

Marxism, Religion and the Taiping Revolution

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Abstract: This study offers a specific interpretation of the Taiping Revolution in China in the mid-nineteenth century. It was not only the largest revolutionary movement in the world at the time, but also one that was inspired by Christianity. Indeed, it marks the moment when the revolutionary religious tradition arrived in China. My account of the revolution stresses the role of the Bible, its radical reinterpretation by the Taiping revolutionaries, and the role it played in their revolutionary acts and reconstruction of economic and social relations. After providing this account, I raise a number of implications for Marxist approaches to religion. These involve the revolutionary religious tradition, first identified by Engels and established by Karl Kautsky, the question of political ambivalence of a religion like Christianity, and the distinction between ontological and temporal transcendence.

In early 1837, one Hong Xiuquan sank into a delirium and had a vision in the small southern Chinese village of Guanlubu.¹ The vision seems to have been full of the characters one may expect from Chinese mythology. Equally so, some were not so conventional. Taken up into heaven, he was greeted by children dressed in yellow, as well as a cock, a tiger, a dragon and men playing music. Placing him in a sedan chair, they took him to a high gate bathed in light, surrounded by musicians.

¹ Hong Xiuquan's own account may be found in *Taiping Heavenly Chronicle (Taiping tianri)*, written in 1848. See Michael and Chang 1966-71b, pp. 51-76.

Here men in dragon robes and horned hats cut his body open and replaced his old and dirty earthly organs with clean new ones. The incision was healed and disappeared, as seems to happen in such places. But now his suspicions that he was on his way to death seemed to be confirmed, for a woman who looked like the goddess Meng appeared, ready to give him the memory-destroying drink on the edge of a blood-coloured stream. Instead, she washed him in the stream and called him 'son'. Alongside his mother, he became aware of a man, who seemed to be a brother. Inside the gates, he was led to his father, a tall erect man sitting on a throne, wearing a high hat and a black dragon robe, with a golden beard that flowed down to his waist.

Hong's father spoke of his grief at the way people on earth had forgotten him, offering the father's gifts of food and clothes and the products of their hands to none other than the demon devils. These devils pretended that they were the source of all that the father had given them, producing immense frustration, rage and pity in the father. Yet the father waited to punish them, even when the demons had infiltrated the 33 levels of heaven. Eventually, Hong persuaded his father to let him act. With the gift of a powerful sword called 'Snow-in-the-Clouds', Hong attacked the demons throughout the heavens, while his brother held up a heavenly seal which blinded the demons by its fierce light. They managed to chase the demons out of heaven and onto earth, where Hong captured the demon king, Yan Luo. But his father told him not to kill the demon king yet, for he may pollute heaven. After this battle, Hong stayed for a time in heaven, with a wife who had born him a son. He studied mysterious texts, guided by his patient father, for they took some effort to understand. His elder brother was not so patient, so he had to be soothed by Hong's sister-in-law. Yet Hong's father would not let him forget the demons, for they still roamed on the earth below and did much damage. To earth Hong must return,

albeit not without a new name (Xiuquan), two mysterious poems and a title, 'Heavenly King, Lord of the Kingly Way, *Quan* [Completeness]'. So Hong set out, with his father's words of blessing and protection singing in his ears.

What did his family and friends do as he ranted and raved while they kept watch at his bed in the village of Guanlubu? They thought he had gone mad. At times during his delirium, he would call out, argue with those around, get up and run around the room while making sword thrusts, only to collapse back on his bed. At one point he wrote out the two poems his father in heaven had bequeathed him, at another he wrote his new title in red ink and posted it on the door. That door was kept firmly locked, since the family would have been held to account should he have done harm to anyone else. They certainly did not understand what was happening, but did Hong? Upon waking and calming down, he was unable to make sense of it all. So he gradually settled back into village life, began teaching children again and studying the Confucian texts in preparation for his next attempt at the civil service examinations.

Hong and the Bible

Let me fill in some context.² Hong Xiuquan (born Renkun, with the courtesy name of Huoxiu in 1814) was a young Hakka man, a minority group in China. He was part of a large family that had moved more than a century earlier to the village of Fuyanshui and then later to Guanlubu, in the mountainous county of Hua (in those times Huadu, 50 kilometres north of Canton). The rugged area was a favourite haunt of bandits and rebels (the distinction is artificial), for the mountains offered plenty of protection. Young Hong was widely regarded as the scholar of the family, so he studied hard for the civil service examinations based on the Confucian texts.

² Spence 1996, pp. 23-65.

On two earlier occasions, he had passed the local examination, which entitled him to travel to Canton for the major examination. The stakes were high, for success enabled one to enter the imperial service and gain prestige for oneself and one's family. To finance his study, he taught in his village, being paid in food and the basics of life. But on the two previous occasions, he had failed the examinations in Canton. By 1837 the pressure was even higher and he arrived with high expectations. Again he failed the examinations, which brought on his nervous breakdown and the extraordinary vision with which I began.

On this occasion there was one crucial difference: Hong had in passing accepted from a missionary (and his assistant) a collection of biblical tracts known as *Good Words to Admonish the Age* (*Quanshi liangyan*).³ They were written in Chinese by a certain evangelical convert, Liang Fa.⁴ The tracts and then the Bible itself (which he acquired a few years later) would become the catalyst for the Taiping Revolution. But at the time, Hong paid little attention to the collection of tracts, tossing them in his bag and ignoring them as the vision descended upon him. Indeed, he ignored them for some years afterwards, as he returned to what resembled normal life.

Six years later, in 1843, he made one last attempt at the civil service examination. The fourth failure reminded him of his vivid dream, but now he turned to the biblical literature that lay gathering dust in a corner. At first the biblical tracts and then the whole Bible gave him the key to his visions. He had been in heaven and had met none other than God the Heavenly Father (*tianfu*) in physical form, with a long beard and wearing a black dragon robe, who vouched for the authenticity of the Bible (these were the mysterious moral texts that had taken considerable effort

³ Fa 1962.

⁴ See the detailed study by Kim 2011, although he overplays the role of the tracts in Taiping thought and practice.

to understand) and had entrusted him with slaying demons. He also learned that the elder brother (*tianxiong*) he had met was none other than Jesus himself. This of course meant that he was Jesus's 'natural younger brother' (*baodi*) and therefore that he, Hong Xiuquan, was a human but non-divine 'son' of God. At this point, many have suggested that Hong was indeed somewhat mad. But to do so would be to miss a vital feature of religious revolutionary movements: visions and dreams function as powerful sources of inspiration, along with the Bible. Both are perfectly authentic forms of divine revelation, one from the past and the other in the present. In Hong's case, the biblical material provided the interpretive key for the dreams.⁵ Even more, his initial visions and interpretive insight provided the ideological basis of the Taiping movement.

Hong Xiuquan learnt much, much more from the Bible, which became central for the movement and to which considerable resources were devoted for reprinting and even corrections.⁶ He studied the Bible in detail in 1847, when he spent some time in Hong Kong with a Baptist missionary from the United States, Issachar J. Roberts.⁷ Study of the Bible made Hong realise the political dimensions of his religious visions, with a focus on the founding a heavenly kingdom on earth, which entailed punishing the idol worshippers and evil ones.⁸ The Bible in question

⁵ But when his dreams ceased, the movement turned to other visionaries and to detailed interpretation of the Bible, although they inevitably used such visions in the factional struggles that threatened the movement. See Spence 1996, pp. 210-45.

⁶ In Hong Xiuquan's own words, from the *Taiping Heavenly Chronicle* (*Taiping tianri*): 'The Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God, ordered that three classes of books be put out and indicated this to the Sovereign, saying, This class of books consists of the records which have been transmitted from that former time when I descended into the world, performing miracles and instituting the commandments. These books are pure and without error. And the books of the second class are the accounts which have been transmitted from the time when your Elder Brother, Christ, descended into the world, performing miracles, sacrificing his life for the remission of sins, and doing other deeds. These books also are pure and without error. But the books of the other class are those transmitted from Confucius These books contain extremely numerous errors and faults, so that you were harmed by studying them'. Michael and Chang 1966-71b, pp. 56-7.

⁷ See further Rapp 2008; Teng 1963.

⁸ Reilly 2004, pp. 104-15; Kilcourse 2012, p. 131.

was a Chinese translation, made by the missionaries Karl Gützlaff and Walter Medhurst, respectively translating the Old and New Testaments.⁹ The important feature of this translation was that it translated the name for God into Chinese as *Shangdi* (Sovereign on High), or at times *Huang Shangdi* (Supreme Sovereign on High).¹⁰ Crucially, *Shangdi* was the original name given to the Lord of Heaven by the Chinese classics. This translation had first been suggested in the sixteenth century by the Roman Catholic missionary, Matteo Ricci. It had suffered under a papal decree that banned it in 1715, but was resurrected in the nineteenth century in the midst of immense debate among the idiosyncratic circle of missionaries based in Hong Kong. Thus, in their translation of the Old and New Testaments, Medhurst and Gützlaff used *Shangdi* for the name of God.

The choice of *Shangdi* had profound implications for Hong Xiuquan and those who followed him. From the first imperial Chinese dynasty (the Qin in 221-206 BCE) the term *Huangdi* (supreme *di*) had been used to designate the emperor. By claiming the title of *di*, the emperor ever since – in the eyes of the Taiping – was laying claim to a name that should have been none other than the name of God. Absolutely no-one was to use either *shang* or *di* (Hong insisted that he be called nothing more than *zhu*, 'lord').¹¹ In other words, from the first moment and throughout the Chinese imperial system, God (the most high *Shangdi*) had been blasphemed. The key for the Taiping was in the first three of the Ten Commandments, which concern the worship of one god and the ban on graven images. These commandments, they believed, were applicable to the Chinese imperial system, and particularly the Qing dynasty of their own time. The emperors

⁹ See further Zhao 2010.

¹⁰ Reilly 2004, pp. 19-53, 78-100.

¹¹ This also included Jesus, for if the Taiping had claimed that Jesus or indeed Hong was also divine, they would have contradicted this position. See Kilcourse 2012, pp. 134-36.

and all who supported them had created false gods in place of the High God, *Shangdi*. In the words of the *Taiping Imperial Declaration* of 1844-45:

By referring to the Old Testament [*Jiuyizhao shengshu*] we learn that in early ages the Supreme God [*Huang Shangdi*] descended on Mount Sinai and in his own hand he wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone, which he gave to Moses, saying, 'I am the High Lord [*Shangzhu*], the Supreme God; you men of the world must on no account set up images resembling anything in heaven above or on earth below, and bow down and worship them'. Now you people of the world who set up images and bow down and worship them are in absolute defiance of the Supreme God's expressed will. ... How extremely foolish you are to let your minds be so deceived by the demon!"¹²

And not only was the emperor himself a self-proclaimed imposter, but so also were the myriad symbols and representations of imperial rule through the length and breadth of China. The whole imperial system, the object of God's wrath, had to be destroyed.

Revolution and Community

The Taiping found many other revolutionary texts in the Bible, all the way from Exodus to the Book of Revelation. But let me outline the main features of the revolution,¹³ which was the most important and largest movement anywhere in the world in the nineteenth century. The revolutionary sparks in Europe of 1848 were a side-show by comparison. It began as a small movement with a few local followers in the villages around Hong Xiuquan's home of Guanlubu, in Guangdong province. Forced to move into more remote areas, they established their base in the remote

¹² Michael and Chang 1966-71b, p. 41. See also the detailed discussion of the strongly monotheistic nature of Taiping theology in Kilcourse 2012, pp. 129-33.

¹³ It was indeed a revolution, and the Chinese term 'Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement' (*Taiping tianguo tundong*) implies. The efforts by some recent US scholars to rebadge it a 'civil war' may be well-intentioned (to give the Taiping movement more credibility), but the unfortunate effect is to equate it with the American Civil War, with which it has little in common. See Platt 2012; Meyer-Fong 2013.

mountainous regions of Guangxi province. Yet the message of resistance found fertile soil among any who were oppressed and exploited. These included peasants, miners, ethnic minorities and organised 'bandit' groups who had for long carried out their own forms of resistance. Memories of oppression run deep and the opportunities for genuine release are few. This seemed to be one such occasion, when all of the bottled-up revolutionary will exploded against systemic economic exploitation, colonial depredations, political suppression by the ethnically foreign dynasty of the Qing and the ideological straightjacket of Confucianism. Within a few short years, the revolution swept northwards, capturing swathes of territory, cities and major Qing garrisons. By the time the old imperial Ming capital of Nanjing was captured in 1853, the Taiping Revolution controlled the 'cradle' of Chinese civilisation, the most populous and prosperous part of China in the central planes around the Yellow River. Here a new state was established.

The scale of the revolution was staggering. At their peak, the Taiping armed forces numbered up to a million. They developed innovative and complex military tactics with spectacular coordination against largely enervated Qing forces,¹⁴ engaged in massive pitched battles, instituted strict discipline, reorganised the social and economic fabric of the new state and their eventual destruction left anywhere from ten to twenty million dead and far more devastated. Left to their own devices, the Taiping revolutionaries would have overthrown the otiose Qing imperial rule itself. The key to the collapse of the revolution was not so much a Qing revival, but the intervention of British forces at a crucial juncture.¹⁵ The British were clearly concerned at losing both their North American and Chinese markets within the space of a few years. The imposition of opium on the Chinese

¹⁴ See further Luo 1991.

¹⁵ See especially Platt 2012.

had turned the balance of accounts into the empire's favour and it was loath to lose such a lucrative venture as the drug market. Of course, the British forces had their own agenda, quite different from the Qing imperial court, but the result was the same: to snuff out the Taiping Revolution. As a result, the tide of war turned against the Taiping revolutionaries. Nanjing fell barely more than a decade after being captured, in 1864. Anyone associated with the revolutionaries was slaughtered *en masse*, including extensive examples of 'ethnic cleansing' in the south, and the last holdouts were 'mopped up' in the 1870s and 1880s. Neither the Qing nor the British could erase the profound effect on Chinese society, so much so that it heralded the end of more than two millennia of imperial rule only a few decades later.

In the hands of the Taiping revolutionaries, the Bible had become a potent source of inspiration for revolution. But it also provided the basic guidelines for a very different organisation of society. As for economic factors, the basic principle was stated in *The Land System of the Heavenly Divinity*:

The whole empire is the universal family of our Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God. When all the people in the empire will not take anything as their own but submit all things to the Supreme Lord, then the Lord will make use of them, and in the universal family of the empire, every place will be equal and every individual well-fed and clothed. This is the intent of our Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God, in specially commanding the true Sovereign of Taiping to save the world.¹⁶

Not only had *Shangdi* had created all the richness of the earth, but he also desired that his children should partake of it equally. In a practice established early in the movement, this meant that all goods were stored in a communal treasury and redistributed to the people as they had need. Initially, the common treasury was filled with the ill-gotten gains of the Qing ruling class in the cities conquered, but it

¹⁶ Michael and Chang 1966-71b, p. 314.

also entailed relieving landlords of their stores, if not their heads and sumptuous dwellings, much to the appreciation of the large peasant base of the movement. However, when the Taiping movement had achieved relatively stable power, it continued to fill the common treasury with plunder, but it also set out to institute land reform, in which the land too was held in common and allocated to each man and woman over sixteen in equal shares, albeit in light of the land's productivity. They were given animals and the responsibility for growing crops.¹⁷ They would be able to keep sufficient for their needs, but the rest would go into the common stores. From here special needs were met, whether illness, birth, death, or indeed surpluses for times of warfare, which was an ever-present reality for the Taping movement. Often, the organisation was left up the local villagers, without the pest of landlords, and after the process was completed, each dwelling had a plaque attached to it to indicate that the dwelling in question was now part of the new economic order. This approach did not remove specialisation, for those skilled in various tasks – such as carpenters, bricklayers, ironsmiths, potters, firefighters, medical workers, bakers, tailors, soy sauce and bean curd makers, and especially printers (for the Bible, which was a major project in Nanjing) – were to contribute their skills to common projects, such as the building and then, after a fire, the rebuilding of Hong Xiuquan's residence in Nanjing. Ideally, all would contribute their skills and then receive what they needed from the local common stores. It also became clear that one common treasury was impractical. So they instituted a system of local common stores, based upon collective units of 25 families. This system required both the removal of speculative trade, especially in the military bases where defensive preparations were paramount, and detailed accounting methods,¹⁸ so that an accurate record of

¹⁷ They did not prevent stalls at the city gates of the various fortresses, where farmers could exchange vegetables, grain, meat, fish and even tea.

¹⁸ See further, Zhu 1989.

people, stores and relevant needs were recorded – down to matters such as cooking oil, salt and drinking water. We can see here the principle of Acts 4:42-35 being implemented, according to which everyone laid all they had at the feet of the apostles and it was distributed to all according to need. This would become the socialist principle of ‘from each according to ability, to each according to ability’.

As for social organisation, the Taiping movement banned what would one expect in nineteenth century China: opium, gambling and slavery, on pain of death. But they added to their list alcohol and tobacco. They also did away with some of the inescapable hierarchies of the imperially sanctioned Confucianism, with complex levels of respect for emperor, parents, elder siblings and nearly everyone else in the social pecking order. Apart from the leaders and ranks in the army, each one was to call each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, as the early Christians did. While this may seem innocuous, in a Chinese situation with its deeply ingrained practices of social deference and respect, embodied in everyday terms of address, this move was more radical than an outsider may suspect. Gender did not escape the Taiping, especially in light of the typical Confucian denigration of women, according to which the role of women was to be illiterate child-bearers and home-keepers, so much so that social and political disaster was believed to ensue when a woman did not fulfil her allotted role. By contrast, the Taiping abolished not only foot-binding, but they also replaced the centuries-old Confucian examination system with a system open to both women and men and based on the Bible. Women often took senior roles of management and administration, especially in the large household of Hong Xiuquan. As a forerunner of communist practice in the twentieth century, women and men served in the armies, in which service was expected.¹⁹ At the same

¹⁹ A strain of Chinese scholarship has sought to downplay the innovations in terms of gender, suggesting that the Taiping movement did little for women. So Wang and Xiao 1989; Xia 2003, 2004; Liao and Wang 2004. I would stress here that such moves were relative and often ambiguous, but that they constitute a significant challenge at the time.

time, the relative equalisation of gender also entailed strict separation of the sexes, with no sexual intercourse (later relaxed somewhat) – a practice that was common among other radical religious movements.²⁰ All of these practices – however compromised, partial and imperfect they might have been – were bound together with religious practices and observance.²¹ Groups of five families, under the leadership of a corporal, were to gather weekly for worship at a local church, while every seventh Sabbath they would gather with twenty other families at a larger church. Here, women and men sat on each side, partaking of a liturgy of Scripture readings, sermons, prayer, singing and one sacrament, that of baptism for new converts (the Eucharist seems not to have been practiced). At communal meals, prayer was said and the Ten Commandments recited. The tell-tale signal of the new order already emerging was the promulgation of a new calendar in 1851, drawing upon traditional Chinese and Christian features, with a focus on the seventh day for worship and prayer. Years now began from the inauguration of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

Interpreting the Taiping Revolution

Interpretations of the Taiping Revolution are myriad, focusing on every aspect from economic reorganisation to its linguistic innovations. Since my focus is on religion, I suggest that we group the interpretations in the following terms. First, all of the missionaries at the time and even those with a modicum of theological sensibilities dismissed the Taiping movement as a heresy. For example, Issachar Roberts, Hong Xiuquan's erstwhile theological teacher, called his former student 'a

²⁰ Such segregation appears in not a few radical European movements, such as the Moravian Brethren. See Fogleman 2008 and Petterson 2014.

²¹ Buddhist and Daoist temples and features were mercilessly destroyed in the process, but Muslims and Roman Catholics were often spared.

crazy man ... making himself equal with Jesus Christ'.²² The paths to the charge of heresy differed. Some argued that Hong claimed to be divine, like Jesus, while others argued that the Taiping revolutionaries saw both Jesus and Hong as divinely appointed human messengers, with the result that Jesus' divinity was denied.²³ However, a longer historical view soon reveals that the charge of heresy was a standard way in which 'mainstream' theological traditions dealt with revolutionary religious movements. Second, modern, mostly non-Chinese critics have equally marginalised the movement, albeit with a range of assessments. These include 'spiritualised' Confucianism, a form of local popular religion, a distortion of Christianity in light of traditional Chinese folk religion, a new form of Chinese religion, another type of millenarianism, fanatical totalitarianism, theocracy, or a somewhat ignorant revision of Protestantism.²⁴

Third, the richest resource for research is in Chinese scholarship.²⁵ Although every aspect of the movement has been analysed in detail, and although positions have shifted and been contested over the years,²⁶ the core religious dimension has not often been given the attention it deserves, with a preference for dealing with class, economics, land redistribution, colonialism, social structure and, more recently, the drive to modernisation. When Chinese Marxist scholarship has faced the question of religion, it has usually resorted to Engels's methodological assumption in interpreting the sixteenth-century Peasant Revolution in Germany:

²² See the useful survey of missionary attitudes in Kilcourse 2012, pp. 126-9.

²³ See the careful reassessment of Taiping theology by Kilcourse 2012, who argues that they held to one divine being, God the Father, and that Jesus was his human but non-divine offspring. Hong Xiuquan too was given such a role, albeit in a position inferior to Jesus.

²⁴ Boardman 1952; Gregory 1963; Michael and Chang 1966-71a, 1966-71b and 1966-71c; Shih 1967; Franz-Willing 1972; Jen 1973; Russell 1977; Wagner 1982; Spence 1996; Reilly 2004; Moffett 2005, pp. 293, 299; Foster 2011; Kim 2011; Cook 2012.

²⁵ For a relatively insightful, albeit dated, survey of Chinese scholarship until the more recent period, see Weller 1987.

²⁶ For example, the earlier scholarship of Luo Ergang (Luo 1951) stressed the egalitarian and revolutionary nature of the movement, while more recent scholars have either seen this as peasant utopianism or challenged its progressiveness.

theological language was a cloak for political and economic factors, an approach that is indebted to an application of the base-superstructure model.²⁷ Thus, studies seek the infrastructural ‘reality’ behind the unstable superstructural Christianity of the Taiping movement, whether in terms of its bourgeois or ‘Western’ nature, or indeed psychological factors.²⁸ Two approaches have more promise: either religion is inherently reactionary and must be separated from the revolutionary dimensions, or religion itself may express the longings of the peasants, if not the Chinese people, against exploitation and oppression.²⁹ Below I will pick up the tension between these two positions in terms of political ambivalence, but here I stress that by drawing on different aspects of Marx and Engels’s observations concerning religion (frequent comments on the reactionary nature of religion and Marx’s ‘heart of a heartless world’), they threaten to break out of the cloak metaphor. Religion becomes a material force, either in terms of the consequences of its ideological framework and scriptural injunctions or – more significantly – in terms of the material dimensions of religion itself.

The fourth approach is one that has not been explored thus far: the connection with what should be called the revolutionary tradition of Christianity.³⁰ I will have more to say on this tradition in a moment, suffice to point out here the Taiping revolution marks the moment when this revolutionary tradition arrived in China – and I have structured my earlier account of the movement in this light. The

²⁷ Engels 1973, 1978. See further Weller 1987, pp. 740-5. He points out that the ‘outer garment’ theory was particularly strong during the Cultural Revolution.

²⁸ Wei 1987; Yin 1989; Zhu 1990; An and Bai 1991; Xia 1992; Zheng 2000; Liao 2005. I leave aside the proposal that the Taiping Revolution repeated an old Chinese pattern of peasant uprisings that sought to restore the dynastic imperial system. My earlier point concerning the anti-dynastic nature of the movement should indicate the implausibility of this suggestion.

²⁹ Qin 2010; Xie 1989; Chen 1996.

³⁰ While not recognising the revolutionary religious tradition, Kilcourse (2012) adds an intriguing twist to this argument: Christian theology enabled the Taiping to rediscover and lay claim to the authentic Chinese traditions concerning the high god, *Shangdi*. These arguments are elaborated in Kilcourse 2016, which was not yet published at the time of writing.

movement was therefore in a contradictory situation, for it was simultaneously the continuation of a very old tradition and a distinct rupture in a Chinese context (in which Christianity had typically sought state sponsorship or was seen, in the nineteenth century, as a colonial ideology). We may go further, for the Taiping revolutionaries were themselves conscious of a distinct rupture with a millennia-old imperial order with its Confucian ideology. As Samir Amin has argued, it was the first modern revolution in China, as well as the first revolutionary struggle by peoples on the periphery of capitalism. It thereby became the ‘ancestor of the “anti-feudal, anti-imperialist popular revolution” as formulated later by Mao’.³¹ It is not for nothing that Taiping Revolution was consciously invoked in the republican revolution of 1911. Sun Yat-sen explicitly claimed the revolution as a forerunner of his own, so much so that he was known by the nickname of Hong Xiuquan. All of this was enabled by the first manifestation in China of the revolutionary religious tradition.

Implications

Thus far, my discussion has been largely historical, seeking to offer a particular understanding of the Taiping Revolution as in part religiously inspired. Now I shift gear, drawing out – in brief – some of the philosophical implications from the largest revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century, implications that have a direct bearing on Marxist understandings of the revolutionary religious tradition.

³¹ Amin 2013, p. 159.

Revolutionary Religion

I have proposed that the Taiping Revolution marks the arrival of the revolutionary religious tradition in China. The one who first identified the tradition is none other than Friedrich Engels. He is of course responsible for the enduring cloak metaphor that has influenced Marxist scholarship (Chinese and otherwise) concerning religion, in which religion becomes a language or code for other, political and economic realities. The metaphor appears in his influential study of the German Peasant Revolution and the ‘theologian of the revolution’, Thomas Müntzer.³² Here Engels argued that Müntzer used incendiary theological language for the outsiders of the movement, but for the inner circle he dispensed with such language and spoke as an atheist materialist in terms of economics and politics. No evidence exists for this dubious suggestion, yet Engels’s other studies of religion are usually read in light of the study of the German peasants. I would like to propose another approach, reading Engels in light of his later ‘On the History of Early Christianity’.³³ Here he argued that Christian origins were revolutionary, for its primary appeal was to the slaves, peasants and unemployed urban poor; it had many of the same features as the modern socialist movement, such as false prophets, sectarianism, utopianism and fund-raising difficulties; and from small beginnings it became a mass movement that conquered the Roman Empire. The crucial point is that Engels came close to dispensing with the cloak metaphor and arguing for an important role for religion itself in the early Christian movement.

This insight would form the core of Karl Kautsky’s much-neglected study of the ‘forerunners of modern socialism’.³⁴ If Engels made the initial moves, Kautsky

³² Engels 1973, 1978. This flawed study was developed into much better arguments by Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch, and resonating in our own day with the novel *Q* (Bloch 2009; Blissett 2004; Boer 2014b).

³³ Engels 1972, 1990.

³⁴ Kautsky 1897, 1976a, 1976b; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977.

was the one who established the existence of what I have been calling the revolutionary religious tradition. Through much of his immense survey of movements, running from early Christianity to the emergence of modern socialism, Kautsky argued that religious reasons were as important as economics and politics. Others would fill out the details of Kautsky's outline, such as the insights of Rosa Luxemburg, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Ernst Bloch or indeed Paul Le Blanc.³⁵ This is not the place to deal with their proposals in an extensive fashion, for I seek to identify the main features of this revolutionary tradition with an eye on the Taiping movement.

These are, first, the revolutionary impulse itself. This impulse arises from a sense of radical alterity, generated by high sense of the transcendence of the divine, the centrality of the Scriptures, and the need for all to obey divine laws – including the ruling class. In light of a current situation in which exploitation exists in economic relations, injustice in social relations, corruption in institutions such as religious bodies, and oppression in political forms, it becomes clear time and again that the status quo is far from transcendent requirements. This emphasis on alterity and transcendence leads not to acquiescence to oppression, but to human agency in responding to such oppression. This response may take a revolutionary path, as has happened frequently in the histories of Christianity, but it may also lead to a withdrawal from the society in question in order to establish a new collective that models an alternative believed to be divinely sanctioned. The two are by no means incommensurable. This brings me to the second feature of the revolutionary religious tradition: forms of communal life, with some type of property in common and the principle of distributing to any who have need. As I noted earlier, the idea originally comes from the biblical Book of Acts 4: 32 and 35: 'everything they owned

³⁵ Luxemburg 1970; Lunacharsky 1908-11; Bloch 2009; Le Blanc 2006, pp. 49-76.

was held in common ... and it was distributed to each as any had need'. It was to become the socialist slogan of 'to each according to need, from each according to ability'.³⁶ Today, radical religious collectives continue to practice this principle. The relevance for the Taiping revolution should be obvious, for it too developed, on the basis of biblical and religious inspiration, a revolutionary approach that also sought to remodel society on similar lines – however it much it may have fallen short.

Political Ambivalence

A further implication for a Marxist approach to religion picks up my earlier observation on Chinese scholarship, some of which argues that Taiping Christianity was either reactionary or revolutionary. I would like to reinterpret this tension in terms of what may be called the political ambivalence at the heart of a religion like Christianity. One influential strain of Marxist thought in different parts of the world holds that religion is a reactionary ideology that seeks to justify its conservative position by reference to questionable metaphysics. Another, lesser strain seeks to join a political orientation (Marxism or left-wing approaches more generally) with religious commitment. By contrast, I want to argue that a religion like Christianity – which for many reasons I know best – has a political ambivalence at its heart.³⁷ Religion can effortlessly result in a reactionary position. It perfectly comfortable seated next to all manner of sundry tyrants, aspiring despots, and bourgeois backstabbers. Christianity has done so ever since it became the religion of empire under Constantine (the victory of Christianity Engels's identified was certainly a problematic one). Yet, at one and the same time, religion can and does foster revolutionary movements that seek to – and from time to time do – overthrow

³⁶ The current form of the slogan appears first with Louis Blanc: '*de chacun selon ses facultés, à chacun selon ses besoins*' (1851, p. 92).

³⁷ For the detail of the argument for this section, see Boer 2014a, pp. 125-70.

precisely those powers. This approach too draws its inspiration from the same texts – the Bible – and the same tradition as the reactionaries. Engels, Kautsky, Bloch and many others have done the work to identify this aspect of a religion like Christianity.

Crucially, both aspects are part of religion – hence the description as political ambivalence. Again and again have I found this ambivalence in my research, especially in the work of many Marxists. In other words, I do not hold that one form of religion is the true core and that the other is a distortion, a bowdlerisation of that core. This approach is common enough. Thus, some – Marxists among them – will argue that religion is inherently reactionary and that the radical revolutionary dimension is a distortion perpetrated by the religious left. By contrast, a good number of those on the religious left want to argue that the truth of religion is found in its radical dimension. Thus, from the earliest Christians the centre of religion was the radical challenge to the powers that be in the name of a better, more just world. Each position presents only half of the truth, for both positions – and indeed variations on them – arise from the dynamic of religion itself.

So what does one who has an interest in such matters do? Here I like to follow Ernst Bloch's suggestion, which entails identifying the political ambivalence of a religion like Christianity, including the occasional dialectical necessity of the reactionary moment for the sake of preserving the revolutionary moment. But it also entails the crucial step of taking sides, for at a revolutionary moment one can no longer prevaricate over political ambivalence.³⁸ In many respects, the Taiping Revolution involved a clear taking of sides. The long history of Christianity in China, from the Nestorian or Eastern Christians of the seventh century, the Roman Catholics of the sixteenth century to the Protestants of the eighteenth and

³⁸ See further Boer 2007, pp. 105-50.

nineteenth centuries, had tended to seek imperial favour for their work. By contrast, the Taiping revolutionaries challenged the imperial system to its foundations.

Ontological and Temporal Transcendence

A further issue that arises from the Taiping Revolution and its distinctive interpretation of Christian theology, as also from the revolutionary religious tradition, concerns transcendence. It is crucial to distinguish between two types of transcendence: ontological and temporal. Ontological transcendence involves being, between nature and supernature, between the world as we know it and the possibility (or otherwise) of a world we do not know directly. Temporal transcendence concerns the difference between the current period of existence and a period in the future of qualitatively different existence (and by existence I mean collective as well as individual). Or to use mythological language, one concerns heaven above, while the other concerns a new earth in the future.

Both forms of transcendence usually appear in religion, although a common caricature is to restrict religion to ontological transcendence, with the supernatural beings in some other realm (for which the term 'heaven' functions as shorthand) and natural beings on this earth. This restriction often goes hand-in-hand with a curious individualisation of religion, in which the relation is between the individual and his or her god. But what about temporal transcendence? A new earth, eschatology, the millennium, the end of history, the heavenly kingdom of great peace – the metaphors vary but the point is the same: religion is vitally concerned with what happens in the future on this earth. A definition of temporal transcendence might run as follows: a qualitatively different era provides the reference point for this era. In other words, the world to come is creatively present to what precedes it. For some, this temporal transcendence is the primary form of

transcendence in religion; indeed, such temporal transcendence determines how ontological transcendence should be understood.³⁹ For others, the denial of ontological transcendence is the condition for temporal transcendence, which becomes the ultimate or highest newness that determines how we understand, act in and seek to transform the present.⁴⁰ Further, how we understand temporal transcendence varies: it may be restricted to a future moment; it may have been realised already, with the new age in its first stages; or it may be proleptic, having been inaugurated but awaiting its fulfilment. It goes without saying that these forms of transcendence can be spoken about in only in metaphorical, if not mythical language, unless one reverts to abstractions as I have done.

As for the Taiping revolution, the visions of Hong Xiuquan initially suggest an ontological transcendence. He meets God his Father in heaven, as well as his elder brother. He battles demons in the various levels of heaven. His earthly life, to which he returns, plays a secondary role. Indeed, the ontological reference point was crucial, for it provided – through the Bible – the reasons for seeking to destroy the whole, blaspheming, imperial system. In short, the imperial system had not obeyed the divine law. However, the temporal perspective is also inescapable. The armies, the many battles against the Qing troops, the significant writings that have survived, the practice of collective forms of living, the renaming of Nanjing to Tianjing (heavenly capital), the name of the movement itself (Taiping Tianguo, or the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace) – these and more give a very clear sense of the this-worldly, temporal dimension of the movement. If anything, it was a form of proleptic eschatology, in which the new world had begun – through the Taiping – but awaited its fulfilment when its enemies were destroyed.

³⁹ See further, Pannenberg 1991-93.

⁴⁰ Bloch 1995, 2009.

All of this means that a religiously inspired movement like the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was as much a material as a spiritual reality. The same could be said about religion itself. To restrict religion to either its spiritual (metaphysical) dimension or to its material base is to truncate a complex phenomenon. Indeed, I suggest that it also offers a truncated type of Marxist analysis. However, I would like to mention another dimension of religion as it was revealed by the Taiping Revolution: it was both a secular and an anti-secular movement. The usual understanding of the term 'secular' is to oppose it to religion. Thus, the process of secularisation is meant to be – in a European context – the gradual dispensing-with of religion as a force in social and political life. But this understanding faces a difficulty when it has to deal with religious secularists, if not the fact that many religious people were and are in favour of secularism.⁴¹ So let me briefly suggest the following: the Latin word *saeculum* (adjective *saecularis*) designates what is of this world and of this age. It does not refer to another world and another age – whether another reality or another better world of the future. One can easily see how this may be read in an anti-religious way, but this reading is not a necessary outcome. The upshot is that any movement that is concerned with a better world – Marxism included – has an anti-secular dimension about it. A revolutionary religious movement like the Taiping has both secular and anti-secular dimensions. It was very much concerned with the Chinese context as it was – imperial system, landlords and peasants, economic, ethnic and ideological exploitation. However, it was also focused on changing that context for the sake of another and better system. It did so by reference to both the realm of the gods and a future that could be inaugurated in the present.

⁴¹ For further detail relating to this argument, see Boer 2014a, pp. 324-7.

Conclusion: Taking Sides

I have proposed that the Taiping revolution marks the moment when the revolutionary Christian tradition arrive in China, and I have explored in brief some of the implications for a Marxist approach to religion, if not theology. Or rather, I have made these points at the (dialectical) intersection between Marxism and religion. However, I close by dealing with a potential objection. The way I have described revolutionary religion may also be taken as a model for reactionary movements: profound criticism of the status quo and the effort to construct a new social and economic order (various movements in Islam may be cited as examples). In answering such an objection, I can only mention the following points briefly, since they are really the topic of another discussion. To begin with, I refer to my earlier observations concerning the political ambivalence of religion, according to which it can easily slip into seats of oppressive power as much as it can seek to overthrow such power. Further, this ambivalence means not so much a sitting on the fence, but the need to listen to intelligent conservatives, since their criticisms of the current situation are at times insightful, although their proposed solutions are distinctly wayward. Finally, many a movement has faced a crucial moment when it may have turned towards a more radical or a more reactionary path, if not a more dialectical moment when what was radical became reactionary, or vice versa. The imperative to take sides thus requires considerable discernment.

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