

A Lesson from History *The Boxer Uprising, 1900*

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Having followed the proceedings of the International Conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China (Taiwan Fujen University, June 10-11, 2004), I have an even clearer perception of the multiple dimensions of this important historical event. The Boxer Uprising has been widely examined by historians of all persuasions, including Christians. Most of their writings, however, deal with the various facets – diplomatic, military, social, and colonialist, etc. – of this complex historical fact. Although they may mention that it was a religious movement, they seldom dwell on what should be considered the *crux* of the matter, namely that it was a clash of religions.

The Italian missionary Father Alberico Crescitelli and many others, who lost their lives as martyrs, were saints indeed. On the other side, the Boxers were struggling to save their most precious religious values. There is the need to inquire what was wrong, and how it produced such a regrettable historical incident.

It is quite clear that the Boxers were spontaneous associations of ordinary people; only later were their hordes taken up and manipulated by Qing government officials. It was a “grassroots” movement, expressing a fit of anger from the populace against the encroachments of a foreign religion. The immediate facts which triggered the uprising were blatant injustices in court, privileges in various matters, negative rumors about the missionaries, colonialist encroachments, famines, banditry, and so on. But the feeling of anger and revulsion against the invading Western religion was already there before the actual uprising. This deserves deeper rethinking and soul searching. Since history is supposed to teach, maybe we can draw an important lesson from this unfortunate episode.

China is a country well-known for its tolerance in religious matters: for ages China has seen a great variety of religious expressions (various Buddhist schools, countless Daoist sects, Confucianism, and other religions as well), usually living peacefully side by side. Therefore the pent-up anger, which finally burst into the Boxer Uprising, is even more surprising.

It appears that what caused the bad feeling among the Chinese masses was the attitude of the Western missionaries toward Chinese popular cults. It was a totally negative approach, a deep and hearty contempt for all expressions of popular religion. The Chinese were viewed as a poor people soaked in superstition, in need of urgent rescue by means of destroying their religious heritage. Speaking bluntly, we could define the attitude of those foreigners as arrogance and conceit. Imagine if I go to your house to live with you and day after day point my finger at all your life habits defining them as base and despicable, yet as coming from the devil, and tell you that you should destroy and change everything, in order to become a proper human being: what would you do?

By the way, most often the missionaries' views were just gross misunderstandings. Take for instance the use of incense. For ages it was one of the hot issues in the Rites Controversy, on the principle that there was no possible alternative: incense was only due to God. Therefore, how could anybody burn incense sticks to his ancestors? Even today, the most stern commandment passed on to a Chinese who enters the Christian (Protestant) religion, is that he absolutely should not burn incense to his ancestors, or join his relatives in doing so. If only they had a more relaxed attitude, they could have seen things in a different light. In the Catholic liturgy, since time immemorial, when a solemn mass is celebrated, is not incense aimed at each acolyte and the whole congregation? Does this not imply that all humans have something worthy and supernatural in them, and that incense offering is just a token of respect?

Today, one century later, many things have changed in the world. Cultural pluralism is more widespread. Add to this the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which changed some Catholic views. All these factors have lessened friction a bit, but the negative view of Chinese popular religion is still with us, and with the Chinese clergy, who were instructed by Western missionaries.

How many Western missionaries are aware that Guan Gong is the epitome of righteousness, the goddess Matsu (or also Guanyin) is the agent of heaven's mercy, and Shen Nong, Wenchang, the City God, and various other popular deities are saints from the past, seen as heavenly gifts bestowed upon humans to educate them. They are deserving of our tribute and gratitude. When Western missionaries were openly teaching that the Chinese peasants should get rid of these deities, which were the very values of their religious and moral life, what do you think would be their attitude towards Westerners? True, there are superstitions mixed with these popular cults; but there are superstitions among ignorant Catholics in South America and in Italy, or even in Germany, when they practice their cult to Mary and to the various Saints.

This totally negative attitude of Christian leaders toward popular Chinese religious expressions is also at the root of the gap widely perceived by most Chinese everywhere regarding Western religions. Even in Taiwan, despite the freedom to evangelize enjoyed for over five decades, and despite the fact that most people appreciate the numerous social works done by Christians, a thick "wall" is perceived by the local people as existing between them and Western religion.

Since it seems that a negative view is still common among Western missionaries, a sincere soul searching is needed, in order to improve relations between Western Christianity and Chinese culture in general to avoid more problems in the future. One could even observe that the Boxers' expression of anger in the end was stopped by the invasion of Western armies, only to flare up again fifty years later, as soon as China "stood up." Are we far from the truth, if we deem that Mao Zedong's wholesale persecution of Christianity, while theoretically being based on the Marxist principle of combating the opium of the people, was emotionally the second part of the Boxer Uprising?

Therefore, there is a very important lesson to be learned from studying this historical happening. If we do not mend our ways, there will never be a harmonious relationship between Christianity and the Chinese world. It will be a hard task for Christian theologians in the future. It requires a huge effort at theological reflection and rethinking.