zhili. It is argued that the short-lived Boxer phenomenon was a unique product of a complex conjuncture of both internal and external causes. The final part of this study deals with the aftermath of the fateful crisis of 1900, in which the Christian empire in China is concerned. First let us consider the nature and growth of the missionary enterprise in the part of North China that gave rise to the Boxers.

Evangelization and Religious Protectorates

Except for the sporadic incursions of Catholic priests to minister to the surviving congregations of “old Christians,” it was not until after 1860 that Christianity began to advance—rather slowly during the first two decades—into North China. Acceptance or rejection of the faith was a considerable extent connected with contextual variations in the social ecology of the region. In contrast to the normative, benevolent, and repressive control prevailing in the social systems of eastern and south-central Shandong, the densely populated yet highly insecure environment in the border regions on the North China Plain, with progressively deteriorating economic conditions and a distinct paucity of upper gentry, fostered socially disruptive human behavior. This pattern was seen in such aggressive survival strategies as feuding, banditry, and salt smuggling, as well as the proliferation of rebellious sects. Yet it was precisely in these turbulent and disaster-prone backwaters that the rapid expansion of Christianity occurred in the 1890s. And it was here that the Boxer movement appeared during the last years of the nineteenth century.

Both Catholic and Protestant missionary work in the interior of China was greatly facilitated by the so-called unequal treaties and associated agreements. The Beijing Convention of 1860, in particular, created the framework for the significant expansion of Catholic activities during the last third of the nineteenth century. The surreptitiously amended Chinese version of article 6 of the Sino-French Convention of 1860 stipulated, for instance, that Catholic missionaries were permitted to rent and purchase

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not always apparent. Moreover, motives for conversion were influenced by spatial and temporal variations in the course of the nineteenth century, as well as by different approaches of the various missionary bodies. For analytic purposes, they can be divided into three broad categories: (1) spiritual incentives, attracting individual “seekers after truth”; (2) material incentives, attracting substantial numbers of “rice Christians”; and (3) sociopolitical incentives, leading to mass “conversion” of what might be termed “litigation Christians.” It is not possible to assign precise numbers to these categories.

The so-called litigation Christians became particularly prevalent in the violent environment on the North China Plain. Hence, what was described as anti-Christian agitation in this region more often than not was part of existing patterns of traditional conflict (usually protracted feuds over land and water rights). As the American Board missionary Arthur Smith put it, “Occasions of offense are never wanting. Petty quarrels and misunderstandings distract every hamlet, and the moment the Gospel enters, these evils appear on the surface like a malignant rash, but many of them, it should be noted, have their roots much deeper than the epidermis.” Indeed, it may have been existing tensions in the community that caused village factions to turn to the church in the first place. In other words, many so-called missionary cases, or jiama (court cases involving primarily local Chinese Christians and their non-Christian neighbors), merely revealed the existence of underlying tensions in rural society.

In environments where violent competition over scarce resources was endemic—such as the provincial border complex on the North China Plain—the political incentives Christianity offered were thus especially attractive. By enlisting the support of the church, the weaker groups in the community had a chance to stand up to the dominant and oppressive elements. Against the background of increasing pressures on local resources, the Christians consequently gained preferential access to these resources and were quick to exploit their privileged position. The converts’ competitive approach was a common feature of traditional rural society, especially in the turbulent districts on the North China Plain. Certainly in the border districts on the North China Plain, Christian congregations were basically similar in social composition to non-Christian communities, because in this highly competitive environment conversion was typically a collective survival strategy. Secure in the knowledge that they would be protected by the missionaries, the Christians and potential converts were quick to take advantage of this new situation and began to display greater assertiveness. Except for the fact that Christian assertiveness ultimately rested on foreign power, there was nothing unusual about such practices. In this context, “conversion” must be seen as an integral part of traditional patterns of competition and cooperation. The fact that one of the rival groups in factional conflict claimed to be Christian was not necessarily the cause of hostility, at least not the principal cause.

Not until the 1860s was this area opened up to missionary work. The American Board was able to expand its operations in northwestern Shandong in consequence of the substantial relief afforded during the 1876-79 famine. French Jesuits began to move into the border districts of southern Zhili and northern Jiangsu. More significantly, in 1882 two missionaries of the newly established Society of the Divine Word (S.V.D.) were given responsibility for the southern half of the province, an area where there were virtually no Christians at that time. In 1885 Rome elevated that mission to a vicariate apostolic under the exclusive care of the S.V.D. Under its ambitious vicar apostolic Johann Baptist Anzer, South Shandong developed very rapidly into a successful mission field. Having accepted the German religious protectorate in 1890, this dynamic and essentially German Catholic missionary enterprise flourished particularly in the wake of the Sino-Japanese War, when German imperialist ambitions came to be focused on Shandong.11

Impact of the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War

The missionary’s role as local protector became particularly prominent during and after the 1894–95 war with Japan, when the province experienced significant displacements. The transfer of Chinese troops to the front had caused a power vacuum, especially in the areas of endemic violence. Here the rapidly expanding predatory groups took advantage of the situation and caused a further escalation of rural unrest. In the absence of effective government intervention, the rural dwellers were left to their own devices to curb the progressive intensification of banditry. Various intervillage defensive organizations, many of which had originally been created at the time of the midcentury rebellions, were now reactivated throughout Shandong Province. Of particular interest is the emergence in the Shandong-Jiangsu border area of an irregular self-defense organization, namely the Big Sword Society (Dadunhu). Established to deal with the escalating bandit problem, in early 1896 it came into conflict with local Christians, most likely as a result of the latter’s refusal to join in communal defense because of the Big Swords’ characteristic invulnerability rituals. These frictions culminated in violent Dadunhu attacks on Christian communities in southwestern Shandong and northwestern Jiangsu in the summer of 1896. Although essentially a minor affair,12 it did have important consequences and illustrates the opportunism inherent in the missionary enterprise in zones of competitive violence.

The Christians benefited most from the postwar developments. In spite of (or, more likely, because of) the considerable hardships experienced by ordinary folk in much of North China, the years 1895–98 saw unprecedented growth of interest in, and conversion to, Christianity. Not even the occupation of Kiaochow as a consequence of the Juye missionary murders interrupted this trend. On the contrary, the growth of Christianity accelerated during the prevailing reformist climate that emerged in reaction to the humiliating defeat by Japan and culminated in the so-called Hundred Days Reforms of 1898. Local officials and innovative members of the local elite interested in Western-inspired development established closer contacts with the missionaries during this period. This situation, however, did not preclude some of the Shandong provincial officials, removed from office on German insistence because of their alleged unfriendly behavior after the Juye affair, from secretly continuing to harbor anti-Catholic sentiments.

Origin and Spread of the Boxers

Given the relatively harmonious relations between Christians and non-Christians in North China after the Sino-Japanese War, the rise of the Boxers as an anti-Christian movement in 1898 is rather surprising. According to Joseph Esherick, the origin of the Boxers can be traced to the emergence of a martial arts group known as the Spirit Boxers (Shengqu) in northwestern Shandong.13 He identifies their most characteristic aspects, namely the practice of mass spirit possession, along with the “boxing” and deep-breathing exercises and invulnerability beliefs and rituals that supposedly made them impervious to injury by sword.
or bullet. Some of these practices may have been adopted from two precursors of the Boxer movement, namely the Big Sword Society of southwestern Shandong and the Plum Flower Boxers (Meihuaqun) in the Shandong/Zhiili border area. Both these groups had gained notoriety because of their anti-Christian activities (the Big Swords in 1896; the Plum Flower Boxers supported non-Christians in their struggle with Christians over control of a village temple in 1897-98). Although these earlier incidents were of minor importance, they acquired considerable retrospective meaning because of subsequent events. The link between these societies and the Spirit Boxers, however, is by no means clear.

In late 1898 the Spirit Boxers changed their name to Boxers United in Righteousness (Yihequn) and Militia United in Righteousness (Yihetuan), the latter implying a degree of official recognition. At the same time, the first Boxer attacks on Catholics were reported in northwestern Shandong. All the while the movement was gaining momentum, spreading northward from Shandong into Zhiili toward Beijing and Tianjin. What were the reasons for this transformation of really insignificant local self-defense groups into a large-scale confederation?

It is now recognized that the unique conjunction of events and circumstances from late 1898 onward was of pivotal importance to the explosive upsurge of antiforeignism, expressed primarily in the form of widespread anti-Christian violence. One significant element in the conjunction was the palace coup ending the Hundred Days Reforms in late September 1898. It brought about a degree of convergence of disparate and otherwise mutually antagonistic strands of popular and elite opposition to alien encroachment. With the militant-conservative faction in control in Beijing, various forces showed a greater determination to confront real or imagined foreign secular and religious intrusions.

To what extent certain militant conservatives at court (including the emperor dowager Cixi) and in the provinces provided encouragement to the Boxers' activities is difficult to say. They certainly appear to have been more attuned to the forces of superstition. Some officials may have taken the opportunity to exact revenge. The dismissed Shandong governor Li Bingheng was involved in the killing of several thousand people in the fortified Catholic village of Zhujahe in Zhiili in 1901, and another former Shandong governor, Yuxian, is thought to have ordered the Taiyuan executions that summer.

In China's more advanced areas (eastern Shandong, coastal Zhejiang, and Sichuan), elite resentment developed in response to the foreign scramble for economic concessions (mining and railways). There is less evidence that these elite concerns were shared by the simple peasants in the provincial border regions, where economic imperialism was not an issue. If indeed the patriotic preoccupations of the elite found some resonance among the tradition-bound masses in the hinterland, the precise nature of this interaction remains a research problem. What is certainly true, in view of the considerable physical mobility of Shandong's rural dwellers, is that currents of concern and apprehension could rapidly spread across the country in the form of village gossip, inflammatory pamphlets and placards, and, most important, unsettling rumors. The emergence of the pro-dynastic slogan "Protect the Qing, exterminate the foreign" in late 1898 is a good example. Although promoted by the Boxers, it is my belief that it was transmitted to them indirectly from elite currents of resistance to foreign economic and political encroachment. Similarly, the popular belief that the anti-Christian campaign had been authorized by the emperor and/or the emperor dowager was persistent and widespread. Whether this notion could be construed as an attempt by conservative elements of the Chinese Manchu ruling class to deflect rebellious potential by way of channeling it into an anti-Christian and antiforeign movement is an intriguing question but beyond the scope of this essay. Recent scholarship has put forward a rather more compelling explanation for the dramatic expansion of the Boxers, namely the prolonged famine episode caused by the extensive drought of 1898-1900, which in conjunction with other factors produced a far more explosive potential for violence. Paul Cohen argues most convincingly that the drought was the critically important element in the genesis and explosive growth of the Boxer movement and of popular support for it in the spring and summer of 1900. Although violence, death, and famine were recurring events and part of everyday life in parts of North China, this particularly severe and prolonged environmental disaster coincided with a number of other significant and threatening events. In this context the most frightful rumors spread across the countryside and into the cities. They had unusual potency and were widely believed. Fear of drought-induced death and the belief that the disturbing presence of aliens was ultimately responsible for this calamity encouraged the spread of the old harrowing and often racist tales about foreigners and their Chinese adherents. The charge that Christians were poisoning wells was by far the most widely circulated news. Given the particular conjunction of circumstances, this highly inflammatory rumor at a time of life-threatening famine was instrumental in creating mass panic and hysteria. In this time of crisis, tolerance was at a minimum in the affected communities and old
quarrels over scarce resources were easily revived. The fearful postcupp climate thus helped revive long-forgotten incidents and transform simmering local animosities into widespread and more or less simultaneous outbreaks of organized violence against Christians and missionaries.

From Conflict to Accommodation

In the final analysis, the Boxer movement was driven by a volatile mixture of grievances, resentment, misery, and fear as a result of the turbulent and complex response to mounting internal and external pressures. While the unfortunate entanglement of secular and religious imperialism in the form of religious protectors was to some extent a contributory factor in the sudden upsurge of anti-Christian violence between late 1899 and 1900, the actual nature of that relationship was closer as is often reported in the scholarly literature. Moreover, it is an exaggeration to claim, as is often done, that the uprising was a reaction to the imposition of the foreign evangelists’ version of ideal Christian living upon local society. On certain occasions, some missionaries and local Christians did violate the cultural and moral principles of Chinese society or interfered in local politics. But it is my contention that the manner and acceptance of the Christian faith were operating more of the time in most places, including areas of traditional violence. Such anti-Christian conflict did break out more often than not linked to traditional forms of strife.

On the whole, the reality of contact between Christians and non-Christians, especially when foreign agents were not directly involved, was very different from the violent confrontations commonly portrayed in the literature. The more common pattern was one of peaceful coexistence between adherents of the church and their non-Christian neighbors. What was emerging from the locally negotiated Christian accommodation to prevailing social arrangements was a kind of Chinese folk Christianity, largely constructive and non-threatening. The Boxer Uprising was merely a temporary setback, the outcome of a particular jumble of circumstances during an abnormally severe natural calamity. Whereas in normal times a modus vivendi might have been worked out, during the environmental crisis of 1899–1900 foreigners and local Christians became convenient scapegoats.

This reading of the Boxer phenomenon helps explain why, after the much-needed rains came and restored the land, the pre-Boxer pattern of toleration and cooperation between Christians and non-Christians reasserted itself. Moreover, many of North China’s surviving Christian communities emerged much stronger from the Boxer ordeal. As the Vincentian missionary Planchet put it: “The Church of China received its baptism of fire in 1900. These Chinese, who were said to be faint-hearted and fickle in their faith, went into battle like old soldiers, and cut a very fine figure there. These neophytes, who formerly were called by the disdainful name of ‘rice Christians,’ declared their faith like the Christians in the time of the persecutions of Rome or Lyons.”

Indeed, one could regard the Boxer Uprising as a significant turning point. For one thing, the traditionally turbulent parts of North China witnessed a remarkable subsiding of “missionary cases” after 1900. Catholic and Protestant missionaries, for their part, had come to realize that an aggressive approach, such as interference in litigation, was proving counterproductive in the long run. At the same time, provincial officials and innovative local notables were now ready to invite missionaries and Christians to participate in the long-overdue modernizing reform program, primarily in the area of education. In other words, the Christian enterprise achieved a degree of recognition by the Chinese ruling class, and in this favorable climate Christianity continued to expand. This understanding of the dynamics of the Boxer movement allows us to see the events of a century ago in North China as a tragic anomaly.

Notes

8. The term “Kiaochow,” referring to the German leasehold, must be distinguished from the adjacent Chinese administrative territory of Liaochou.
11. The presumed link between the German missionary enterprise and secular German ambitions in Shandong before 1900 is discussed in Karl Josef Riviéron, S.V.D., Weltlicher Schutz und Mission. Das deutsche Protektorat über die katholische Mission von Süd-Shantung (Cologne: Böhlau, 1907); Horst Gründer, Christliche Mission und deutscher Imperialismus, 1886–1914 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1982), chap. 4.