

Buddhist-Christian Encounters

Fulfillment Theology

by Terry C. Muck

Editor's Note: This paper was written and submitted in response to questions raised during the discussion sessions during the Ralph D. Winter Lectureship in February 2021, an event that addressed the theme, "Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Today's Realities in Light of the Pioneering Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt in China." The IJFM felt that Dr. Muck, one of the four presenters at the lectureship, provided our readership with an excellent appendix on the historic perspective of Fulfillment Theology.

The relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions has been one of the most enduring questions in all of Christian theology. That question has three specific forms: the theological form, the dialogical form, and the missiological form. The theological version of the question might be simply stated: *How do the non-Christian religions of the world relate to Christianity?* The dialogical version of the question has a more specific, and personal form: *How should Christians relate to adherents of non-Christian religions?* The missiological version of the question gets even more specific and practical: *What goals should monitor the interaction when Christians meet and relate to non-Christians?*

Strictly speaking, Fulfillment Theology, as the name implies, answers the theological version of the question: *How do the non-Christian religions of the world relate to Christianity?* How one answers the theological question, however, has significant implications for the answer to both the dialogical and missiological questions. That is, answers to the theological question unavoidably influence answers to the dialogical and missiological forms. At the conclusion of this short paper, I will give an example of how various ways of understanding and evaluating Fulfillment Theology affect the way Christians relate to non-Christians dialogically and missiologically.

Some Useful Distinctions

Let's begin by taking note of three useful distinctions in the way the term "fulfillment" is used and understood in biblical and theological discussions.

First, biblical writers use two main Hebrew root words and two Greek root verbs for the word "fulfillment."¹ The word often expresses the sense of completeness, particularly of promises and prophecies made in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the New, and of New Testament promises that come to be fulfilled in the ongoing life of the church. For example, the Old Testament

Terry Muck (PhD, Northwestern) is professor emeritus of World Religions at Asbury Theological Seminary. He has served as editor of Christianity Today and Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission at Asbury. He has been a long-time participant of The Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, to which he brought vital leadership. He is widely published on the subject of Buddhism and religious studies and has authored along with Harold Netland and Gerald McDermott the Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices (2014). Along with Frances Adeney he has also published Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century (Encountering Mission Series, 2009).

promises of a Messiah to come are fulfilled in Jesus, and Jesus' promise that he would send a helper, a *parakletos*, for our aid is fulfilled in the church's collective and individual experiences of the Holy Spirit. This use of the term is often summed up in the phrase, Promise Fulfillment.

Second, the phrase Fulfillment Theory is very often a specific reference to an understanding of how the Christian church relates to the Israelites, God's chosen people. Since this relationship is central to the gospel story, several possible ways of relating have been offered:

Replacement Theology teaches that Christ and his church simply replaced Israel as the definitive people of God. This position is sometimes called supersessionism.

Dispensational Theology, on the other hand, suggests that Judaism and Christianity represent two of several different ways God has chosen to work administratively with human beings—they call these different ways of administration dispensations, or defined periods when God initiated a new type of management. These dispensations don't necessarily replace one another. In dispensational thinking, both Judaism and the Christian church, for example, continue their separate journeys and have distinctive roles to play in the end times.²

Covenant Theology, in its simplest form, teaches that over time God initiated different covenant relationships with humanity. Three of the covenants are often considered major by covenant theologians: (1) the redemption covenant which was an agreement among the three members of the Godhead regarding their respective roles as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; (2) the works covenant (or Old Covenant) which God offered to his chosen people Israel based on following the Mosaic Law; and (3) the grace covenant (or New Covenant) representing the way Jesus offered salvation as a free gift of grace.

In this context, *Fulfillment Theory* is a form of Covenant Theology. It offers a specific way of talking about how God's first chosen people, the Israelites, continue to exist, a dynamic left uncertain in many forms of Covenant Theology. Fulfillment theologians cite the passage "I came not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17), insisting that Israel continues to exist in relation to God as a spiritual people and nation, even if not as a physical people group and nation. Stated in world religion terms, then, Christianity neither destroys nor replaces Judaism, but fulfills its deepest spiritual impulses.

Third, using the biblical relationship between Judaism and Christianity as a sort of analogy, a theology called Fulfillment Theory has arisen that extrapolates the teachings of the Fulfillment Theory referencing Judaism and Christianity

to all the major world religions. According to this form of Fulfillment Theology, Christ came not to destroy the world's religions but to fulfill them.

Where did this teaching come from and what does it mean?³

What Fulfillment Theologians Believe

Classic, full-blown Fulfillment Theology has five key elements:

1. A humanity-wide offer of salvation
2. A robust general revelation
3. A long-term progressive revelation
4. The means of salvation through Christ alone
5. A commitment to dialogical discourse.

As we shall see, there are many different forms of Fulfillment Theology, and some of the differences have to do with whether or not they stress all five of these elements and how they specifically interpret each element.

One cannot say that none of these five elements existed circa 1800 as modern missions hit their stride. Yet, as Sung Deuk Oak notes in his essay, "Edinburgh 1910, Fulfillment Theory, and Missionaries in China and Korea,"

The early nineteenth-century Protestant missions regarded other religions as diabolical in their origin and antithetical to Christianity. Non-Christian religions were summed up as "heathenism," "false religions," or "idolatry." Evangelical missionaries, citing Romans 1:18ff, believed that the individual "heathen" was under condemnation with his sin and immorality.⁴

Of course, Promise Fulfillment was eagerly embraced, and Jesus' coming to fulfill the promises of God to His chosen peoples was similarly endorsed, although that form of fulfillment was strictly of the replacement type. Still, nothing like Fulfillment Theology existed vis-à-vis world religions among the missionaries of this era.

As the nineteenth century wore on, however, things began to change.⁵ Christians learned more and more about the religions of the world, and it became difficult to dismiss everything about them as evil. Confucian ethics, Buddhist meditation, Muslim acknowledgement of one true god, to cite just a few examples, when measured against Greek values, Roman virtues, and Christian ethics did not fare too badly. By the end of the century, the common attitude, at least among mainstream protestant missionaries, was that the non-Christian religions of Asia contained much truth, and while they could not deliver the salvation offered only in Christ, they did deliver points of contact with Christian truth and could be seen as what Eusebius called *praeparatio evangelica*.⁶

Fulfillment Theology was the theological justification for this about-face change of attitude toward Christianity's major competitors. The collective fulfillment hypotheses emerged in England and Scotland in the theological works of men such as F. D. Maurice (1805–1872)⁷ and the history of religion works of Max Muller (1823–1900). Maurice and his kin reminded readers of general revelation (wherever we go in the world, God has been there before us), Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, and the *logos* theologies of Johannine literature. Muller noted that historically the Nestorians had long ago influenced Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism with Christian ideas and St. Thomas had planted the seeds of Christianity in India. By the time of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, Fulfillment Theology was an irresistible mission force. Commission IV of that conference, "The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions" championed the elements of Fulfillment Theology throughout its summary report, a report generated by answers to a ten-question survey sent to missionaries throughout the world.⁸ Two questions of that survey reveal the inclinations of the surveyors toward Fulfillment Theology:

Question Five: "What attitude should the Christian preacher take toward the religion of the people among whom he labours?"

Question Six: "What are the elements in the said religion or religions which present points of contact with Christianity and may be regarded as a preparation for it?" (2)

"Christianity is not antagonistic to the other religions, but a fuller revelation of what the people instinctively groped after." (Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, 1910)

Over 200 missionaries responded in some detail to the survey. Their responses gratified the writers of the survey who freely admitted that two of their goals were to "ascertain from the body of missionaries what they found on the one hand to be really alive in the non-Christian religions," and what "had the power [in non-Christian religions] . . . of preparing the way for faith in Him [Christ]" (1). The report is then divided into five lengthy chapters on mission work to animistic religions, Chinese religions, the religions of Japan, Islam, and Hinduism. To give an idea of the kind of responses they chose to highlight, let's consider the summary of the animistic religions chapter.

It would be hard to imagine a more robust form of general revelation (and its progressive nature) than what missionaries to animistic peoples avowed in their answers to the survey questions. "Christianity is not antagonistic to the other religions, but a fuller revelation of what the people instinctively groped after" (23). "There is a modicum of truth in all religious systems . . . the missionary should look for the element of good, should foster it, and build upon it, gently leading on to the full truth" (22). The assertion that the search for salvation was universal among men and women was affirmed constantly and in many ways, e. g., "widespread is the belief in an afterlife and even in the immortality of the soul" (26). In spite of this generosity of intellectual spirit, however, there is little doubt in the minds of the missionary respondents that the means to salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. Statements like: "Christ is mightier than the devil" (30), and "The general line of testimony is that experience has deepened the belief of the workers that God dwells among men, that Christ is the only Saviour, and that the Holy Spirit sheds abroad power and consolation in the souls of believers" (36), were common and run throughout the report.

The most underdeveloped aspect of Fulfillment Theology in Edinburgh 1910 was a commitment to dialogical discourse.⁹ If by dialogical discourse we mean an attitude of:

1. respect toward other religions and religious, and
2. humility toward our own understanding of the mysteries of God and God's work, combined with
3. a deep commitment to our own faith,

the only one of that triad fully evident at Edinburgh was the third one, commitment. Although one can see that respect toward the other religions and religious was developing, still, the language used of those religions betrays a lack of feeling to match the theological assertions of respect. The religions were routinely described as paganism, heathenism, superstition, witchcraft, sorcery, primitive, and uncivilized. Implicit in the make-up of attendees at the conference was a distinct lack of the second one, humility. "West is best" (and "male is best") asserted itself over and over in who was given voice and what was said. The full flowering of dialogical discourse only developed over the course of the twentieth century.

Still, in many ways, Edinburgh 1910 was the high point of what we might call classical Fulfillment Theology. This distinctive way of looking at other religions was taken up by many mission workers in India, China, East Asia, and Africa, and dominated subsequent mission conferences for decades to come. One of the most complete publications espousing the Fulfillment Theology viewpoint and perhaps the high point of this form of strategic missiological thinking was a book by J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism*.¹⁰

Farquhar's The Crown of Hinduism

J. N. Farquhar (1861–1929) was a Scot from Aberdeen who completed his studies at Oxford. He focused on India and its religions, studying with the likes of A. M. Fairbairn, Max Muller, and Monier-Williams. He decided to go to India as a mission worker in 1891. In India, Farquhar continued the life of a scholar of religions, teaching at the London Missionary Society's college at Bhowanipur, Calcutta. He eventually began work for the YMCA of India, doing evangelism and writing on Indian religions and their relationship to Christianity. The pinnacle of his work was *The Crown of Hinduism*, published in 1913. Poor health forced him to leave India in 1923, and he finished his career teaching comparative religion at the University of Manchester.

The Crown of Hinduism embodies the principles of Edinburgh 1910's Fulfillment Theology and then some. Farquhar argued that there is truth in Hinduism, that there even may be some salvation for especially dedicated Hindus, but that Christianity is the best religion, fulfilling all that is good about Hinduism:

The key word in Farquhar's missionary theology was "fulfillment." He did not invent the term but did much to popularize the idea that Christ came to fulfill and bring to completion not only the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17) but all the world's higher religions. It is in this sense that Christ is the "crown" of Hinduism.¹¹

Farquhar also asserted:

There is truth in Hinduism: "We gladly confess that these great and good results prove the presence of truth in each of these [religious] systems" (28). As much as anything, Farquhar was arguing for respect for the religions of the world. Having gotten to know many good Hindu men and women in his time in India, he argues that it would be foolish to deny the value of their religion in giving scope to that goodness. He extends his argument beyond Hindus to include Buddhists and Muslims, but even more:

Every religion has given its followers at least the idea of duty and of the community, and usually also the idea of God and of worship. There has never been a religion that did not uplift men, that did not bring them nearer to God. (28)

There may even be salvation in Hinduism: "It is possible for every human being, no matter what his circumstances may be, to find his way to God, if he truly uses all the light he has" (26).¹² In this assertion, Farquhar went beyond what most of the Fulfillment Theologians of his day (i.e., the

attendees at Edinburgh and the respondents to Edinburgh's survey) believed and taught. As time went on, however, this kind of thinking became more common among theologians attempting to answer the questions of the relationship of Christianity to the world's major religions. One might even say that a fissure was created between Fulfillment

Theologians who held to the typical Protestant statement, "salvation by Christ alone," or the typical Roman Catholic avowal, "outside the church no salvation" (*extra ecclesiam nullu salus*) and those who suggested there might be other means of salvation.

Christianity is the best of all the religions: Still, Farquhar maintained the principle that of all the religions, Christianity is the best, the fulfilling of all of humankind's urges toward God:

"Every thinking man sees clearly the superiority of the great religions over the lowest faiths. The

Christian sees as distinctly the superiority of Christianity to the rest of the great religions" (32). It was this commitment to Christianity's superiority that kept Farquhar in the Fulfillment Theology camp.

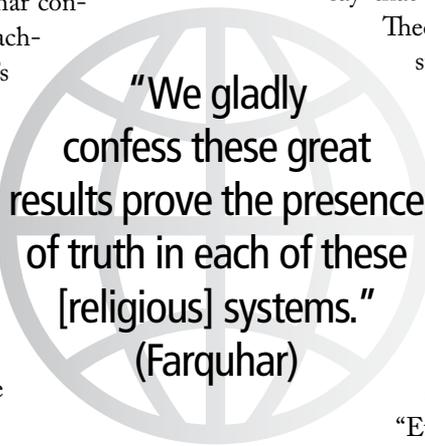
The overall message of *The Crown of Hinduism* was a plea for a more generous view of this great religious system in India sometimes called Hinduism and, by extension, all the great world religions:

Christians acknowledge fully the great and good work that has been done by each of the great religions. We gladly recognize that, in them, many saints have been trained, thousands of homes have been purified and uplifted, and multitudes of men and women have found God. (28)

This is a far cry from the "heathens" and "pagans" and "uncivilized" non-Christians of Edinburgh 1910. In claiming salvation for some, however, many Christian theologians and missiologists thought he went too far and ironically, misunderstood badly the non-Christian religion he studied the most, so-called Hinduism.¹³

Karl Reichelt's Christian/Buddhist Monasteries

In terms of practically orienting mission work to the principles of Fulfillment Theology, one of the most distinctive practitioners was Karl Ludwig Reichelt in his work with learned Buddhist and Taoist monks in China.¹⁴ Reichelt (1877–1952) lived at a hinge of mission history, the two sides of which might be described as pre-fulfillment and fulfillment-dominant. He went to China in 1903 filled with pre-fulfillment missiological ideas not unlike what we cited above in Sung Deuk Oak's paper: Christianity is good, the other religions are bad, and never the twain shall meet. His



early experiences with Buddhist monks in their monasteries, however, proffered a different viewpoint and approach. He was usually received at Buddhist monasteries with hospitality and respect for his Christian viewpoints. He became convinced that by mimicking that hospitality and intellectual respect with the Buddhist monks, his chances of gaining a real, deep hearing of the gospel story increased dramatically. As this conviction grew, he tailored not just his missiological approach but his missiological thinking accordingly, in keeping with what was becoming his version of Fulfillment Theology.

A Commitment to a Universal Offer of Salvation

A specific Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching grabbed Reichelt's imagination early, and he referred to it often in his writings. In his book, *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism*, he calls the goal of universal salvation of all sentient beings, "the principle thought of the Chinese Mahāyāna."¹⁵ This teaching—"The salvation of all living things (*P'u chi chung sheng*)" meets "in a remarkable manner, many of the great religious cravings of life which men in all times and all places feel more or less consciously" (1). For Reichelt this echoes the Bible's teachings about God's desire for the salvation of all. Christ, God's eternal *logos*, is at the back of God's general revelation."¹⁶ The *logos* exists everywhere and at all times.

A Robust General Revelation

In order to better understand how Christianity and the Chinese religions, particularly Pure Land Buddhism, related to one another theologically, Reichelt embarked on a crash course in Mahāyāna Buddhism. After learning the language, he read the religious texts Mahāyāna Buddhists held dear. In studying those texts, he discovered what he saw as echoes of Christian teaching—lots of echoes. Sometimes he saw direct influences in those teachings, Buddhists learning from Christians, Christians learning from Buddhists. The more he studied, the more General Revelation became not just glimpses of God in nature and in archetypal human consciousness, but in the actual teachings of Chinese religions. Perhaps "robust" is not a strong enough word for what Reichelt saw. Christian teachings in Romans 1:19–20, Romans 2:15, Acts 14:8–18, and Acts 17:15–34 took on weightier meaning.

A Long-term Progressive Revelation

For all Fulfillment Theologians, Christianity cannot be properly understood without seeing it as a story, a narrative of God's progressive revelation to humankind. A sort of spiritual evolutionism arose, probably a response in part to Darwin's teachings which were taking the scientific world by storm at this same time. This spiritual evolutionism might be described as the survival of theological truth. That is, the "fittest" religious teachings of the world religions were found to be even better realized in the teachings of the Scriptures and the Church. Conversely,

that which did not contribute to human spiritual flourishing and the flourishing of the Christian church would eventually fall away. In this way the world religions prepared the way for God's special revelations in Judaism and Jesus Christ. One of Reichelt's favorite images of this humanity-wide revelation was to call it the *logos spermatikos* after the teachings of Justin Martyr.¹⁷

A Reaffirmation of the Means of Salvation by Christ Alone

Yet for Reichelt, salvation comes through Christ alone, the centerpiece of both general and special revelation. All of general revelation is "only partial and fragmentary" to be fulfilled solely in Jesus Christ (46). "It is unthinkable," Reichelt says, "that man all by himself, with the general revelation as his starting-point, could rise to the full apprehension and appropriation of the light and life which the Christian church possesses" (49). Such fullness comes only with Jesus Christ. In affirming this crucial truth, Reichelt places himself dead center in traditional, orthodox Christian teaching. However, one thing changes. Instead of "winning over Buddhism in China in any outward manner" we should be striving to win "Buddhists from within" their own tradition.¹⁸

A Full-time Commitment to Dialogical Discourse

In a previous section we observed that of the five key tenets of Fulfillment Theology, the missionary conference at Edinburgh 1910 came up short in the fifth, the Commitment to Dialogical Discourse. The same cannot be said of Reichelt. He did not call what he did "inter-religious dialogue" but it certainly pre-saged all the features of what we call dialogue today. He invited Buddhist monks to come and stay at his Christian monasteries and talk freely with the Christian missionaries there about questions of faith. The atmosphere was free and uncoercive. Topics of conversation were decided together, and final conclusions were not the goal of the talks. In many ways, we must consider Reichelt a pioneer of not just fulfillment-influenced missions but of the inter-religious dialogue movement that grew in force through his lifetime and the rest of the twentieth century.

**Instead of winning over Chinese
Buddhists in any outward manner we
should be striving to win them from
within their own tradition.**

Hendrick Kraemer and the Christian Message in a Non-Christian World

Criticisms of Fulfillment Theology were not long in coming. The most cogent and influential of those criticisms from the conservative side of the theological spectrum came from the pen of

Hendrick Kraemer (1888–1965). Kraemer, a Dutch missiologist, was commissioned to write a book for the World Missionary Conference in Tambaram, India in 1938. His assignment:

State the fundamental position of the Christian Church as a witness-bearing body in the modern world, relating this to different, conflicting views of the attitude to be taken by Christians towards other faiths, and dealing in detail with the evangelistic approach to the great non-Christian faiths.¹⁹

Kraemer's objections to Fulfillment Theology are unlike the knee-jerk dismissals of the 1800s' missionaries. He argues *against* Christian attitudes of superiority. "The 'orthodox' missionary attitude requires humility."

His most focused response to this is in chapter four, "The Attitude Toward the Non-Christian Religions."²⁰

Kraemer's objections to Fulfillment Theology are unlike the knee-jerk dismissals of the 1800s' missionaries mentioned above. He argues *against* Christian attitudes of superiority. He says that "the character of [Christian] faith and the nature of the divine truth of revelation" excludes attitudes of superiority (110). He argues *for* Christian attitudes of humility: "The 'orthodox' missionary attitude requires purification toward humility" (297). And he is certainly in favor of commitment:

The only valid motive and purpose of missions is and alone can be to call men and peoples to confront themselves with God's acts of revelation and salvation for man and the world as presented in Biblical realism, and to build up a community of those who have surrendered themselves to faith in loving service of Jesus Christ. (294)

In this regard, Kraemer, in his objections to Fulfillment Theology appears to address the weaknesses of Edinburgh 1910's approaches to Dialogical Discourse. Although he does not use the language of dialogue in this area, he actually promotes that aspect of Fulfillment Theology.

But he does have criticisms—major criticisms. It seems he most objects to the direction Farquhar took Fulfillment Theology in championing salvation outside the strict bounds of "Christ alone." For example, Kraemer twice mentioned Reichelt and his work in the book:

He praised the Norwegian missionary for interpreting Christianity to Buddhist monks but condemned any notion of Christianity as a more refined expression of Mahāyāna Buddhism . . . [yet] he agreed that Reichelt was proclaiming the Gospel in its uniqueness rather than something that grew out of Pure Land Buddhism.²¹

And he dramatically reduced Fulfillment Theology's heavy reliance on general revelation—at one point he called general revelation a "contradiction of terms" (111). General revelation, he said, cannot supply what only Jesus supplies:

It will no more be permitted to consider undiscerningly the glimpses of revelation and the religious intuitions of mankind as a preceding and preparatory stage for the full revelation in Christ. (123)

Instead, Kraemer focused solely on the person and work of Jesus Christ and argued that Jesus and his teachings (that is, special revelation) is the only standard we should use to evaluate non-Christian religions: "The most fruitful and legitimate way to analyse and evaluate all religions is to investigate them in the light of the revelation of Christ" (110).

Perhaps the following is the single best summary of his rejection of what he understood to be Fulfillment Theology's teachings:

The function of natural theology [i.e., general revelation] will henceforth be, not to construe preparatory stages and draw unbroken, continuous lines of religious development ending and reaching their summit in Christ, but in the light of the Christian revelation to lay bare the dialectical condition not only of the non-Christian religions but of all the human attempts towards apprehension of the totality of existence. (125)

Jean Danielou, Karl Rahner, and Vatican II

Fulfillment Theology received a major shot in the arm when the Roman Catholic theologians attending the two year (1962–64) event called Vatican II basically adopted the tenets of the teaching in the primary document they produced having to do with non-Christian religions.²² *Nostra Aetate*, as the document was called, turned out to be based on innovative theological work done by Karl Rahner, but the title "Father of Roman Catholic Fulfillment Theology" is probably due to Jean Danielou.

So let's begin with Danielou. Jean-Guenolé-Marie Daniélou S. J. (1905–1974) was a Roman Catholic cardinal and a French member of the Jesuit order. He was also a noted theologian and published historian and a member of the Académie Française. In 1958 he wrote a book, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, in which he argued that, for Christians, all of history must be seen as a "progressive divine manifestation to humankind."²³ And

within that overall history, a special history emerges which Danielou calls “salvation history,” an understanding of history unique to the Judeo-Christian, biblical tradition. For Christians, at least, there is no secular view of history. There is only a history used as a vehicle for God’s ongoing revelation to all of humankind and a history specific to Christians that shows what God has done through Israel and Jesus Christ.

Since non-Christian religions are a part of general history, they must also have elements of God’s revelation to humankind embedded within them. They are not part of God’s special salvation history, a history limited to Judaism and Christianity, but the religions’ revelations of God are real and true and beneficial to all humanity. Still, they “were unable in the past, and remain unable today, to lead to the saving faith which can only come from God’s gracious intervention in the lives of people.”²⁴ To become useful in a salvific way they must be fulfilled in Jesus Christ and Christianity.

Rahner continues this type of thinking. In 1961, he gave a lecture that eventually was published in volume five of his *Theological Investigations* as a chapter entitled, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions.”²⁵ In summary, Rahner begins with the assertion that God wants all human beings to be saved, such that even the nature we live in (including the religions) is graced. Rahner then goes on to argue that since grace must be embodied in order for human beings to embrace it, and since the world religions are part of nature broadly conceived, then the world religions can, and do, embody God’s grace. The religions can embody grace and thus be part of the ways of salvation, but only because of what God did and continues to do through Jesus Christ. Thus, adherents of other religions can be saved, although they may not know that the reason they can be is because of Jesus. Rahner, controversially, calls such people, “anonymous Christians.”

Non-Christian religions must also have elements of God’s revelation to humankind embedded within them.

Danielou and Rahner both heavily influenced Vatican II thinking about the non-Christian religions. The council did not go as far as Rahner, but they went a long way. They acknowledged that

there is genuine revelation in other traditions or “rays of truth”; but they’re just that, “rays,” and not enough to enable the full sunlight of God’s saving grace to be felt. So, revelation through the religions, yes; but salvation, no.²⁶

Vatican II left many questions unanswered, but opened the door for Fulfillment Theology to become perhaps the dominant voice in the Roman Catholic Church’s inter-religious theological debate.

So What Are We To Think of Fulfillment Theology Today?

In the first quarter of the 21st century, it is safe to say that Fulfillment Theology is still on the table of theological options when answering the questions raised by the world religions vis-à-vis Christianity: “How do the non-Christian religions of the world relate to Christianity?”

A progressive theologian, Paul Knitter, considers it one of four main theological answers to the question, along with the Replacement Model, the Mutuality Model, and the Acceptance Model. An ecumenical theologian, Veli-Matti Karkkanen, also devotes significant space to it in his 2003 book, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*. Many claim it to be the dominant model among mainstream Protestant Christian theologians. Two evangelical theologians of religion, Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland, also consider it in their book, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal*, even though Fulfillment Theology does not in any sense dominate evangelical theology of religions which is still heavily tied to the Replacement Model.²⁷ Of course, these three books take different positions on the faithfulness and efficacy of Fulfillment Theology as a Christian theological option, but it is treated as a serious option by all three.

Of course, some vociferously object to Fulfillment Theology. The position taken by mission workers in the 1800s—that non-Christian religions are diabolical in their entirety and antithetical to Christianity—is still held by many on the conservative side of the present-day theological spectrum. It is a position ably represented at a pastoral level by men such as John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. MacArthur recently said that he

wouldn’t fight for the religious freedom [of non-Christian religions] because I won’t fight for idolatry. . . . Why would I fight for the devil to have as many false religions as possible and all of them be available to everyone?²⁸

Ironically, strong objection to Fulfillment Theology can also be found on the Christian left among progressive theologians. Whereas the objections from the right center on the idea that Fulfillment Theology gives way *too much* theological and pastoral respect to non-Christian religions (even, in some cases, postulating that one can be saved by them), progressive

theologians argue against Fulfillment Theology because it gives *too little* sincere respect to non-Christian religions. The argument goes something like this:

- Adherents of Fulfillment Theology feel they have come a long way from total rejection of all aspects of non-Christian religions, arriving at a place where they look for, and find, God's truth in many of their teachings.
- Many progressive Christian theologians, however, counter that while this may, from their side of the spectrum, seem like a very positive move in the direction of respect for non-Christians and their beliefs and practices, it is still a put-down to be seen as inadequate when measured against the highest truths of the Christian gospel.
- A further objection put forward by progressive Christians regarding Fulfillment Theology is that it encourages borrowing from other faiths, something that can be seen as a "colonizing" of their religious practices and their religious beliefs. This, too, can be evaluated from two different directions. It can be seen as a positive judgment: "I think enough of your meditative practice to try them myself in my Christian context." Or it can be seen as an attempt to Christianize a practice that is properly speaking Buddhist (or Hindu or Muslim or whatever).

Still, in between these two positions, conservative and progressive, a large central cohort has emerged that embraces at least one of the many variants of Fulfillment Theology as the best of the options we seem to be offered in deciding on a faithful and effective theological approach to non-Christian religions. Let me be more specific about what this can mean by evaluating the five elements of Fulfillment Theology.

Progressive theologians argue against Fulfillment Theology because it gives too little sincere respect to non-Christian religions.

Fulfillment Theology: A Summary

How, then, would a Fulfillment Theologian answer our fundamental question, *How do the non-Christian religions of the world relate to Christianity?* He or she would begin with an assumption that underlies all variants of Fulfillment Theology—that *God desires the salvation of all human beings*. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul asserts that "God our savior . . . wants all men to be saved."²⁹ He does not say that all men will be saved. Other New Testament texts such as the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats claim that at the end of time there will be both saved and unsaved human beings.³⁰ Paul simply states that God *wants* salvation for all. This assumption

places Fulfillment Theology square in the middle between theologians who argue that God has determined only a chosen few will be saved and theologians who assume that eventually every human being will be saved. To be clear: Fulfillment Theologians are here making an assumption about what God *desires*, not about what actually happens on Judgment Day.

That God desires all human beings will be saved is consistent with the picture the New Testament draws of God. The Johannine literature especially claims "God is love."³¹ It is unreasonable to believe that a loving God would not want everyone to be saved. Conversely, it is reasonable that God would not automatically save everyone. Human beings were created to either choose to follow God and accept God's graceful offer of salvation or to eschew God's sovereignty and reject the gift of salvation.

Further, it is unreasonable to think that if God wants everyone to be saved that he would not provide vehicles everywhere that would enable that salvation. Thus, Fulfillment Theologians typically have a very robust *General Revelation*. There is not a place on earth where God and God's creative work is not visible. The Psalmist lauds this ubiquity:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go to the heavens you are there.
If I make my bed in the depths [of the sea] you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day for darkness is as light to you.³²

This ubiquitous presence is not at all neutral. It is a witness to God's greatness and goodness:

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.³³

This kind of global revelation of God and God's nature has been a common feature of orthodox Christian theology. What distinguishes the robustness of Fulfillment Theologians recognition of truth, however, is their willingness to entertain truth claims globally in other cultures, in human philosophies not directly influenced by Christian thinking, and, especially, in other religions. Truth is truth wherever it might be found—"All truth is God's truth" is the common catchphrase.

It is the acknowledgement of truth in the other religions that distinguishes Fulfillment Theology's answer to our question—*How do the non-Christian religions of the world relate to*

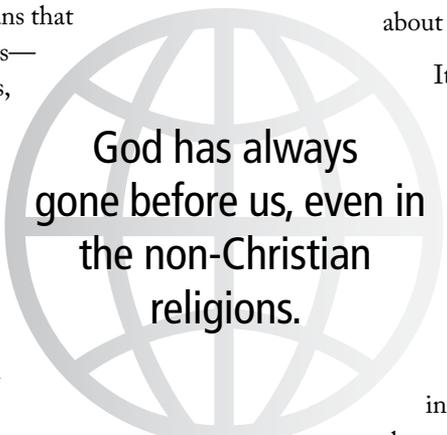
Christianity?—from other theological answers. It means that even though the claim that there is truth in other religions is quickly followed by the claim that there is also much error in other religions, the Fulfillment Theology embrace gives the non-Christian religions a cache they have not traditionally been afforded. The truth claim means that interactions with non-Christian religions—religious interactions, cultural interactions, personal interactions—suddenly become complex rather than simple. This provides a careful analysis against biblical truth, not just the automatic dismissal of a false, evil religion. It posits even with the expectation of finding truth, since, for the Fulfillment Theologian, God has everywhere, always gone before us, even in the non-Christian religions.

Fulfillment Theologians have a further insight regarding General Revelation. They accept without question that God's revelation is ongoing and progressive. That is, not only does God's revelation fill all of spatial reality, it fills all of temporal reality as well—past, present, and future. God's revelation to humankind did not end with the final jot and tittle of biblical truth, but continues to our very day, much of it enabled by the sending of the *paraclete*, God's Holy Spirit. And, for Fulfillment Theologians, that continuing revelation is part of an overarching story of God's reaching out to human beings, a story that includes non-Christian religions. This is where the word "fulfillment" finds its most important meaning. The non-Christian religions are not destroyed by Christianity, but fulfilled by Jesus Christ and the Christian narrative. Of course, the error in non-Christian religions must be acknowledged and fall away. But the truth in non-Christian religions must also be acknowledged and continued in Christian teaching.

The progressive revelation that characterizes Fulfillment Theology means all of human history is a single story of God reaching out to humankind with a grace-filled desire to make right what was lost in Eden. "All history is a progressive divine manifestation to humankind."³⁴ Thus, the missionary urge for Christians is a bringing together of the religions from within to form one continuous story, rather than an elimination of them via an external attack from without. We learn from one another. We join hands with one another, and, in Christ, help build God's kingdom on earth.

The important phrase in that last sentence is "in Christ." Fulfillment Theologians hold that the only means to salvation is through Jesus Christ. For most, what God did through Jesus Christ to save humanity is well known and embraced.

For some, it may not be known. What Karl Rahner called "anonymous Christians" may be saved through lights of their own; they may not know that their salvation would be impossible without what God did through Jesus Christ. But salvation comes only through Jesus Christ, whether known about or not.



God has always gone before us, even in the non-Christian religions.

It is ironic that two of the four characteristics of Fulfillment Theology we have examined so far are about salvation. Ironic, because Fulfillment Theology is really more about truth than salvation. Its position on salvation is classic textbook, historical orthodoxy. God offers salvation to all and salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ. The theological innovations regarding Fulfillment Theology have to do with truth, with God's revelations to humankind. Fulfillment Theologians argue that God has an insatiable appetite to reveal the divine self to all creation, humanity and the religions included.

The final characteristic of Fulfillment Theology has to do with the way Christians relate to people of other religions. We must exhibit a skill that has been a hit or miss feature of personal interaction—dialogue. We call this Dialogical Discourse to distinguish it from some of the forms of dialogue advocated in formal settings. Instead, Fulfillment Theologians advocate a more general way of relating to adherents of non-Christian religions. "Dialogue" in this sense means a cooperative search for truth and a reciprocal sharing of experiences. If there is truth in other religions, then the only way for Christians to fully understand and evaluate it is to engage in dialogue with those for whom that truth has the most meaning. That kind of dialogue, a method of discourse, has three main features.

First, it can only occur if we have a high level of respect for our partners in the dialogue. If their religions contain some of God's truth, then even if it is accompanied by much error, we must approach the Other with a respect that will not throw out the theological babies with the cultural bath waters.

Second, dialogical discourse can only avoid the twin snares of triumphalism and exclusivism if we have a high level of humility about our own knowledge. We do not know it all and, more importantly, our religious traditions are not perfect. We have far more to learn than we have capacity to learn it. Much of the content of what we have to learn is about God, who by definition exceeds the limitations of time and space to which we are restricted. Humility is essential and only occurs when we are willing to say, "I must have been wrong."

Third, commitment is also required. One of the most damaging features of some modern approaches to dialogue is the canard that one cannot both participate in dialogue and have a high level of commitment to the truth of one's own religion. Commitment, it is said, reduces the amount of respect and humility one can have in the dialogue. Wrong. In fact, the exact opposite is true of dialogues. The best dialogues involve fully committed participants who can honestly share their religion's truths as they understand them.

Dialogical discourse does not lead to final answers but to a willingness to engage in ongoing discussions for as long as it takes to establish and nurture relationships with members of non-Christian religious traditions. Dialogue, it may be said, never ends. Dialogue, faithfully carried out, can move us and our partners closer and closer to truth, but we never really arrive. A dialogical discussion is a never-ending discussion.

As it turns out, Fulfillment Theology creates a habitable ground somewhere between total replacement theory and religious perennialism, the belief that all religions can be reduced to a finite set of commitments common to all human beings and cultures. As such, it enables Christians to open themselves to aspects of God's revelations, even those that reside in other religions, without fudging on wholehearted commitment to our firm belief that our religion is the right one. Dialogue is not only enhanced by honest sharing of such absolute commitments, but it can only occur in such contexts. It is not in spite of, but because of those commitments, that the ongoing, never-ending conversation continues.

We need to admit that although we continue to embrace "salvation through Jesus Christ alone," we are just not sure—perhaps we are not meant to be sure—who is saved and who is not.

Conclusion

For whatever reasons, the last two hundred years have seen what Karl Jaspers called an Axial Age when it comes to world religion. Jaspers' Axial Age was circa 800 BCE to 200 BCE; ours from circa 1800 CE to 2000 CE and beyond. Call it Axial Age II. Whereas Axial Age I created the conditions for the rise of new and revised religions themselves (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and eventually, Islam), discrete religions that increasingly saw the world in global terms, Axial Age II has focused on a change

in the way we view relationships among adherents of the different world religions. With religions no longer limited to tribal groups and with religions able to leap across cultural boundaries in a single bound, a new way of looking at humankind became necessary. In addition to identifying humans and their groups as tribal and racial and ethnic and culture-based, a new category emphasizing the solidarity of all humanity became necessary. Humankind, humanity, and *homo sapiens* (the biological and evolutionary term) are words that made reference to this solidity. And as Axial Age II principles take hold, Axial Age II promises to be as world changing as Axial Age I has been.

What has changed? Or, since we are still in the midst of Axial Age II, it might be better to say, *What is changing?* The *terms of engagement* among peoples of different religions have changed. Whereas those terms used to be antagonistic and exclusionary, and then became competitive and market-driven, they are now becoming dialogic and global. The *means of relating* to adherents of different religions have added to the tried and true means (preaching, publishing, and witnessing) an emphasis on dialogue that demands respect for others, humility about oneself, and honesty in individual and group commitments.

And the *goals of inter-religious relationships* increasingly focus on mutuality and reciprocity. Metaphors that used to be seen as sure signs of theological liberalism—we are all on a religious journey up the same mountain; we are like blind men feeling different parts of a single elephant; we are parts of a broken mirror seeking to be put back together again—now are beginning to make sense, especially in contexts of religious plurality which seem to admit no other possible way of creating the conditions of faith, hope, and love.

Fulfillment Theology is the theology of Axial Age II. As we have seen above, it began as a way of recasting the relationship between two of the Axial Age I religions, the Middle Eastern religions of Judaism and Christianity. From there it spread to China where the Nestorians and then Karl Ludvig Reichelt, among others, used its principles to describe and prescribe relationships among Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians. In India it was used by J. N. Farquhar to propose a possible way of understanding indigenous Indian religions (Hinduism?) and its relationships to the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam. A missions conference at Edinburgh in 1910 distilled Fulfillment Theology principles from what it was hearing from its missionaries in Africa and Asia (and among indigenous peoples everywhere), utilizing a growing body of theological work from the United Kingdom. Roman Catholic theologians such as Jean Danielou and Karl Rahner formalized the principles in ways acceptable to the

Magisterium, such that it became the foundational way of inter-religious theological thinking at Vatican II. And mainstream Protestants in the West adopted it as its most characteristic way of conceiving Christian ways of relating to non-Christian religious traditions.

Perhaps the most telling sign that Fulfillment Theology is the theology of Axial Age II is not that it has been accepted uniformly as a new kind of orthodoxy, but that it has been seen as a mere theological jumping off place for a host of variants. Rather than call it Fulfillment Theology, a better term is Fulfillment Theologies. Religious Pluralists have embraced Fulfillment Theology's commitment to religious diversity and proposed *avant garde* ways of extending God's offer of salvation even beyond the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Religious Conservatives have begun to embrace Fulfillment Theologies' insistence on religious particularity as a way of maintaining historic Christian orthodoxy in the face of multi-cultural conditions that can make such particularities problematic. Indeed, the variants have proliferated in ways similar to the ways virus variants proliferate, in this case theological mutations designed to better penetrate target audiences with the gospel. The core teachings remain: A universal

offer of salvation. A robust and progressive general revelation. A primacy to God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. A commitment to dialogical discourse.

Fulfillment Theologies have the potential to teach us the lessons that may very well enable us to survive as religious entities in cultures that are increasing secular and anti-religious. If the religions of the world continue on a course that creates violence and division, then they will continue to be seen as needless adherences to dead and dying traditions. If, on the other hand, they can be seen as useful—indeed essential—to helping create and enforce commitments to peace and justice and human flourishing, then our future brightens. As Christians, the path to growing God's kingdom on earth leads through the unfamiliar terrain of compromise and ambivalence. Perhaps we will need to admit that, although we see ourselves as part of a single spiritual human narrative that ends in a Heaven accessed only by Jesus Christ, it may be that we cannot get there as fully and meaningfully without the spiritual input of all humanity. Perhaps we will need to admit that although we continue to embrace “salvation through Jesus Christ alone,” we are just not sure—perhaps we are not meant to be sure—who is saved and who is not. For now, the story continues and we are a part of it. Fulfillment Theologies are a way of insuring that we remain essential to the human story. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ Hebrew: *male* (H4848) and *kalah* (H3983). Greek: *anapleroo* and *ekpleroo*.
- ² The technical term for “end times” is the Greek word *eschaton*, which refers to a future described variously in the teachings of several world religions (both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic), which teach that world events will reach a climax, often including a judgment and an afterlife.
- ³ We will note several different definitions of Fulfillment Theology throughout beginning here with the one offered by Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (IVP 2003): “Since Christianity is considered to be the highest religion, other religions' search for truth and salvation can find fulfillment in Christ and Christian religion.” 103.
- ⁴ Sung Deuk Oak, “Edinburgh 1910, Fulfillment Theory, and Missionaries in China and Korea,” in *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 9 (March 2009): 29–51.
- ⁵ One of the best resources narrating this change is Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846–1914* (Epworth, 1995).
- ⁶ “Preparation for the Gospel” (Greek: Εὐαγγελικὴ προπαρασκευή, *Euangelikē proparaskeuē*), commonly known by its Latin title *Praeparatio evangelica*, was a work of Christian apologetics written by Eusebius in the early part of the fourth century AD.
- ⁷ F. D. Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (J. W. Parker 1847).
- ⁸ *Report of Commission IV of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions* (Fleming H. Revell, 1910). References to page numbers are in parentheses in the text.
- ⁹ The word “dialogue” was not commonly used to describe interactions among people in this era. We use it here and elsewhere acknowledging the anachronistic problem but suggesting that its use helpfully connects the past and present.
- ¹⁰ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (Oxford, 1913). References to page numbers are in parentheses in the text.
- ¹¹ Eric Sharpe, “John Nichol Farquhar,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (Macmillan, 1998), 208.
- ¹² See Acts 10:34–35.
- ¹³ See H. L. Richard, editor, *Cultural Gaps: Benjamin Robinson's Experience with Hindu Traditions* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing 2020). Two scholarly works on the form Fulfillment Theology took in India: Martin Maw, *Visions of India: Fulfillment Theory, the Aryan Race Theory, and the Work of British Protestant Missionaries in Victorian India* (Peter Lang, 1990); Paul Hedges, *Preparation and Fulfillment: A History and Study of Fulfillment Theology in Modern British Thought in the Indian Context* (Peter Lang, 2001).

- ¹⁴ Karl Reichelt wrote a great deal, but mostly in Norwegian. Three of his books have been translated into English: *Religion in Chinese Garments* (James Clarke, 1951 [1923]), *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001 [1928]) and *Meditation and Piety in the Far East* (James Clarke, 2003 [1954]). Reichelt didn't use the analytic language of either Fulfillment Theology or Inter-religious Dialogue, but made significant contributions to both through his practical mission work.
- ¹⁵ Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 1.
- ¹⁶ Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 32.
- ¹⁷ The clearest statement of Reichelt's theological principles in English is in his book, *Meditation and Piety*, 13–59.
- ¹⁸ Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 7.
- ¹⁹ Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Kregel, 1963 [1938]), v. References to page numbers are in parentheses in the text.
- ²⁰ I recommend an analysis of Kraemer's work by Christopher James in his blog. In my comments I have drawn from his summary, although my conclusions are different from those of the author: Christopher B. James, "Hendrik Kraemer's 'The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World' (1938): Summary," *Jesus Dust* (blog), accessed on March 7, 2021, <http://www.jesusdust.com/2012/06/summary-of-hendrik-kraemers-christian.html>.
- ²¹ Rory Mackenzie, *God, Self and Salvation in a Buddhist Context* (Wide Margin, 2017), 13.
- ²² Paul Knitter, in his book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis, 2002), framed his discussion of Fulfillment Theology this way: Fulfillment Theology "offers a theology that will give equal weight to two foundational Christian convictions . . . : that God's love is universal, extending to all peoples, but also that God's love is particular, made real in Jesus Christ." 63.
- ²³ Jean Danielou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History* (Longmans, Green 1958), 105.
- ²⁴ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis, 1997), 135. See Dupuis full discussion of Danielou in this regard on pages 130–143.
- ²⁵ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations Volume V* (Helicon, 1966), 115–134.
- ²⁶ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 77.
- ²⁷ Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford, 2014).
- ²⁸ Quoted in a story online in *The Christian Post*, entitled, "John MacArthur: 'I won't fight for religious liberty because I won't fight for idolatry,'" accessed March 6, 2021.
- ²⁹ 1 Timothy 2:4.
- ³⁰ Matthew 13:24–30 and Matthew 25:31–46, respectively.
- ³¹ 1 John 4:7–21
- ³² Psalm 139:7–12
- ³³ Romans 1:19–20.
- ³⁴ Jean Danielou, quoted in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis, 1997), 134.

Select English References

- Danielou, Jean. *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*. Longmans, Green 1958.
- Dupuis, Jacques. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Orbis, 1997.
- Farquhar, J. N. *The Crown of Hinduism*. Oxford, 1913.
- Karkkanen, Veli-Matti. *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions*. IVP Academic, 2003.
- Knitter, Paul. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Orbis, 2002.
- Kraemer, Hendrick. *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. Kregel, 1956 [1938].
- McDermott, Gerald and Harold Netland. *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*. Oxford, 2014.
- Muck, Terry and Frances Adeney. *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century*. Baker Academic, 2009.
- "Nostra Aetate" ("Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"). In *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter Abbott. America Press, 1966.
- Reichelt, Karl Ludvig. *Meditation and Piety in the Far East*. James Clarke, 2004 [1954].
- Report of Commission IV of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions*. Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910.
- Sharpe, Eric. *Not to Destroy but to Fulfill: The Contribution of J. N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India Before 1914*. Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia: Gleerup, 1965.