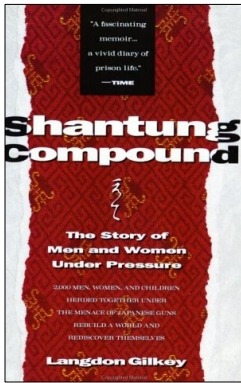


Shantung Compound

The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure

by Langdon Gilkey (Harper and Row, 1966)

Reviewer: Erik Johnson (12/29/2012)



In 1943 imperialist Japan, already occupying China, rounded up nearly 2000 non-Chinese civilians living in Peking and imprisoned them 200 miles away in a decrepit Presbyterian mission/hospital compound located in a city called Weih sien. These prisoners included mostly British and American teachers, missionaries, bachelors, families, children, elderly, businessmen, diplomats, bankers, lawyers, monks, and medical workers.

Langdon Gilkey (1919 - 2004), a 24 year old American teacher with a philosophy degree from Harvard, was among the prisoners. He kept lengthy notes of his 2 ½ years internment and eventually became a theologian (not scientist as I misreported to our group; he merely wrote on scientific subjects).

There were no tortures, no assassinations, and no tales of starvation or brutality in this camp. But the confinement was difficult on many levels and Gilkey used his creative mind and excellent writing skills to turn this experience into a laboratory for testing the character of human nature. An adult version of Lord of the Flies, these civilians had to carve out a civilization to manage space (living quarters were cramped and overcrowded), medical needs (the hospital was in disrepair), sanitation (toilets overflowed), food (cooking and baking for 2000!), and security (stealing was rampant).

Internees didn't know what to expect from their Japanese captors. The specter of disease and starvation was real. There was no running water, too few latrines, and no centralized heating. Electricity was erratic. There were 45 minute waits for meals. They endured bedbugs, muddy streets, cement floors, and no Chinese servants, a luxury many were used to. Electrified barbed wire, 6' walls, and machine gun turrets made escape impossible (and how would a European blend into Chinese culture anyway?).

To me the most significant 'plot' of the book is Gilkey's transformation from a liberal humanist who believed in the goodness of humanity to Christian thinker who embraced the notion of depravity and sin.

My favorite quotes

"We in the Weih sien camp suffered no extreme hardships of limb, stomach, or spirit....our problems were created more by our own behavior than by our Japanese captors" (p. ix).

"In our internment camp we were secure and comfortable enough to accomplish in large part the creation and maintenance of a small civilization; but our life was sufficiently close to the margin of survival to reveal the vast difficulties of that task" (p. ix).

"It is inevitable that in attempting an analysis of our problems I should describe the 'sins' as well as the virtues of the people in the camp. For this is essentially the subject of our story" (p. x).

"But at Weih sien all the vast interconnected services of civilization had vanished, and with them had gone every one of our creature comforts" (p. 12).

"If this great crowd of people were to survive, much less to live a passable life, a civilization of some sort would have to be created from scratch" (p, 12).

“I recall clearly my relief that a providential case of constipation during the first ten days of camp saved me from having to test the strength of my stomach” (due to overflow of human waste, p. 14).

“Bank clerks, professors, salesmen, missionaries, importers, and executives became bakers, stokers, cooks, carpenters, masons, and hospital orderlies” (p. 15).

“Spiritually, and often physically, naked before twenty dorm mates, he had to live out the most private moments of his life surrounded by an alien and often prying world” (p. 17).

“In general, however, the human ability to adjust is beyond belief. By the end of six months, nearly everyone in the camp had learned to live with almost anybody, and generally speaking existence in the dorms became in some way tolerable for all” (p. 19).

“In a very short time people became to us personalities, pleasant or unpleasant, hard working or lazy, rather than the British, Eurasians, or Americans that they were when we first met them” (p. 24).

“To be facile in the area of abstractions or of general truths was of no help when the oven walls were cracked, when the yeast wouldn’t raise the bread dough, when slightly smelly meat was delivered in the hot weather” (p. 27).

“The culmination of these early forms of ‘culture’ came, surely, when a baseball league (e.g., the Peking Panthers vs. the Tientsin Tigers) started in earnest on the small ball field, exciting the whole population two or three afternoons a week” (p. 34). . . . “the baseball league enthralled everyone” (p. 35).

(The ban on speaking was temporarily lifted by his order for a Trappist monk who’d spent 25 years in the same monastery and had spoken no more than four words to any living person for a quarter century. He was caught smuggling eggs into camp with the help of a Chinese conspirator and that Chinese conspirator had been shot). “At the end of the elaborate trial, the (Japanese) chief announced his stern verdict. First, he said that because he was determined to stamp out the black market, he would have to make an example of Father Darby—adding parenthetically that it pained him ‘to punish a man of the cloth.’ The camp heard this pronouncement with a shudder. And so, said the chief, he was going to sentence Father Darby to one and a half months of solitary confinement! The Japanese looked baffled when the camp greeted this news with a howl of delight, and shook their heads wonderingly as the little Trappist monk was led off to his new cell joyously singing” (p. 38).

“How quickly man makes his life—whatever its character may be—into what he can call ‘normal.’ What would have seemed a fantastic deprivation to a man comfortable, well fed, and serene in an easy chair at home, had by the end of a few short months become just ‘life’ for us” (p. 48).

“We recognized Weihsien as the accepted framework of our existence, and so the familiar context within which we reacted emotionally to things. It no longer represented a new horror against which we reacted. We would now gripe if a queue was slow, but not at the fact of the queue—for this aspect of life was ‘normal’ to us now” (p. 48).

“Only [by acceptance], I decided, can mankind live with any serenity amid so much social misery, through such unsettled periods in history in which wars have been far from abnormal. Only thus can he stand the stark insecurity that the next moment may bring to any vulnerable creature!” (p. 49).

“Work and life have a strange reciprocal relationship: only if man works can he live, but only if the work he does seems productive and meaningful can he bear the life that his work makes possible” (p. 52).

“I learned through my experience that ours was a remarkable hospital. Devoid of running water or central heating, it managed to be not only efficient but personal. It seemed to me a far better place in which to be sick than many ‘modern’ hospitals, equipped with the latest gadgets but run on impersonal terms” (p. 57).

“One pair of undershorts of mine brewed up quite a metaphysical storm in our dormitory. Since the shorts were so covered with patches that only the band around the middle contained some of the original cloth, a nice philosophical point was raised: was it now the same old pair of shorts, and if not, at what point had it become another pair?” (p. 67-68).

“As we often said to one another, when one is immersed in a play or listening to a symphony, the mind is most easily transported beyond the walls of the camp” (p. 70).

“I was deeply impressed not only by the courage and tenacity of my fellow humans but also by their inventiveness. However strange the world in which they may be set down, they will adapt themselves to it bravely, I was finding” (p. 71).

“To support justice in that time [1939-1940] was to relinquish peace, for Hitler could be overcome only with force” (p. 72).

“...I changed from the naturalistic humanist of my college days, I became what I felt to be a ‘convinced Christian.’ My new faith, however, was not so much the result of any personal religious experience as it was the intellectual conviction that only in terms of the Christian view of things could I make sense out of the social history in which we live and the ethical decisions we humans have to make” (p. 73).

“Crises occurred that involved not a breakdown in techniques, but a breakdown in character, showing the need for more moral integrity and self-sacrifice. The trouble with any new humanism, I found myself deciding, was not its confidence in human science and technology. It was rather its naïve and unrealistic faith in the rationality and goodness of the men who wield these instruments” (p. 75).

“I began to see that without moral health, a community is as helpless and last as it is without material supplies and services” (p. 76).

“...everyone saw only the logic of his own case,’ I reflected. ‘If that is at all typical of human affairs, then what sort of reality is there to the concept of ‘impartial reason?’ For when it is needed most desperately, that is, when the stakes are high for both parties and they begin to be overwrought, then impartial reason is sadly conspicuous by its absence! Does it fly away every time it is needed, to return only when harmony reigns, when the conflict is over? If that is so, then surely reason is more a symptom or effect of social harmony than it is a cause—and if that is so, from whence can we expect social health to come?’” (p. 84).

(*Gilkey tried to reason with an English prisoner who took up more space than others*). “He slammed the door. I persisted, however, shouting against the closed door that it might be hard for him to show the British title to his room in the camp and that our committee did have some official jurisdiction in these matters, after all. At that remark, he opened the door again just far enough to threaten quite seriously to sue me after the war for deliberate persecution. At this I must admit my own temper cooled and I laughed. I asked him what court he thought might have jurisdiction over the case of a British subject against an American citizen in a Japanese camp on the Chinese mainland? But he was too furious to debate this interesting legal question, and slammed the door shut for good” (p. 87-88).

“Such experiences with ordinary human cussedness naturally stimulated me to do a good deal of thinking in such time as I had to myself” (p. 89).

“To be sure, people at Weihsien did not continually snarl at each other, nor were they obviously brutal or continually selfish. As a matter of fact they remained surprisingly cheerful. We found that a sense of humor, incidentally, is the most pervasive and most welcome of men’s better qualities” (p. 92).

“As I was forced continually to notice, in any situation of tension and anxiety, when the being or security of the self is threatened, the mind simply ceases to be the objective instrument it pictures itself as” (p. 93).

“Rational behavior in communal action is primarily a moral and not an intellectual achievement, possible only to a person who is morally capable of self-sacrifice. In a real sense, I came to believe, moral selflessness is a prerequisite for the life of reason—not its consequence, as so many philosophers contend” (p. 93).

“To our mixed amusement and dismay we found that our stomachs, like implacable slave masters, completely supervised our powers of thought. A conversation might begin with religion, politics, or sex, but it was sure to end with culinary fantasies” (p. 98).

“Wealth, compounded with greed and injustice leads inevitably to strife...it became evident that the only answer was not less wealth or material goods, but the development of moral character that might lead to sharing and so provide the sole foundation for social peace” (p. 105).

(Quoting Brecht): "For even saintly folk will act like sinners, unless they have their customary dinners" (p. 111).

“Surely I had learned that men are neither so rational nor so moral as they like to think” (p. 114).

“I began to recall some of the theological ideas I had almost forgotten in the bustle and activity of camp life. Among the most relevant, it now seemed, was the old idea of original sin” (p. 115).

“For the first time it appeared to me that, contrary to most pacifist and anarchistic theory (to which I had been sympathetic), legitimate force is one of the necessary bases upon which justice can be established in human affairs” (p. 119).

“Somewhat to our surprise, we found we agreed that the law was made necessary because of self interest, and that therefore its primary function was not, as I had always thought, that of stating what is abstractly just and right, but rather that of controlling self-interest, and molding it into socially creative rather than socially destructive patterns” (p. 140).

“The question uppermost in the minds of the Labor Committee and managers was no longer, ‘Has he the skill to do his job?’ but rather, ‘Has he the honesty to be trusted with these supplies?’ For the skill, while important, could be learned, but the integrity could not. Yet it was indispensable to our common life. However highly developed our technology might have been, a technique was of no real service in the hands of a dishonest man” (p. 161).

“My early indifference to the moral element in society faded, as our splendid institutions were threatened with collapse from within” (p. 161).

“My thoughts seemed to have run into a strange dilemma I concluded ruefully a few days later. Two things that apparently contracted each other had become transparently clear in his experience. First, I had learned that men need to be moral, that is, responsibly concerned with their neighbors’ welfare as well as their own, if human community was to be at all possible; equally evidence, however, men did not or even could not so overcome their own self-concern to be thus responsible to their neighbor” (p. 162).

“It was difficult to say just what it was about the (RCC) fathers that so completely won our hearts. In part, it was their cheerfulness and their personal selflessness, a kind of noncompetitive character that was at the same time strong and masculine. In part, it was their accomplishments in the black market, which delighted us as well as fed most of us. Their unbeatable baseball team may have contributed. But probably primarily it was the remarkable was they manifested strength of character without some of the weaknesses that often accompany piety” (p. 171-172).

“One man could help another man inwardly not so much by his holiness as by his love” (p. 172).

“Aside from their readiness to clean up the latrines at the start of the camp, the most generally useful case of this willingness to tackle jobs no one else would undertake was the missionaries’ work with the teen-agers” (p. 190).

“There was a quality seemingly unique to the missionary group, namely, naturally and without pretense to respond to a need which everyone else recognized only to turn aside. Most of this went unnoticed, but our camp could scarcely have survived as well as it did without it. If there were any evidences of the grace of God observable on the surface of our camp existence, they were to be found there” (p. 192).

“Two days after the war started, eight of us a Yenching recorded some guesses as to when victory would come. Like most of those in the early church waiting for the second coming, the vast majority of the guesses were eager, optimistic, and quite wrong” (p. 201).

(NOTE: Chapter XII, “Rescue from the Clouds” describes in exciting detail what it was like when seven US paratroopers descended from the sky to liberate the camp. I cheered, I cried, I marveled at the awe these rescuers inspired). “These seven men who ruled the camp for the next two weeks were like gods among us” (p 211).

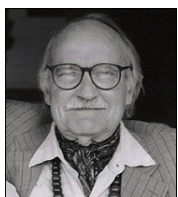
(Note: Chapter XIII, “Last Days at Weihsien” describes the astonishing drop of supplies from B52s). “Seven free boxes and many more gallon-sized tins came down. They fell with great earth shaking thuds all around us—one of them about twenty feet from me. But none of us was hit. When at last, shaking in every limb, I lifted my head, I saw with relief that great plane was winging east. I also saw crouching near me and white as a sheet, a large Scot named John McCracken, a man whom I admired very greatly as one of the wisest and strongest in the camp. I said to him, “That was the closest call of the whole damn war for me. This is the last time I go out among the corn to forage for Spam.” “Yes,” he replied panting. “I don’t think I’d mind dying protecting my country or someone I love. But I’ll be damned if I want to be killed by a can of Del Monte peaches!” (p. 216).

“Liberal humanists often express amazement that their apparently intelligent Christian friends believe many things about God which cannot be proved. At least the Christian can answer that what he believes about God cannot be disproved. But the main article of faith of the humanist, namely, the goodness of mankind and man’s consequent capacity to be moral, is refuted by any careful study of human nature. If it is unreasonable to hold a religious faith that cannot be demonstrated, surely it is irrational to defend a humanistic faith that the evidence so universally contradicts” (p. 230).

“For the man who knew nothing of divine Providence, coming to camp was an arbitrary fate that separated him from every familiar meaning by which he had lived his life. To those—and there were many—who found this new situation to be a strange work of Providence, however incomprehensible these purposes were, there could be no such loss of significance in the new and unexpected situation” (p. 240).

“The unwanted is often creative rather than destructive. No one wished to go to Weihsien camp. Yet such an experience, resisted and abhorred, had within it the seeds of new insight and thus of new life for many of us. Almost because of its discomfort, its turmoil, and its boredom, it eventually became the source of certainties and of convictions with which life could henceforth be more creatively faced. This is a common mystery of life, an aspect, if you will, of common grace: out of apparent evil new creativity can arise if the meaning and possibilities latent within the new situation are grasped with courage and with faith” (p. 242).

Langdon Gilkey: Author bio taken from his 2004 Washington Post obituary and Wikipedia



- Protestant
- argued for a rational coexistence between science and faith in the modern, secular age. He argued against both fundamentalist attacks on science and secularist attacks on religion.
- taught at the University of Chicago divinity school.
- considered a pre-eminent interpreter of the work of the theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and


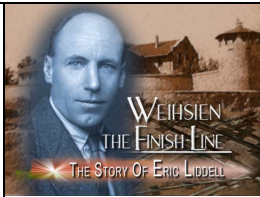

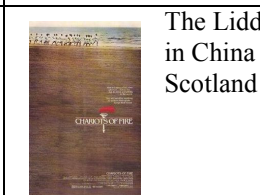
Paul Tillich.

- “A Protestant of liberal social conscience, he often argued publicly against the initiatives of Christian fundamentalists, including school prayer and creationism. As an expert witness for the American Civil Liberties Union, he testified in a highly publicized 1981 case in which an Arkansas law requiring the teaching of creationism in public schools was struck down.”
- father was the University of Chicago chaplain.
- earned a bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1940, and a Ph.D., in 1954, from Union Theological Seminary, where he was a student of Reinhold Niebuhr.
- His early books and articles demonstrated the existential power of his experiences, from his early pacifist professions as a student at Harvard University, where his classmates included, among others, future President John F Kennedy, and Cardinal Avery Dulles, to his teaching in China and his experiences as a POW.

Books include:

- Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure (1966)
- Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock (1985)
- Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge (1959)
- Naming the Whirlwind A Renewal of God Language (1970)
- Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View (1975)
- Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History (1976)
- Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology (1979)
- Through the Tempest: Theological Voyages in a Pluralistic Culture
- Nature, Reality, and the Sacred: The Nexus of Science and Religion
- Religion and the Scientific Future: Reflections on Myth, Science, and Theology
- Contemporary Explosion of Theology: Ecumenical Studies in Theology
- Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline
- Gilkey on Tillich 1990
- Blue Twilight: Nature, Creationism, and American Religion
- On Niebuhr: A Theological Study 2001

Japanese internment camps in China are also depicted in these books/films:

	<p>Spielberg’s film, Empire of the Sun (a very good film!) was based on the memoir of J. G. Ballard who was imprisoned in Lunghua.</p>		<p>Scottish Olympic runner Eric Liddell died in Shantung so any biography of his will make mention of the compound. Gilkey described Liddel “as close to being a saint as I have ever known.”</p>
	<p>Herge’s graphic novel, Tin Tin and the Blue Lotus.</p>		<p>The Liddell film, Chariots of Fire. “Eric Liddell died in China as a missionary during World War 2. All of Scotland mourned.”</p>