BOOK REVIEW

Albert Monshan Wu. *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860–1950.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. 344 pp.

Albert Monshan Wu begins his fascinating history of German missionaries in China with an account of an encounter in 1902 between a missionary belonging to the Society of the Divine Word, Georg Stenz, and the 76th direct descendant of Confucius, Kong Lingyi. Stenz's description of Kong dripped with contempt, faulting Kong for knowing "nothing of the situation and learning of Europe," and for living "a thoroughly Chinese existence" (p. 1). Wu demonstrates how Stenz's views were typical of German missionaries, whether Catholic or Protestant, of the time; they regarded Chinese culture as vastly inferior to European, Chinese religion as "superstition," Chinese temples as "houses of the devil."

And yet, in a few decades, these missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, gradually relinquished their antagonistic attitudes toward Confucius and local cultures and realized the importance of Christianity becoming more "indigenous." What accounts for this radical reversal of attitudes? Wu's work investigates the history of this change from 1860 to 1950 among two German groups of missionaries in China, those belonging to the Catholic Society of the Divine Word (SVD) and the Protestant Berlin Missionary Society (BMS). He argues that the missionaries' perception of the general failure of the missionary enterprise in China led to "self-reflection and self-criticism" (p. 9) that was ultimately "generative" (p. 11), leading missionaries "to reconsider the relationship between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture" (p. 11).

Four Periods of German Missionary Engagement with China

One can discern four major moments in the history of missionary engagement in Wu's account. First, the years 1860–1899 saw a dramatic increase in the number of Western missionaries in China. This increase was made possible by the unequal treaties foisted on China after the Opium Wars, which forced China to open itself up to Christian missionaries and the French and, later, German protectorates, which secured European missionaries with French and German diplomatic and military power. These years also saw a surge of violence against Christian missionaries, a resentful backlash prompted, not surprisingly, by the widespread perception that Christianity was a "foreign religion" and that missionaries were colonial agents.

This violence, Wu suggests, was "effective" in the sense that it "provoked reflection within missionary circles" (p. 48). In the 1860s and 70s, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries held numerous conferences to reflect on the Chinese rejection of Christianity. Much discussion centered on indigenous Chinese clergy, which all saw as "crucial for Christianity's prospects in China" (p. 56). Nonetheless, there was little agreement about the manner and the speed with which indigenous clergy should be promoted. On the one hand, there were concerns about the lack of spiritual maturity among Chinese converts. On the other hand, less justifiably, convictions of European superiority led to the insistence that "Chinese priests needed to remain under the control and direction of European priests" (p. 59). Racial chauvinism led to widespread negative portrayals of the Chinese – "fickle, lazy, ambitious, vain, cunning, hypocrites, liars, ungrateful, extremely greedy for money, easily rebellious,"

summarized one Italian archbishop (p.60) – stereotypes that included the Chinese clergy.

The second major period covers the era and aftermath of the Boxer Uprising of 1900 and the Chinese Revolution of 1911. Both SVD and BMS missionaries spoke of Chinese culture, once great, as now surpassed by Western culture; both groups characterized Chinese culture and indigenous religions as "superstitious" and degenerate, needing to be replaced by a "modern faith like Christianity" (p. 80). Wu notes how this manner of speaking was characteristic of the late 19th century Sinophobic trend in Europe, which "depicted the Chinese in increasingly racialized terms as a way to demote China from the ranks of advanced civilizations" (p. 79). The defeat of the anti-foreign Boxers and the overthrow of the Confucian regime of the Qing dynasty confirmed missionaries in their convictions and led many to believe that a new "era of Christianity" (p. 88) was dawning in China. During this period, however, Chinese Catholic intellectuals like Ma Xianbo and Ying Lianzhi became increasingly critical of Western missionary disrespect for Chinese culture. They argued that "the majority of Chinese could never accept Christianity as long as it continued to oppose Chinese ideas and customs" (p. 94), asked the missionaries to "abandon their contempt for Chinese spirituality" (p. 95) and to trust the Chinese with leadership.

The third historical moment was the post-World War I period, which saw a dramatic change in the attitude of German missionaries. The vaunted European superiority was thrown into serious doubt by the cataclysm of the war. German missionaries not only lost political and financial backing, but also faced powerful new nationalistic, anti-Western, and anti-Christian movements in China, particularly the rise of Communism. Anti-Christian actions now began to be interpreted as part of a global movement of secularism and bolshevism. In the global battle against irreligion and revolution, Confucius, with his openness to the transcendent and his hierarchical conception of reality, was now recruited as an ally. SVD mission journals began to feature Sinicized depictions of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, in marked contrast to the resolutely Western aesthetic of these publications in the 19th century. Around this time, SVD missionaries began to reflect on how a foreign religion like Buddhism had become "so finely adapted to the Asian soul" (p. 182) and found the answer in Buddhism's ability to adapt itself to indigenous traditions.

At the same time, institutionally, leadership remained in German hands. Pope Benedict XV's landmark mission document *Maximum Illud* (1919), largely inspired by the situation of mission in China, pointedly warned missionaries against becoming pawns of colonial powers, strongly advocated the development of indigenous clergy, and insisted on the equality between foreign missionaries and local priests. The SVD, however, largely viewed *Maximum Illud* negatively, seeing it as the fruit of the machinations of the Belgian Lazarist Vincent Lebbe, remaining convinced that the Chinese were not ready for leadership. On the Protestant side, the BMS missionaries found an impetus to indigenize the Church in the theology of the *Volkskirche* being developed in German missionary circles. Unfortunately, the notion of *Volkskirche* was connected to a theory of racial hierarchy: "The Germans retained their mandate of spiritual guides and superiors because they had reached a higher plateau of racial development" (p. 144).

The final period discussed by Wu covers the turbulent 1930s and 40s, which saw missionaries besieged on all sides by events in the larger world: the war between the Communist and the Nationalist Chinese; the war between China and Japan; the Nazi regime in Germany; and finally, the Communist takeover of China after World War II. During this chaotic period, missionaries and Christian communities were subjected to serious harassment from all parties. Both Communists and Nationalists resented the extraterritorial rights of missionaries. The Japanese suspected churches as sites of organizing resistance. Nazi restrictions on sending money from Germany to China meant that the missions in poor rural areas had to struggle to survive with drastically reduced funding. Communist propagandists made inroads among Christian communities, leading to a significant number of cases of abandonment of Christianity among Chinese converts.

Yet this period also saw the definitive turnover of leadership from European to Chinese hands. Ironically, both BMS and SVD were grudgingly brought to this point by external forces. Tragically, the BMS, with German funding utterly decimated by Nazi policy, ended up with a handful of German missionaries in China and hurriedly granted Chinese communities "independence" in the 1940s. On the SVD side, Chinese diocesan priests, resentful of their exclusion from participation and leadership, wrote to Propaganda Fide in 1931, asking for a Chinese bishop. This gave Propaganda a strong weapon to pressure the reluctant SVD into identifying a Chinese priest

who could become apostolic prefect. The SVD Bishop Augustin Henninghaus, feeling deeply betrayed, did all he could to exclude these "rebellious" diocesan priests from any positions, but under pressure from the Vatican, proposed a Chinese SVD, Thomas Tian. Tian would later become the first bishop of Qingdao, the first Chinese Archbishop of Beijing and the first Chinese Cardinal – indigenous church leadership that would be absolutely necessary with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries by the Communists in 1951.

Observations

Drawing from an impressive array of archival and primary sources in German and Chinese, Wu has produced a finely researched, focused, and illuminating account of modern missionary engagement in China. His work joins the ranks of recent excellent studies of Christian missionaries in 19th and early 20th century China, such as Ernest P. Young's *Ecclesiastical Colony* (Oxford University Press, 2013), D. E. Mungello's *The Catholic Invasion of China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), and R. G. Tiedemann's "The Papacy, Foreign Missionaries and Chinese Catholics" in the collection *Rooted in Hope* (*Monumenta Serica Monographs* LXVII, 2017). Wu's distinctive contribution is to cast light on the German missionary experience, often less focused on because of the generally overriding influence of the French protectorate in China.

His chronicling of the *changes* in missionary attitudes toward the cultural and religious Other is also particularly valuable. Although it is true that the German missionaries began in the 19th century with culturally and racially chauvinistic attitudes towards the Chinese, by the 1920s and 1930s their attitudes towards Chinese culture and spiritual traditions began to change, and "Chinese Christians and European missionaries worked together to synthesize Christianity and Confucianism" (p. 248). What makes this change even more significant is the fact that, as Wu points out, this change was taking place precisely at the time when racism and xenophobia were on the rise in Nazi Germany.

At the same time, however, there is no denying the puzzling resistance to the indigenization of church leadership among both BMS and SVD. Wu underlines the marked difference between the attitudes of the Vatican and of the SVD. This reluctance, Wu shows, was partially due to the missionaries' sense of responsibility for their flocks and their experience of the fragile faith of their new converts. Nevertheless, Wu also gives evidence of a perhaps "unconscious

arrogance" (p. 248) among many missionaries, an unremitting attitude of suspicion with regard to the spiritual maturity of both Chinese Christians and Chinese clergy. The fact that Christian communities *without the missionaries* survived the persecutions of the early Communist years raises questions about whether that attitude of suspicion was justified.

What of Wu's thesis that the change of attitudes in the missionaries towards Chinese culture and spiritual traditions was largely because the missionaries were "self-reflective and critical of their work and humbled by their sense of failure" (p. 248)? One wonders whether this is perhaps a bit overstated. While Wu does give evidence of this self-generated change throughout his work, it is also quite clear that some of the "institutional about-faces" (p. 258) on the part of the BMS and SVD were the largely unplanned results of "global social, political, and cultural change" (p. 258). Wu also indicates in at least two places the important role of pressure from Chinese Christian intellectuals and native Chinese priests in the changing of the missionaries' attitudes and strategies. It might have been interesting to receive a fuller treatment of the role of Chinese Christians in this transformation of missionary mindsets.

Wu does give detailed and sympathetic attention to two remarkable Chinese Christian leaders in his penultimate chapter: the BMS-affiliated pastor Ling Deyuan and the Catholic intellectual Chen Yuan, president of the SVD-run Fu Ren University in Beijing. Both were collaborators with the German missionaries before 1949; both chose to collaborate instead with the Communists after 1949. Although both were condemned as "traitors" by horrified missionaries and some Chinese Christians, Wu's nuanced discussion demonstrates the complexity these men had to negotiate. From the 1920's to the 1940's, "both men had to repeatedly withstand accusations of aiding the foreign imperialists" (p. 242) from their politicized Christian constituencies (parishioners or students) and the Chinese Nationalists and Communists. On the other hand, they had to appease a "foreign missionary establishment" that continued to insist on ultimate decision-making power. From one point of view, their difficult decision to break with the missionaries was an anguished way of resolving the issue of being both Christian and Chinese, "a persistent question," Wu points out, "since Christianity's entry into China" (p. 221).

Wu's book helps one understand more deeply that the tragedy that Ling and Chen had to make such a choice was not simply due to Communist efforts to control religion, but precisely because of the intertwined histories of the

modern missionary movement and the Western imperialist project. Without calling into doubt the motivations and achievements of German missionaries, Wu's fair but unflinching portrayal of missionary cultural and racial chauvinism, modified and softened with time, but persistent in some way to the very end, is a sobering invitation precisely to the generative self-critique he highlights in his book.

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