

The Hundredth Anniversary of the Boxer Uprising in China.

On April 7, 1840, when the British Parliament was discussing the affairs of China, the erudite Queen Victoria's Secretary of War, Mr. Thomas Babington Macaulay, asked: "What does anybody here know of China? Even those Europeans who have been in that empire are almost as ignorant as the rest of us. Everything is covered by a veil, through which a glimpse of what is within may occasionally be caught, a glimpse just sufficient to set the imagination at work and more likely to mislead than to inform."

Macaulay's voice of common sense is still relevant as in our attempt to understand the Boxer Uprising, the "midsummer madness" of 1900" --- a tragic and extremely bloody outbreak of violence, usually described as an outburst of intense anti-foreign hostility, affecting much of North China and Manchuria. Why this strong anti-foreign feeling in China in the closing decade of the 19th century? Who were the Boxers? Why was the event a turning point in the history of the Chinese church?

Anti-foreign Feeling

The missionary cause became confused by its identification with Western powers, an alliance one missionary called "the Society for the Diffusion of Canon Balls." Both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary work in the interior of China was greatly helped by the so-called unequal treaties and associated agreements. For example, the Sino-French Convention of 1860 stipulated that Catholic missionaries were allowed to rent and purchase land in all the provinces and erect buildings. France assumed the right to protect all Roman Catholics in China, regardless of nationality. In their dealings with local functionaries, Catholic priests insisted on wearing Chinese official dress and considered it their right to demand preferential treatment and equal social status with local officials. Some missionaries, including Protestants, and their converts were prone to violate the cultural and moral principles of Chinese society. Weddings and funerals, in particular, were occasions that could give rise to anti-Christian hostility and even to violence. And Christians' refusal to take part in communal practices that they claimed to have "superstitious" character, such as ancestral worship, was also a bone of contention. And the 1899 elevation of the status of missionaries by the Chinese government, making a Roman Catholic bishop or a Protestant superintendent the equal of a provincial governor, was another blow to Chinese national pride. We must also keep in mind that the great majority of the rural population had never seen Europeans and may have derived their opinions from inflammatory posters and ugly rumours. Some anti-missionary opposition was based on the widely held belief that foreigners engaged in atrocious practices, immoral licentiousness, and kidnapping of children.

In 1894-1895 Japan defeated China. After the war ambitious European powers began what threatened to be partition of the vast empire. For example, the Germans wanted a suitable harbour for themselves, occupied Kiachow and obtained railway rights. What were the Chinese to think? They feared that all foreigners, whether missionary, merchant, or engineers were in league to bring about the partition of their empire and the destruction of their ancient civilization, dating from some 4000 years ago. The severe and prolonged drought of 1898 - 1900 combined with the disturbing presence of

aliens, who were held responsible for this environmental deadly calamity, encouraged the spread of the old harrowing and often racist talks about foreigners.

In September 1898, the cruel, superstitious, and wily Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi took charge of the government. She deposed the Emperor, Kuang Hsu, champion of modernization and reforms, kept him a prisoner in his own palace, and counter-demanded most of his edicts. Under her reactionary rule an effort to save the country - by conservatism - was in full swing.

By 1900, there were about two thousand Protestant missionaries in China, as well as one thousand Roman Catholic priests and nuns. Canadian missionaries numbered about 120. One of the most outstanding Canadian Presbyterian missionaries working in China was Dr. Jonathan Goforth (d.1936). In 1888 Goforth and his wife Rosalind were commissioned in the historic Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto. Goforth was not beholden to European powers. In his case, there wasn't anything of the colonial missionary about him and his work. A plaque honouring their mission endeavour is in the vestibule of Knox today, "donated by the Christians in Manchuria."

In his *Miracle Lives in China*, Goforth recorded the "humbling" conversion of a "proud" Confucian scholar. Although the conversion of a scholar was rare, the churches did attract people from all classes, from rich peasants down to the rural poor, from merchants to butchers and actors. And it would be a mistake to classify all converts as "rice Christians." Mission literature abounds with stories of individual courage, of one convert standing up to his or her father or mother, and sometimes the whole village.

The Boxers

Roused by the indignities suffered from the hands of the foreigners, combined with the agony of the long drought, Chinese conservatives blindly hit back and sought to expel the foreigners. The reaction culminated in what became known as the Boxer Uprising. The origin of the Boxers can be traced back to the emergence of a martial group known as "Spirit Boxers." Their characteristics were the practice of mass spirit possession, deep breathing exercises, along with the belief that their rituals made them invulnerable to injury by sword or bullet. In late 1898 the Spirit Boxers changed their name to Boxers United in Righteousness and Militia United in Righteousness, the latter implying a degree of official recognition. The empress sided with the Boxers and issued an edict that all white people be killed. Hatred for "the foreign devil" exploded across the country. The most spectacular episode of the Boxer Uprising was the fifty-five-day siege of foreign legations in Beijing. On June 20, 1900, the attack of the Legation Quarter began. A foreign military expedition was formed to save the legations and then to crush the Boxers.

The relief column, reaching Peking on August 14, found the besieged diplomats and their friends still holding out. Inside the legations and in the Northern Cathedral where the French bishop sheltered four thousand people, life was grim during the weeks of unremitting warfare. The women tended the wounded. The male missionaries manned the barricades. On August 15 the siege was lifted. The anti-Christian persecution in the

Beijing area had been so severe that nearly all Christians were killed outside the relatively safe centres in the capital.

Martyrdom

Of the 300 foreigners massacred during the Boxer Uprising, 243 were missionaries - 136 Protestant adults, 53 children, and 54 Catholics priests and nuns. According to reports, "They were hunted down like wild animals, burnt alive, shot, disemboweled, and beheaded. Their heads were hung in triumph from the city walls." But we should remember also the brutal massacre by the Boxers of thousands of Chinese Christians, who were called "secondary foreign devils," accused of treason to their country and its culture. And in local communities many Chinese, private citizens and officials, risked their lives to save foreigners, including missionaries.

Many stories of martyrdom and bravery can be told. One American missionary woman, ritualistically beheaded in the presence of the governor of Shansi, wrote in a letter found after her death, "I was very restless and excited while there seemed a chance of life, but God has taken away that feeling, and now I just pray for grace to meet the terrible end bravely." In her biography of her husband *Goforth of China*, Rosalind relates the moving story of her family's flight, the serious wounding of Dr. Goforth by sword-wielding rebels, the courageous help given by Chinese believers.

No wonder that in mission history of China the year 1900 holds the same significance as does the flood in Old Testament chronology - all China missionary history dates before or after 1900. The Boxer Uprising became a turning point. Destructive as it had been, it served to clear the air of hostility toward foreigners. The Christian enterprise achieved a degree of recognition by the ruling class. Provincial officials and innovative local functionaries began to invite Christians to participate in the long-overdue modernizing reforms, primarily in the area of education. When the fury of violence had blown over, missionaries returned to their posts where they received a warm welcome from their flocks. Mission work developed even more rapidly than before. Many of North China's surviving Christian communities emerged much stronger from the Boxer ordeal. As one missionary wrote, "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." And new converts, "who were formerly called by the disdainful name of 'rice Christians,' declared their faith like Christians in the time of the persecutions of Rome or Lyons." The hundredth anniversary of the Boxer Uprising was a pivotal event for the Chinese Church. The past century became one of church growth but also of incredible suffering for Chinese Christians. But today the Chinese Church, which is still being persecuted, is larger and stronger than ever. This is the Lord's doing. Praise His Name!

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